

AUROVILLE TODAY

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PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

Glimpses of village life

A PORTRAIT OF KUILAPALAYAM

The neighbouring village of Kuilapalayam—the place of the ‘Koil’, or cuckoo in Tamil—has been closely involved with Auroville from the very beginning. The communities of Aspiration, Fraternity and Douceur grew up around it—and with its help—and today the nearby presence of the State Bank, the Health Centre and Pour Tous continue to make this area one of the focal points of Auroville.

In the early years, the children of Aspiration were always visiting friends in the village, and some Aurovilians also attended meetings there. Since the conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society in the late 1970’s, however, a conflict in which some of the villagers were actively involved in harassing Aurovilians, this easy interchange has ceased, although the majority of adult villagers continue to work in Auroville or to rely upon it for their livelihood.

Consequently, for most Aurovilians today Kuilapalayam and the other nearby villages are terra incognita, places to hurry through on the way to somewhere else, or

images of rural India to be shown—selectively—to interested visitors. But what is the reality?

It’s extremely difficult to get at. In many ways, for example, this village of 3,500 inhabitants is unlike many other villages in Tamil Nadu. Its proximity to Auroville and, to a lesser extent, Pondicherry has markedly influenced its values and the way it has developed: the old patterns are constantly overlaid, tinged, or infiltrated by new ones. Another complication relates to my situation as an outsider trying to make sense of a very different culture. How do I interpret the information that I get? How can I be sure that it is reasonably objective, and not distorted by old scores that people want to settle? Or that it isn’t simple window-dressing?

The answer is, I can’t. The following article, therefore, which is based upon interviews with more than 30 villagers over the past few months, is probably only one among many ‘versions’ of life in Kuilapalayam today. But, as far as possible, it’s theirs, not mine.

Alan

A brief history

“A few thousand years ago,” explains Varadarajan, the eldest headman of the village, “the area where Kuilapalayam is now was all forest, and it was ruled by a king called Vikramadita. For six months every year he would rule the country, and for the other six months he would retire to the forest to meditate. Many years later, people would come to the forest to cut firewood, which they would then sell in Pondicherry. They knew of no source of water around here. One day, a dog came with the woodcutters. The dog wandered off and discovered a kolam (a small lake). He drank and swam in it, and then returned to the woodcutters. When they saw he was wet, they followed him back to the kolam. After that, they came to the kolam every day.

One day, they heard the sound of a horse near the kolam. When they investigated, they discovered an ancient Aiyenar temple nearby. (Aiyenar is the traditional protector of villages. His temple traditionally has earthenware horses standing outside—ed.) This was the real

beginning of the village, for with water and a temple nearby people could begin to live here.”

“Sixty years ago,” remembers Dhanapal, another headman, “the village was still very small, with just one street to the south of the Mariamman temple. There was forest all around. The villagers made the kolam bigger, but the water supply remained unreliable, and women had to go to another village to fill their pots. At that time, the main occupation of the men in the village was working in the fields for the Muslims in Pondicherry who owned much of the land around here.

“Then, some thirty years ago, we heard about a scheme named after Sri Aurobindo called ‘Auroville’ which was to be built in this area. Some of the villagers were very scared because they felt that the white people would come and rule them again. But I read about the project in a local newspaper, and explained to them that Auroville was meant to help them, not dominate them. Afterwards, I was taken to meet The Mother a number of times. She told me many times

that the villagers should cooperate with the project, because it was for them. And this wasn’t just words. She said it in a way that I knew she would make it happen. This made me very happy.”

“In the beginning,” he continues, “we worked with the first Aurovilians to help purchase the land. But after this, some of these people just forgot us... Auroville has done a lot for the village over the years, like improving the water supply, building the Health centre and providing employment, but I would be happy if Aurovilians came to our meetings again. We live beside each other; we must work things out together.”

The daily rhythm

But ‘working things out together’ means understanding, among other things, that the daily life-style and preoccupations of the villagers is quite different from those of Aurovilians. Kuppumal was born in Kuilapalayam almost 50 years ago, and subsequently married a man from the same village. “We women get up at about 5 o’clock,” she says. “Then we clean inside and outside the house, make a kolam (a sacred geometric pattern) outside the front door, wash all the dishes and start preparing food. While the food is cooking, we go out and get in line for the water tap. Water is only available between 5 and 8 o’clock in the morning, and each woman may have ten pots to fill. So if we are not in line early, we may not get water that day. After breakfast, at this time of the year (January) we go to our fields and do weeding until 4 o’clock in the afternoon. Then we come home, clean the house again and cook for the family. We go to bed at about 8.30.”

Kuppumal is not employed in Auroville, but three-quarters of the women in Kuilapalayam are. And for them the day is even longer. Jothi, who works at Mirramukhi creche, has the same household tasks as Kuppumal, but in order to finish them before going off to work she frequently has to get up an hour earlier. Does she get any help in the house from her husband? “No. I have to manage everything in the house myself, as well as supervising my child’s homework when he comes back from school.”

Generally, the men get up later than the women. Twenty years ago, when traditional subsistence farming was still practised, most men would be engaged during the

day in labour-intensive, back-breaking fieldwork. The women would bring a mid-day meal of ragi porridge to the field, and the men would return to the village in the late afternoon. Today, many of the men in the village are employed in Auroville—in jobs like gardening, construction and caretaking—while others commute daily to office or construction jobs in Pondicherry. And subsistence farming has given way to the much less labour-intensive monoculture cultivation of cashew.

Yet life in the village remains hard, close to the bone, for both men and women. So it's not surprising that quarrels and flare-ups are frequent. Sengeni, who was born in the village and has lived there many years, enumerates. "Quarrels break out when children from different families fight together; when two women argue about who was first in the queue for water; when there are disagreements about land boundaries; and when the men bring home a quarrel started in the arrack shop" ('arrack' is locally-brewed alcohol). Jothi confirms that the majority of men in the village have a drinking problem. "And it's definitely getting worse. When they come home drunk, they want their food immediately. If I say to my husband I want to finish cleaning the house, he says, 'Why do you go out to work in Auroville? Your job is to cook the food'". In these circumstances, verbal abuse is often followed by violence against the woman.

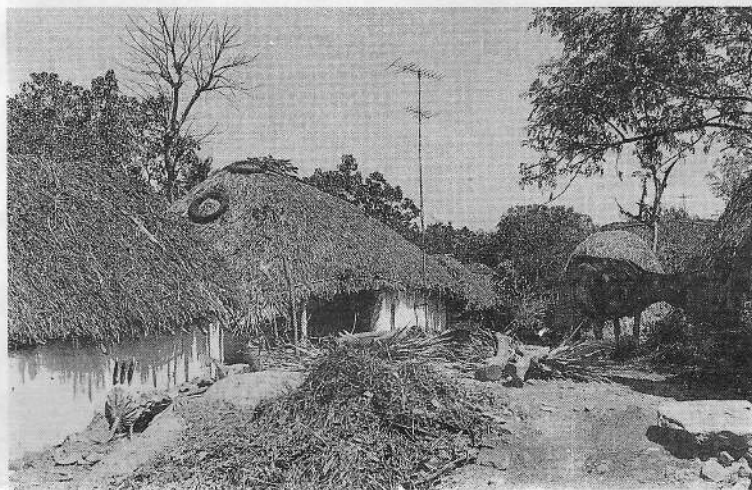
Relations between the sexes

The general perception from outside is that the village women are very downtrodden. As a girl, for example, she is much more likely than her brothers to be taken out of school early, mainly to help with the housework. But also, as Jothi points out, "men feel threatened when their wives are more educated than them". Again, at the time of marriage women are expected to move to the home of the husband's family—which is often in a distant village—where the mother-in-law and the other relations often make life difficult for her. A woman is not allowed to purchase land in her own name, and if her husband dies, she is often sent back to her own family. As a widow, she is not allowed to wear bangles or her wedding *mala*, or to put flowers in her hair; and she is not allowed to attend marriages and other important events because her presence is believed to be unpropitious.

In practice, however, the relationship between the sexes is not necessarily so one-sided, particularly if the woman has a strong personality. Kuppumal, Jothi and Sengeni claim, for example, that in their households all important family decisions are taken by both partners. But what happens when the wife is earning a salary? Does the husband demand it? "I keep my salary", says Jothi, "and in addition my husband gives me something of his to help with the household.

Sometimes we quarrel about money, for example, when he wants some to go drinking. So then I give him 5 or 10 rupees to keep him quiet!"

It's clear that in Kuilapalayam, as in most other villages, the women are the most concerned about improving basic hygiene and cleaning up the pot-holed streets. Yet women are not represented on any of the groups responsible for looking after the village. Why not? "We are not interested in politics," says Kuppumal. "Parents don't like to send their daughters out to participate in such work," says Jothi, "because it is not the women's traditional role, and they may get bothered by the men." Yet Jothi herself helped set up the first night school in Kuilapalayam. Would she stop her daughter doing the same thing? "In a way I would appreciate it if she wanted to do something like this. But if people started talking badly about her because she was doing this work, I would stop her."



All photos in this article: John Mandeon

"Increasing prosperity is changing the whole style of life in the village".

(Ramamurthi)

Yet women like Jothi work in Auroville where they have daily contact with different role models. In an Auroville home, men may help with cooking, housework and looking after the children, while women may run businesses. Has any of this rubbed off on the relations between the sexes in the village? "There has been some influence," admits Jothi. "Many village women want fewer children now, and husbands and wives—particularly if they both work in Auroville—tend to discuss things together more. Also, some husbands help more now with tasks like carrying water. But in other respects, the village has kept to the old ways. The wife, for example, is still expected to do the cooking and clean the house."

The village power structure

The old village hierarchy was straightforward. Dhanapal explains: "Originally, there was a *shastra*, a written law in the village which said that any villager who belonged to a

family that had behaved correctly for 32 generations (a 'generation' in the village is one lifetime!) was automatically to be selected as a headman. More recently, the process changed. Some men with a little education, and who had sufficient money to feed others, were elected by the other villagers as headmen, and their eldest sons inherited the position. That is still the process today."

The headmen are a village institution. Some years ago, however, the Government introduced the panchayat system. The Panchayat is a village body, elected every three years, which can collect certain local taxes and, in return, is responsible for the upkeep of the basic infrastructure of the village and its surroundings. Originally, the headmen were automatically selected by the villagers for the Panchayat. However, with the coming of Auroville, and the ability to levy taxes on Auroville

another power grouping—the political parties—or, rather, their representatives in the village. For when a party comes into power in the State, their representatives in the village, through their links to the big party men, are in a position to grant favours. "Even if a person does wrong, they will stand behind him if he is 'one of theirs'. If necessary, they will even go to the police and get him released. Politics is ruining the village," concludes Dhanapal.

But so is money, according to Varadarajan. "When we were young, the Panchayat celebrated Saraswati puja (Saraswati is the goddess of wisdom) because they wanted the villagers to get more knowledge and education. But today they only want to celebrate Lakshmi puja (Lakshmi is the goddess of wealth) so they can get more money!" In this sense, another power grouping in the village is the successful businessmen who can afford to build large houses and employ other villagers. The traditional headmen like Dhanapal look to these businessmen to revive the pride and prosperity of the village, "but they work mainly for themselves." Unsurprisingly, the businessmen have a different point of view. Ramamurthi used to work for 'Auroville Press' and now runs a small printing business in the village. "We are willing to work with the headmen to improve conditions



properties, the Kuilapalayam Panchayat became one of the richest in the area, and many other villagers became interested in being elected to it. So the traditional headmen withdrew from the Panchayat, so that today there are two separate governing bodies in Kuilapalayam.

Well, actually, it's not as simple as that. The headmen, for example, had been losing influence steadily over the years. "Years ago," recalls Varadarajan, "the headmen had a lot of respect. They were like judges, settling village disputes. And when they called the villagers to desilt the village pond, everybody came. The Mother also very much appreciated the traditional institution of the headmen. She told us that when Auroville came, Aurovilians who misbehaved with the villagers should come to a village meeting, and the headmen would decide what to do. But today we headmen have lost all our influence in the village; we can't get cooperation from anybody any more."

Why not? Dhanapal blames it on

in the village, but only if the headmen behave correctly. If we give them money at present for the village, they will spend it on themselves." It's a complaint which is heard from many other villagers, too. "If the headmen and members of the Panchayat don't get some financial benefit," says Kuppumal, "they won't do anything for us."

Another potential power grouping in the village is the Kuilapalayam Youth Group ('youth', in this context, seems to mean anybody below about 35 years). The Group was set up in 1985 to investigate and sign up for Government and voluntary organization schemes which could benefit the village, a work which the headmen or Panchayat members didn't have the time to pursue. The Youth Group helped clean the streets and build a village creche, but within a few years it disbanded, and it is still struggling to reorganize itself. What went wrong? Ravi, the President of the Youth Group explains. "The main reason we

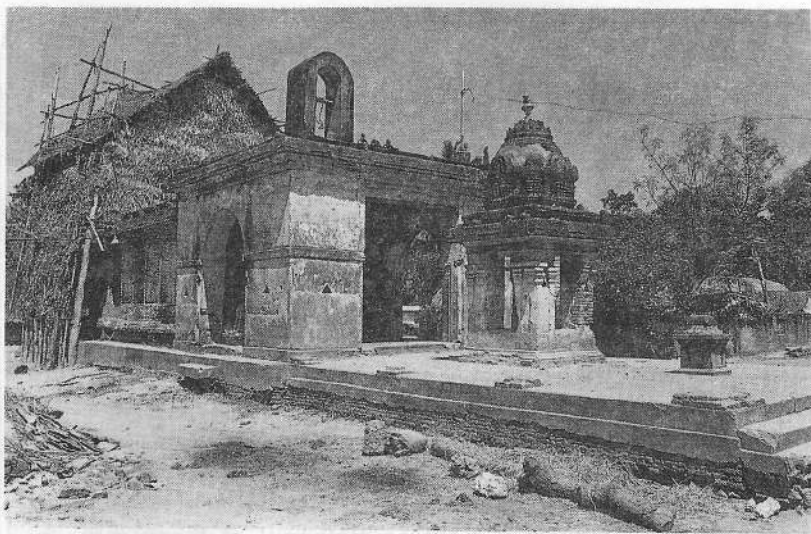
stopped was that the Panchayat felt they should be doing this work, and that if we did it, their prestige would suffer." Relations between the Youth Group and the Panchayat have improved since, but Ravi is still very critical of the way the Panchayat operates at present. "The work of the Panchayat is to be like a father to the village, to stand up for it and to communicate its concerns to the government people outside. But at present the people who put their names forward for the Panchayat know nothing about the work. They are only interested in the prestige of the position and in making money. The Panchayat, the headmen and the Youth Group should work hand-in-hand, and not all pull in their own directions as they do now."

The result, as Perumal, an old watchman, puts it is that, "nobody has any respect for anybody any more in the village. In the old days, the police would never come into the village unannounced: they would wait for permission from the headmen. But now they just come in whenever they like."

A village in transition

The unclarity of the present power structure reflect a village in transition; from old values, practices, occupations and lifestyles to new ones. The traditional farming families are among the most conservative elements in the village, so it's interesting to hear their version of the changes that have taken place. Kannayan is one of the largest landowners in the village: "The old farming methods were very hard, very labour-intensive. We grew mainly crops like peanuts, ulundu and ragi and relied upon the rains to irrigate them. Nowadays, most of us cultivate cashew." Why? "Mainly because it is much less labour-intensive, which is important because most of the village workforce have taken up work in Auroville. Also, the women who remain in the village no longer want to do field work or to clean the grain. If labour had been available, we wouldn't have switched to cashew, but would have grown irrigated crops like coconut and rice as they give a bigger profit."

The influence of Auroville, both direct and indirect, is pervasive. "Other things have changed, too. In the old days, each of us farmers had five pairs of bullocks to plough our land. Today, there are only ten pairs of bullocks in the whole of Kuilapalayam. This is because the boys who used to look after them are employed in Auroville, and also because when Auroville bought our land, they fenced it off, so our cattle had far less grazing land." Kannayan is gloomy about the future of farming around the village. "Even our sons don't want to farm. They just want an easy life; to buy a car and have a big house in the town. The other day, during a rainstorm, a villager said to me, 'Why does it ever have to rain? It can be sunny every day as far as I'm concerned.' I'm sure that with attitudes like this, agriculture in Kuilapalayam will end



The village temple, under restoration for many years...

with our generation."

The sense that the village has become much more materialistic in its values in recent years is echoed by many of the older villagers. And signs of a new prosperity are everywhere. Huge new houses are going up on the ancient streets; almost every house or shack has not only electricity, but also a television; there are many more mopeds and motorcycles around; the young men are much more likely to wear trousers than the traditional lungis; and polished white rice, bought from the shop, has replaced the local grains as a staple food. Although it hasn't happened yet, businessmen like Lingapam wouldn't mind if big factories or cement works come up around the village. "The main thing is that there should be more work so people can live a better life."

For Ramamurthi, "it's clear that increasing prosperity is changing the whole style of life in the village. We used to have broad streets but now, when people get more money, they build bigger and bigger houses which encroach on the streets. They don't care about others living beside them who may have little to live on. In fact, the gap between the rich and poor in the village is getting bigger and bigger. The whole mentality has changed. Recently, some youngsters who wanted to clean up the village streets went round the village collecting money for the work. But some of the villagers said, 'You're only doing this work to get money out of it'. How can anything change when people think like this?" And Ravi of the Youth Group confirms that many villagers are no longer interested in taking up work for the

village. "They turn round and say, 'That's what the Government is for. Let them look after it'."

Yet generalizations may be dangerous. For just as old Kuilapalayam probably had materialistic tendencies—albeit moderated by a relative lack of money—so the modern tendencies are not necessarily all negative. Fifteen years ago, for example, it was rare to see a village woman on a bicycle. "We had to practice at night!" says Savitri, who also works in Auroville. But now everybody seems to cycle. "In fact," says Savitri, "the older people in the village are envious of the young people today because the young people are so much more free now. In the old days, if women wanted to eat at another person's house, they had to get the permission of the village elders. In those days, only the elders were educated, so we had to go to them for everything. But now all that has changed. People are seeing a much wider world now."

Partly, of course, through films, video and television. Yet, even here, the influence may be less than it seems. "We like to watch the old films about the gods," says Kuppumal, "but we don't feel much connection with the new things on Star TV. We watch, but it doesn't really change us at all." One proof of this seems to be the attitude towards religion, which remains a strong force within the village. "Whatever happens, this will never change," says Kuppumal.

Similarly, Ravi of the Youth Group believes that, while many of the village youth are caught up in an individualistic and materialistic

phase at present, "once they have attained a certain living standard they will think of the village again, and want to work for it." And he points out, "Most of the young people definitely have love for the village in their hearts; they don't want to live anywhere else."

Shankar, an Aurovilian who grew up in the village, disagrees. "Last year, ten young men from Kuilapalayam went out to work in the Middle East. When they, and others like them, come back, they'll have money.

They'll buy land, build big houses. But I don't think they will have any more sense of community. If anything, there will be less and less of this spirit as Kuilapalayam becomes more outwardly prosperous."

The villagers' perception of Auroville

Just as different villagers have different perceptions as to the effects of 'progress' in Kuilapalayam, so too there is some disagreement about the nature and the degree of Auroville's influence upon village life. In terms of degree, for example, the influence of Pondicherry and—through the mass media—that of India and the larger world may be as great for some villagers as the daily contact with Auroville. And, of course, the nature of the personal contact with Aurovilians often determines how the villagers view Auroville as a whole.

Nevertheless, villagers who work in Auroville tend to be overwhelmingly positive about Auroville's influence. "It's been very good," says Savitri. "We got many things from Auroville, like the Health Centre, a better water system, and the new school which is being built now—we would have had to wait another 20 years for the government to have done this. Above all, we got work."

"In the old days," she continues,

"the village people wouldn't think of sending their children to Pondicherry to be educated beyond the first few grades. Now everybody wants to do this. This is the influence of Auroville, because parents feel that with a good education their child can get a good job in Auroville." "Auroville has brought three meals a day to every household in the village," is how Ramamurthy sums it up.

Some villagers are less positive. The older farmers, in particular, are critical of Auroville's afforestation and land use programme. "Most of the trees you grow are not useful," says Kannayan. "Only people like Charlie are growing useful trees like fruit trees. And you grow thorns and eucalyptus along the fences with our fields which dry up the roots of our crops. That's why our methods can never go hand-in-hand with yours." "Also," says Chandrasenan who farms 13 acres of cashews, "the Aurovilians want us to stop using pesticides. But they give us a better yield; and the Government people, who are also educated, are telling us to keep spraying. The big problem is that Auroville tells everybody all over the world that we are doing wrong. So foreigners may stop buying Indian cashews and make it difficult for us. If Auroville really wants us to change, it has to provide us with alternatives, not make things more difficult for us."



Village women with tamarind harvest

Perumal, who has worked as a watchman in Auroville for over 20 years, is generally happy with Auroville's influence, but for one thing: "In the old days, parents would 'wear out seven pairs of chappals' in arranging the best marriage for their daughter. But now, as the young men and women work together in Auroville, they arrange their own marriages, and the parents have almost nothing to say."

A more general dissatisfaction, held by a surprising number of villagers, relates to the behaviour of the Tamil Aurovilians who were born in the village but subsequently joined Auroville. Ravi of the Youth Group is particularly critical. "The Tamil Aurovilians could do so much for the village, but they've turned their backs on us, forgotten us completely; they behave like the foreigners now. If some villagers dislike Auroville, it's because of the arrogance of these people." Ravi, like several other villagers, is also critical of the way the Health Centre is run at present. "We are fortunate to have good doctors, but there are

far too many attendants who act like maharajas. Sometimes," he concludes, "I think the only connection between the villages and Auroville is Matrimandir. Without Matrimandir, Auroville would have no respect from us."

Where next?

Ravi's views would not be shared in their entirety by many other villagers. Nevertheless, there is a sense that Auroville and the village are not communicating well, and that they face each other across a widening comprehension gap. And this is ironical for, on the basis of the villagers' own statements, it appears that Kuilapalayam and Auroville are facing similar challenges. These include the erosion of communal values by more individualistic ones, an increasingly consumeristic lifestyle, and the question of what constitutes an appropriate system of governance.

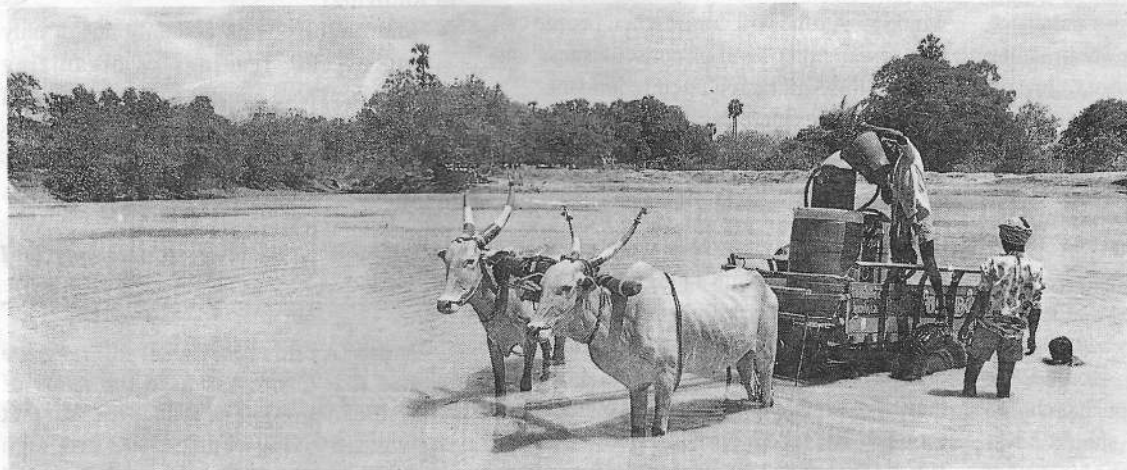
What is lacking on both sides, perhaps, is a genuine respect for each other's way of being, a respect which is the prerequisite for 'working things out together'. And this can only come from better understanding. Which means, for example, that Aurovilians need to appreciate why a village society which has existed, for so many years, on a close to subsistence level should value material prosperity and security so highly. While many villagers, on the other hand, need to understand why some Aurovilians have apparently given up precisely these 'benefits' to live in a hot and dusty corner of India.

Thanapal is one of the oldest men in the village. "At times," he says, "my heart is defeated because everything is such a big struggle." Yet he has a vision, a dream, that "in the future, if Auroville really grows according to the wishes of Mother, if you become like she wished, there will no longer be this matter of black and white. We will give our girls to you, and our boys will marry your girls. There will no longer be any differences between us. Auroville should not make the same mistakes as we have made in the village. Aurovilians must cooperate with each other, and with the villagers. If this happens, then at least when I die, my soul will have *shanti* (peace)."

Acknowledgements

I'm grateful to the many villagers who gave their time, in the middle of a busy cashew season, to be interviewed for this article. John Mandeen took all the photos. And I owe a very special thanks to Shankar Vengadesan, who not only arranged the interviews, but translated all the questions and responses!

Alan



Kuilapalayam kolam: cashew farmers washing out barrels used for pesticide spraying

DANCING TO THE TUNE OF THE ONE

Everything in the universe is interrelated. Everything dances to the tune of the One. Occultism, in its broadest sense, refers to all phenomena that reflect this secret cosmic unity. In *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo describes occult science as "essentially, the science of the subliminal in ourselves and the subliminal in world-nature, and of all that is in connection with the subliminal, including the subconscious and the superconscious, and the use of it as part of self-knowledge and world-knowledge and for the right dynamisation of that knowledge." It could be argued that this definition of occultism encompasses Matrimandir which is "the living symbol of Auroville's aspiration for the Divine."

In a narrower sense, occultism has found expression in the creation of many systems of knowledge that are used to predict the future. Systems such as the Tarot, palmistry, numerology and astrology are based on the

belief that, because of the prevalent cosmic unity, events in one's life are revealed through signs and symbols of the system. Such systems are actively practised by some people in Auroville, and many Aurovilians, though themselves not going for in-depth studies of these systems, are seen to consult these practitioners for guidance. Others however feel that occultism does not have a role to play in the integral yoga, and some are concerned about the potential misuse of occult knowledge and the harm that it can cause.

AUROVILLE TODAY sheds some light on this difficult topic by interviewing Georges, a long-term Aurovillian, on the place of occultism in the integral yoga and by featuring a talk with Claire, a newcomer who offers workshops and consultations using aspects of occultism.

* The Life Divine pp. 875-877

Man, confronted by this incapacity of the intelligence and yet avid of the knowledge of the future, has fallen back on other and external means, omens, sortileges, dreams, astrology and many other alleged data for a past and future knowledge that have been in less sceptical times formulated as veridical sciences.... A higher psychical knowledge shows us that in fact the world is full of many systems of correspondences and indices and that these things, however much misused by the human intelligence, can in their place and under right conditions give us real data of a supraphysical knowledge. It is evident, however, that it is only an intuitive knowledge that can discover and formulate them,—as it was in fact the psychical and intuitive mind that originally formulated these ways of veridical knowledge,—and it will be found in practice that only an intuitive knowledge, not the mere use either of a traditional or a haphazard interpretation or of mechanical rule and formula, can ensure a right employment of these indices. Otherwise, handled by the surface intelligence, they are liable to be converted into a thick jungle of error.

The true and direct knowledge or vision of past, present and future begins with the opening of the psychical consciousness and the psychical faculties. The psychical consciousness is that of what is now often called the subliminal self, the subtle or dream self of Indian psychology...

Sri Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, Cent. Ed. vol 21, pp.860-861

Claire: Reading the aura - many people can do that

In the month of March two half-day workshops, on palmistry and on the Tarot, were being offered at Verite by Claire, a guest from France, who reputedly possessed psychic powers including a natural ability to read auras. Wondering about the place of these kinds of workshops in Auroville Bindu decided to join the Tarot workshop and discovered that the participants found it useful. Claire introduced the 22 major arcana of the Tarot, and afterwards used them to answer personal queries for everyone in the group. Together with Carel, Bindu later visited Claire in New Creation Field where she lived with her two children. What work do you do exactly and why did you decide to come to Auroville? they asked as a kind of introduction.

"I have been involved with different aspects of occultism for 12 years, using aura-reading, various kinds of tarots, pendulums and palmistry for individuals. I have also organised seminars on occultism which involved scientists and doctors from all over the world, in order to try to explain occult phenomena in scientific terms. I was never formally initiated into occultism, but have worked with many people, from Africa, India, France and the USA, who do a similar kind of occult work. I had visited Auroville twice before. Three months ago I came to settle in Auroville because it reflects my ideals: the international city where people from all over the world have come to work out something for a higher purpose. I was particularly struck by Auroville's Charter. If we can live up to that..."

She pauses, and we take the opportunity to ask her how she interprets that difficult clause: "to become the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness?" Claire responds: "I am not sure what people generally mean by the term 'Divine'. For me, the quest for the Divine is always there, meaning to become God here on earth and not to leave the body to unite with the Divine elsewhere. This incarnation has a purpose: I remember why I incarnated in this body and for what purpose

I came to earth. I constantly feel the presence of a spiritual guide. When anything goes wrong with me, or when I am not sure of something, I meditate and come in contact with my spiritual guide to give me an answer."

When we observed that contacting a spiritual guide and reading someone's aura is quite a remarkable capacity, Claire's reaction was immediate: "But everybody has a natural spiritual guide that they can connect to! And yes, I can read the aura of a person but it is not a special power that I possess. It came naturally to me at an early age—many children have the ability to see auras, can 'feel' these things and are like psychic [psychic is used here in the sense of occult] readers, but as they grow up they lose this capacity. I believe that many people can open to this inner perception again. It is often just a question of waking someone up to his or her hidden abilities."

The talk then went to the readings themselves. Many Aurovilians have already come to consult Claire. Do people really have a need? Or, is it mere curiosity? What is the help you can give, we asked.

"I help people only when they want to be helped to learn more about themselves. I don't go and force my insights on them. When a person comes to me for a 'psychic reading', the session usually lasts for an hour and depending upon the person, I use palmistry, tarot, numerology, astrology or aura-reading to help the person learn more about himself. This almost always involves saying something about the person's future. This is a difficult area, for what one 'sees' will not automatically come true. I do not like to make predictions because there are some things that can change in one's fate, and some things that cannot. In some cases I cannot tell people what I see in their aura because some are not ready or strong enough to face it; then my words would act as a negative force on them. Each soul has chosen its path here on earth. So one should never judge a person and say that her or his way of life is bad or good. Sometimes the path that a person chooses is due to 'past karma' and

sometimes I am able to explain that to a person and help him to deal with it or to 'repair' it. But for most people such a session is little more than a confirmation of a future happening they are already dimly aware of. My work is to help them to be ready for that, to help to release them from their blockages, or fear of the future. For instance, I have had some people [not in Auroville] who were facing death, come to me for a reading. In those cases I have tried to prepare them for this change, and in such matters I often seek the help of my inner spiritual guide."

The conversation drifts to the various occult systems Claire uses. Are they indispensable means for her work? Will they have a future if mankind becomes more psych-ized?

"No, they are certainly not indispensable, I could throw all these systems out of the window. A time will come, when people can act from another level of consciousness and then all this will be rendered redundant."

But, at present, offering her rather unique skills to individual Aurovilians and giving workshops, Claire says, her reception in Auroville has been mixed: "Some people have been very positive, others were extremely negative. There is quite a judgmental attitude prevailing in Auroville, perhaps because people try so much to live up to the ideals of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Is it because they have trouble accepting their own nature? Can they not accept different spiritual paths? When I mentioned my interest in tantric yoga I met with quite an unexpected resistance, but at the same time had the feeling that there was



not much real knowledge about tantra."

What about the future, we ask. No, not ours, but yours. How do you see your future in Auroville?

She laughs: "Well, certainly not in only giving psychic readings or organizing workshops. There is more to life than that. I also enjoy doing manual work in the Matrimandir, at the Health Centre or in New Creation. I am just another human being who has come here to learn."

Bindu and Carel

Note: As this issue went to Press, we learned that Claire has used the name of Auroville to promote in France the fact that she will be giving courses here at a high price. This, among other things, has caused the Entry Group to refuse her application to become a newcomer. (Eds)

Georges: Each human being practises occultism

Georges van Vreckhem lives in Shakti, a small community south of Aspiration. He started his career as a poet, playwright and theatre manager—areas in which he achieved quite some fame—in Ghent, a city in Flanders (Belgium); afterwards he was briefly active as a travel guide and finally found himself at the feet of the Mother in Pondicherry. In 1978 he moved to a little hut in Auroville. There he continued his study of astrology and other occult systems, translated works of Sri Aurobindo, Satprem, and the Indian epics of the Mahabharata and the Ramayana into Dutch, and taught at Last School and New Creation. During the last six years Georges has made an in-depth study of all the material available on Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's life and work, which has resulted in a 500-page book (to appear this month in The Netherlands) entitled *Voorbij de Mens (Beyond Man)*, with particular emphasis on the process of Mother's transformation. An English translation is being prepared.



DRAWING: EMANUELE SCANZIANI

His house is full of books. There is a section on homeopathy; on humour; there are books on religion and philosophy; a cupboard full of works by and on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother; a shelf with books on various occult systems. In between the books and above the shelves photos of Mother predominate, most of them in her aspect of Mahalakshmi: the smiling, comforting, love-emanating personality of the Great Mother. Georges, offering his best chairs to me before seating himself on a stool, sets out to answer my first question:

What exactly is occultism?

"Briefly, real occultism can be defined as wisdom or systems of wisdom about that which exists behind the surface of things as perceived by us. We are mental beings, restricted to viewing each phenomenon separately without seeing the whole, unified in one picture. Because our perception is so limited we

talk about occultism as a separate phenomenon, while in reality anything outside our mental awareness, anything hidden, is occult. In fact, every human being practises occultism all the time. You cannot live without it. Thinking and feeling are essentially occult acts.

In normal parlance, however, occultism has a much more limited meaning. Most people equate occultism with magic of some kind or other, or with the use of some 'supernatural' power. All kinds of systems have been and are still being developed that endeavour to get access to and mastery of hidden planes for a variety of reasons, mostly to gain knowledge and especially power. Some of these systems are hundreds and even thousands of years old. Astrology, for example, existed already in the ancient civilizations of Babylonia, Chaldea and India. Palmistry has been known since the Egyptian civilization. The Tarot has a cabalistic background; it is a great system of wisdom, you may even say a system of inner evolution which is yoga. But of course, all depends on the quality of the person who uses any of these systems. If you choose to practise a system, you have to be serious about it and consider it as a part of your life. To just read a book won't do. It is my impression that most Aurovilians are interested in occultism, but few have the patience to make a real, time-consuming study of it.

*In her *Entretiens* the Mother has often warned against the use of occultism, for she says that the practitioner may open him or herself to beings of a lower vital plane. If one consults an astrologer, or allows one's hand to be read or uses the Tarot, what guarantees that those beings are not interfering?*

It all depends on the spirit in which one approaches these systems and their practitioners. If you use occult knowledge in the right spirit, you will get the answer in the right spirit and profit from it. If your motivation is aggrandizement of your ego only or self-satisfaction or search for power of some kind, you are opening yourself to beings of the lower worlds. The only right attitude in such things is sincerity. Sincerity implies a purity which in turn implies surrender to the Divine: it is your only safeguard. This applies to those who consult an occultist as well as to the occultist. There have been a number of occultists who have misused their power, and who have used other people to feed their ego. You see then a budding guru becoming 'great' because he actually feeds on the devotion of his growing number of disciples. I doubt if a sincere seeker really would be fooled by this. But even if this was the case, it would help him to grow. You can learn from everyone, from a man in the tea-shop or a child no less than from an occultist. You can catch in passing the word that changes your life! Even the devil can lead you to your destiny—on the condition that you are sincere in your search!

I would, personally, never fully trust any human being. But I might go to any occultist with a good reputation to learn more about myself. I would not surrender myself to the knowledge or conclusions of the occultist but to the power of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the only trustworthy Beings, to speak through that occultist in case it might be helpful for

me. If you have made the central surrender to the Divine, then you can go to any occultist, as well as confront any event in life. And there is another important point. Things happen in your life when they have to happen. So if you consult an occultist at a given moment, he may tell you something that strikes you consciously or unconsciously, because at that moment it has to be told to you.

This brings in the discussion of predestination versus free will. Your observation would imply that even the consultation itself is predetermined.

Predestination is always a difficult philosophical question. Let's begin with saying that the human world is a world full of choices. There is a motivation behind someone's decision to consult an occultist. This motivation, I dare say, is rarely pure. Most people are only interested in hearing more about themselves or solving a particular problem, especially a love relationship. There are very few who come to an occultist with sincere goodwill for help on the spiritual path. This is the position seen from their angle.

But there is another angle as well. At birth we are programmed to work out something. It is not blind predestination which made your soul choose these particular events in life. Your destiny, as The Mother has said, works itself out on different levels of awareness; the more conscious you are of your destiny, the higher you can reach, the more fully you can work out that destiny. At the highest level, the destiny is to reach or realize our Self or the Divine. This fact of the different levels is extremely important for yoga, as it is for occultism. And above everything is the Grace. And it is this combination of Grace and levels of awareness which will give you an answer, even if you do not understand it at the time that it is given or even if you note it only subconsciously, that is important to you for your growth.

In India an occult knowledge known as Tantra is practised. What kind of occultism is this?

In India, Tantra is very often regarded as being synonymous with black magic. In *Mother's Agenda*, and also in her *Entretiens*, you can find instances of so-called tantric magicians using or misusing their occult powers. There is a Tantra of powers. There is also a Tantra of the sexual force. Sri Aurobindo has said clearly that if you are not a completely pure being and you practise these things, you are sure to fail and to fall. But the real Tantra is the great Tantra of The Mother. While all the other spiritual systems of India have taken the *Purusha* as the main source for their yoga, with as their aim to escape from this world, the Tantra venerates *Shakti*, the Great Mother as the Divine Creatrix. The aim of this real Tantra is to assert the worthiness of the world, to consider it a holy place, a place of the Divine and Divine realisation. Actually,

Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga has a close relation with the Tantra. One could well call it a Supertantra: it is the yoga of Matter, of this evolutionary world and it is the yoga of the Divine Mother. Sri Aurobindo has put The Mother, the Supreme Shakti, as the direct support and inspiration for the yoga. He did not do that in the beginning, when his yoga had more of the *Sankhya*: to step back, to detach oneself from the appearances and all that. But from 1926 onwards, he declared the central path of the integral yoga to be the full surrender to the Mother. His answer to the question 'Is thinking of the Mother yoga?', for instance, was a simple "Yes."

That brings us to the question about the place of occultism in yoga.

Occultism is part of the phenomena of the

world in which we live and evolve, and since the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo embraces everything in the world in its minutest detail, occultism must have a place in integral yoga. Sri Aurobindo has written about it, and The Mother has very often pure occultism to the children in the Ashram.

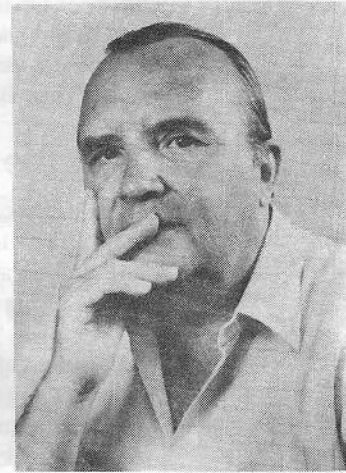


PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

Do you believe that with the advent of the Supramental Conscious-

ness the role of occultism has come to an end or will change drastically?

The Supramental consciousness is a Unity consciousness, where you know everything because you are identified with it. As the Mother has described it so strikingly in *The Agenda*: "I was the mountains. I was the Gods." When somebody asks Her to explain, She replies, "I cannot explain because to explain I would have to use words. I was that." Actually, one cannot explain anything. One can try and write beautiful prose or poetry about whatever one was, but it is not an explanation, it is just an attempt to express what one has experienced. In the supramental consciousness nothing will be hidden anymore, nothing will be occult anymore. Everything will be revealed, known and concretely experienced in the one Unity which is all. In such a state of consciousness there is no longer any place for occultism.

On the way towards it, however, occult knowledge will be more and more important—real occultism, which is an essential aspect of yoga. Normally, an ordinary human being, sincerely practising yoga and with good intentions, has a long way to go during which, even if he obtains some initial realisations, the greater part of him remains an ordinary human being subject to the ordinary laws of nature. This implies much suffering and many problems, and the farther one goes in yoga the more problems one will have to solve; for in this yoga, Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga, when one has solved one's own troubles, one takes up the problems of the rest of humanity. The measure of one's positive realisation is equal to the measure of the resistance. One's occult knowledge, obtained through one's realisations, will help to overcome the resistances.

Carel

Auroville International

What is Auroville International (AVI)? How do the different AVI centres function? How do they relate to each other, and to Auroville? What are their concerns? These questions became real for me last year during the AVI meeting in Holland, to which I had been invited as one of the 'official' Auroville representatives. For, coming as I did directly from Auroville, the experience was both moving and, yet, somehow mystifying; as if I'd stumbled into a country where the signposts were familiar, but the particular features of the land unknown.

The following, then, is the result of my subsequent attempt to explore that terrain. An introduction to 'AVI—Land'. Alan

A brief history

In November, 1969, Mother gave her blessings to the creation of a new organization called 'Auroville International'. The brain-child of a Persian devotee who wanted to organize international support for the fledgling community, this was an initiative that didn't take off. By 1972, however, in an independent initiative, a number of individuals and small groups in Europe discussed setting up an 'Auroville International Europe'. This also fell by the wayside because only groups in France and Switzerland had energy to put into the project at this time.

Meanwhile, Navajata of the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) was travelling through Europe and the U.S., setting up centres as part of a worldwide Sri Aurobindo movement. Many of these centres related to and supported activities in both the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville. By the mid 1970's, however, some of the groups which were more Auroville-oriented became increasingly concerned by the behaviour of the SAS towards Auroville, and finally decided to cut their links with the SAS as an act of solidarity with the Aurovilians.

During the 1970's, the Auroville movement abroad had been sustained by individuals with close personal links to Auroville working in relative isolation. In 1981, however, the movement received a new boost when three Aurovilians decided to make a tour through Europe to visit all those who were working actively for Auroville. Yusuf, Dorothee, and Peter Anderschitz knocked on many doors and, impressed by the warm welcome extended to them, decided to call a meeting of Auroville supporters at a place called 'Auroc' in the south of France. This meeting was a crucial catalyst in activating the AVI movement, for one of its results was that efforts to organize a unified network of support for Auroville in Europe intensified. A practical consequence, for example, was that representatives and friends from the different centres began meeting together annually, each centre taking its turn to play host to the others.

By now, it had become clear that certain functions needed to be fulfilled by these Auroville supporters abroad: to represent Auroville to the 'outside', to provide information, and to raise funds. And it was soon realized that if these support groups had a legal status, this could allow donors to benefit from tax-exemption schemes. Consequently, in seven European countries, and somewhat later in the USA and Canada, legal organizations were created called 'Auroville International',

"We're not just satellites of Auroville"

followed by the name of the country. In the year following the Auroc meeting, meanwhile, the need also evolved for a non-governmental organization which could represent Auroville to international organizations like UNESCO (at this time, the SAS continued to be the official Auroville representative with this body). Finally, after long discussions, Auroville International was founded, on 15th August, 1983, as an umbrella organization with each national organization as a member. For both political and financial reasons, it was established as an association under Dutch law.

Today, there are eight centres—in the U.S.A., Canada, U.K. Holland, France, Germany, Sweden, and Spain—and the total membership is about 500 people. (Argentina and Italy do not have centres but each has an official contact person who gives information about Auroville.)

How the centres function

If the centres share a common legal status, they differ in terms of their size, organization and in their approach to matters like information-giving and funding. In fact, each centre has its own 'flavour', reflecting the preoccupations of its dominant members as well as something of its national character. AVI U.K., for example, tends to keep a low profile, AVI Holland is oriented to very practical issues, AVI Germany is keen on 'professionalizing' the link with Auroville by taking advantage of the latest technical advances. AVI France focusses on the collective aspect of Auroville, while AVI U.S.A. is becoming increasingly skilled at networking and synthesising the various orientations—Ashram, Sri Aurobindo Society and 'undiluted' Auroville—which coexist in the States.

Information-giving is seen by all the centres as their most important, and time-consuming, function. And all agree that the centres should not try to 'pull' people into

contact with Auroville. Yet where they draw the line between giving information and publicizing Auroville differs. At one end of the spectrum are AVI U.K. and Holland. Ilse, of AVI Holland, explains, "We don't do anything to push people into contact with Auroville. Sri Aurobindo said no advertising. My address in Holland is known. Those people who really want to go to Auroville find it and make the contact. After that, I give them all the support they need."

Ulf, of AVI Sweden, has a similarly low-key approach, although once or twice a year he puts information about Auroville in New Age magazines. The core members of AVI France are more active, running an Auroville information stall at an annual alternative fair and giving introductory talks about the community. AVI Germany is the most active centre on the information front, which partly reflects the skills and commitment of Wolfgang, a journalist and professional fund-raiser. Auroville has probably received more media attention in Germany than in any other country, and Wolfgang finds that more and more of his time is taken up with briefing journalists and film-makers who want to feature the community.

The question is, what do you tell them? As June Maher of AVI U.S.A. puts it, "How do you give the inspiration behind Auroville without going into a religious mode? Or go to the opposite extreme if they are only interested in planting trees?" How, in other words, do you communicate the Auroville experience 'undiluted', and to people living a very different life-style? Videos are one attempt at bridging the gap but, as somebody who used to work for the French centre points out, "We had to constantly counteract the effect of an Auroville video like 'Earth Needs', which makes Auroville appear too beautiful." In fact, many AVI members have discovered that communication is not just a matter of

regurgitating facts. It's a quality of being, of sharing one's deepest commitment. "When people telephone me about Auroville," says Ulf, "if I feel a good contact with them I tell them what a tremendous difference Auroville has made to my life. That it IS my life."

Some Aurovilians look upon the centres primarily as a means of raising funds for Auroville projects. Yet, with the notable exception of individuals like Shirishbhai in the U.K. and Wolfgang in Germany, fund-raising plays a very minor role. Why? Partly it is lack of expertise and time. Only one centre has its own office: the rest operate from members' homes. And because nobody is working full-time for AVI, members have to fit in Auroville-related work whenever they can. This *ad hoc* approach, while reflecting something of the Auroville ethos, is frustrating to those who want, like AVI Germany, the "inspiration to be linked to professionalism."

But lack of time or skill is not the whole story. Cecilia and Didier, who used to work for AVI France but now live in Auroville, explain. "Fund-raising is a very touchy matter. In France, people are asked so often for money by different organizations. So we were careful about asking, because we felt it might break something in our relationship with the person." It's a reservation that's widely shared. Moreover, certain members feel that Auroville itself should take up much more responsibility for meeting certain financial needs, like maintaining ongoing projects or supporting long-term Aurovilians without personal resources.

June Maher, of AVI U.S.A., sees it slightly differently. Back in the early years, she had written to Mother for a message for their work. Mother replied, "No recruiting but money may be obtained." Consequently, as June explains, "We are honing the financial channel, which is not the same as fund-raising but which provides a means for money to come through." And money HAS come through the Centres. AVI Germany, in particular, has raised significant amounts for different projects, AVI Sweden is a regular contributor to Village Action, and AVI U.K. has been a staunch supporter of Auroville greenwork over the years. Moreover, the AVI network played a large part in raising funds for the crystal for Matrimandir.

One of the most important functions of the centres, however, and the one that is probably least understood in Auroville, is to provide support for their members, many of whom are trying to follow the path of yoga in totally alien circumstances. "It's terrible," says Ulf, "to have to block a part of yourself away when you are with people who have no understanding of the spiritual dimension." Caroline of AVI U.K. agrees: "The way you are forced to live in the West it's as if a whole level of life is missing." And it's this need more than any other, the need to be and to share with people on the same path, to 'recharge the spiritual batteries', which brings people to the annual AVI meeting, and which determines the success or failure of such occasions.

Most centres have an active core group which meets more regularly to plan activities and give mutual support. The AVI U.K. core group, for example, meets every two months, as does the Dutch. The French come together before every big event in which they participate, but they also organize on average two weekends a year when they live together, sharing games, collective meditations and

THE AVI CENTRES

CANADA:	25 members. Meet twice a year. Activities: Information, newsletter whenever possible.
FRANCE:	131 members. General meetings 4 times a year, core group more often. 2 weekend 'live togethers' annually. Activities: information (including stalls at festivals and introductory talks), newsletter 4 times a year, small amount of fund-raising, hospitality for visiting Aurovilians.
GERMANY:	120 members + 300 'friends'. Annual general meeting but smaller group meet every 6 weeks. Activities: information organizing group visits to Auroville, fund-raising, counselling, linking Aurovilians with marketable skills with businesses in Germany.
HOLLAND:	About 40 members. Organizing group of 4 meet every 2 months. Activities: mainly information, newsletter 4 times a year, parcel service for Dutch Aurovilians and certain units.
SPAIN:	No membership scheme. 4 organizers, but 2 are moving to AV soon. Activities: information (includes translation of AV leaflets and books of Sri Aurobindo and Mother into Spanish).
SWEDEN:	14 members. General meetings 4 times a year. Activities: information, fund-raising for MM and Village Action and providing a report on latter for donors.
U.K.:	130 members. 2 general meetings a year, core group meets every 2 months. Activities: information, newsletter twice a year, mutual support.
U.S.A.:	30 members, 300 more support the work (3000 on mailing list). Activities: Information, networking, newsletter, hospitality, fund-raising. Exploring possibilities for student exchange between the U.S. and Auroville.

discussions on the yoga. "These moments may really be very beautiful," says Cecilia. "Sometimes you feel the walls between people disappear, and that everybody has the same vibration within them." In Germany, a group of about 20 have been meeting every 6 weeks for some time now, and have built up a deep group identity. "We feel a lot of energy among us when we are together," says Wolfgang, "which comes from the same source which is powering Auroville." AVI Germany has a number of members who are skilled therapists, and it is considering organizing workshops to assist those members who may be encountering difficulties in the yoga.

Yet it's noticeable that, while the annual AVI meetings appear to fulfil a vital supportive function for many participants, there is not much contact between the centres at other times. Why? "Writing and telephoning don't have the same vibration", points out Didier. Moreover, for many members time is short and money unavailable for journeys across Europe or the U.S.A. In the absence of anything else, however, a chain-letter is making the rounds, and some centres are planning to send their newsletters to all the other centres to keep them informed.

The relationship with Auroville

How satisfied are the centres with their contact with Auroville? The answer is not too positive. A general complaint, for example, is that not enough useful information is forthcoming from the community, and that when a centre has a specific question, it often fails to get an answer. In order to improve the information flow, certain Aurovilians agreed to be contact people for their national centres but, according to people like Ilse, the situation has not improved. "The problem", says Cecilia, who was asked by AVI France to be their contact person when she moved to Auroville, "is that once you are here, there is so much to do that there just isn't the time to go round getting all the information needed by the centre." Another problem was encountered by Wolfgang when he tried to convince Auroville to come up with a new introductory video. "Some Aurovilians asked me, 'Are we ready to publicize ourselves? Aren't there so many shadows and contradictions in the community?' I told them this was true. But that they've forgotten what the rest of the world looks like. And, from that point of view, Auroville is really a place of hope."

An even more serious complaint from the

centres, however, concerns their perception that Auroville sees them simply as a source of funds. "I sometimes go crazy when every letter that comes from Auroville asks for money," says Ulf. "It's so frustrating because I would like to help, but I cannot. I feel so useless." And Ilse confirms that this is the main problem the centres have with Auroville.

This sense that Auroville takes the centres for granted, and that it doesn't understand their needs, is often expressed. Ilse puts it like this. "I feel that many Aurovilians who've lived for a long time in Auroville forget how people in the West are living. Our problems are different, our thinking is different. Even the way that people 'use' their relationship to Sri Aurobindo and Mother is different. The AVI centres have a completely different way of working among themselves than the way you work in Auroville. That's why the AVI meeting that took place in Auroville some years ago was not a success for us, because we couldn't be together in our own way."

Many AVI members feel that Aurovilians are arrogant in their relationship to the centres, expressed in the tacit assumption that the 'real' work is going on here, and that AVI members are not 'true' Aurovilians. Didier and Cecilia

tell the story of the Aurovilian who, arriving at Paris Airport some years ago, telephoned them with the arresting message, "I am here. Pick me up!"

The way ahead

Clearly, the relationship between the centres and Auroville is somewhat strained. Many centres feel unsupported, unappreciated and misunderstood. They also feel a lack of a push from Auroville to set up new centres, which they believe are badly needed. What can be done?

One development, which centres like Holland and Sweden are very optimistic about, is that a long-term Aurovilian, Mauna, will take up on a full-time basis the central coordinating role in Auroville for the centres, keeping the centres fully informed of all new developments in the community, and answering their specific enquiries. Another development, supported by AVI Germany in particular, is the planned linking together of Auroville and the centres through the Internet. AVI Germany, in fact, is trying to set up an agency which would find clients in Germany for services—like translation and Desk Top Publishing—which Aurovilians could offer through the 'Net'. The idea behind this is to explore other ways of funding Auroville apart from donations. But another potential effect of interlinking would be to allow centres to participate more fully in community discussions and problem solving. This is not just of practical use; it would also make the centres feel far more valued as co-creators in the experiment.

But a technological link does not necessarily imply a psychological opening. And this appears to be one of the keys. For if, as regular visitors like Ilse and Wolfgang believe, Auroville remains locked up in a somewhat arrogant parochialism, if it really doesn't feel the need—beyond donations—for help from outside, or if it fears it as some kind of dilution, then all the technology in the world won't change this. In fact, Wolfgang sees the rapid resolution of the 'inside/outside' issue as one of the keys to Auroville's future. Ilse is more philosophical. "I think that when Aurovilians see that they really can't handle things themselves, then they will open up more to the outside."

But maybe this is not the whole story. There is a feeling that the centres have not fully discovered their true roles yet, and that—just as in Auroville itself—any premature attempt to force themselves into a mould may preclude the possibility of something else, infinitely subtle but infinitely strong, working through. One thing seems to be clear, however. For, just as the 'feel' of AVI work and the circumstances surrounding it are very different from those in Auroville, so the centres have an opportunity to create and express something unique, something which is unmistakably their own. Wolfgang puts it like this. "Finally, each centre has to find its own inner focus and source, and not be dependent upon Auroville for its identity. We're not just satellites of Auroville. The Force which is supporting Auroville is spreading out over the whole world. The AVI centres can be points of that Force, not just mini-Aurovilles. And the greatest service Auroville can do to the centres is to help them discover that source, and through it their unique identity." **Alan**

AUROVILLE TODAY provides information about Auroville, an international township in South-India, on a monthly basis and is distributed to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville in India and abroad. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.

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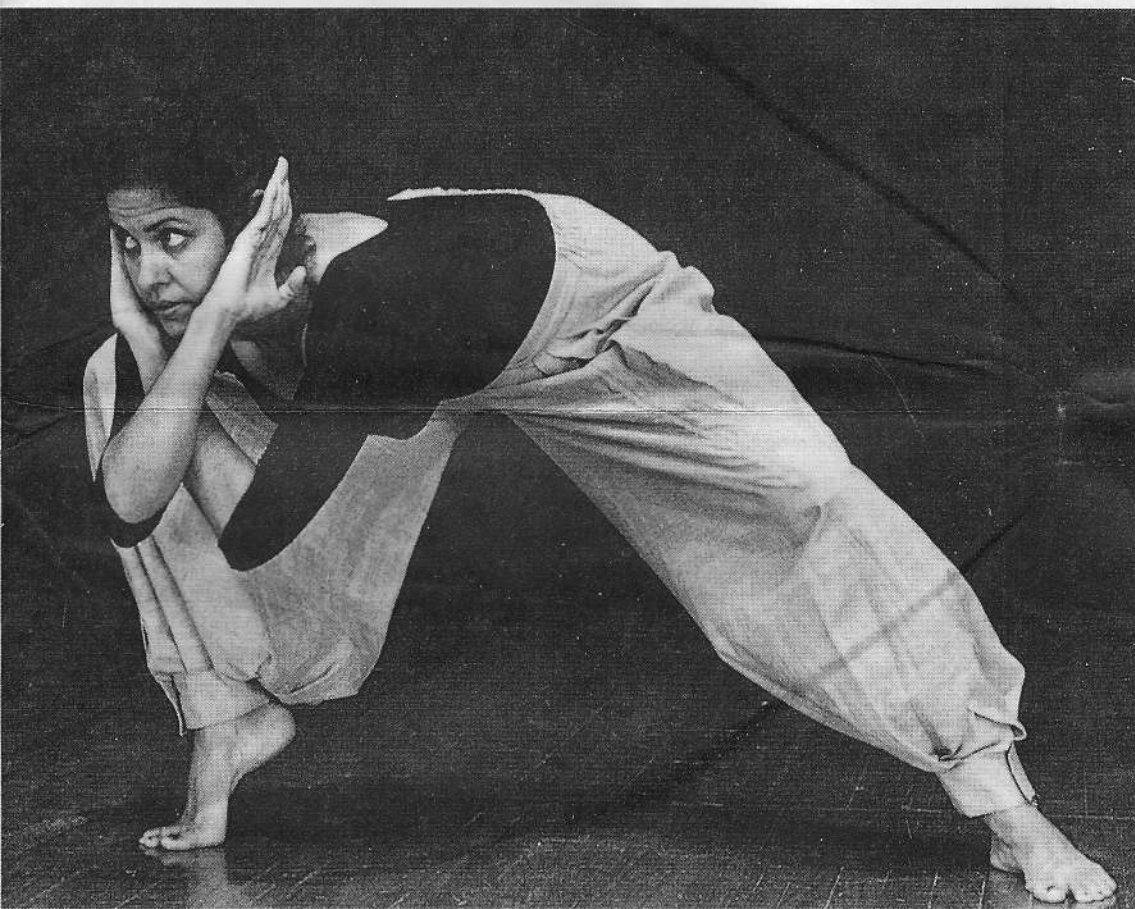


PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

CROSSROADS REACHES OUT

Crossroads, the dance choreography by Anu (photo above) which was first staged in Auroville during the UNESCO Seminar in February 1994 (see AVT # 63) was recently successfully performed by the Auroville Dance Lab. in the theatre of the Alliance Française in Bangalore.

ART EXHIBITIONS

Art has become the norm and not an exception in Auroville. At present there are three art exhibitions going on at different places in Auroville.

Saraswati's paintings at the Centre for Indian Culture reveal her current fascination with matter. The medium chosen, oil, the forms, and the dark brooding colours, mainly browns and oranges, all reflect the complexity and the rigidity of matter.

Hans' paintings, exhibited at Pitanga, lie at the other end of the spectrum. Hans captures the joy and lightness of being through a simplicity of lines and forms and the colours blue, white and gold.

And finally, Firooz conveys the play of cosmic forces through delicate and abstract forms on silk. Her titles are apt and poetic and add greatly to one's appreciation of the paintings. Her work is displayed at the Visitor's Centre.

BEST BUILDING CENTRE

The Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO), Govt. of India, which mainly finances housing and urban development projects, has set up a national network of approximately 250 building centres all over India to do research and provide training and assistance in appropriate, cost-effective building technologies.

In April this year HUDCO celebrated its 25th anniversary, on which occasion the Auroville Building Centre received the award for the best building center in India from the Union Minister of Urban Affairs and Employment.

FIRST TAMIL BROCHURE

The need for a comprehensive brochure in Tamil on Auroville has been voiced from time to time. Twenty seven years after the inauguration of Auroville, it is now reality. The brochure has been prepared by a group of Aurovilians living in Auroville and associated with the Tamil population in and around Auroville for a long time.

APRIL FOOLS

The 580th edition of *Auroville News* resembled the other 579. There were the quotations, the meeting reports, letters, messages and menus. The Working Committee Report had the familiar style and solutions, but the content was loaded with shocks that caught many unawares until they realized that April had just begun. The report began with the firing of the editor, Hero, for his lack of seriousness, followed by a takeover bid by a consortium of certain well-known contributors, and ending with the resignation of the Secretary who wanted to become an Aurovilian. Finally, our two retired Generals were taking over with the help of the Auroville Guard and the promise of a future free election. In the next report, the Development Group was deep into an unauthorized construction controversy and building permission subject to quite some conditions. Certain notorious personalities were listed as new Aurovilians in the Entry Group Report. Other meeting reports were loaded with lampoons and sly understatements, subtle and overt. Then the NEWS lapsed into its regular fare without warning. Once again people were caught scratching their heads and debating the validity of the contents. Just to keep everyone off balance, there were a few more April-first entries to add to the hilarity and/or confusion. Did Paulette really write "The lost secret of Ayur-Veda" or was it a 'hero' with a thousand faces?

Bill

AUROVILLE TODAY

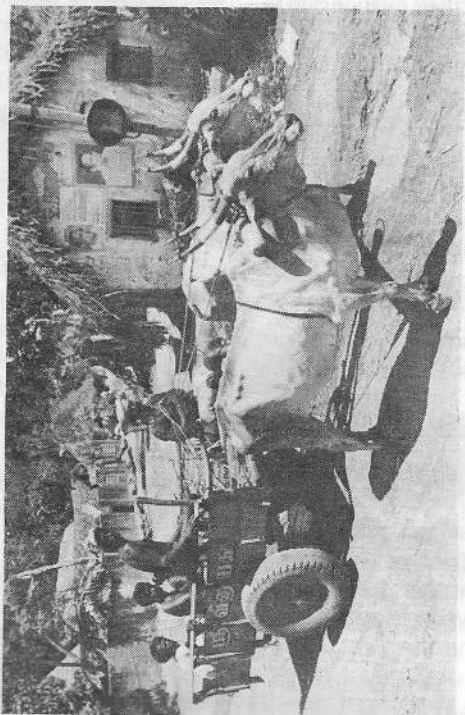
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KRISHNA TENARI
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May 1995
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IN THIS ISSUE:
A PORTRAIT OF KUILPALAYAM VILLAGE; OCCULTISM; THE AUROVILLE
INTERNATIONAL CENTRES; WEAVING AT IMAGINATION; ETC.



Weaver at 'Imagination' creating a rug

PHOTO: JOHN MANDEEN

Weaving through Time

There is something appropriate about the setting. Down a winding dirt road in Kottakarai, through a small, gravelly canyon, a crooked sign points the way to 'Imagination'. Imagine, then, and weave your way into the thatched shed where perhaps a dozen people, men and women, are busy at their looms. Imagine the clear blue sky, the keel roofs, the latticed bamboo walls, the cloth, the yarn, the cotton thread being prepared on an enormous bobbin. Two women, facing each other, sit on the ground, one releasing the thread from a spool, the other receiving it, guiding it onto the bobbin. The dyes are being stirred in a pot over a wood fire. Over and under the warp, the shuttle is thrown from left to right and makes a sound... Clack-clack. Clack-clack. It is a bit mesmerizing.

Weaving has a rhythm in time and space, yet it is also timeless, made of movements and gestures which you can see depicted on Egyptian wall paintings, Greek murals and described in Sanskrit texts. It is like a dance; the hands and feet moving together, the steady, concentrated atmosphere where colours delight the eye and textures flow as fingers move expertly through warp and weft.

"You feel much more near the Divine, working with your hands". It is Dara speaking. He is the force behind Imagination. Born in Santiago, Chile, Dara first visited Auroville in 1985, although he had heard about it in the 70's. Dara had tried a number of jobs—starting a printing press with a friend in Argentina, working on a cultural magazine... even beekeeping. Searching, restless, curious. During his second visit he met Prema and Wandana, and subsequently worked three years with Prema at Auromodele Atelier, a garment workshop. "It was a very good training school", Dara recalls. "I helped in production and in purchasing". Then a few of us learned weaving from Luis, a visiting friend from Argentina. "Luis taught us the ABCs of weaving. It was then that we made the first looms".

I stand in front of a hand-operated loom. The weaver works with a number of harnesses; the way the yarn is threaded through the harnesses and the sequence in which the harnesses are raised and lowered produces the weave. It is a peaceful feeling. There is also pattern weaving. With this method, the loom controls the pattern, so that you set up the loom with the textural pattern in the structure of the loom. Clack-clack. Clack-clack. The weaver, a strong, smiling woman named Rani, guides the shuttle expertly from one end to another. Her feet work the pedals, keeping time to the percussion of the wooden shuttle.

Rani had been trained in the Lotus workshop in Fraternity. "She is a good worker, always ready to learn something new", Dara tells me. "Later she brought her husband, Vidapan, also a weaver. Traditionally in India, it is the men who weave, not the women. We've had some resistance against having women in this craft, especially as we pay them

the same salary as the men. But now the group is pretty stable."

Later, I sit with Dara and Wendy Weiss on simple straw mats in his newly created office space. Wendy is an American weaver and Associate Professor in the Textiles, Clothing and Design Department at the University of Nebraska. She is visiting Auroville and helping Dara at Imagination. She came because she had read about Dara's work in a magazine called WARP (Weave a Real Peace).

Now she is teaching the weavers the structural design theory behind the applied aspect of weaving. It is sometimes difficult, because of the language barrier. She tries to keep her weaving charts simple, but at the same time it is exciting to try something new, to show a weaver from India a pattern from Mexico, to take part in this kind of international exchange.

"We are introducing the Jacquard loom", Wendy explains. This loom uses what looks like an old computer 'punch card'—it also resembles the roller on a player piano, only the holes are used to raise or lower the weft. It allows for more complex patterns. For the moment, it sits idle, broken, in need of repair and repairing machines always takes twice as long as you expect.

"I have to keep experimenting. It is an ongoing process. Lately, I have been working with natural dyes, like indigo. I am trying to combine aesthetics and a concern for the environment. Synthetic dyes contribute by-products which pollute. With natural dyes you have to know how to set them properly so they don't run or bleed." Indigo is one of the natural dyes used in India. Dara is also experimenting with pomegranate (yellow), katha (brown), the bark of the acacia and casuarina trees—even turmeric. Recently, he attended the First Congress on Natural Dyes in Madras. At this conference, resource people came to share information, see demonstrations, 'talk shop'.

Dara describes the research he is doing. "Vegetable dyeing is kept alive in very few places now, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh.... The process takes longer {than dyeing with chemicals}. It is tedious. But the colours are less harsh and intense; they conceal a magic which vibrates with nature. You become a friend of the fibre, since the whole process takes 15 to 20 days."

And finally, after the spinning and dyeing and weaving, what emerges? Imagination started by making bedcovers, and now produces men's and women's clothing (dresses, shirts, hats), table mats, even carpets for sale in India and abroad. There are plans for a training center near Auroville. I ask Dara what has kept him going through all the ups and downs of people coming and going, strikes and lay offs, orders and no orders. "It's inspiring", he answers, "to take a thread and a loom and to see a beautiful material appear. And it's a miracle."

Jill

TO SUBSCRIBE

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