

# Auroville Today

APRIL 2008, No.230

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

## Auroville's visitors and guests

The past guest season has been the busiest by far. The tensions it has generated in Aurovilians and visitors alike is raising searching questions like, what are our expectations of visitors and guests? What can they bring? Can we do more for them? And how can we prevent Auroville becoming, as one Aurovillian put it, "a second Goa"?

It's not just the volume of guests which is different this year. Some Aurovilians feel that, while many guests are attracted by the ideal, we are increasingly attracting a different kind of visitor, one more interested in attending cheap workshops, or simply "chilling out". On the other hand, some guests complain that "Auroville just wants our money."

So what is the reality? And what can we do about it?

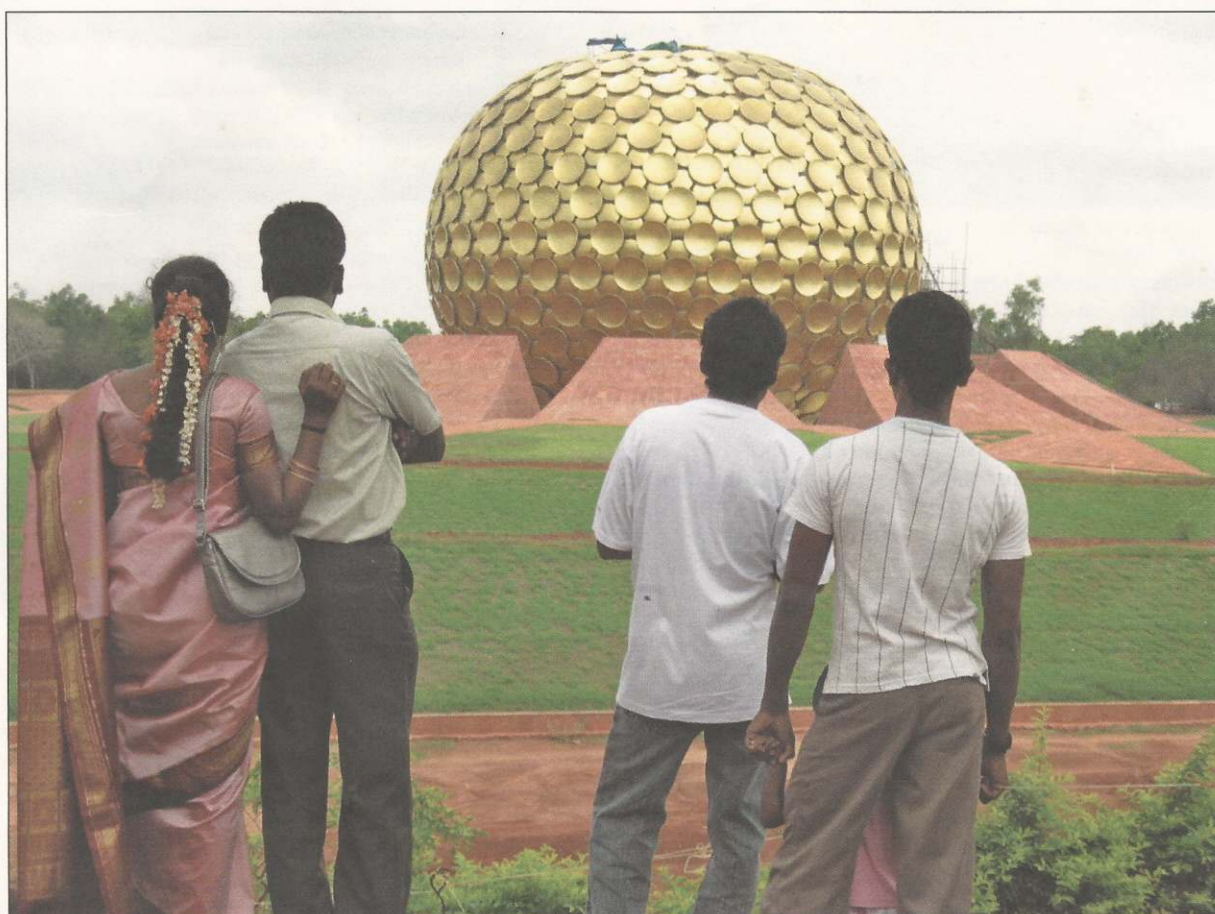
### Day visitors

To begin with, we need to distinguish between day visitors and those who stay longer in Auroville guest-houses. Most day visitors are handled by the Visitors Centre. The main attraction is, of course, the Matrimandir. "If people are given the freedom, they will simply rush straight there," says Nicole, one of the managers of the Visitors Centre. "I see one of our main functions as breaking that wave so that they go on to the Matrimandir in a quieter state of mind. So visitors are encouraged first to see a Matrimandir video and an exhibition on Auroville and then they walk, or are taken in an electric shuttle, the last kilometre to Matrimandir."

Future plans include shifting the parking – and, therefore, the 'wave' – further to the west of the Visitors Centre. Visitors would then take a short walk across a canyon and would enter the Visitors Centre complex through a gate or portal, "to mark they are entering Auroville's space".

### Visiting the Matrimandir

"For us," says Gilles, a member of the Matrimandir Access Group, "the Visitors Centre fulfils a crucial role in filtering and informing visitors before they reach us. People cannot understand that the Matrimandir is not a temple, that it is the soul of Auroville, if they have not first understood something about Auroville itself."



Day visitors at the viewing-point

The Matrimandir Access Group has its own method of 'filtration'. Gilles points out that 90% of the day visitors just want to catch a glimpse of the Matrimandir. "For them we've created a viewing-point outside the oval because Mother said that people will only have access to this special area with permission." Serious visitors have to book in advance. They are given a short introduction explaining the meaning of the Matrimandir and the fact that this is neither a traditional religious temple nor a place for rituals. Then they are taken to the Chamber where they can sit for 10-15 minutes. The next time they visit, they can sign up to attend the one-hour visitors' meditation.

"People understand this process very well, and they are very happy with it."

But the number of visitors to the Matrimandir is increasing dramatically – 69,000 in December, 63,000 in January and 46,000 in February, an increase of 60% over the same months last year. Can the Matrimandir management cope?

"It's an extraordinary challenge," admits Gilles. "I see the Matrimandir as one of the main tools to communicate something of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother to India and the world: it is radiating something. On the other hand, I see that people in a mass lower the atmosphere. Normally we limit our introduction talk and experience to 70 people and another 70 people can attend the one-hour visitors' meditation. At Christmas and the New Year there were so many visitors we doubled the allocation but immediately the atmosphere in the Chamber fell dramatically. So now our main concern is to preserve the quality of the atmosphere and to favour those who are really serious."

"What we cannot do is to forbid someone going to Matrimandir, even if we sense that a person is unsuitable. In most cases you simply can't tell! People select themselves because we ask them to make a little effort. As Mother said, 'They have to ask'."

Have the Matrimandir Access Group considered extending the opening time for visitors? "We do extend it on peak days but some of us feel strongly that generally we should confine the visiting time to two hours a day."

### Providing more information

The Visitors Centre is also feeling the pressure of the increased numbers of visitors throughout the year. "It's an enormous work for everybody here," says Nicole. "This year we were able to handle it, but in the future our facilities may become so strained that people, especially those coming with organised tours, may have to book ahead."

Part of the problem is that many Aurovilians do not want to work on the frontline at the Visitors Centre – it's too demanding. Yet, judging by com-

ments in the Visitors Book, most visitors seem very happy with their reception: many refer to the special atmosphere of the place. Those with reservations are generally frustrated by the fact that they cannot learn more about Auroville. "We didn't get any clear picture of the community but only saw some buildings," lamented a visitor from Finland. "We came with a curiosity to find out more about Auroville but we don't know how to do this. We feel shut out rather than welcomed," said another. Others complained that the exhibition in the Visitors Centre told them nothing about why people join Auroville or the daily experience of living here (although the video showing next door provides some answers to these questions).

"Sometimes I feel embarrassed that we offer so little," says Annemarie, who works at the information desk. "I've often thought that we need to organize one hour tours so interested visitors can really get an idea of what Auroville is like. At present, the vast majority of people don't have the faintest idea. Of course, running regular tours means having to get permission to visit interesting places in the community and having to find someone dependable to manage them – not an easy task."

An alternative is to provide a fuller experience of Auroville at the Visitors Centre itself. In fact, one of the original ideas was to have a small 'demo' farm and workshop there, along with examples of renewable energy applications in use in the community. The problem once again, as Nicole points out, is that not enough qualified people come forward to take up the work. "It's comparatively easy to set up these things. The hard part is sustaining them. But we have just put up, with a team of concerned Aurovilians, a new environmental exhibition which focuses upon Auroville's history, challenges and achievements in relationship to the environment. It also touches upon global issues."

### The guest situation

Some years back, the options for those who stayed in Auroville as guests were limited: there was the beach, a café or two, and a Matrimandir that was under construction. Today, those who stay in Auroville guest-houses do not complain about not having enough to do, particularly in the main tourist season that runs from the middle of December until the middle of March. This past season has seen a record number of courses, workshops and therapies offered, on topics like freeing the healing voice, kung fu shaolin, laughter yoga and belly dancing, as well as introduction programmes to Auroville, the integral yoga, and the surrounding villages. And all at rates far cheaper than in the West or elsewhere in India. Then there are the high-quality cultural events, the restaurants and shops, the international ambience, and, of course, the completed Matrimandir. So it's not surprising that the Auroville guest-houses, with their capacity of 500 beds, are fully booked up for these three months and that guest-houses, shops and restaurants are mushrooming in the nearby villages.

*continued on page 4*

## Royal visitor to Auroville

HR Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn, the second daughter of King Bhumibol Adulyadej of Thailand, visited Auroville on March 21st. The princess, third in line to the throne and widely admired by the Thai people who refer to her as *Phra Thep*, meaning 'princess angel', was accompanied by her niece, Ms. Ploypalin Mahidol Jensen, and entourage.

The princess was first received at the Matrimandir and afterwards at the Visitors Centre by representatives of the Governing Board and the community, which included Auroville's two Thai residents. At her request the princess, who has extensive experience in working for development projects and was a recipient of the Magsaysay Award for Public Service in 1991, was given brief presentations on Auroville and its work in the bioregion.



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# AVITRA: Auroville International Translators

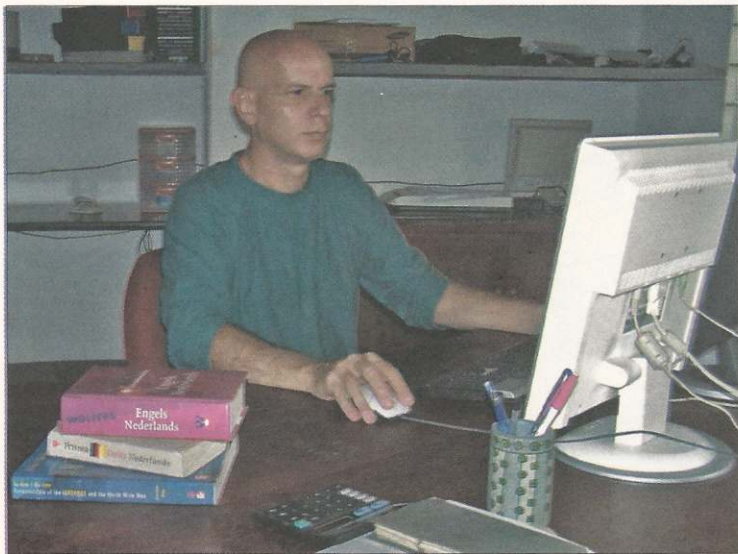
"No matter the subject. We ensure high quality translations of your precious material" (the Avitra website)

With a resident population of nearly 2000 individuals coming from more than 35 countries it isn't amazing that translations are part of Auroville's service package. "Avitra is Auroville's official language service provider," says Michael proudly. This 45-year old former Dutch economist joined Auroville in 1998. But economics wasn't his true calling. His interest in languages led him to start Avitra in 1999.

Some Aurovilians were at the time involved in translations and language activities. "We wanted to do things more professionally," says Michael. "In 1999, Lloyd and I ran into Chandresh Patel, a member of Auroville International USA, who convinced us that we could offer something unique. He loaned us the start-up capital and we got an office, purchased the necessary computer equipment and obtained access to advanced translation software. The next step was to find people in Auroville interested to join this experiment."

It was more difficult than expected. "Auroville has many qualified people in many areas," explains Michael. "However, translating is not everybody's job and we wanted to bring people together who share the necessary characteristics – competence, concentration, precision, a sense of perfection. If you add to that things like motivation and, particularly, availability at short notice, you'll have to search a lot harder. We managed to form a small team, and by trial and error we were able to build up a group of competent people."

Auroville translators work freelance from their homes and are paid per 'source-word'. For



Michael at Avitra

some, this is their main source of income, even if it is not always their main activity in Auroville. For others it is a part-time involvement to help pay for expenses they can't easily cover from their existing income. "Avitra is happy that it can offer people the chance to be engaged in challenging and rewarding work," says Michael.

Does Avitra accept everything that comes for translation? "Certainly not," responds Michael. "In the beginning we had a clear preference for texts dealing with spirituality, social sciences, organic farming, renewable energy and architecture, as they connect to the reference points of a lot of people in Auroville. That turned out to be hard going, and with hardly any work coming in, we widened out a bit. Now we are more pragmatic and accept most material unless the subject matter is beyond our grasp or in conflict with our ideals." He gives the example of an enquiry from an Indian company for a translation of a text dealing with nuclear technology. "Apart from the fact that I was

personally disinclined to get involved with something like this, we had to refuse the job as we did not have a qualified person to translate the highly technical engineering language." At the other end of the spectrum, Avitra once translated a book for the Tibetan Government in Exile. "This concerned the entire political philosophy of His Holiness the XIVth Dalai Lama: a more rewarding subject and closer to our Auroville hearts."

Though textual translations are Avitra's core business, there is more on offer. "We do translations of entire websites, and try to ensure that the end result will look and feel exactly like the original version of that site." Avitra also provides subtitling and offers voice-overs for videos, slide shows and multi-media presentations. "This is a relatively new field for us. With a wide range of potential voice talent in Auroville, we can offer many voice qualities and accents."

Avitra has another forte. "We can offer multi-lingual solutions – in other words, we can translate a text or a website or offer voice-overs in many languages. Few can match this." An offspring of Avitra, Avipro, which is managed by Lloyd, offers text-editing.

Has Avitra developed into one of Auroville's more successful business ventures? "We can't complain," says Michael. "We expected to break-even after four years, but we already managed this by the third year. In the

## Translations offered by Avitra

Source	Target
French, German, Spanish, Dutch, Italian, Swedish, Russian, Portuguese, Finnish, Catalan, Hindi, Chinese, Korean, Japanese	> English
English, German, Spanish	> French
French, English, Spanish	> German
English, German, Italian, Portuguese	> Spanish
French, English, German, Spanish	> Dutch
French, English, Russian, German	> Italian
English	> Swedish
English	> Russian
English	> Portuguese
English	> Hebrew
French, English, Danish	> Finnish
Spanish	> Catalan
English, Japanese	> Hindi
English	> Tamil
English	> Chinese
English	> Korean
English	> Japanese
Major Indian languages	> on request
African languages	> on request

last four years Avitra has run relatively well, although we still feel that it's nowhere near fulfilling its full potential. The challenge in the coming years is to rethink and reorganize our set-up, so that we're better able to provide more interesting work for so many talented people."

Carel

## Tree Care: respecting diversity

A new generation of Auroville youth brings vigorous pragmatism to the environmental scene.

In early March, a rather urgent appeal appeared on the Auroville intranet that opened the eyes of the community to a relatively unfamiliar issue – that of human-tree conflict. *Can we let the biggest silk cotton tree in Auroville come down? This tree is in the process of being cut down. It is still save-able. What we need is an insurance fund to cover damage trees can do in public areas when they fall. Is anyone willing to donate money for this [...]?*

Its author was Island (pronounced 'Is-land'), a young Aurovillian of French origin who, together with arborists or tree doctors Juan and Indra, founded *Tree Care* in 2005. A sub-unit of the Auroville Botanical Gardens, *Tree Care* offers all kinds of assistance related to trees. It also runs an apprentice programme, when possible, for Auroville youth having a respect for nature and interested in trees – like the two at present, Ilango, and Gopal.

So what's the story with the silk cotton tree?

Island explains. "A few months ago I was called by the people at the Dental Centre to take a look at a silk cotton tree. They wanted us to cut it down. I suggested that I'd first go up to check if it was healthy or not, and then give my evaluation. It was healthy and so we refused to cut it." The tree, around 20 metres in height, was a giant in the making. This one was relatively young at 40 years as these trees are known to live for hundreds of years.

"Many factors complicated the issue with this particular tree," explains Island. "There were overhead electrical cables running beneath it posing danger, incidents of branches dropping on the building below, but most importantly, it was the focus of people living nearby who were afraid that the tree could become a danger during a storm even though it survived the last one untouched. Of course, it is not possible to have a group of tree experts guarantee that it will not fall down in a storm. Later perhaps, when we have accumulated data, we will be able to do this."

"The other issue was that we could not move the people from that area – this would have been the only way to save it really. And there was the dispute with a neighbour. The Dental Centre is located in the middle of the village, and every flowering season, the cotton with the seeds would drift across the neighbourhood and people complained about that. So it became a cultural conflict of sorts."

Though the outcome of Island's efforts to save this tree was unsuccessful, he believes that it has been a first step in preventing such incidents from happening in the future.

Another positive outcome of this episode has been exploring insurance options in India against public tree damage, perhaps as part of a community insurance plan. "We know such policies exist in other countries – what we need is information relevant to India."

Arboriculture or the art and science of tree care, is a relatively new area to India and even to Auroville. Says Island, "Our early foresters

were good at planting trees and knew how to help them stay alive and grow in harsh environments, but little was known about pruning. It's only after Xavier and Juan came that people began to become aware of this aspect."

In Auroville, *Tree Care's* job description also includes removing parasitic plants from tree tops, working with the Auroville Electrical Service in removing branches close to high tension wires – "it's a frequent cause of power failure in the rainy season" – and the occasional pruning of some of Auroville's fruit orchards.

Educating the public is also a priority, according to Island. "There are a few things that people need to be aware of," he says. "Like knowing what kind of sapling one is planting and how big the tree is going to get, because some of them can get quite enormous. For example, some of the banyans in Auroville have been planted too close to people's homes – they're bound to become a problem in the future."

Island confesses to being a perpetual student himself. This summer he is off to Perth in Western Australia "to work and maybe to do a short course on arboriculture. I hear the ecosystem there is similar to Auroville; there are a lot of eucalyptus and many other species that were introduced here!" He is also considering developing a database on trees for the Auroville area that can be expanded to include the urban Indian context as well.

For *Tree Care's* expertise is not only sought within Auroville. Last year, their work at Pondicherry's Bharathi Park drew a lot of media attention. "We had three local newspaper crews gawking at us as we were swinging from the trees in our ropes and harnesses. You could see how surprised they were – it was all very new to them."

Recently *Tree Care* landed a more high-profile assignment. "It happened completely by chance," says Island. "We went to check out a store in Chennai that had recently become the dealer for Petzl, a French maker of mountaineering gear. We met the manager who informed us that Petzl was going to do a seminar in Chennai to demonstrate their products. We gave him our card, and 3 days later he called to say that Petzl's export sales people wanted to meet us to see if we would want to do the demo for them."



PHOTO ANNEMARIE

No fear of heights for this tree doctor! Island pruning a tree in the greenbelt.

This contact led *Tree Care* to demonstrating their safety equipment in pepper plantations in Kerala. "Petzl is trying to improve workers' safety while they work on these very tall trees that have the pepper plants growing on them. Apparently there are a lot of injuries on the job, and even some deaths due to people falling from heights."

"Ultimately our aim is to improve tree-human relationships," says Island. His idealism appears tempered with a healthy dollop of pragmatism. Having grown up in Auroville – he came at the age of 12 – he is used to its ground realities. "One shouldn't enforce things – the solution is to try to find a middle way that will satisfy everybody, which of course doesn't always happen."

"In the forest, there is little tree-human conflict, but in an urban setting, many things are trying to live together, often with different objectives. And our work at *Tree Care* is all about respect for diversity."

Priya Sundaravalli



# Showing Promise?

A proposed four-lane highway threatens the future of its school and some of its housing. Its location outside Auroville's Green Belt makes it vulnerable to being sold for commercial development. Each year Pondicherry gets closer. Can Promesse survive and prosper?

We have a small place called "Promesse", where there will be six or eight rooms, an office which will be Auroville's first administrative office, and also a guest house with a few rooms, five or six rooms for visitors. It's quite a small place, with a pretty garden and trees, on the Madras road. It's on Auroville's outer border.

The Mother to Satprem,  
3 May 1967, MA VIII, p. 130

Promesse was a place of first experiments, a place for future Aurovilians working on the town's early stages. The land was bought from the Customs Department in May 1965. It was convenient, being on the main road, and it had existing customs houses which could be converted to provide accommodation and other facilities.

By November, 1968, a progress report listed the buildings at Promesse: "4 hexagonal experimental huts, 12 patio apartments (six of which were created by renovating the existing customs houses), a dining room building, a post office, 2 coco-leaf [keet] huts for storage of building materials, 1 [keet] hut for workers, a guest house with space for six air-conditioned rooms and a large reception room (in construction)."

Most of the patio apartments became living quarters. The four hexagonal huts, experiments for first-phase building in the future, also functioned as architectural offices and a small weekly school of architecture. Lack of funds prevented the completion of the guest house, which instead became the maternity clinic not only for Auroville, but for some Ashram babies as well. Babies born in Promesse were often named by the Mother, with Auroson, Aurofilio, Aurohanda, Aurora, Junauro, Aura and Aurokumar leading the way. Altogether about 70 babies were named by the Mother, including some born to Aurovilians overseas. From 1972 onwards, other birthing facilities became available and progressively fewer births took place at the clinic in Promesse. They stopped completely after 1974.

The first planned nucleus of 1,000 people at 'Advance Colony' (today named Aspiration) led to research into the cost and quantity of housing materials needed. Experimental huts were built in Promesse to assess different solutions including bamboo and iron, wood and keet, and bamboo and keet.

A 1969 report on Auroville suggested that Promesse should become a temporary centre for the lodging and training of newcomers because of its easy access, relative isolation, and the anticipated availability of boarding facilities. It already had a maternity facility, infirmary and cafeteria. A low-cost campus of 500 people, living in temporary lodging, was envisaged. The role of Promesse would be to receive, coun-

sel, direct and select, after a probationary period, the candidates who had asked Mother for permission to live in Auroville.

It didn't happen. Promesse remained a small community, quietly losing its functions as an experimental community, a maternity clinic and a boarding centre as these activities moved to more accessible locations. After some years the post office, too, was moved to its current location in Bharat Nivas.

In 1985 Arul Vazhi ('the path of grace'), a school for Morattandi village children, was started in Promesse. Village youth from 3 to 18 come to classes in yoga, art, drama, sports, computer skills and other



A kindergarten class at Arul Vazhi, a school in Promesse for village children

activities designed to complement and extend their academic subjects. Nearby, in Morattandi village, a separate training centre for workshops and seminars has been started. "We still need a bore well to be able to properly utilise this facility but we don't have the funds for that" says Varadharajan, the man behind the school's programmes. "If the main road is widened we could lose the school, which is right next to the road, and we'll have to take over the training centre for its classes."

Promesse residents work in many different areas, making it difficult to maintain an overall sense of community. The loss of many of the long-standing, older residents has exacerbated this. The Auroville Foundation has built six new houses in the community, four of which are used as staff quarters, and makes regular contributions to the maintenance account but, lacking individuals who can make big contributions, budgets usually can't meet all demands.

The community faces many issues: the planned widening of the road, the possibility of Promesse being sold to enable plots closer to the centre of Auroville to be purchased, the maintenance of good



Residences in Promesse

relationships with the village next door (which is both spreading and generating more traffic), the presence of asbestos in the roofs of some older houses, the inexorable advance of Pondicherry, and the obtaining of funds to carry out essential work and improvements.

Indra and Bithi are two of the original residents.

Their son, Aurokumar, was one of the maternity clinic's first babies. Indra's role in the early days was the purchase of land for the new town. "The Mother told me where she wanted land and I went out, negotiated and bought it," he says. Their house is one of the original patio apartments, now right on the main road and blanketed by traffic fumes and noise. "The Mother gave us this house" says Bithi, "We've no idea what'll happen to us, where we'll live, if our house is demolished for the new highway. I've been to see the housing group but they say they can't provide new houses for all the people who might be affected. I don't know what we'll do. We've lived in Promesse for most of our lives; we'd like to stay here if we can."

Others speak of Promesse's historical value, and see it as a future gateway to Auroville, a community on the main highway where visitors can get information and advice before travelling on to the centre of the township. "We could carry out the Mother's initial plan of building a guesthouse in Promesse", says Srinivasmurthy, Financial Officer of the Auroville foundation. "An ashram-style, simple guesthouse. The income would enable the community to put itself on a firmer financial footing."

The Master Plan for Auroville suggests a further use for Promesse as a service node. If Auroville decides to regulate visitor traffic it will need a place on its boundary for visitors to leave their vehicles and transfer to non-polluting transport within the town. Businesses within Auroville may also have large storage requirements which should be located on its boundaries.

Promesse has never been short of plans for its future. Few have come to fruition. On a report card, "Shows promise" is generally shorthand for "can succeed if the will is there". It's a long shot. Can Mother's "small place, with a pretty garden and trees" find a workable niche in tomorrow's Auroville? Will the next report read "RIP" or "Exceeds expectations"?

Elle Rasink

## In brief

### Fundraising efforts

L'Avenir d'Auroville, Auroville's town planning department, constituted by order of the Governing Board on March 7th, received a donation of Rs 40 lakhs (US \$ 100,000) for fundraising. The donation will be used to set up a professional fundraising organization for the development of Auroville. A fundraising and networking tour of India and the USA is in preparation.

### Housing

Members of L'Avenir d'Auroville and architects presented 7 new housing projects in various stages of approval. Once manifested, these projects would house 265 people in 117 units. Plans for the next phase, housing 222 people, are in development.

### Auroville in Ethiopia

In June 2008, the Ethiopian "Auroville International Africa Education Centre" will organize a gathering in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Interested Aurovilians, Auroville International Centres, and Aurobindonians are invited to participate in the programme. For more details please contact Amy. amy@auroville.org.in.

### Rains

Unexpected showers in mid-March (220 mm!) gave the impression of a spring monsoon. Such unseasonal precipitation has not occurred since 1971, when 239 mm rainfall was recorded. The average figure for March over the last 10 years is 27.8 mm.

### Water Task Force

A Water Task Force has been created by L'Avenir d'Auroville to prepare an Auroville water organization and to study water aspects of the Residential Zone such as water supply, rain water harvesting, and waste water treatment.

### Support for forests

The Forest Group complains that insufficient funds are made available to pay for forest maintenance. For the last 6 years the community has contributed Rs 66/day per watchman against an average actual expense of Rs 120/day. Also retirement bonuses are not being paid by the community. An overview of all forest workers is being prepared.

### Errata

The February issue of *Auroville Today* should have been numbered 228, not 227 as printed. In the March issue, the photo of Manohar should be credited to Iolanda.

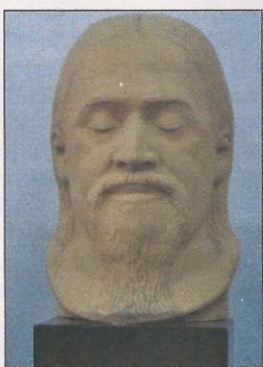
### Pournapréma

Mother's granddaughter Pournapréma – meaning 'the fullness of Love' – (born Françoise Marie-Thérèse Morisset), previously married to Roger Anger, passed away at the age of 74 in the Ashram's Nursing Home in the early morning, of March 14th. She had been battling cancer for several years, and during the last three weeks her close friends and family came to bid her farewell. Her son Kalya and his family attended to her every day. Long-time Aurovilians remember her for her elegant 'Tout ce qu'il faut' Ashram restaurant in the early seventies and maintained contact with her over the years. For some, she had acted as an intermediary with the Mother.



## LETTERS

### On Sri Aurobindo's bust



Dear Editors,

In the August 2007 issue of *Auroville Today* you published an interesting collection of busts of Sri Aurobindo. Among those described as "sculptor unknown", there is one – kept in the entrance hall of the Sri Aurobindo Library, – of which the sculptor actually is known.

It was Karl Abel, husband of my late friend Marie Abel – who was a sculptor in her own right,

having worked on many busts and small statues of The Mother as well as on a bust of Sri Aurobindo (which was completed by former Aurovillian Ulrich).

Karl Abel had made this bust in Tahiti where he had emigrated with his wife after Hitler came to power in 1933, and where he remained after Marie had joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1952.

Karl Abel also carved two most wonderful portraits of Sri Aurobindo and of The Mother on a mother-of-pearl shell. Both pieces are kept in Mother's room and are occasionally exhibited on a Darshan day. Fixed in a rosewood frame and lit from within, they are breathtakingly beautiful in their fine carving and rich hues.

Karl Abel had never seen Sri Aurobindo or The Mother. As Kumud-ben told me, "Mother had seen his works and appreciated them very much." Agnidhan

### The Auroville symbol

Dear Editors,

The Mother explained the symbol of Auroville as: "The dot at the centre represents Unity, the Supreme; the inner circle represents the creation, the conception of the City; the petals represent the power of expression, realisation." (Ref: CWM/13/218).

Regarding the five petals of the symbol, I have not read anywhere that the Mother had given any detailed explanation, as given by Her in case of the petals of Her Symbol.

In *The Secret of the Veda* (CWSA Volume 15, Page: 381) Sri Aurobindo explains the five powers of truth-consciousness. "There are also female energies; for the Deva is both Male and Female and the gods also are either activating souls or passively executive and methodising energies. Aditi, infinite Mother of the gods, comes first; and there are besides five powers of



the Truth-consciousness; Mahi, or Bharati, the vast Word that brings us all things out of the divine source; Ila, the strong primal word of the Truth who gives us its active vision; Saraswati, its streaming current and the word of its inspiration; Sarama, the Intuition, hound of heaven who descends into the cavern of the subconscious and finds there the concealed illuminations; Dakshina, whose function is to discern rightly, dispose the action and the offering and distribute in the sacrifice to each godhead its portion. Each god, too, has his female energy."

What I understand, on reading Sri Aurobindo's above words is that Mahi or Bharati, Ila, Saraswati, Sarama and Dakshina stand for the five powers that are symbolised in the five petals of the Auroville symbol.

Sib Sankar Ray



# Auroville's visitors and guests

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Many guests return annually, booking a year ahead. By October, Auralee at the Guest Service is getting 60 emails a day from people enquiring about accommodation. "I always send a personalised email response. For many people this is their first contact with Auroville, so the way I answer is important."

So is it first come, first served? "No. I answer Aurovilians first, then Auroville International centres, then people whose names I recognise from past years. I give priority to those who want to stay longer and who want to give something to Auroville. And I first send people to Center Guest-house when they have vacancies because this guest-house makes the biggest financial contribution to Auroville."

Auralee wonders about the motivations of some guests. "Some therapists come every winter to offer courses and

facilities and profiting from Auroville. These people come here because we're too loose and don't seem to want to put any restrictions, which creates enormous stress for all. The main problem is that there are just too many guests and visitors for us to cope with. It is like being invaded."

Sonja, who also runs a small guest facility, points out that many guest-house managers are much more selective in whom they take these days. "We want people who are really interested in Auroville: there's nothing so draining as a lazy consumer."

Tineke, who manages Center Guest-house, says that in her guest-house the kind of guest changes with the season. "In May and June many of the guests are Indians, but the winter season is the time when many Westerners come, particularly older single women travelling in groups, as the climate is good and Auroville is a safe stepping-stone into India."

"Then we become mamas!" says Sonja. "We get them a moped, bandage them when they fall off, nurse them when they get sick, we remove the funny animal from their room, we listen to their dreams. It involves a lot of support and care and we have to draw lines, otherwise we get overwhelmed. At the same time, we both feel it's important that Auroville welcomes guests because they can give a lot back. They lighten Auroville up, they bring new perspectives and fresh energy, and they can be a valuable mirror to you – they make you look at yourself anew. And some of them become like family."

Nicole also points to a new trend – the number of young people, particularly from overseas, who want to do volunteer work in the community. "The Mitra hostel is really helping here because it's important that Auroville provides cheap, clean accommodation for youngsters like this," Sonja is also enthusiastic about this new wave. "I'd reduce my prices for young people who want to put their energy into Auroville. One problem is we are not providing enough work opportunities for them at present."

Neither Sonja nor Tineke seem to have major problems with the guests they take: it is rare they ask a guest to leave. "But sometimes I apply a filter," says Tineke. "For example, I get phone calls from young Indian professionals in Chennai or Bangalore. When I ask them why they want to come they say, 'Just to chill out'. Then I tell them life here is very simple, there are no bars, no night clubs. That's usually enough to change their minds. But some people really appreciate the peace here, and others come for a course and get hooked by the deeper aspect of Auroville: you can't predict who will be touched. So I wouldn't want the doorway into Auroville to be too narrow."

## Auroville not guest-friendly

Some guests with a deeper connection to the community come year after year and leave refreshed, recharged. But it's not easy to be a guest here. Many Aurovilians view guests as an irritant in the season, the cause of long queues at the shops and the Solar Kitchen, a source of danger on the

roads, importers of alien preoccupations and, when they get lost, invaders of personal privacy.

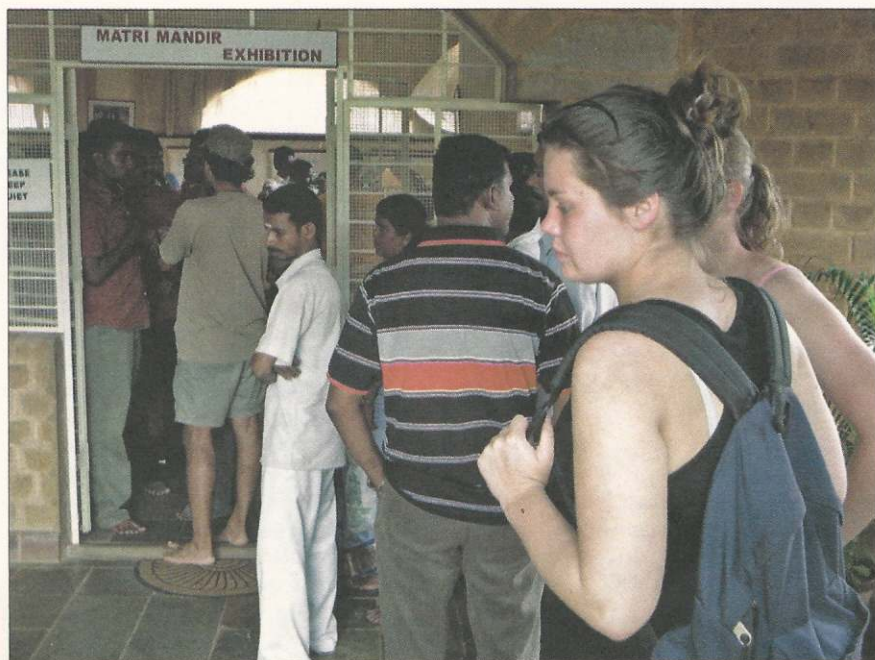
Then again, guests see Aurovilians getting a preferential rate at certain restaurants and shops and resent this, not realising this is because some Aurovilians work hard for the community but receive little maintenance. Some guest-house managers are 'hands off', giving little or no information about Auroville and leaving the day-to-day running in the charge of employees with little skill in handling guests. Quite a few guests also feel overcharged for the facilities provided. No wonder some feel that Auroville is only after their money.

## Solutions

What can be done? Regarding day visitors, whom most Aurovilians do not meet as they simply shuttle between the Visitors Centre and Matrimandir, there's a general feeling they are being handled well at present. They could be provided with more information, a larger electric shuttle would help solve the traffic problem on the road to Matrimandir between 4 – 5 p.m., and tours might be an option for those with more time and interest, but the vast majority of day visitors appear happy with their Auroville experience.

The more problematic casual visitors are the ones who by-pass the Visitors Centre and drive around Auroville looking for entertainment or a place to picnic or to sneak photos of the Matrimandir. It's probably impossible to completely prevent this, but a more active presence at the existing check-posts and extra check-posts at key points would help control this.

The guest situation is more complex. While not everybody is convinced that there actually is a 'guest problem', many of those working in this area feel we need to begin by ensuring that the right kind of person stays here. How to ensure this? Suggestions include requiring all



Queuing up for the pass for the Matrimandir viewing-point

Of course, many of the so-called 'problem' guests may not be staying in Auroville. Nobody knows how much guest accommodation is being offered in the nearby villages and in the new hotels springing up in the vicinity, but it must be substantial. Auroville has no control over these guest-houses. Yet people who stay there are able to use some of Auroville's facilities and can attend cultural events, courses etc.

As to the workshops offered, at present there is little control over who offers what during the guest season: it is largely up to the discretion of the Aurovilians managing the workshop space. Many of the workshops are offered by Aurovilians and have an Auroville 'flavour', but one community hosted a one-month festival in February which was largely run by guests. While many people enjoyed the energy, some questioned the relevance of some of the workshops to Auroville's ethic and the festival closed prematurely because of complaints regarding noise and inappropriate behaviour. This experience, more than anything else, seems to have fuelled the fears of Auroville becoming a 'second Goa'.

And it's not just the content of some of the workshops that worries people. There is also a lack of clarity regarding what happens to the money generated. So another suggestion is

Auralee also favours such a one-stop facility for guests. "At present the Guest Service is located above the Solar Kitchen, quite a long way from the Visitors Centre. I really feel for those people who struggle here in the dust and the heat, with their heavy backpacks, and can't get a drink or something to eat at the coffee shop next door because it does not accept cash."

It's partly because of this that the Visitors Centre has now set up its own guest accommodation facility.

## No unanimity

It's worth remembering that the Aurovilians who are dealing with guests are not all cut from the same cloth. They have different perceptions of guests, different motivations for being involved with them, different capabilities of dealing with them. Some want more supervision of the guest scene, including more filters on which guests we allow in and better quality control of what different guest-houses offer; others reject any kind of supervision as an interference in their personal domain. Some are seriously concerned that a certain type of guest dilutes and distorts the energy field of Auroville; others feel that we cannot judge and must remain as open as possible. Some would like to limit any further expansion of the guest scene in Auroville; others, concerned that the villages are profiting from providing accommodation and services for guests, think we should charge a hefty fee for entering Auroville and dramatically increase our own guest facilities.

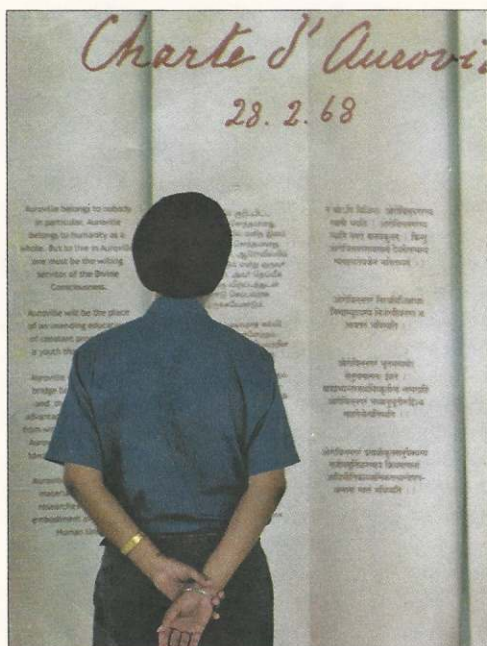
One thing is clear, however. More and more Aurovilians and guests are dissatisfied with the present situation. We need to ensure that the people with the right motivation come to stay here, but then we need to offer them the best possible experience of Auroville. The hope is that as more and more of the 'right' people come to stay here, perceptions of guests will change and more Aurovilians will be attracted to work in this field.

At the same time, we should see that it's not only certain guests who are the problem – it is ourselves. For example, there is the tendency of some Aurovilians to put personal profit above the well-being of the community as a whole. Guests can also become a convenient target for our own insecurities. And complaining about the behaviour of guests can be an excuse for keeping Auroville small and cosy, insulated from the outside world.

Which returns us to the core questions. Why are we here? And who are we here for?

We have never sat down as a community and looked deeply at the guest situation. With the finished Matrimandir already being described in the national press as a "second Taj Mahal", it's clearly time to do this.

Alan



The Auroville Charter in four languages at the Visitors Centre

I wonder, why? Who is checking on their qualifications? And are their workshops appropriate to Auroville, to what we are trying to achieve here?

"But we also need to look at ourselves. Some Aurovilians depend on the guest season to make enough money to support themselves for the rest of the year. The whole activity around guests – accommodation, workshops, therapies, tours, restaurants, shops, transport, bike hire etc. – is such an important part of our economy now. I'm concerned that, in such an environment, economic motives may be overriding other concerns."

In fact, in January alone guest and guest-house contributions to the community amounted to more than ten lakh rupees (over \$26,000). When one considers that guest-houses are only required to contribute 33% of their profits to the Central Fund, guests' total expenditure in Auroville guest-houses, shops, restaurants, courses etc. may be triple this amount. In fact, guests and visitors may have contributed as much as \$500,000 to the community over the past year (see box on page 5).

## Who is coming?

While some people worry that Auroville is attracting a different kind of guest these days, Auralee values the contact with those guests who are open and really want to know more. "I really appreciate these people; it gives meaning to our work." She dreams of an expanded Guest Service that will allow them to spend more time on such interactions.

But what about the guest-house managers? Do they feel that a different kind of guest is being attracted to Auroville and its environs? Ambre, who runs a small guest facility, has no doubts. "There are plenty of guests in the vicinity who are just using our



In the information hall of the Visitors Centre

guests to fill out an application form before they come here to clarify their intention in visiting the community, and extending the minimum stay in Auroville guest-houses to ten days. However, a ten day rule would discriminate against those people who can only get away for weekends and the 'drop-ins' who get deeply touched by their visit.

Other ideas include greatly expanding volunteering possibilities and low-cost accommodation to attract young, committed people, and requiring all guests who want to offer or follow workshops to attend first an Auroville introduction course.

that an overview body be created that would ensure that the workshops offered are appropriate and their financing transparent.

## A new guest department

Sonja goes a step further. She envisages an Auroville Guest Department that would handle all aspects of the guest experience under one roof and one economic umbrella. "I'd like to see a big beautiful Guest Reception Area close to the Visitors Centre which would centralize booking, issue guest cards and provide information on all the educational and volunteering opportunities available."



# The Matrimandir Access Policy

Access to The Matrimandir, called by The Mother 'The Soul of Auroville', is restricted. According to the Mother's guidelines, access is only for those who are 'serious and sincere'. She specified that visitors would only have access at a designated 'time of the day' or 'a day in the week'.

One of the greatest challenges for Auroville is the implementation of the instructions given by the Mother for access to Matrimandir. The Matrimandir attracts hundreds and sometimes thousands of visitors a day, but it is not a tourist or pilgrim resort. It is and remains a place for silent consecration and dedication to the Divine. In particular, the atmosphere in the Park of Unity – the area which includes the Matrimandir, the Matrimandir gardens, the Amphitheatre and the Banyan Tree – must be maintained at the highest level – silent and sacred – and cannot be allowed to diminish because of throngs of visitors. To regulate access, the Matrimandir Access Group has elaborated policies for special guests, visitors and Aurovilians.

## The first visit

The point of entry for most visitors is the Visitors Centre. It offers information about Auroville through exhibitions, leaflets, brochures, books and DVDs. Introductory videos on Auroville and the Matrimandir are shown and long-time Aurovilians are present to answer questions and assist people. The Visitors Centre also houses boutiques that sell a wide range of Auroville products, a spiritual bookshop, and a cafeteria.

First-time visitors to Auroville are invited to watch a short introductory video on the Matrimandir. Then they can obtain a pass to visit the viewing-point, a garden located at the southern bor-



The Inner Chamber of the Matrimandir

der of the Park of Unity which offers a full view of the Matrimandir, the Amphitheatre and the Banyan Tree. The viewing-point can be reached after a fifteen-minute walk along a shaded footpath; for the handicapped and elderly, an electric shuttle – a non-polluting, silent mode of transport which helps maintain Auroville's environment – is available.

The visit to the viewing-point is essential for first-time visitors to get an impression of the area. After this first visit they can contact the Matrimandir booking office and make a reservation to participate in a guided tour of approximately 90 minutes.

This tour offers an explanation about the significance and meaning of the Matrimandir, followed by a visit to the Banyan Tree and a concentration in the Inner Chamber for 10-15 minutes.

Having once visited the Chamber, it is possible to attend the regular one hour concentrations, but always subject to availability of places as the Chamber can only accommodate

68 persons at a time. All regular visitors are asked to make a booking, which can be made up to seven days in advance.

## Reception of special guests

A major task of the Matrimandir Access Group is arranging visits of 'Special Guests' or Very Important Persons (VIPs). Those arranging the visit of 'Special Guests' are asked to give prior intimation of the visit, preferably a few days in advance. Special Guests are received by a long-time Aurovillian at the Visitors Centre or at the Matrimandir and then are shown around.

Unlike VIPs, the visits of VVIPs are largely beyond the control of the Access Group. When the President of India visited Auroville on December 22nd, for example, security virtually took over. More than 30 cars entered the Park of Unity and the President's car drove up to the Matrimandir entrance. The Access Group hopes that in future no cars and armed police will come into the area.

## The Aurovilians

With the increasing number of visitors, it became necessary to make a policy for the Aurovilians. Before Matrimandir was ready, everybody had free access. Some Aurovilians included the Park of Unity in their jogging tour or walked their dogs, and many brought their friends or relatives. This is no longer possible. Aurovilians and Newcomers continue to have free access to the Park of Unity at any time, but access to the Inner Chamber will be limited to the early morning, mid-day and evening hours. During one hour each day individual Aurovilians and Newcomers may bring two guests, very close friends or family members, into the Inner Chamber provided they remain with them all the time.

All these regulations have been made with one objective: to maintain the spirit of the place, and allow all those who are serious to concentrate and experience the presence of the Truth. As The Mother wrote on November 15th, 1967, 'The Mother's Shrine will be an empty place, empty of all material things, meant only for meditation, con-

**The Matrimandir is not the focal centre of any religion.**

**Here we do not have religion. We replace religion by the spiritual life, which is truer, deeper and higher at the same time, that is to say, closer to the Divine. For the Divine is everything, but we are not conscious of it. This is the immense progress that man must make.**

*The Mother*

**On access to The Matrimandir**  
**People will not come for "regular meditations" or anything of the kind ... it will be a place for concentration. Not everyone will be allowed in ... There will be a fixed time or a fixed day to show the visitors, and the rest of the time only for those who are... serious – serious, sincere, who truly want to learn to concentrate... No fixed meditations, nothing of the sort, but they will have to stay there in silence – silence and concentration.**  
*The Mother, 3rd January 1970.*

centration and prayer... and I hope, filled with light, spiritual force and the presence of the Truth.' The Matrimandir welcomes all sincere seekers.

*Carel*

## Statistics

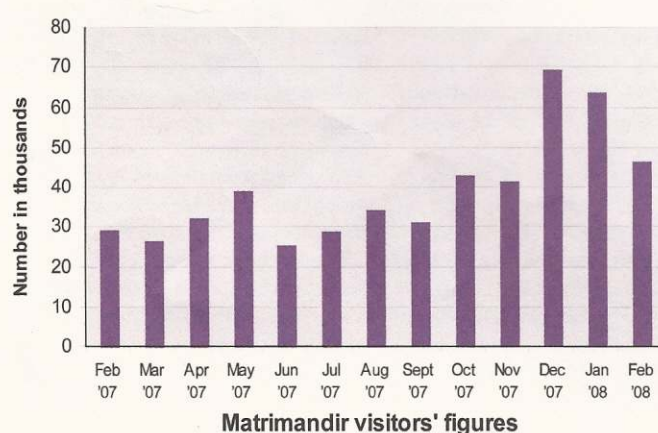
### Central Fund income from guests (in rupees)

Month	Guest House Contribution <sup>1</sup>	Guest Contribution <sup>2</sup>	Total <sup>3</sup>
Jan 2007	33 385	628 204	661 589
Feb 2007	33 580	719 560	753 140
Mar 2007	506 705	650 410	1157 115
Apr 2007	122 300	657 670	779 970
May 2007	131 280	238 470	369 750
Jun 2007	40 379	187 800	228 179
Jul 2007	79 800	196 647	276 447
Aug 2007	159 830	318 695	478 525
Sep 2007	83 285	354 350	437 635
Oct 2007	95 110	271 320	366 430
Nov 2007	95 904	204 190	300 094
Dec 2007	118 533	448 322	566 855
Jan 2008	115 609	946 854	1062 463
Feb 2008	127 268	880 321	1007 589

<sup>1</sup> Guesthouse contributions refers to the contribution made by guesthouses (33% of their profits) to the Central Fund.

<sup>2</sup> Guest contribution is payment guests make to the Central Fund through purchasing guest-passes. It includes contributions from Friends of Auroville and long-term guests. In the year March 2007 – February 2008 the total contribution made by guests to the Central Fund was Rs. 69,91,946 (approx \$175,000)

<sup>3</sup> The total expenditure of guests in Auroville over the past year is probably at least three times this figure if expenditure in Auroville restaurants, shops, taxis, etc., are included.



## Impressions

### DAY VISITORS On the Matrimandir:

It's very surreal, spaceship-like. It's how a temple would look on Planet Krypton. But the experience was very powerful. I couldn't help but stare into the crystal ball for most of my meditation there. When I came out I felt like I needed to be silent.

*Alonya Zviya, Israel*

It's the first time I've ever been able to sit still for ten minutes. You could feel the energy.

*Victoria Stanley, Singapore*

I didn't really care for it at all. The building, I think, is very self-conscious, it's not organic, it doesn't look as if it belongs there. The shape is a flattened sphere. I find that ominous. I would expect an aspiration towards the divine, or divine consciousness, to reach up, not be flattened down.

*Kate Buchanan, U.K.*

What makes it so special is that you have such a clean place in India – so white, so clean. After months of travelling it makes it very special.

*Theresia Schug, Germany*

### On their Auroville experience:

Today I discovered a place that only existed in my thoughts.

*A seeker, Malaysia*

An amazing, bold idea for the future.

*Kevin Pogorulski, USA*

I think I'd like to retire here.

*Tara Leishman, Australia*

I wish I could have been with the people who created this.

*Anon.*

I miss the lovely, inspiring and powerful photos in the old visitors' information hall. Please bring them back.

They speak more than thousands of words about Auroville.

*Anon.*

Utopia is as utopia does.

*Jane Carlen, USA*

The concept is simply GREAT! But as a young generation we are not aware of this good cause. Let's get this out to people.

*Suresh, Dubai*

The areas off-limits should be marked. We wandered off a few yards to the right of the sitting area in front of the lotus monument and an employee of Auroville was very rude to us.

*Mohit Bhatt, Nainital*

A small stone dropped in the water sends ripples far!

*John Nuttgons, England*

This place doesn't exist.

*Palacios, France*

We are coming from a very long distance. Only Sunday is holiday in India. Why are you keeping Sunday a half-day holiday for seeing Matrimandir? This is not correct so change your rules.

*Vijay, Tirupur*

The place is beautiful but very boring.

*RBI, Chennai, India*

I never thought there would be something like this in India. I never realised it was such a huge concept. What really impressed me were the messages in the exhibition in the Visitors Centre. This is what I want to do and it's right here in India. One day I'll come to live here.

*Sammer & Prachi Ghadge, Mumbai*

### GUESTS WHO HAVE STAYED A FEW DAYS

I went to the peas versus pills workshop one day. I want to do a Healing Touch course and wanted to get some information but no one was very interested. Tomorrow I start a 3-day introduction to Auroville course. I knew about these courses before I came so I could get started on them straight away. So far everything has been very good.

*Margaret Searamellini, France*

I found Auroville to have very long distances between things, and the map is not accurate. It's very difficult for a visitor to find anything. Yesterday I found Solitude after two days of looking. An old Indian man was making rope. I liked that. The Indians were being recognised as having skills, not just being told what to do. I had some moments when I felt very joyful to be here. I felt gratitude for the people who had created Auroville and I felt very connected to them.

*Eliza Weiller, France*

We came with a curiosity to find out more about Auroville. The video wasn't very helpful in this regard. It was very idealised, and we even got the slight feeling of a sect from it. We're wondering a little bit about the orb as well. Maybe these difficulties are designed to weed out those who are not truly interested, but it would be nice to satisfy visitors' curiosity and leave them with positive thoughts about Auroville.

*Nicole Crabtree and Claudio Cerin, Switzerland*

It's like I'm not in India. There's a noticeable difference. It's an international place. I feel less foreign here.

*Carla Meschede, Germany*  
 Research by Elle



## A guest's perspective

**"Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville, one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness." Auroville's Charter.**

**A**urovilians are the natural guardians of Auroville, but this does not give them sole proprietary rights. If Auroville is serious about belonging to humanity as a whole, then it should aim to be inclusive rather than exclusive. What does this mean in practice? It surely includes helping guests to experience the underlying concepts as they operate on a day-to-day basis. But then, how can Aurovilians reconcile the desire to share the experience of Auroville with the desire to simply get on with life without being constantly disrupted by those following a different lifestyle?

One answer is to try to more closely match the type of guest who comes to Auroville with the type of guest that Auroville wants. But this can't be imposed by Auroville.

Potential guests may not know the right questions to ask or the right people to approach in relation to them. They will also have different reasons for coming and a range of interests they would like to explore. Interactive on-line and on-site information services could be more fully utilised. These don't require a huge expense or high ongoing personal involvement by overstretched Aurovilians.

It needs to be immediately obvious to potential guests that Auroville is essentially a practising community rather than a tourist destination, that they are invited to experience its life but not to disrupt it. It should be clear that if they want to visit Auroville it is they who will have to fit into the community rather than the other way around, while still being made welcome and honoured as guests who bring to, as well as take from Auroville.

Guests almost invariably have difficulty in finding their way around. Appropriate information spots would be extremely useful for getting one's bearings, identifying communities, and finding

buildings in which events or courses are offered. There could be maps showing all or part of Auroville, with a 'You are here' indicator.

Events and courses are a different issue. Increasing numbers of people are perceived as coming to Auroville simply for a cheap holiday and to attend workshops and seminars. They may have little interest in the underlying beliefs, aims, aspirations and issues that are an integral part of Auroville. Are these people the problem? Are the courses the problem? Once guests arrive with expectations that differ from those of the residents one or both groups are headed for disappointment.

Auroville needs to clearly differentiate itself, and what it offers guests, from the usual sort of activity-based holiday. This probably means that the laissez-faire model, imposing no effective control over what courses are offered and by whom, will no longer suffice. Auroville needs to ensure that the myriads of workshops and courses, which are part of the attraction to guests, are in line with its overarching principles, and function as a practical demonstration of its philosophy. This won't be easy. Yet the tensions that grow with each year of increased visitor numbers, increased levels of activities and lack of consensus on what is and is not appropriate should not be left to fester.

If all courses are required to reflect Auroville in some way, then guests who attend them will receive, besides the tangible course content, the intangible dimension that demonstrates the Auroville philosophy and thought, and the Aurovillian approach to life. How that is done, and



At the information desk in the Visitors Centre

what that might be, must be for the presenters and the community to decide. It may involve a restriction on non-Aurovilians giving courses, it may impose some requirements on course content, it could affect the use of the Auroville name or its symbols in identifying and promoting courses.

The question of whether and how much to charge is another issue fraught with difficulty. Are there 'core' activities for which no fees should ever be levied? Matrimandir visits come to mind. At the other end of the spectrum, are there community services and courses which should always be priced to provide a decent return? There is currently no way of telling at first instance whether, for example, an advertised class is free, expensive, or suggests a donation. Of course, one can ring and ask. But it's hard to get at a logical reason for the differences in response, from 'donate what you can for materials' to 'it'll be five thousand rupees'. Guests who understand the aspirations of

Auroville will not be looking for a free ride, but greater transparency in why certain courses are priced the way they are would be helpful.

Differential pricing for goods and services is another regular irritant for some guests. They see opportunism in differential charging which does not sit well with their other experiences of the Aurovillian generosity of spirit. It may be opportune to look at new ways of providing equitable access to desired goods and services without sending a message to non-Aurovilians that their money is the most desirable thing about them.

Guests often feel while they are here that they, too, are Aurovilians, and when they return home it is this feeling that they'll communicate to their friends, family and workmates. They are Auroville's ambassadors around the world and their influence is potent. Auroville can help to be an inspiring influence.

*Elle Rasink (who has been here 3 months)*

## AUROVILLE'S NATIONALITIES

### Russians in Auroville

**The Mother has said: "the Russians, in their soul, are mystics - they are AT LEAST (at least) as mystical as the Indians."**

**W**hen I telephoned the first Russian on my list to ask if I could talk with him about the Russian community in Auroville for *Auroville Today* he said: "I am not Russian, I am Aurovillian." I rang my friend Tatiana who speaks Russian but she said she was from Bulgaria. I realized this may be a difficult assignment but decided to pursue it out of doggedness and also because I love listening to that soft throaty Russian accent.

In Auroville, there are 48 Russians. And then there are over two dozen other Aurovilians who were born in the former Soviet Union, now passport-holders of fiercely independent nations. All of them share Slavic roots, and the common language of Russian, which they can all speak.

Vera from Moscow tried to explain. "Russia lost more than twenty million souls in World War II, and this is still within living memory. It has caused enormous suffering and has taken so much spirit to overcome. Then there was the repressive Communist regime that lasted for years. The Mother said something relevant here. She said: 'I have great hope for the Russian people, I don't know why. They have had an experience and realize the emptiness of it all.'"

"Russia has always been a multifaceted and richly cultured country with the deep mystical tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church," she continued. "Russians like to communicate on a deep level - they don't like socializing on a superficial level. They also value friendships, and share a deep love for nature. It is a very different mind-set from the rest of Europe, though this is changing very fast."



The banner for the Russian Pavilion created by Saraswati

Vladimir gave more insight. "Until *perestroika* in 1986, when censorship was lifted, it was impossible to get any spiritual books. The few we had were passed around clandestinely and had to be read in a couple of days and passed on. Many young men had been in the army and experienced Afghanistan and had their eyes opened to a completely different country and experience of life. Young people were hungry for contact with the outside world. Satprem's *The Adventure of Consciousness* was one of the first spiritual books published and it is said that a million copies were sold. Two friends translated it over a 10 year period and it seemed full of force and soul, as if it were alive. Russian people are very intellectual yet have a very big

heart and responded to Satprem's dynamism. When I first read it I felt as if I was bathed in the energy of it. We had not been exposed to the sea of New Age books like Europe was, and so were very receptive and open.

"Before 1986, Russians were not allowed to leave the country but now they are free to move about and are desperate to catch up with Europe. We now have the strongest mafia in the world, right up to government level and the people have become very materialistic and competitive. Skyscrapers, shopping malls and casinos are now appearing at an incredible rate in Moscow, all for the elite, needless to say. The more cynical of us are now saying something like: 'Money and brains leave.' As if to counteract this movement, there is a stronger interest in all Eastern philosophies and yoga; the people are hungry for it."

Anna, who teaches clay modelling in Udavi School, told me how she came

to Auroville eight years ago. "One person who had been here gave a talk on Auroville and it seemed to me like an absolute dream - like there really were some drops of spirituality left in the world. At that time Russia was closed and I remember seeing a picture of the Matrimandir in the *Courier*, the UNESCO magazine, but then the KGB banned it. After many years I was finally able to come to Auroville but I did not know one word of English, just a few words of German that I remembered from school. And of course, very little money. So both language and money were the problems of the early years. Everything was so different here I felt I had to change my very cells."

The Russians in Auroville are also involved in manifesting a pavilion that will represent the soul of Russia. Regular meetings to discuss it have been ongoing for a few years now. Anna gets frustrated with the general lack of agreement and delays. "A Russian businessman (Ruslan Bairamov) who visited Auroville a few years ago and was very inspired and impressed by what he saw, told us that he will sponsor the pavilion building. But it is definitely not the time to even start thinking of construction. There are ten of us in our pavilion group, not enough for such a massive and important project. Building a country's pavilion is not any ordinary building project - it requires vision and huge commitment from many. We did, however, have an inauguration ceremony and laid a foundation stone with crystals inside."

Anna pulls out two beautiful handmade banners from a cupboard and carefully spreads them on the floor. "My daughter Saraswati made these. They will go into our future pavilion. Our donor also wants to establish a small guest house for Russian people, or build apartments here, but we do not have enough people involved and we often disagree. The Russian people have very strong opinions and can be stubborn. I went to some of the French Pavilion meetings to see how the

French do things. I found they behave very differently from us; it is as if they are more used to a democratic way of organizing things. The Russian-speaking Aurovilians from other countries do not come to our meetings, as perhaps all these countries feel very separate from each other right now. I just hope our sponsor can understand the reasons for our delay. Now our meetings have stopped for a time while we re-think."

"We are looking for our cultural roots, in Russia and here in Auroville. For an entire generation our culture has been artificially created and now we have a Soviet pop culture. The history we were taught at school was a lie. The original pagan culture was suppressed and it went into hiding - first from the Christians then, later the Communists. But the secret knowledge is still waiting for us, and only by discovering our true roots can we move forward. As Sri Aurobindo went to the Vedas for the true spiritual knowledge of India, we Russians have to discover our true past. In all the Slavic languages the word 'Ved' means deep knowledge, and this is for us to discover."

Another connection is being made through Vera who brought the magical Russian flat bells to Auroville. "Over the Christmas period, three performances were given which were universally appreciated," she says. "These bells will eventually resonate in the Russian Pavilion and ring out the soul of Russia to the world."

"Last August, ten Aurovilians were invited to Ethnomir which is 60 kilometres outside Moscow, by Ruslan Bairamov. Ethnomir is to be an International village with cultural centres of 52 different countries, and the Aurovilians went there to lay the foundation stone of the India House. We also hope an Auroville International Centre will soon start in Russia to formalize the bonds that have been established. 2008 is the 'Year of India' in Russia. I feel a wonderful connection has been made and in a few years it will bear fruit."

*Dianna*



# Shakuntala, or the Ring of Remembrance

The combination of dance and drama always pays off. This age-old maxim was proven once again in the recent performance of Kalidasa's play *Shakuntala, the Ring of Remembrance*, at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium at Bharat Nivas. Partha's staging of the drama and Kanchana's direction of the dancers proved to be a happy combination, resulting in two very enjoyable evenings even if, as someone observed, "it was a touch too much like Bollywood."

The story of *Shakuntala*, as recounted by Kalidasa, the great Indian poet of the 1st century CE, is perhaps the most famous Sanskrit play in existence. On a hunting expedition in the forest King Dushyant meets, in the hermitage of Rishi Kanva, the beautiful Shakuntala, daughter of the apsara (heavenly nymph) Menaka who had left her in Kanva's care. The king falls in love with Shakuntala as he watches her playing in the grove with her friends Anusuya and Priyamvada. His love is returned and they marry according to the Gandharva tradition. Soon after the consummation of the marriage, the king returns to the palace to assume his kingly duties. As he leaves, he gives Shakuntala a ring engraved with his name.

While the king is away Shakuntala spends her time day-dreaming about her future with him. She does not notice the arrival of Rishi Durvasas, known for his short temper. Enraged that he is being ignored, he curses her: "He of whom you are thinking and for whose sake you have forgotten the most elementary laws of hospitality, he will forget you!" Anusuya and Priyamvada convince the sage that Shakuntala is blameless. Durvasas then modifies the curse: when the king sees the ring he had given her, the curse will end.

When Shakuntala realizes that she is pregnant, she travels to the court to be united with her husband, the king. But he does not recognize her and to her dismay she discovers that she has lost his signet ring. Distressed, she leaves but is lifted up into the heavens by her apsara mother.

Later, palace guards bring in a fisherman who, they assume, has stolen one of the king's rings. Protesting his innocence, the fisherman



Shakuntala (played by Elene) engraves a lotus leaf while Anusuya (Shristi, left) and Priyamvada (Manjula) look on

explains how he had found the ring in the belly of a fish. Seeing the ring, the king recollects his past with Shakuntala. He rewards the fisherman. But Shakuntala has gone.

Many years pass. The valiant but grieving king fights a war on behalf of the gods. Returning victorious from battle in the chariot of Indra, the King of the Gods, his attention is drawn by a mountain, shimmering from afar with a golden, honey-like light. It is the retreat of the great sage Maricha, an ascetic known for his formidable powers. The king visits the ashram and meets a young child playing fearlessly with a lion cub. Asking who the boy is, he suddenly realizes the child is his own son. He is then reunited with Shakuntala. Maricha and his wife Aditi bless the couple and reveal that their son Bharat will become a great emperor, and will give his name to India: Bharat.

The story of *Shakuntala* can be interpreted on more than one level. "The title of this story could be *In search of the forgotten soul*," writes Aurovilian Christine Devin in the foreword of her book 'Shakuntala or The Ring of Remembrance'. "For the story expresses the deep and poignant need at the heart of our human condition – like King Dushyant, man has been condemned to forget his inborn divinity." Seen from that perspective, the play is also the story of transformation. "Love, born in the paradise of childhood and innocence, is regained, transmuted and magnificently widened."

In enacting this play in simple English, the original beauty of Kalidasa's great play and its majesty in Sanskrit has been lost. But *Shakuntala* has been interpreted so often in so many versions that one more is acceptable. This certainly was the case here. The young actors and dancers from both Auroville and Outreach schools performed commendably, and the cast showed a lot of promise. Partha had invited many outsiders to come and comment during the rehearsals to improve wherever possible. This paid off. We hope that Partha and Kanchana will take this first success as a starting point for further cooperation.

Carel

## Blue Invasion

Monique Patenaude's *Blue Invasion* at Pitanga was indeed that; a breathtaking immersion in blue. Contrary to what the 'blues' generally signifies, each of Monique's thirty odd images evoked deep peace, lightness, and transcendence, drawing the viewer into more refined regions.

Created over 10 years; it was a body of work inspired by Monique's inner dreamscapes: rarefied expanses of powder-blue skies, aureate beings with their golden steeds, endless mantras (churned by a tiny feet of a dancing Krishna on his flute), and the ultimate dissolving of body and mind reaching nirvana... Two unusual pieces were the 8-metre long silk scrolls titled *The music of humanity as a whole* – meticulously painted with thousands of beings in harmony (symbolic of Auroville's 50,000?).

This visual offering was pure oxygen after the onslaught upon the senses during birthday week and the guest season. After showings like these, one feels particularly grateful for the existence of artists in Auroville.

What is still missing is Auroville's own Guggenheim – an art museum with enormous, light-filled spaces where creations such as these can find a permanent mooring, so that, when the struggle towards human unity gets too excruciating, there is a silent refuge for the senses to turn to.

Priya Sundaravalli



La Débâcle

## About Death and beyond

In March, the Auroville Renaissance Cappella, directed by Eugene Liven d'Abelardo, gave no less than six performances of motets, madrigals and songs by composers from the renaissance, baroque, romantic and modern eras. They were interspersed by poems read by Norman Bowler on the same theme of death and the beyond. Four performances were held in Auroville, and one in the Hall of Harmony of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram School. The concluding performance was given in the Église Notre Dame des Anges in Pondicherry.

"They are definitely up a notch since their last performance," was my first impression. Particularly the opening *Madonna ma pietà* by Orlando di Lasso which was striking in the choir's mastery of dynamism. Similarly the works of the other renaissance composers were well-crafted. In this field the choir showed a greater mastery than in the evening's baroque and romantic repertoire.

Yet, with all the precision in execution, the renaissance works did not feature amongst my favourites. That accolade went to the works of the four modern composers, Messiaen, Pärt, Tavener, and Eugene himself. The harmonies created by these 'new mystics' are hauntingly

beautiful, revealing a new aesthetic.

Eugene's composition was a premiere. His *Is this the end, my friend?* based on Sri Aurobindo's poem by the same name, was dedicated to Silvano who passed away in 2004. The work is noteworthy when one realizes how difficult it is to set Sri Aurobindo's poems to music without compromising the music or the poetry. In this he succeeded remarkably well and the work was beautiful throughout.

The intermixing of the music with the poetry was, in general, not so successful. Often two or three poems would be read before the choir took up the next song. Each was introduced by "I will now read..." This was a disturbance and often prevented the listener from appreciating the impact of a poem, each of which deserves quiet contemplation.

This said, a new project should now start, namely the harmonious recording of the songs and the poems from this programme – with a booklet offering texts and translations – in one seamless production.

Given the fact that the majority of songs on this programme were not from the renaissance period, a name change for the choir should be considered. What about 'The Auroville Timeless Capella'?

Carel

## On going into colour



On the occasion of Auroville's 40th anniversary and the completion of *The Matrimandir*, the February 2008 issue of *Auroville Today* was published in full-colour. We were very happy with the result, as were many of our readers. At the request of many, we went in for a reprint (if you would like to receive extra copies email us at [avtoday@auroville.org.in](mailto:avtoday@auroville.org.in))

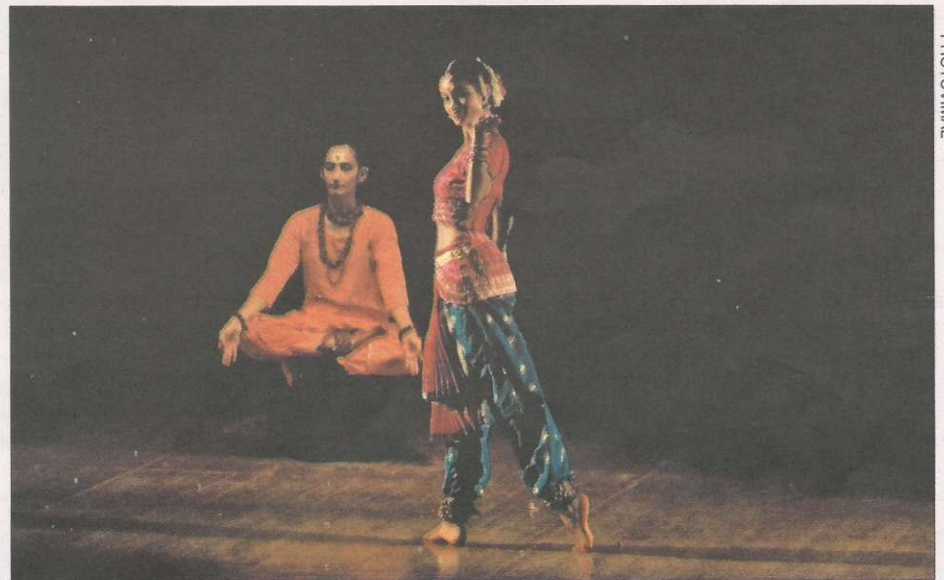
We have decided to continue printing in colour. In the months to come, we will experiment with different paper qualities in order to find the best solution in terms of quality and cost. The latter is an important factor. The printing cost of the February issue was two and a half times that of our old b/w version; the March issue – on less-expensive paper – was about twice as expensive.

As *Auroville Today* is neither subsidized by the community nor carries advertisements, we have to find funding for going full-colour. What we are looking at is approximately Rs. 200,000 (\$ 5,000 or € 3,333) to enable us to print in colour for one year.

As yet, we do not know how to raise this amount. We may have to raise subscription rates. Those of you who are in a position to help make this transition to colour are invited to contact us by email at [avtoday@auroville.org.in](mailto:avtoday@auroville.org.in). We hope you will appreciate our move forward. After 20 years of publication, it was not before time!

The Editors

## The Kaluveli Siddhar legend



The tale that unfolded one evening in March was of an ancient legend of how Auroville was predicted thousands of years ago by Lord Shiva himself. The key players were Kaluveli Siddhar, an enlightened but irascible sage (played by Pushpa, above); Sundaravalli, the enchanting temple dancer (played by Harini, above); the local king; and most importantly, Lord Mahaleesa of the Irumbai temple. The story 'received' by 80 year-old Murugesan, a long-time Aurovilian from Kottakarai, was adapted into a Bharatanatyam dance drama format by Krishna Kumar and Gita, offered as part of a 12-week dance workshop, and premiered at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium.



**L**iberty was trained as a racehorse, but he didn't enjoy racing because the riders would mistreat him. One day he had a stroke of luck. A man came and took him home with him. But by now Liberty didn't like people: every time anyone came close, Liberty bared his teeth. So the man was scared and he neither rode nor beat him. After a while, Liberty was brought to the Pony Farm in Auroville. The new stablehand here was a woman called Lea.

Lea, from Belgium, had been living with her husband and children in Geneva. But her husband, an Indian from the Punjab, had had to face racism so frequently that he decided to go back to India. Lea decided to accompany him – but she didn't go to the Punjab. She was more interested in a place she knew only from a movie: Auroville.

#### Two suitcases and one vision

One picture from that movie stuck in her mind: it was of a man riding a horse bareback on a red road. This image so awakened her sense of freedom that she decided to begin a new life in Auroville. When she arrived with her daughters Mimi and Sara they had only two suitcases, but lots of ideas and fresh hope.

The man in the movie was Achilles, who ran the Auroville Pony farm together with his wife Gaya, until they gave it to Nicolette and went back to Germany. But soon Nicolette couldn't manage any more as there was hardly enough money to feed the twenty ponies and horses. Although it was a very tough time to become the caretaker of such a place, and they themselves had almost nothing, Lea and Sara decided to take it on. This was in 2001.

"Feeding horses is expensive," Lea says, "so, you are always looking for money". They came up with a novel concept. Since this is Auroville where the aspiration is to go beyond

## Natural horsemanship

On the Pony Farm, humans learn the yoga of horses.



PHOTO FRIEDRIKE RÜLL

Lucky Lady trusts 9 year old Monica

personal ownership, the idea was that every pony on the farm would be looked after by two people who would share the running costs and the training. If the caretakers leave, the ponies would stay and be looked after by others.

Each of the ponies and horses which Lea and Sara organized to buy (today the Pony Farm is in fact half a horse farm) has its own history. Like Liberty, many were beaten in the process of being trained as racehorses. "In India, many horses are not treated as emotional beings," Sara says, "although, it is not only Indians who beat their horses. Almost all horse people do that."

Sara and Lea say that trying to dominate

horses results not only in unhappy horses, it also poisons the relationship between horses and people. So at the Pony Farm they decided they had to start by training the riders.

#### Speaking with horses instead of beating them

"Working with horses is just like yoga," Lea says. "They are mirrors for our behaviour. Every problem one has with one's horse is a problem one has with oneself."

They are inspired by the principles of Klaus Ferdinand Hempfling and Pat Parelli who teach methods to learn the language of horses. "This means learning to think like a horse, which is a long, hard work," says Sara.

Lea teaches the Hempfling method, while Sara is experimenting with Parelli's.

Riding is only the very last step of the process. For the first few months, Liberty's new stablehands just walked with him, asking for his trust and confidence. They would make turns, stop, go on again, gradually giving him less and less signals. And it worked because he enjoyed learning something new, but most of all because he felt he was being respected as an individual. Though it is still a work in progress, today Liberty is calm and easy to ride.

This method gave Lea new courage because, in fact, she had often been doubtful that the Pony Farm concept would work. Almost all the caretakers are children, and they are often not able to take enough responsibility for their sometimes complicated protégés. And all the children, Lea complains, "are very busy with school, homework and their obligatory sports every day". So, there is not much time and energy for them to work with all the ponies and horses properly.

But whenever she thought about giving up, something surprising happened. For example, she recently got a gift – a full course at a discount in the Hempfling methods. When she finishes it in September, she plans to offer a basic introduction in horse speech to Aurovilians as well as to guests (the Pony Farm has guest accommodation).

Meanwhile, the children are having their riding lesson with Mahi, one of the three young teachers on the Pony Farm. Barefoot, without saddle, they sit on their ponies, concentrating on stopping them from eating grass. "Push her, but carefully" Mahi encourages nine year old Monica. "Go on with your belly. Move yourself, and you'll see, she will go."

And Lucky Lady moves. She is one of two new ponies and enjoys learning. But after a few metres she begins eating grass again. Like Sara said, it takes time.

Friederike Rüll

#### SIGHTINGS

## Ferraris in town

On March 14th, a rainy Friday morning, two Ferrari 612 Scagliettis rolled into Auroville. No one knew about it...



PHOTO COURTESY FERRARI INDIA BLOG

#### Rare visitors

**W**hat are the odds that Auroville will be included in the Italian car maker, Ferrari's, 13,000 kilometre all-India tour? And what is the likelihood that the one lone Aurovillian who witnesses this once-in-a-lifetime sighting, is a car-connoisseur? Perhaps one in 2000, according to the recent census...

A young French Aurovillian had her heart-stopping moment when she was returning from Pondy a little after 10 in the morning. "It had been raining all night and that morning too. The sky was grey and overcast, the roads empty, and there was a fine mist drifting over Auroville. Then, somewhere near the Pitchandikulam bridge, I heard them – this sexy belly-thrilling low purr of what could only be the finest piece of engineering. And lo and behold, right out of the dirt lane from the Pitchandikulam forest, they emerged. Two absolutely magnificent Ferraris, one ivory on burgundy and the other burgundy on ivory. But before I could register, they had breezed past me.

"No way was I going to let them get away so easily! I took off my rain jacket, applied a fresh coat of lipstick, turned around, and vroomed after them, honking all the way. They slowed down, graciously letting me overtake them... the windows rolled back and the occupants waved, just as I had expected. Only then did I turn back..."

Priya Sundaravalli

#### LIFE IN AUROVILLE

## Beauty in Auroville

"Let Beauty be your constant ideal," said The Mother. "Beauty of the soul, Beauty of feelings, Beauty of thought, Beauty of actions, Beauty in work, so that nothing comes out of your hands that is not an expression of pure and harmonious beauty. And the divine help will always be with you."

**T**he beauty of Mother's aspiration runs through Auroville. She was an artist and this love of beauty permeates the air here. You feel it when you turn a corner on your

bike and suddenly catch a glimpse through the trees of a white house with a couple of rattan chairs in the shade, as if you stumbled upon a secret magical place. If you go up on the roof, the golden ball of Matrimandir may gleam through the trees.

The scattered gems of beauty and creativity of Auroville's residents never fail to surprise and inspire. The Indus Valley Café with its tables spread under the trees and its concept of food as gift; while next door in Kala Kendra huge clay pots over a thousand years old rest in the cool basement.

Or the beauty of the Free Store with its thrice-used clothes and bizarre knick-knacks waiting for yet another lease of life; or the shiny new tables of La Terrace above the Solar Kitchen where one can sip a cup of frothy cappuccino gazing over the tree-line.

At the other end of Auroville, past the

scented eucalyptus grove, there is Papyrus hidden away, offering beautiful handmade stationary created by the local ladies downstairs. Nearby is La Piscine, New Creation's outdoor swimming pool set amidst a line of Palmyra trees; a constant surprise with its sparkling blue waters that delight children on hot afternoons.

The Auroville Bakery, of course, is a living, breathing, perfumed oasis with its multitude aromas of baking – bread and pizza and chocolate croissants – wafting into the dusty chaos of Kulapalayam. Farther away, there is the beautiful and so aptly named Quiet, with

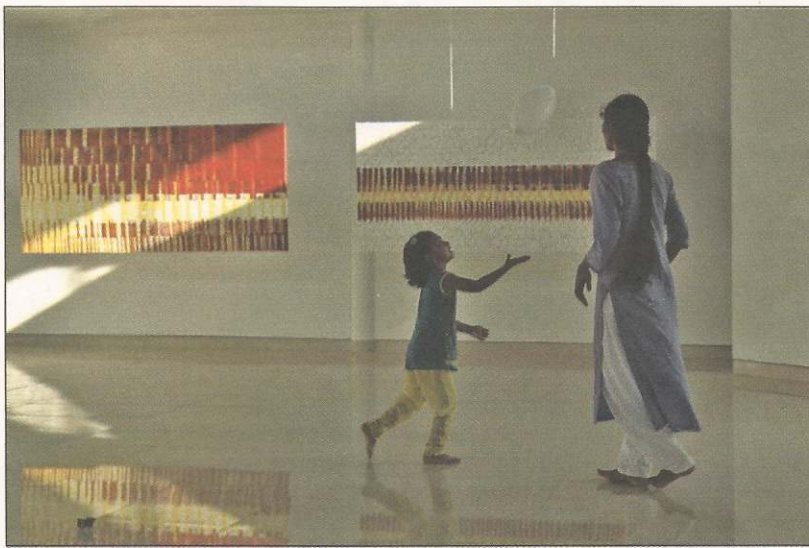


PHOTO GIORGIO

its gift of healing and an endlessly lapping sea.

But always in Auroville, beauty is surrounded by action and work, or by nature's intensities; the churned-up mud of the monsoon or the sizzling vapours of the summer. Or the year-round sounds of hammering, the shouts of workers, or, behind closed doors, the architects, builders and planners

in passionate discussion about ways of building a city.

Through all this is the eternal beauty of the Tamil woman in her wondrous coloured saris and a string of jasmine on her jet black hair. When you come across one with a pot of water on her head, gracefully balancing it with a curve of an arm and an exquisite measured walk, her poise and beauty can take your breath away.

And scattered everywhere, on walls, in nooks and crannies, on shelves and office desks are little statues of Ganesh with a red flower offering, or pictures of Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

And when we die, we are carried slowly down the bumpy road at dawn to the special pavilion in a place called Adventure. Our friends follow behind on motor bikes with only the headlights visible in the misty darkness; the path is strewn with flowers and lined by perfumed candles. Everything is clothed in dignity and deep silence as the first light of day breaks through the trees. Exits in Auroville are the most beautiful of all.

Dianna

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