

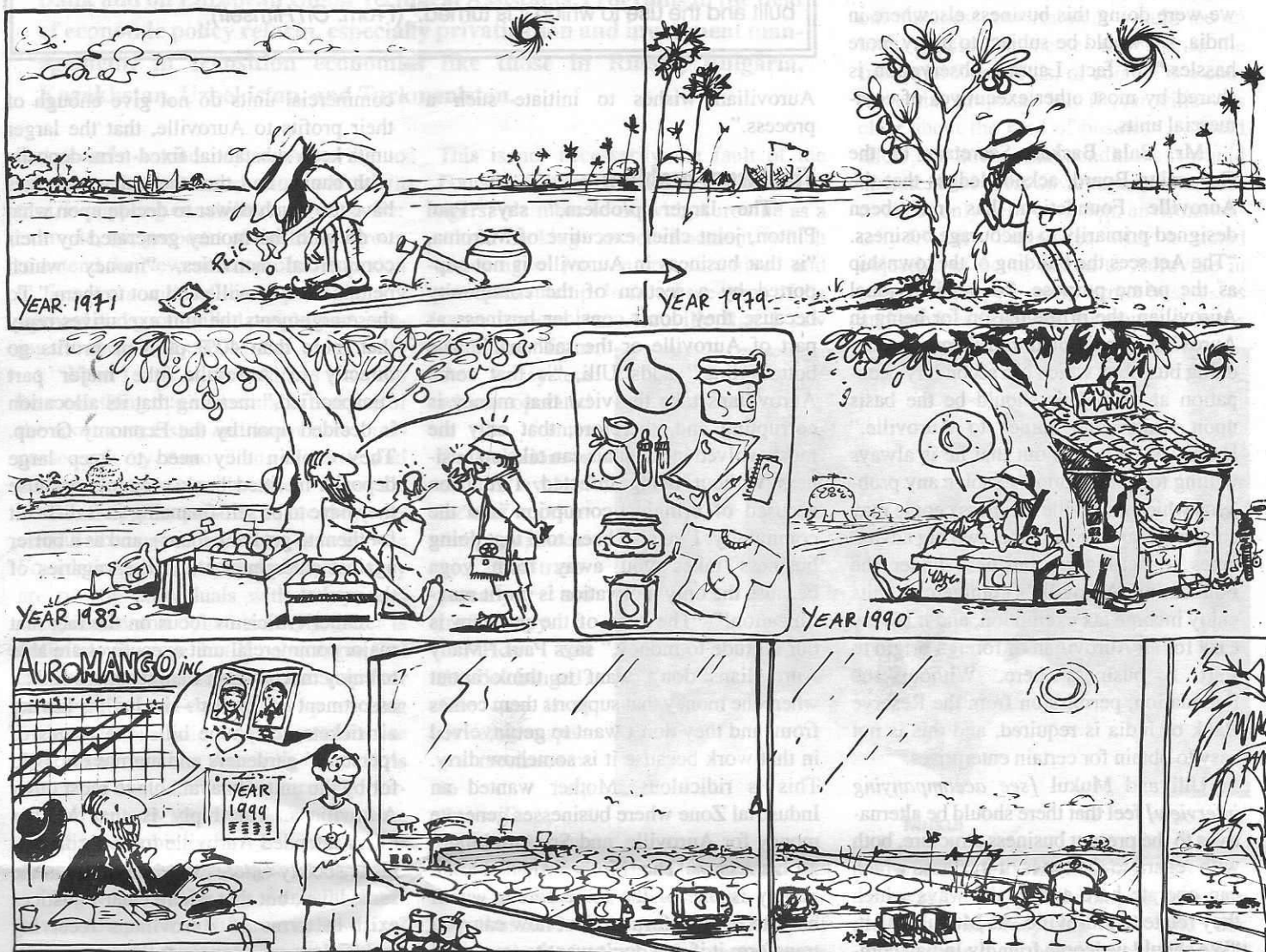
AUROVILLE TODAY

Number 125, June 1999

The nineties have seen a remarkable growth in business in Auroville. There are many commercial units in Auroville, but are they different from anywhere else? What are their achievements and where do they fall short? What role did the Mother want Auroville businesses to fulfil? Is the present climate in the community supportive of commercial activities, and if not, why? Here is an overview of some of the major issues associated with business in Auroville, along with ideas which could lead to a different perception—and scale—of commercial activities in the community.

The Seed of Business...

Drawing by Emanuele



To a casual observer, business in Auroville seems to be thriving. More than 90 different commercial units are registered under the Foundation with a collective turnover last year of about 20 crores (US \$ 5 million), a fourteenfold increase over the turnover of 1987-88. However, most of the commercial units are small. The three largest units—Maroma, Auromode Atelier and Filaure—are responsible for the major portion of this increase, with Maroma, the largest unit under the Foundation, accounting for almost one third of the total turnover at present. In fact, a recent study of Auroville businesses showed that 25% of Auroville's commercial units could be called financially successful, that between 25-50% of the units generate some profit, and that the others are struggling to break even. "This is not very encouraging," the study concludes.

Of course, there are other criteria by which the success of a commercial unit in Auroville should be

Attitudes to business

The development of larger business activities is hampered by a negative attitude towards money and mistrust of business from certain sections of the community.

judged. These include the expression of individual creativity, the production of high quality products, and to what extent a unit provides employment for and improves the skills and well being of the local people. In all these areas Auroville businesses score well. The commercial units have acquired a reputation for providing good working conditions for their workers, above average wages (around 25% above the average for the area), and a host of incidental benefits including free health care, a provident fund, educational opportunities and maternity leave. Today, the local villages surrounding Auroville house skilled masons, carpenters and entrepreneurs earning decent incomes. Moreover, the employment of women has increased—in most units they represent between 40-70% of the workforce—and this is a powerful factor in their increasing empowerment both within the home and in village society in general. As to the quality of Auroville's products: the above-mentioned study concluded that "Auroville's prod-

ucts have become a trademark for their quality, exquisite crafts, innovation and environmental-friendly processes."

Business under the Foundation

However, Mother indicated that the commercial units should play a key role in making Auroville self-supporting—"...sections like industries which participate actively towards making [Auroville] self-supporting will contribute part of their income towards the development of the township..."—and this obviously requires that larger and more profitable undertakings are established than is the case at present. But many executives of small-scale units do not want to expand their unit, being more concerned with creativity and providing

financial support mainly for themselves and their families, and even some of our biggest units think twice about expanding further. Why? One possibility is that the particular structure of the Auroville Foundation discourages business development. Here views differ. Noting that little business on a major scale is being done under the Foundation, Ulli, executive of the software company Shuttle (which is outside the Foundation), believes that the Foundation structure acts as a straight-jacket on business activities. He points out that successful entrepreneurship involves risk-taking which, in turn, requires ownership of the assets and limited liability. However, Auroville's business units are all owned by the Foundation, which cannot promote the taking of risks, and the Trust structure under which Auroville's commercial units operate (every unit is registered under a Trust created by the Foundation) rules out formal collaborations or mergers with outside companies. Ulli further notes that the present visa policy makes it

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impossible for Aurovilians to do business independent of the Foundation. "All of which sends a very powerful message. We don't want business here."

Laura, joint chief executive of Maroma, a unit under the Foundation, disagrees. "We've experienced no restrictions doing business under the Foundation. In fact, I feel very protected in Auroville. If we were doing this business elsewhere in India, we would be subject to many more hassles." In fact, Laura's observation is shared by most other executives of commercial units.

Mr. Bala Baskar, Secretary to the Governing Board, acknowledges that the Auroville Foundation has not been designed primarily to encourage business. "The Act sees the building of the township as the prime purpose. For an individual Aurovillian, the prime reason for being in Auroville is individual transformation, not doing business, which is a secondary occupation at best. This should be the basis upon which one comes to Auroville." However, he points out that he is always willing to do his utmost to solve any problems which Auroville business people may encounter, and he indicates two big advantages to setting up business under the Foundation: Auroville's commercial units enjoy income tax exemption, and it is very easy for an Aurovillian of foreign origin to start a business here. Without the Foundation, permission from the Reserve Bank of India is required, and this is not easy to obtain for certain enterprises.

Ulli and Mukul [see accompanying interview] feel that there should be alternatives to the present business structure, both with regard to the types of business which can operate here and to the ways which they relate to Auroville. As Mukul puts it, "We should welcome friendly Indian companies which would like to base themselves in Auroville, and we should be able to experiment with other types of business in Auroville, such as public joint stock companies which, because they would be able to raise considerable amounts of equity, would enable large scale enterprise to flourish here." Mr. Bala Baskar points out that the Foundation Act has no specific provision for promoting or participating in joint stock companies. He sees a better possibility for business innovation in a Section 25 company, which is owned by the shareholders but where the profits do not accrue to the shareholders but go to the stated aim of the company: "I'm willing to investigate this possibility further if any

SRI AUROBINDO ON BUSINESS

"I may say, however, that I do not regard business as something evil or tainted, any more than it is so regarded in ancient India... Even if I myself had had the command to do business, as I had the command to do politics, I would have done it without the least spiritual or moral compunction. All depends on the spirit in which a thing is done, the principles on which it is built and the use to which it is turned." (From: *On Himself*)

Aurovillian wishes to initiate such a process."

The larger problem

"The larger problem," says Paul Pinton, joint chief executive of Maroma, "is that business in Auroville is not supported by a section of the community because they don't consider business as part of Auroville or the sadhana." "The bottom line," adds Ulli, "is that some Aurovilians take the view that money is corrupting and, therefore, that only the most evolved individuals can take up business without being infected. I've been accused of bringing corruption into the community. I've also been told that doing business takes you away from yoga because the only motivation is profit maximization!" "The core of the problem is our attitude to money," says Paul. "Many Aurovilians don't want to think about where the money that supports them comes from, and they don't want to get involved in that work because it is somehow dirty. This is ridiculous. Mother wanted an Industrial Zone where businesses generate money for Auroville, and Sri Aurobindo, in his essay 'The Mother', writes that money is one of the three forces which have to be transformed. But how can you transform it if you don't want to touch it? It's difficult, very difficult, because money is a great power, but if you are given this responsibility, you have to take it up fully."

The smaller units share the problems of 'image' with the larger units. One Aurovillian who recently set up a small business after working for years in a service unit was told by his friends, "So you've changed sides!" Yet much of the criticism in the community does not seem to be directed against business *per se*. Rather, critics object to certain practices and orientations which they associate with the way in which business—and, particularly, 'big' business—is done in Auroville. The most common criticisms are that the

commercial units do not give enough of their profits to Auroville, that the larger units keep substantial fixed-term deposits with banks, and that the unit executives have too much power to decide upon what to do with the money generated by their commercial activities, "money which belongs to Auroville and not to them." To these arguments the unit executives reply that more than 40% of their profits go directly to Auroville, the major part "unspecified," meaning that its allocation is decided upon by the Economy Group. They explain they need to keep large deposits in fixed bank accounts because they have to be self-financing (it is difficult for them to get bank loans), and as a buffer against emergencies and the vagaries of the market.

Other criticisms focus on the fact that major commercial unit executives are able to enjoy much higher maintenances and an assortment of 'perks'—including having air tickets, telephone bills, the wages of 'personal' gardeners and ammas etc. paid for by the unit—unavailable to most other Aurovilians. The reply is that Mother never intended Auroville to be a communistic society where everybody lives at the same level, but that where clear injustices exist in terms of Aurovilians receiving insufficient maintenance, the larger units are willing to help.

The situation is complex, relating to larger issues of power and authority and to inequalities of resources within the community, issues which Auroville is still wrestling with after thirty years of existence. The consequences, however, are clear: the atmosphere of distrust surrounding business acts as a powerful brake upon Auroville's commercial prosperity.

Changing the climate

How can we change the present climate which surrounds business in Auroville? One suggestion from those who are critical of present business practices is that the community should have much greater

power over the commercial units. "After all," the argument runs, "if a unit collapses with large debts, those debts may eventually fall upon the whole Foundation, so the community has a right to have some say in how a business is run." A more radical suggestion is that all profits from all the units should go directly into a Central Fund from which the units would obtain the funds necessary for their running, a system which has worked well in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

The commercial unit holders dismiss the latter suggestion as unworkable, and as evidence of how little understanding there is of the needs of business in this community. For Ulli, a combination of freedom and transparency is the key. "We should not over-regulate our commercial units but allow them to develop with as much freedom as possible. The only thing we should ask of them, beyond fulfilling certain basic requirements, is that they should be fully transparent in their accounting. We need to introduce a standardised accounting sys-

GROWTH OF THE AV COMMERCIAL UNITS

Type of business	1990	1999
Handicrafts	7	24
Clothing and fashion	9	13
Electronics & engineering	5	12
Architecture & constr.	4	10
Food	4	9
Shops and boutiques	2	9
Press, printing, graphic design, photography	3	8
Others (includes air travel service, tour operators, landscape design, marketing consultants etc.)	4	11
TOTAL	38	96

Problems of the small commercial units

Although it may be easier for Aurovilians to start a business under the Foundation, many of the smaller units find the going hard. The most common complaint is that they have to do everything on their own: raise finance, find workshop or office space, train their workers, and discover for themselves how to master the intricacies of pricing, marketing, accounting and Indian law. A number of them note how difficult it is to find a place in Auroville's Industrial Zone involving, as it does, meeting numerous—and, often, mutually antagonistic—groups and signing innumerable agreements. But their situation may be about to improve. The Auroville Board of Commerce, the umbrella organisation for commercial units in Auroville, is already offering short-term and medium-term loans for business start-ups and expansion, as well as a centralized accounting service. In the future it hopes to compile a register of all the units and their products as an aid to marketing, as well as inviting successful entrepreneurs and craftspeople from outside Auroville to come

We the undersigned Aurovilians, the founders, trustees and executives of commercial activities, wish to make the following statement at this time.

To be an Aurovillian responsible for a commercial activity means that there is no personal ownership. Our work is a service and an offering to Auroville, carried out with an attitude that reflects the Charter of Auroville.

We have come to Auroville committed to doing a Karma Yoga, a Yoga of work, putting consciousness into matter.

Our aim is to do business in a different way, and is reflected by the importance placed on our relationship with

DECLARATION

SIGNED BY THE TRUSTEES AND EXECUTIVES OF AUROVILLE'S COMMERCIAL UNITS IN SEPTEMBER 1996

the workers and clients. Our aim also is to express through our products, created and produced in an environmentally-friendly way, beauty and perfection. These products are living symbols of Auroville towards India and to the world at large.

It is understood that a substantial part of the income goes towards the maintenance and development of Auro-

ville through Auroville channels. The other part of the income goes towards the research and development of the unit for the ultimate benefit of Auroville.

As executives of commercial activities, it is important that our accounting and management be carried out with honesty and transparency.

Trust and freedom of expression in our work is necessary in order to achieve these ideals while abiding by the laws of India.

We accept the responsibility and the challenge of changing the role of money in accordance to the vision of Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

"Auroville needs to support its business"

Mukul talks about how to energize our business scene

I think we need to begin by defining this word 'business.' In Auroville, business is usually associated only with the commercial units, but this is misleading. Business can be defined as any exchange of goods, services, resources or ideas. In the Auroville context, then, rather than talking about commercial units and services (with the frequent implication that one is 'bad,' the other 'good'), it would be better to term them loss-making businesses, not-for-profit businesses and for-profit businesses.

"If, however, we confine ourselves to business as carried out by the Auroville commercial units, one of the concerns in the community seems to be what happens with the monetary profits. How, in other words, does one ensure that a fair share of the commercial units' profits flow into the community pot? Auroville operates at present with something like a 'tax' option, by asking the units to donate a minimum of 33% of their profits. This system is simple to operate, but I'd argue that in the context of Auroville it is self-limiting. Why? Because usually the response to imposed systems elsewhere is for people to try to circumvent them, minimise their contribution through creative accounting, and to argue that 'Now I've paid my taxes I can do what I like with the rest.'"

"There's another important point here. I've learned, when designing regulations in different countries relating to legal and economic policies, not to design for worst-case scenarios, because if anybody really wants to circumvent the regulations they will find a way. It's much better to design a simple and practical system that works with honest, hard-working people in mind.

(continued from page 2)

tem, and have the accounts audited by reputable outside auditors, so that everything is clear to everyone."

Some of the commercial unit holders see this as yet another example of the distrust with which certain members of the community view them. "The attitude we would like to see from members of the community is not one of distrust but of giving, of giving whatever we can to Auroville through work, kind or money," says Laura. "And we have to have full faith and confidence that something larger is moving us. I've heard business people here say, 'I don't want to expand any further.' But I don't know if we have the right to say this: maybe we are shutting the door on prosperity, on something which wants to be expressed through us."

"When a business has grown as fast as Maroma," clarifies Paul, "you realise that it's not you who is 'doing' it, but that something else is inspiring you. At certain times we've definitely felt the touch of Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the way that things have happened here, and this, more than anything else, is what we are working towards: to become channels for Their work. If we can be a model for this we def-

Mukul joined Auroville recently as a newcomer. An economist by profession, he has been working independently as an advisor to the World Bank and on European Union Technical Assistance Programs in the field of economic policy reform, especially privatization and investment management, in transition economies like those in Russia, Bulgaria, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

But there's a tendency in Auroville to assume worst-case scenarios which, in turn, is crippling our ability to develop. For example, the proposal of the Entry Group to extend the Newcomers probation period to five years will definitely put off many talented and good-willed people from joining the community.

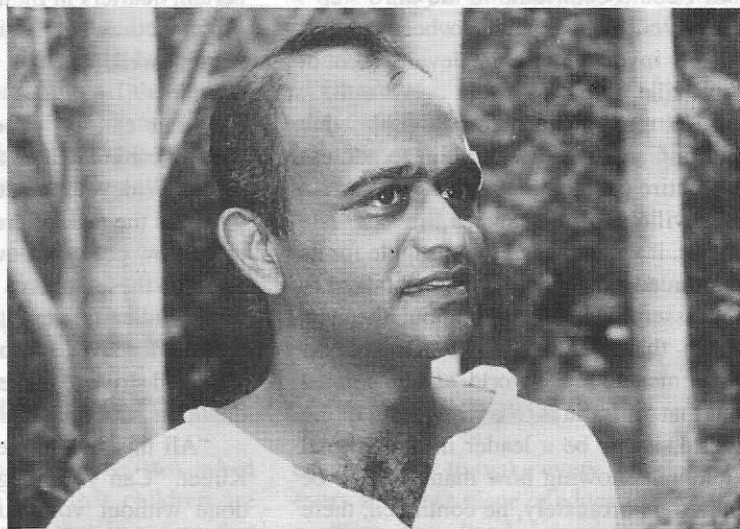
"When I look at the business situation here one thing that strikes me is that two of the most successful and innovative businesses run by Aurovilians—Shuttle and Hidesign—are outside the Auroville Foundation. The question is, are they successful because they are not in the Foundation, or is it simply because they are run by individuals with exceptional imagination and dynamism? The latter is definitely the case, but I'd also argue that the businesses are successful because their managers are not constrained by working under the Foundation. India is now more liberalised outside Auroville than it is under the Foundation. For example, foreigners can now start businesses elsewhere in India, something which is impossible for Aurovilians of foreign origin.

"How innovative are Auroville businesses compared to businesses elsewhere? Environmental responsibility is a big thing in the corporate world now and, in this respect, Auroville businesses generally score well. In terms of product design, I don't see very much regular innovation.

This is not necessarily the fault of the Foundation or of the commercial unit managers: it's more to do with Auroville as a whole lacking an environment which encourages innovation, initiative and entrepreneurship. In fact, I see some of the same 'cancers' in Auroville that I saw stemming from the system which operated in the former Soviet Union—a certain level of lack of motivation, complacency, non-transparency and inefficiency.

"How can this be changed? One way is to devise transparent mechanisms to help Aurovilians, especially our youth and those who have joined Auroville from the nearby villages, to start up their own businesses. For one of the sources of tension in the community at present seems to be unequal access to the financial resources which would allow people to enjoy a certain standard of living and to materialise their dreams. Another way is to

enable Aurovilians to more easily start Auroville businesses outside the Foundation. Yet another way to energize our business environment would be to invite outside businesses to locate in the Industrial Zone. This, of course, is a controversial proposal, but if Auroville was clear about the kind of business it would allow and under what conditions it would operate, I see great advantages. If we were to allow only zero-emission, environmentally-friendly businesses with a stated objective of being linked to Auroville in some manner, we could attract businesses and services involved, for example, in the



Mukul

PHOTO: CAREL

manufacture of wind turbines and other renewable energy technologies, software development, recycling etc. And this would mean that our young people would not have to leave Auroville to get a job and gain business experience, and it would make our business environment much more dynamic, more capable of sustaining both a city of 50,000 people and the surrounding bio-region.

"Our businesses could also do more to create new products or solutions for new markets. Many Auroville businesses are export-oriented at present. There's nothing wrong in this. It's clear, for example, that Auroville itself offers only a very limited market, and, anyway, the world is so interconnected today that if there is a global economic crash it's an end-of-the-world scenario for all of us. However, there is an additional untapped market on our doorstep, and this is the bioregion. Auroville business people have been saying for years that producing for the local bioregion would be unprofitable, but I believe this is a misconception: even the multinationals are targeting the rural market now. We could provide solutions for the local people in line with our ideals of sustainability: for example, a more efficient way of threshing rice or of spinning coconut coir into rope.

"The world badly needs new models for business—many of the present business strategies are drawn from the military!—and Auroville could and should provide alternatives. But this won't happen if the present primarily negative perception of business in the community doesn't change.

In conversation with Alan

initely have something to show the world."

Crystallized mindsets

The distrust directed by some sections of the community towards business activities may be part of a larger pattern in Auroville: a pattern of crystallized mindsets and intolerance of different perspectives which often results in groups with differing viewpoints blocking each other's proposals, and of bold new initiatives being viewed with distrust. As Paul puts it, "You have to be made of steel to be successful in Auroville today. It's much easier to keep your head down and do nothing."

And this, in turn, may be a symptom of a larger fear: of the new, of the unknown, of the next step we are being asked to take, both individually and collectively, as the pressure increases upon us to move more swiftly towards Mother's Auroville. In such a situation it's tempting to try to slow things down, to control events, to keep things somehow manageable. But Auroville moves too fast for such securities. We are left, then, as always, with the need to widen ourselves, to do our work in a spirit of surrender, and to trust that each of us—given the space—will ultimately find

his or her true role.

For too long business in Auroville has received a bad press. While, as in any other activity, there may be deformations, it's time to appreciate the crucial role that it plays, not only in the financial sense, not only as an expression of creativity and as a legitimate and very powerful field for individual sadhana, but also—as businesses depend for their very survival upon taking risks and trying out new ideas—as a prime catalyst for change. And nowhere is this more clearly expressed than in their 'mission statement', the Declaration that all the unit trustees and executives signed a few years ago:

"Our work is a service and an offering to Auroville, carried out with an attitude which reflects the Charter of Auroville...Our aim is to do business in a different way, and is reflected by the importance placed on our relationship with the workers and clients. Our aim also is to express through our products, created and produced in an environmentally friendly way, beauty and perfection...We accept the responsibility and challenge of changing the role of money in accordance to the vision of Mother and Sri Aurobindo."

Alan

"We need to move rapidly rather than slowly."

From the opening talk by Kireet Joshi, Chairman of the Governing Board, on the Solar Kitchen roof

Kireet began by giving a short address on the theme of human unity. He then recalled that the Mother had told him there were three steps in her work. The first one was to create the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education in the Ashram, the second was the building of Auroville, and the third was the building up of a new India and a new world. Kireet was very much involved in the first, but initially he missed out on the second step because he left the Ashram to take up a post in the Government of India, "where I felt I could contribute to the third step". However, he was soon to become intimately involved with the development of Auroville.

He remembered, for example, that Indira Gandhi had asked him to address the entire cabinet at a critical juncture in Auroville's affairs, when, in the late 1970s, it was engaged in a struggle for its continued existence. Kireet had talked to the assembled ministers about the new Truth that the Mother said had to be implemented in the world, and he pointed out that "if India is to be the leader of the world, it can be a leader in one special field—in showing how mankind can be united". Fortunately, he continued, there is a place where people from many nations had come together to make an experiment in human unity, in order to show India and the world that it is practicable. And that place was Auroville.

When Kireet finished his presentation, Indira got up and said, "Now we decide to help Auroville".

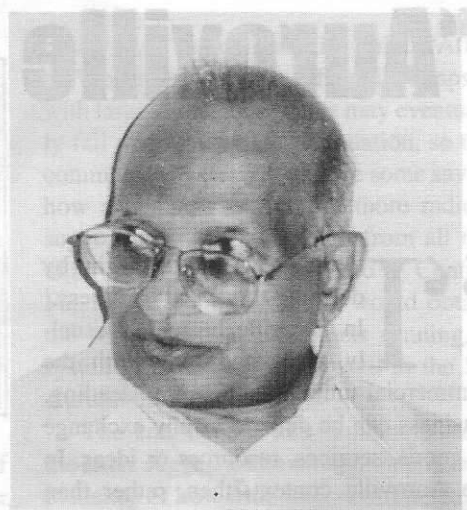
"But where are we, today, in the light of our great ideals?" asked Kireet. "We are beginning a new chapter, but there is a great need to move rapidly rather than slowly towards something new." He explained that while Auroville has achieved certain things which he admires very much—that today, in comparison to the insecurity of the late 1970s, Auroville is "vibrating, active, working"—Auroville does not have a good image in certain quarters in India. "Let me tell you brutal facts. What is said is that Auroville started well, but it's all sliding down now."

What can be done to rectify this? Kireet noted that there are important lacuna in our development: that Mother has given us the task of creating a new society, a new polity, a new economy, yet in none of these spheres do we have anything radically new to present to the world. Moreover, Mother had written that "We will strive to make Auroville the cradle of the superman".

"All this is a tremendous task," said Kireet. "Can you imagine that it can be done without voluntary service to the Divine Consciousness? We are only here to collaborate. It's not a matter of how many hours we work. It's a matter of each of us feeling that what we did today was far, far less than what we should have

Kireet Joshi

In January the Government of India appointed Kireet Joshi a member of the International Advisory Council, and at their first meeting he was made Chairman. In April, the Government also appointed him Chairman of the Governing Board, and it was in this capacity that, a few weeks later, he revisited the community.



Kireet Joshi joined the Ashram in 1956, and from 1958-69 was Assistant Registrar of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. Subsequently, on the passing of Pavitra, he became Registrar. In 1976 he left the Ashram on being invited by Indira Gandhi to join her Government as special adviser on education. Kireet has played a key role in the development of Auroville. He often visited in the early years, advising in particular on educational matters. Later he was instrumental in convincing the Indian Government to support Auroville in a critical phase of its existence; he was the inspiration behind the founding of SAIER and many of its subsequent activities, and his was the guiding hand in the framing of the Auroville Foundation Act.

Kireet made a point of meeting many individuals and working groups and of visiting various schools and work places. He also gave two talks to the whole community which were listened to with great concentration, and, on his last evening, he gave an interview to Auroville Today. On these pages we feature extracts from the talks and the interview which have been edited by Alan.

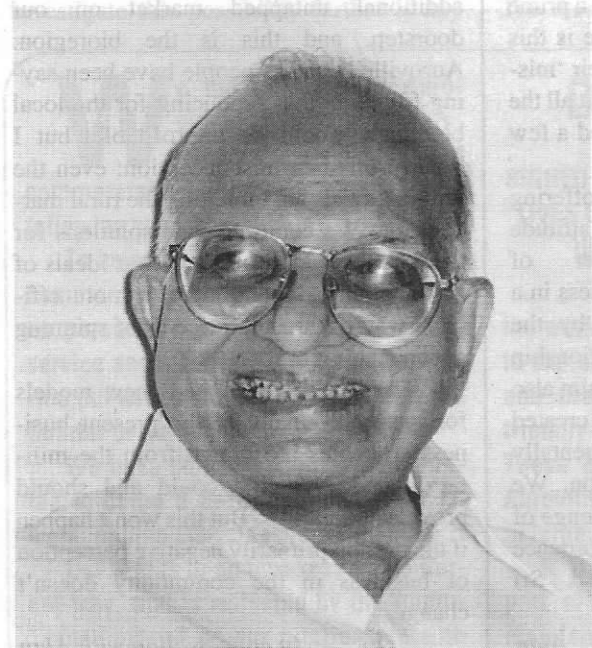
done."

Kireet concluded with a suggestion: that each resident member of Auroville sincerely sign a voluntary pledge that "we are here to fulfil Mother's dream of building a new world". At this point Santo, an Aurovilian, remarked that he had already signed a contract with Sri Aurobindo "in my heart". "This is enough," replied

Kireet. "If everybody signs that—'my contract is with Sri Aurobindo and Mother'—it is enough, because this contract is of such a nature that it cannot allow you to rest thereafter. And I can sleep very peacefully and proclaim to the whole world that all the criticisms of Auroville have no meaning, for our progress is certain."

AVT: During the past two days you have met many people and groups. What is your impression of Auroville, and has this visit modified any impression that you might have had previously?

Kireet: First of all I must say that if there is any love in my life, it is Auroville and the ideals of Auroville. Whether I work here or there or anywhere else, my entire life is given to a prayer that these ideals will be realized. I believe that if these ideals are fulfilled, even to some extent, they will open the next step of



"There is a great possibility of a new awakening"

From an interview with Auroville Today

humanity's march. For Auroville, to my mind, is the only place where a new model of living can be created for the world.

My experience of a few days here has shown me that there is a large group of people in Auroville who are dedicated to the aims of Auroville; that there is a good deal of inner search going on in Auroville people, and that there is a great possibility of a new awakening in Auroville. So if you ask me if I now have a new perception, I would say that whereas before I had a question mark, that question mark is to some extent reduced.

If I still have some reservations, it is only because I would very much like Auroville to move rapidly towards a new form of economy, a new form of political organization. And since there is not very much serious thought going on in Auroville concerning these matters I have some pain in my heart. What I also find is that the

child is not in the centre of Auroville: the adults are too concentrated elsewhere. This is a painful fact. So that requires a social reorganization such that the children really come to be the focus. I notice also that, because of historical reasons, there is a kind of mistrust of the system of dialogue. There used at one time to be Pour Tous meetings and much dialogue, but people got fed up at a certain stage, and the feeling persists that there's no point in dialogue as it always ends up in useless discussions. Now I'm not in favour of endless discussions, but I am also opposed to too much closure. There has to be a real dialogue about important issues, an introspection, to see that here there are certain negative elements. Why should we hide this and say we are wonderful and ideal? No, we are all human beings with all kinds of tendencies, but we are here to see that as soon as possible we make a march ahead.

This seems to link with your idea of a "pledge" to be taken by all residents of Auroville. Could you explain the thinking behind this?

It is an experimental idea. We are facing in Auroville a very difficult problem. This problem is that the concept of Auroville cannot be fragmented—either you have the full Auroville or it will perish. Now we are in a state where we have to move towards a fullness of the development of Auroville. When Mother spoke of 50,000 people for the population of Auroville, it is as if She is telling us that if we want the fullness of life, opulence, richness of life, with all kinds of interrelationships, then we should have 50,000 people. Everywhere we don't have sufficient manpower. Therefore the fullness will only come when there are 50,000 people living together.

This means that we have to acquire land enough to get that idea of the fullness of Auroville. But now we find that other people want to take advantage of all that we have done here. We have planted a million trees and made this place so beautiful, and people from elsewhere now have the idea that if they put up a hotel here, people will flock to it. And we shall be in great danger.

Now the Land Development Group's position is that somehow we should persuade the Government to give us a special status by which it is known that this land will be used only for Auroville. But the Government's central question will be, "Why should we enter into this problem in Auroville?" "What is the speciality of Auroville which will justify this?"

(continued from page 4)

It is in that context, as a brother of everyone here, I thought that Auroville has to base its argument for this special treatment on three grounds. Firstly, it has to say 'Here are the ideals of Auroville which are unique, and which have been proclaimed by Sri Aurobindo who is indisputably the greatest philosopher and saint of our times.'

The second point we have to make is that we have already made developments: we have to describe all our achievements. Thirdly, we must say that the ideals of

this task on behalf of humanity, we are soldiers of humanity. We want humanity to be benefited on the right lines. Therefore it is important, as Mother said, that you inform people about Auroville. We have to tell the people that here is an ideal, this is a work that is being done and we want to develop in this way. Much more has to be done. But here was a society which started from scratch, which had difficulties in feeding itself at a given time, and now, within a few years, it has a turnover of 20 crore of rupees while developing so much in other ways. What a great example it is, what a



Auroville include two important desiderata: an attempt to build an alternative political organization and an alternative economic organization.

In other words, we need to show that the present prosperity of the community is still not enough, that even greater prosperity is possible. But this prosperity does not take us on the path where normal prosperity takes humanity. We want to create a society in which, as Mother had said, money should not be the lord, where there will be no exchange of money and where people will not necessarily go into possessing this and possessing that. Now, unfortunately, we are not in a position today to say to the world that we have achieved this. Therefore, the only recourse that we can take is to say that we are determined to see that these ideals in the field of a new organization are realised. That we are determined to work on this, and here is our pledge that we will do so.

What do you think is Auroville's role in relationship to India as a whole?

The very fact that Auroville is located in India has a significance for Auroville and its intimate connection with India. If Auroville is to be of service to humanity, if Auroville is to contribute to raising the consciousness of humanity, it seems that from the present logic of the situation, India will be a first field to uplift. Therefore Auroville has to concentrate upon India as a means of serving humanity in a very concentrated, methodical manner: one of the indispensable steps in serving humanity is to raise India.

Now many people in Auroville feel that they are here for Auroville and not for India. According to me, this is a mistaken idea. One of the purposes of Auroville is to be a model, and what is the meaning of a model if it is not projected properly and doesn't have an effect? We are taking up

great lesson to India. Again, you can teach India how to make arid land a green land. This example can be given to the whole of India—it's a problem all over India—you have shown how it can be done. It's a marvellous example. If India is poor it is because people have no enterprise, they do not want to think big, they do not want to work big. But here is an example—you can do it. Only you have not been able to project it, to communicate it sufficiently to India.

The second point is that Auroville has a freedom to act in a new manner, which is necessary for India and the world.

Was the Auroville Foundation Act, which you conceived, primarily intended to preserve this freedom?

Yes. There were two factors in my mind when I conceived of the Foundation Act. One was that Auroville should not come to be exploited by any outside body. I, personally, am an anarchist—what Mother called a divine anarchist. I do not want any human being to be subjected to any kind of subjection, except by the Divine. Therefore although it was necessary to create an authority for Auroville, my concern was to create such conditions that no authority could subject the freedom of Aurovilians to any kind of slavery or subjection. So the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council are like a check and balance on each other—if one hand is too authoritarian the other can loosen it—so Aurovilians feel there is a protecting hand and their freedom to pursue the ideals is not in any way hampered. This is the idea.

However, at present you are Chairman of both the International Advisory Council and the Governing Board. This may be in contradiction to the stated aim that the bodies act as a check and

balance upon each other in a conflict. Will you continue to be on both bodies?

What is your advice? (laughter) I'll listen to what people have to say...

My other concern in conceiving the Act was that, if there is an assembly, the Aurovilians would use it to create a new form of social and political organization in the light of Sri Aurobindo's writings. This whole Act was so conceived that mature individuals would be able to devise a new form in which individual freedom and social fulfilment would be reconciled. That, according to me, is the purpose of Auroville in its social and political aspects. That is why I give a great importance to the formation of the Residents Assembly.

But did you conceive of the Residents Assembly being a big meeting, at which 1,800 people would sit together?

My idea was that meetings could be conducted up to a maximum of 2,000 people, and by the time you reached 2,000, you would have found ways and means by which the original aim would have been fulfilled. My aspiration was if the people of Auroville really met at a mature level, by now you would have been able to create an alternative form to what we call democ-

racy today. But this has not happened—this is the one point of pain in my heart.

Could you conceive of different forms for different phases of Auroville's development, so that every phase would find its own true form or expression?

The future form is unforeseeable. Sri Aurobindo has written in another context that the future form has to be worked out—nobody can foresee it—but if you start really responsibly dealing with your social problems, political problems, and if those who are discussing are absolutely dedicated to individual freedom, out of that a new form will emerge.

Some people think that will take a lot of time. I do not share that view. Given the mentality which exists today among a large number of Aurovilians, if a decision is taken at a collective level that, yes, from now onwards we shall look at all our problems and deal with them, we can move fast. Don't say it will take 2,000 years, that in 2,000 years we will be ready. This is not the answer!

Ultimately, we all have to ask ourselves, are we really trying to live the life that Mother has said will collaborate with the birth of the superman?

"Make the child sovereign"

From a talk at the College Guest-house

"Mother told me that when you see that children are happy, that is a sign that they are progressing. One general remark I can make—every child I saw in Auroville was happy. Similarly, I found a great sense of responsibility and dedication among the teachers. So I feel that the children here are being looked after very well. Why then do some parents feel that their children should be sent away for their education? It seems that what is needed is to take the present experiment farther."

At this point, Kireet recalled an experiment initiated in the Ashram School by Mother. For four years, all lectures were abolished: everything had to be communicated and learnt through worksheets. "The idea behind it was that only in an atmosphere of silence is true knowledge born". At the end of it the teachers learned that silencing the mind is a matter of communicating in a certain way rather than of suppressing speech.

"In other words, we learned to be flexible. This links with what Mother once told me: 'There should be no dogma in education' or, as Sri Aurobindo put it, 'The good teacher has no method and every method'. One of the most important things I've learned on this visit is that in Auroville there is a tremendous effort to combine many methods of education, there is a great flexibility of approach, and this is very good.

"But what about the future programme of education in Auroville? I think one of the greatest needs is for a large number of teachers. So, just as in the Ashram we had very eminent people teaching in the school, I would like to invite eminent people in Auroville, architects, engineers and others with great knowledge in their field, not only to come to teach at the centres of

education but to make every work place, every activity a place of education.

"For, after all, what do students want? Every child wants to fly: the movement of the soul is such that its kinship is with the sky. No child would like to leave a school if he knows that here are teachers who can make him fly. So that is what we need—a sufficient number of teachers who can fly with the students to higher levels of thought and experience. In this sense, it's important that all of us become students, that none of us stops learning. Sri Aurobindo, in one of his aphorisms, remarked that knowledge is invincible when it is fresh. So we are truly educated when we are constantly fresh, when we encounter every experience with freshness. This, I think, is the true character of Auroville.

"Children here are happy, but the children are not in the centre of Auroville, for the adults are busy elsewhere. This is where a new emphasis needs to be laid in the community. All our energies should be poured on the children, and no activity should be allowed in the community which will injure a child's growth. This requires a great discipline on the part of all the adults. In fact, this gives meaning to Mother's statement that Auroville is a site for unending education. For if all of us become students, and look upon our work as a work conducted by students for the sake of students, we shall have gained access to the real meaning of Auroville.

"Here we are given the tremendous privilege of redesigning society from scratch. My request is, please make Auroville a place—the only place in the world as yet—where the child is sovereign. Please ensure that all the possibilities are here so that children do not want to go elsewhere for education. This is my prayer to all of you today."

Our daily bread, and more...

TWO AUROVILLE BAKERIES

It's a pleasure to step into the Auroville Bakery (near Kuilapalayam) and be met with the most wonderful odours of fruit tarts, Dutch butter cake, mazariner, banana muffins, apple strudel, mushroom quiche, cheese bread and vegetable pizza. Not only do things smell good, but the place has recently been remodelled: there is a well-lit three-tiered glass case to display the delicious items, and more improvements are on the way.

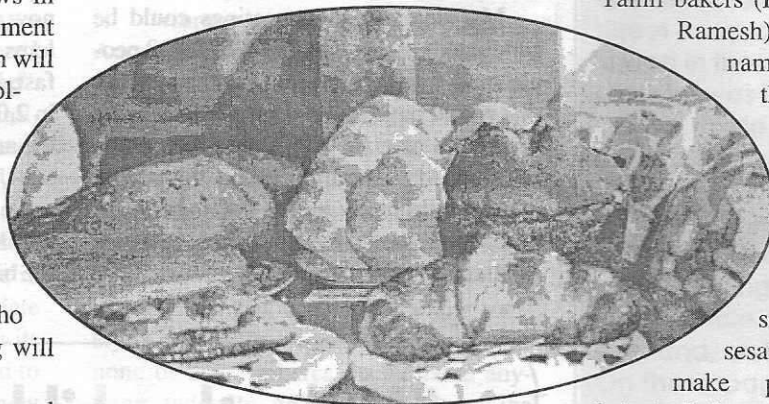
Agnes has been with the Bakery off and on since 1993. Up to her elbows in dough, she explains that at the moment they are renovating a storeroom which will become a cold baking room. With cooling racks and fridge installed, they will be able to make croissants and baguettes. Earlier attempts at these French delicacies were greeted with enthusiasm, but the *aficionados* were not satisfied with the dough, (the butter kept melting) and those who know and dearly love the real thing will now shortly be satisfied.

The bakers start working at 6 a.m., and the croissant bakers arrive as early as 3:30. There are now eight full-time and two part-time Aurovilians on the staff, along with ten employees from the village and three

cleaning ladies.

"We make 40 different cakes", explains Iyanar, a Tamil Aurovilian who helps with the accounting and orders, "besides muffins, bread, buns, biscuits, and pies."

"We try to buy all our ingredients from Auroville itself," says Kathrin. "Our corn, ragi, samai and varagu come from Annapurna Farm. These local grains are mixed with whole wheat and white flour, which is necessary because of the lack of gluten in the local grains."



"Villagers are also buying Auroville bread. About 10% of our bread is sold to villagers," says Iyanar. "People come even from far away places and foreigners who

pass through this area stop here and buy our bread."

Across town, in Kottakarai, if you're hungry for chocolate cake or vegetable puffs, you can visit the Ganesh Bakery. This bakery was started in 1994 by Sundaram, its manager. Now there are four bakers, three assistants and one lady at the counter. The place is small, with a sitting area in front where you can take your tea and soft bun and relax. The

Tamil bakers (Durai, Segar, Manu and Ramesh) proudly reel off the

names of the various items they make, including:

bread (wheat, white, light, sesame, and ragi), coconut rolls, chocolate cake, lemon tart, butter cookies, and ragi, sorghum, kambu and sesame biscuits. "We also make pizza, muffins, and brioche," Segar says with the proper French accent.

"We would like to have a mill," Sundaram adds, "where we can grind our own flour from local millets. We would

like to make a threshing floor and dryers. If we want to go really organic, it means a lot of follow-up with the village farmers. But I can explain to them what to do, since I am a farmer myself. We are teaching them how to grow our local ragi and kambu, organically, without using chemical pesticides. I hope we can show them how to make natural pesticides using local herbs. Since I attended the permaculture course, I can teach the villagers, especially the cashew farmers, and tell them the reasons why it is an advantage to spray without chemicals."

As we speak, morning tea time arrives and a number of workers drift in to enjoy their tea and a bun. They sit quietly at the rough table, sipping quickly and dipping the soft bread into the sweet hot liquid.

"I am building an extension in the back," continues Sundaram, "where the children from the village night school and from the Auroville schools can come and learn how to bake. It is especially nice for them during their two-month vacation time. They can learn something useful and it keeps young children occupied. It's a good training," he says proudly. "After all, here baking is research."

Interview by Jill

A stone mason from Salisbury

Young, blonde and slightly built, Sarah did not fit my image of a stone mason. But a stone mason she is, and she assures me that there are quite a few of them, women stone masons that is, at Salisbury Cathedral, England, where she used to work.

"My job in Salisbury," says Sarah, "was to replace the eroded stones in the

like the precision involved in this work—the need to use both one's head and hands.

"Salisbury Cathedral Works Dept. was also involved in the repair and conservation of old buildings in the area. Site work is fun because it involves a number of different jobs, from mortar repair and fixing of new stones to documenting the structure of the building. I guess this is how I became interested in conserving old buildings and ended up doing a course in York

last year on conservation. I was doing my dissertation on vaults for this course, and seeing my interest a fellow student who was doing a Ph.D. on earth building, suggested that I write to CRATerre in France to find a trainer in vaulting. As it turned out, CRATerre, along with a couple of other names, suggested Satprem of Auroville Building Centre to me. As Satprem was the only person who had work available, I booked my ticket for Auroville.

"I have been training with Satprem in diverse aspects of building vaults. I got hands-on experience helping build a huge dome for the Isha Yoga Centre near Coimbatore. (See box on this page.) But there is of course lots more to learn. I am especially interested in being able to calculate the thrust and the forces in a vault—the engineering aspect that holds a vault



Vault at the Auroville Building Centre

cathedral with new ones. To do that one has to measure and make a mould of the old stone, and use the mould to carve out a new stone, and then fix it back in place. I specialize primarily in the working of the new stone. I work mainly by hand, using a mallet and a chisel, but of course, if need be, there are angle-grinders and circular saws for cutting out the larger shapes. I

PHOTO CAREL



Sarah

together. One day I would like to build vaults of stones. But I have a long, long way to go... At the moment, I take advantage of every moment Satprem has to learn from him.

"Being interested in conservation and vaulting, an old, abandoned pilgrims' resting place, the 'choultry' on the way to Repos with its lime-plastered brick vault, intrigued me and I have been studying its architecture. I hope that Ajit who tries to conserve old buildings in Pondy through INTACH (see AVT #123) can make use of my drawings and photographs. In this regard, I am shocked to find how little people care about conservation in India. I used to find the attitude of people back home apathetic, but here it is ten times worse!"

Sarah, who is self-employed, is due to return to England in May, but she hopes to come back to India in the fall to help Satprem build another vault in Coimbatore.

Bindu

A MILLENNIUM DOME

The Auroville Building Centre/Earth Unit recently designed and built a unique dome. The dome is part of the newly constructed Dhynalingam temple for the ISHA Foundation at Poondi near Coimbatore. The designer of this temple, architect Karthikeyan, built the foundations and walls.

The dome has a diameter of 22.16 m. and is free spanning (built without a mould).

Guru Jaggi Vasudev set a tight schedule from the beginning. Therefore we were compelled to use fired bricks instead of compressed earth blocks, which need 3 to 4 months to dry. The fired bricks were quite odd and irregular in shape which made our work much more difficult.

It took us and our 220 workers nine weeks to lay the 2,14,000 fired bricks needed for the dome. Its total estimated weight came to 570 tons.

No reinforced concrete was used in any part of the building: neither for the foundations, nor for the plinths or ties for the dome. Guru Jaggi wanted the dome to last at least 1000 years and reinforced concrete has not yet been proven to last that long. The stability of the dome is intended to be maintained solely by compression forces. The foundations and walls were built in random rubble masonry with granite stones in lime mortar.

The dome was completed on the full moon day of January 31st, 1999. It will stand for a long time!

A. Satprem, AV-BC Earth Unit

Passings

LIESKE

Lieske, the most elderly Aurovilian, passed away peacefully on the morning of the 28th April at the age of 94. She came to Auroville from Holland in 1973 and never again left India. Her presence in the Matrimandir Nursery was instrumental in making the Nursery into the oasis of health and loveliness which it presently is, for she devoted herself to looking after the plants, trees and shrubs growing there.

Lieske's body was buried in Adventure forest after a simple ceremony.

MYRTLE

On Thursday, 15th April, in the presence of her two daughters, Myrtle left her body in her home near Las Vegas after a long battle with cancer. Old-timers from the Auroville of the 1970s will remember her staunch and solid presence, and her generosity in hosting Pour Tous meetings in her house—Tapaloka—in Certitude. As Jack Alexander put it, "Even when things were not perfect, she would always go out of her way to make us feel comfortable. Her gift of friendship and joy is very much in my memory".

ANNE

Early on the morning of Friday, May 14th, Anne Herbert passed away in Auroville, due to heart failure. Anne was a regular visitor to Auroville for 18 years and finally left France to settle here for good in 1993. We featured her and her partner, Mark, in an article in Auroville Today no. 116, September 1998.

As Mauna put it, "because of her unceasing and warm-hearted work as a psychotherapist for young and old, and because of her exceptional energy and outgoing nature, she will be sorely missed by many".

JOY

Joy Calvert, one of the founders of Auroville International UK, passed away on the 19th of May 1999. She was 93. Along with her companion Edith Schnapper she hosted many Aurovilians in their beautiful house in the English countryside.



The fixing of the glass mirrors to the solar bowl at the Cuisine Solaire Pour Tous, or Solar Kitchen, is now complete. The bowl is expected to be operational in August.

In Brief

New building for VAG

On the occasion of the Tamil festival of Chitra Poomima, the Auroville Village Action Group invited everybody to the former AGRC building, which has now been renamed the Isai Ambalam Resource and Training Centre, for a re-dedication of their work of co-evolution between Auroville and the villages. There were displays by the Health Centre, the Life Education Centre and Harvest among others, and a talk on The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and their relevance to our work by senior Aurovilians of Tamil origin.

A special gift

Water Harvest invited Aurovilians to a dedication ceremony on the occasion of receiving two excavators donated by the Sri Dorabji Tata Trust for Harvest's work of tank restoration in the bioregion. The excavators were driven all the way from Mumbai.

Auro-air?

While the temperature rises above 38°C., Auroville is experiencing its yearly exodus. Over 400 Aurovilians are reported missing so far, and some flights from Madras airport had large groups of Aurovilians on board.

One group of outward-bound Aurovilians had their hired bus break down twice—once in Auroville and once on the way to the airport. They finally had to hitch lifts with passing lorries... but still caught their flight.

Collector's edition of AVNews

After a three weeks' absence due to a computer failure, the AVNews turned up in a collector's edition. As the editors put it on the front page: "hand typed, white-exxed, flawed, incomplete and archive quality, but... full of goodwill." As a result, their computer was fixed within 24 hours.

Udavi School

The management of Udavi Gentilesse school, founded by Maggi and Nata in the vil-

lage of Edayanchavadi is to be taken over by a team of Aurovilians on a trial basis for a two year period starting in June. The school has a student body of 250 students, mainly from the village of Edayanchavadi, and offers classes up to Indian 10th standard. The school used to be managed by the Auroshikha incense factory and had been closed due to labour problems. Its reopening is the result of an agreement between the Sri Aurobindo Udyog Trust, Udavi School and the Auroville Foundation.

Concentration upon land

On Friday, 14th May, some 500 Aurovilians assembled in the Amphitheatre. They heard Guy of the Land Fund group tell them that Auroville's physical integrity is at risk because of land speculation, and that if we don't secure the remaining land in the next two years we will be facing tremendous difficulties. The gathering closed with a silent call for Mother's Grace.

Miami conquers the Himalayas

Johnny may have become the first person to conquer the Annapurna Pass (5,400 metres) in the Himalayas wearing Miami chappals, the preferred footwear of Auroville. Johnny wrote to the manufacturers thanking them for their excellent product, without which he would have had to trek in bare feet.

Quote of the month

"Auroville belongs to nobody in particular, Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be a willing SURVIVOR of the Divine Consciousness." (From a Government of India report on Auroville)

Overheard

"This community is highly predictable in its perceptions. The default setting is negative." (Ulli, a computer buff, on the community's response to new initiatives.)

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Legends of the Land: The Mariamman statue

Hundreds of years ago the village of Edayanchavadi—along with Kottakarai and Irumbai—was the last outpost before Pondicherry of the territory ruled by the Raja of Gingee. Two *chatrams* or pilgrim shelters were built in Edayanchavadi under the orders of one raja Desingh; one of them is used today as an Auroville health sub-centre for the village. The inscriptions on the *chatrams* are in ancient Tamil and can no longer be read by the local villagers. Here, in our occasional series Legends of the Land, is a story to do with the annual Edayanchavadi festival.

Once a year in the summer, the village of Edayanchavadi celebrates a seven-day temple festival that culminates at sunset on the sixth day in a fire-walking ceremony in which hundreds of villagers, watched by a crowd of thousands, walk across a bed of burning coals. The atmosphere and fervour builds up throughout the afternoon as the bed of coals is fanned with leafy neem branches, and three village elders holding tridents—symbolic of the earth goddess—are drenched with oil, rice, turmeric, chilli and water before finally drinking three draughts of chilli water. The villagers, clad in yellow lungis, who will follow the elders across the coals, will have undertaken a strict regime of purification throughout the week. The walk is preceded by a crescendo of music and drums, prayers and invocations to the goddess Mariamman, “the colorful pearly-rain goddess”, whose statue will be brought out of the temple following the fire-walk and carried in procession around the village in order to bless it for the coming year.

The goddess Mariamman offers protection from evil, danger and epidemics—particularly smallpox, and can be represented both in her benign and terrifying aspects. The *neem* tree is particularly sacred to her and only *neem* wood is used for the fire. In 1922, after the new temple was built, the priest had a dream in which Mariamman told him to organise a yearly fire-walk in her honour. Following the fire-walk, trucks will also be pulled around the village by devotees with hooks stuck into their flesh, and the fervour and spirit of celebration built up through the day will continue well into the night.

Edayanchavadi is the largest and one of the older villages in the Auroville region, and its strong agrarian roots are still in evidence today. On the first day of the festival, seeds are planted on a plot of earth within the temple area—a symbolic grid map of sorts—and farmers will sow more intensively in areas corresponding to where the seeds sprout on the temple plot. The ashes from the firewalk will then be placed in the earthen vessels containing the seeds that the farmers will sow. Today, however, ashes are also scattered onto cashew trees. Farm work will not begin until after the firewalk and it is hoped that the first rains will come within a couple of weeks of the festival.

A legend exists concerning the Mariamman statue that is brought out of the Edayanchavadi temple during the festival after the firewalk. The legend was recounted to me by Erumalai, a village leader.

Many years ago the villagers of what is today called Edayanchavadi wanted to celebrate their festival, but the precious statue of Mariamman,

their goddess and protector, a statue made out of five different precious metals, had been stolen from its location under a tree near to where the temple stands today. The festival could not be held until the statue was found. The four thieves had at first hidden the statue in the upper roof of a cowshed, but this burned down and was destroyed. The thieves found the statue “shining, with the power of the goddess in the ashes”. It was then buried in a well, but the well ran dry. They then tried to break it up in order to sell pieces of its precious metal, but two thieves who struck it with blows died on the spot. The two remaining thieves then buried the statue in a faraway river bed near Villianur.

A drought began to afflict the land as no steps had been taken to retrieve the statue, and the villagers became worried and decided to undertake a special ceremony in order to try and locate it. A seven-year old girl went into a prophetic trance and, possessed by the spirit of the goddess, recounted the story of how the statue had been stolen and where it could be located. One of the two remaining thieves who had struck the statue—he had damaged it by striking it on the cheek—had gone blind and the other who became scared had a change of heart and repented of his actions and prayed for forgiveness. The villagers were finally able to locate the statue in the river bed as the water flowed around where it had been buried and lightning rose skyward from the spot. The young girl then informed the villagers that the statue should be brought back to Irumbai to be washed and a purification ceremony should be conducted. Although camphor was lit, the ceremony was not conducted in full, and when the villagers tried to carry it back to their village the statue became so heavy that they could no longer lift it. The goddess then spoke through the young girl again and said that the people of the village had to become united if they wanted her to come back and protect them. “If you overcome your differences and become united I’ll be with you forever and no one will ever take me away.” The village did become united and when the ceremony was conducted only two people were needed to carry her statue back to the village.

The king learnt of the story and decided that the remaining thieves should be punished. However, in a dream the goddess told him, “Do not punish the blind man as he was the instrument of my play. I used him to manifest and reveal my power in order to bring back unity into the village.” As a result, the blind man was appointed to serve in the temple and eventually had his vision restored. The king then had the first temple built as well as the *chatrams*, and the *kolam* (tank) that still stands in the village today.

Roger (In collaboration with Mary and Paul Vincent)

AUROVILLE TODAY

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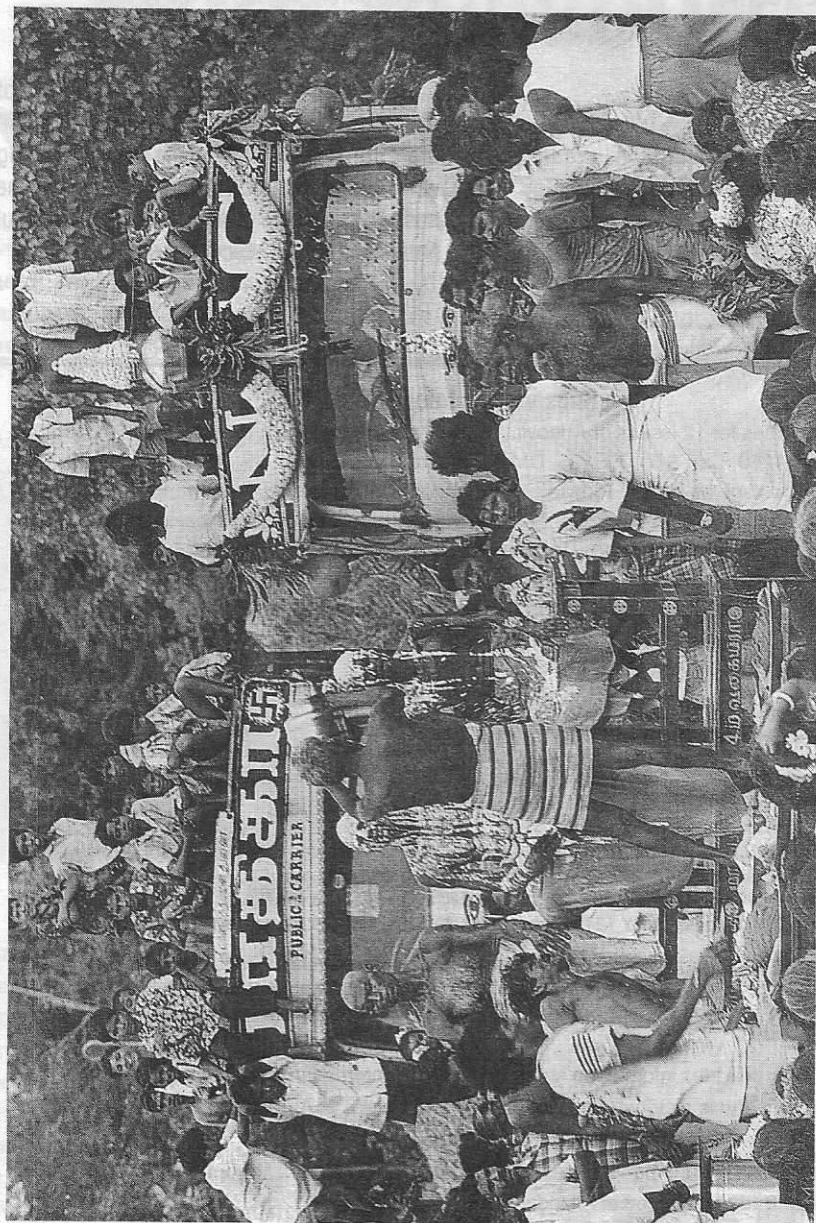


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AUROVILLE ARCHIVES
C/O KRISHNA T.
BHARAT NIVAS
AUROVILLE

June 1999
Number 125



Edayanchavadi festival preparations: Village elders being drenched with oil, rice, turmeric, chilli and water. Photo: Sven