

Auroville Today

NOVEMBER 2003, No.178

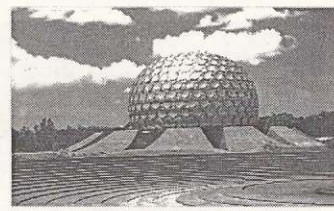


Matrimandir in 1988

MAIN ISSUE: Auroville Today is fifteen years old

- Environmental developments
- The struggle for organisation
- Village development: building bridges
- Economic research
- Matrimandir in pictures

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Matrimandir in 2003

Beware the first editorial of a new journal or magazine. Its high-toned statement of intent is likely to read, years later, as little more than a mélange of wishful thinking, naivety and preoccupation with issues which have long since faded from memory. While Auroville Today's first editorial, sixteen years ago, was mercifully brief it cannot be said to have completely escaped the above faults. At the same time there was a genuine desire to manifest something different. This was the time when dogma stalked our general meetings as the community heatedly debated issues like Aurelec and the government's involvement in Auroville. Meanwhile, Auroville's only window to the world – the Auroville Review – had stopped reporting on day-to-day events in Auroville, filling its columns instead with quotations from Sri Aurobindo, Mother and Satprem. It was against this background that we made our promises: Auroville Today would focus on the here and now, it would provide a meeting-place for differing perspectives, it would open a door upon a lesser-known Auroville, and it would try to maintain a standard of civilized discourse. Brave? Unrealistic? Both, perhaps. But after 15 years we continue to use them as our benchmarks.

So how have we done?

Concerning the 'here and now', we've provided regular coverage of key topics like the economy, environment, education, Matrimandir, building the city and relations with the villages, making Auroville Today an invaluable – in fact, unique – history of Auroville's development over the years. What we hadn't anticipated, however, was how many issues we couldn't cover, either because they would show the community in a poor light, or because discussions were at such a sensitive stage that we didn't want to jeopardize the outcome through insensitive reporting, or because as most of the team are technically 'foreigners' with few rights in Indian law, we were only too aware that we could receive quit notices if we were perceived to be making statements offending sensitivities. For Auroville Today is read not only by Aurovilians and friends and supporters abroad: it is also read in government offices and foreign embassies in India and Indian embassies abroad.

All this meant we were nudged further into the conservative section of the reporting spectrum than the team would prefer. This tendency has been reinforced by our second goal: for in our wish to provide a meeting-place for understanding different perspectives it was important that we were perceived to be unaligned, or at least able to grasp the larger picture. This has its drawbacks, notably in our sometimes having to sacrifice the 'edge' which spices journalism the world over (the edge has been further blunted by our policy of allowing interviewees to read and change their articles before publication). Increasingly over the years, however, we've been willing to talk about not only our successes but also our failings as a community, and to ask hard questions as a means of stimulating debate. In this sense our role has expanded from passive reporting to being, at best, initiators of change.

Have we opened a window on an unknown Auroville? We've certainly introduced our readers to many of the lesser-known activities taking place in the community. As to individuals: some of the Aurovilians profiled in Auroville Today are not well known. Others may be better known, yet often something new is revealed. For here we talk not of geography but of people's hearts, of the innermost feelings and aspirations which, in this community, are rarely shared publicly. Who knows what community blockages, what deep tectonic plates, have shifted irreversibly as a result of somebody revealing something about themselves in one of our interviews?

For ultimately, if we're honest, we don't really know what we're doing with Auroville Today. We embarked on a voyage with a clutch of promises, but once the coastline faded we've had to chart a course as much by intuition as by sextant. More than once we've thought of abandoning the whole enterprise as seemingly bigger and better ships (a new website, for example) hove into view, but we kept sailing on because of the enthusiastic support of our readership and because we feel we still have something unique to offer in the hunt for that elusive species, Auroville today.

In this issue and the next, we survey fifteen years of our publication, attempting to draw out the main themes and lines of development in each of our major categories. In November we deal with the economy, the environment, the organisation and our relationship with the villages, and we feature a photographic history of Matrimandir's progress. Next month we feature education, building the city and the arts. Happy reading.

An environmental community?

Two areas are critical for Auroville's environment: afforestation and farming.



Building dams to prevent water run-off and to recharge the aquifers has been a successful aspect of Auroville's reforestation work. In picture: a check dam in the Utility canyon provides for a nice swimming pool for local youth after torrential monsoon rains.

For many years, Auroville's credentials rested primarily upon its environmental achievements. These are considerable.

Over two million trees have been planted to stabilize and refertilize the soil, canyons have been dammed and hundreds of fields bunded to prevent water run-off, there has been much experimentation in developing environmentally-friendly building techniques and recycling waste water, while solar power is widely used for pumping, heating water and providing electricity. During the last decade, Auroville's eco-service has ensured that much of Auroville's waste is recycled, and ground-breaking work is being undertaken to develop non-polluting biofuel and to expand the uses of effective micro-organisms (EM) which work with rather than against nature.

Nor has the bioregion been neglected. Aurovilians have worked with villagers to desilt rainwater catchment tanks, afforest wasteland, find safe alternatives to toxic pesticides, develop organic farming and vegetable cultivation techniques, and to clean up the villages.

This is the plus side. Yet there are plenty of areas in which the environmental consciousness of the community as a whole remains underdeveloped or dormant. Take water. In spite of a massive reforestation programme, underground water levels are falling. Much of this is beyond our control – local farmers pump enormous quantities onto their fields while the main monsoon has failed three years in a row – yet rather than providing a good example of responsible water management, Aurovilians' per capita water usage is way above the average of India (and of many Western countries!), partly because of wasteful irrigation techniques and inefficient storage and supply systems. Or take architecture. There are plenty of houses in the community which, rather than taking advantage of materials which release heat quickly, use large amounts of energy-intensive materials like cement and function as oversized solar cookers. Then there is the lack of public transport which results in large numbers of motorcycles (and, increasingly, four-wheelers) clogging up our roads and lungs. Finally there is the matter of Aurovilians' changing tastes in food and entertainment

which sees the growth of a more consumeristic, less environmentally-sensitive lifestyle than was the case in the early days.

Afforestation

In the beginning was...not very much, actually. A few palmyra, neem and scrubby thorn bushes and, for the rest, acres and acres of eroded laterite unshaded from the fierce south Indian sun. Out of necessity, greenworkers in the early years of Auroville concentrated upon building bunds and planting trees. A few were already interested in exploring indigenous species, but the majority of greenworkers were happy to plant anything which was fast-growing, drought-resistant and shade-providing – including exotic pioneer species like *Eucalyptus* and *Acacia auriculiformis*, otherwise known as the 'work' tree.

The first tree nurseries date from the early 1970s. However, afforestation in Auroville received a huge boost in the 1980s when the Department of the Environment funded a project to explore the species that could be successfully grown under these conditions. Many of the largest tree-planting programmes – like the one at Aurobrindavan – date from this period and, once again, many of the trees planted were non-native species, like *Acacias* and *Khaya senegalensis*. Meanwhile, Walter from Shakti had begun a seed-exchange programme with botanical gardens and seed banks from many countries, particularly those with climates similar to ours, with the object of introducing new species to Auroville and the bioregion: *Acacia holosericea* was one of the most promising varieties. He was also interested in finding out what had grown in this area before, but "in those days it was easier getting seeds from the Amazonian basin than to get the seeds of the former indigenous species here."

Why? At one time an almost unique ecosystem – an evergreen forest – had stretched along the coastline from Madras in the north to Kanyakumari in the south. Over the years, however, most of it had been cut and cleared for farming, settlement and firewood; at the time of Auroville's inauguration, less than 1% of it remained in scattered pockets which were under continual threat.

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An environmental community?

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Finding these pockets, identifying the different species and understanding their relationships was no easy task. By the late 1980s some

In the last 15 years, the new emphasis upon the recreation of the original TDEF has been accompanied by an increasingly scientific approach to ecosystem restoration. The earlier



Tree seedlings at one of the Auroville nurseries

Auroville greenworkers were beginning to have doubts about the wisdom of planting so many non-indigenous species. While exotics like *Work* and *Transformation* were providing valuable shade for less hardy species, they were also spreading like weeds, crowding out many other trees. It was also noticed that some, like the eucalyptus, tended to crash down in high winds.

The turning-point came in 1993 when the Foundation for the Revitalization of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT) which is based in Bangalore set up two centres in Auroville – in Shakti and Pitchandikulam – to propagate local medicinal plants. A spin-off from this was a new interest in recreating the original ecosystem of the area, which was now referred to as Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF). Dr. Meher-Homji of the French Institute compiled a list of 266 plant species which he considered belonged to the TDEF and greenworkers like Joss, Jaap and Walter, who already had considerable

knowledge of local species, made frequent visits to remnant indigenous groves to collect seeds to propagate in Auroville nurseries.

Today, all tree-planting by Aurovilians involves almost exclusively TDEF species. Many foresters are retrofitting the areas they steward by underplanting with TDEF species and then slowly removing regenerating exotics (particularly work tree saplings), so allowing a new type of forest to gradually emerge over the next ten years.

“if it will grow, plant it” approach has given way to more sophisticated scientific studies of symbiotic relationships, of the water uptake and transpiration rate of selected tree species, and of the rate at which soil forms under different conditions. The FRLHT project has resulted in valuable research into the medicinal properties of local plants and trees based largely upon the wisdom and experience of traditional healers, who are themselves an endangered species. This illustrates the third main component of afforestation over the last 15 years – outreach. Actually, Auroville landworkers have been sharing their



Vegetable nursery

skills outside of Auroville for many years. In the early 1980s greenworkers began bunding the fields of local farmers and offering them saplings. Later, the Auroville forest was visited by Tibetans from refugee settlements and tribals from Rajasthan (enthused by our achievement they proceeded to plant hundreds of thousands of trees in their drought-stricken region), and Aurovilians helped reafforest the Palani Hills where the traditional shola was threatened with extinction. But the last 15 years has seen an

increase in outreach activities as some Aurovilians realized that the environmental and social health of Auroville cannot be separated from the health and vibrancy of the bioregion of which it is an integral part. Auroville landworkers, in conjunction with Village Action, have run courses for local farmers in organic agriculture and have introduced kitchen gardens into the villages. Palmyra has been involved in large wasteland reclamation projects in the region while the same organization and Harvest have done extensive tank restoration and set up water-users organizations in many surrounding villages. The Pitchandikulam seed museum has become a centre for botanical research and environmental education, visited by conservationists, healers, government officials and school-children, while the Botanical Gardens will soon provide a living experience of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest biotope.

Auroville’s environmental reputation continues to grow. Recently, funding has come from the European Commission to promote the concept of shared forest management in the Kaluveli bioregion. This has given some Aurovilians the opportunity to get involved in developing practical steps towards the sustainable development of an area vital for our water resources to the north of Auroville. It’s a huge task that will take many years to complete,

but it is one which can be achieved in small manageable steps. One of these is promoting environmental education in schools – this has just received a funding boost from the Australian Government – while another is working with the Forestry Department to develop management plans for the reserve forests of the area.

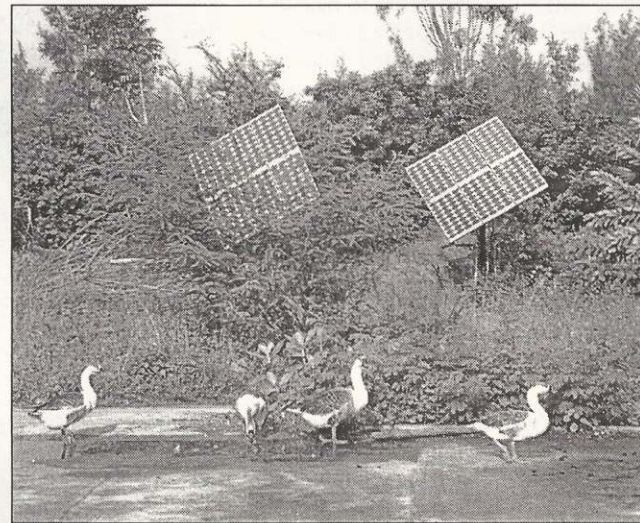
Farming

Dry land agriculture had been practiced in this region for many years, but poor cropping practices had depleted the soil and accelerated the drift of the local people away from the land. The first Auroville farmers toiled under the tropical sun, employing organic methods to grow local grains – ragi, varagu, kumbu, samai – but when the rains failed, so did the crops. There was little or no support from the community. Unsurprisingly, few Aurovillian landworkers stuck at it: many turned to afforesting the land as an easier option.

The few who continued to practice agriculture were inspired by Mother’s statement that Auroville should strive for self-sufficiency in food. Gradually they learned to adapt, to draw the most out of the limited resources available. The watchword was diversification. Bernard experimented with traditional varieties of rice and millet which were more drought-resistant than hybrid crops, and with no-till agriculture based on Fukuoka’s

experience in Japan. Other farmers interplanted leguminous hedges and beneficial trees among their crops to stabilize and improve the soil and provide shade. Most planted out fruit orchards and vegetable gardens, a few developed dairies and raised poultry.

By 1988 there were still only four major farms in Auroville, covering less than 300 acres. A number of farmers were managing, precariously, to cover their immediate needs, but the larger community was still far from being self-sufficient in food. While our farmers were meeting the demand for milk and eggs and of seasonal vegetables and fruits in season, they were growing less than 2% of the community’s requirement of rice and other grains. Most of the food eaten in Auroville was purchased from Pondicherry market: it was grown



Geese parade in front of the solar pump panels at Siddhartha farm

using artificial fertilizers and pesticides. By now, the challenges facing our farmers were formidable. They were no longer simply battling the climate, water shortages and local soil conditions (Annapurna, designated to be the rice-basket of Auroville, has some of the most intractable and depleted soil in the area), or the lack of adequate financial input from the community. There was also a serious lack of manpower – fewer and fewer Aurovilians were attracted to landwork and our farmers couldn’t afford to pay wages which would attract Indian farm managers – a lack of technical expertise (none of our farmers had professional training), a lack of storage and processing facilities, and poor coordination between the farms and consumers. Meanwhile Aurovilians’ eating habits were changing. More and more were eating processed food or fruit and vegetables

Meanwhile the Solar Kitchen provided a valuable new outlet for a large part of the farms’ output while introducing Aurovilians to the delights of little-known local vegetables.

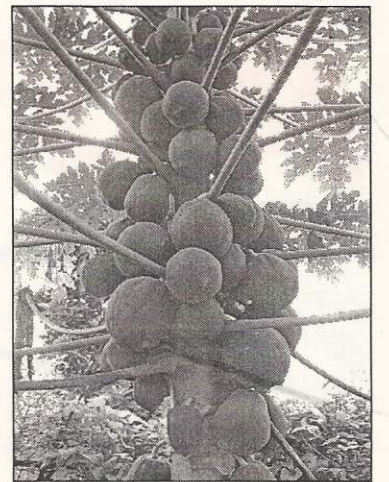
A few years ago, however, came another serious blow. The Auroville farms were reclassified by the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board and forced to pay premium rates for electricity. This led to large fruit farms like Aurogreen cutting back heavily on production, but it also encouraged a switch to more efficient use of water – like drip-irrigation and the bio-intensive method of vegetable growing – and to the widespread use of solar pumps.

Today there are 13 farms in Auroville covering over 350 acres. Production is increasing, partly as a result of improved financing but also because of new techniques introduced by professionals who have taken up the challenge of farming here.

Meanwhile a comprehensive assessment of our farms is presently underway to ascertain, among other things, the farmers’ needs and to plan, for the first time, an overall strategy for farming in Auroville. Major questions remain, however. Is it realistic to strive for self-sufficiency in food? If so, does the community really want it?

If the answer to each question is ‘yes’, the implications are immense. It would imply that many more people be involved in farm work, that Auroville purchases much more premium farm land – some of it outside the Auroville area in the hills – and that the community be willing to heavily subsidize the production of organic food as a service to the health of the community and the environment.

Alan



Papaya trees at Discipline farm



Rice fields at Annapurna

Economic research and developments

Though many attempts have been made, some of the ideals outlined by The Mother for Auroville's economy are as distant as ever.

How do you create an economy if all you have is a set of high ideals made by none other than The Mother and no economic base to speak of? This question has been in the mind of many Aurovilians since Auroville's inception in 1968. How can one manifest a city where "the land and buildings will belong to the Supreme Lord"¹, a city "which will be the ideal place for those who want to know the joy and liberation of no longer having any personal possessions"², a city which "will have money relations only with the outside world"³, a city "which will provide for each individual's subsistence and sphere of action"⁴ and which, on top, "will be a self-supporting township"⁵? These questions have led not only to intense debates but also to the living research that has characterised Auroville for the last decades. However, many major issues are yet to be resolved.

In the beginning

Most of the early settlers came with lots of enthusiasm and little money. Mother had organised 'Prosperity' for them on the lines of the system in use in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Within a limited range, goods, services and some cash were made available according to one's request. The Sri Aurobindo Society collected donations and bought land for the Auroville project and built the first settlements. If one wished to build one's own keet hut or a house, it was sufficient to ask permission from Mother. The principle of 'no private ownership of immovable assets' was started in this way. It has continued ever since. At present all immovable assets are owned by the Auroville Foundation which 'holds them in trust for humanity as a whole'.⁶

After the split between the Sri Aurobindo Society and Auroville, 'sharing to survive' became the dictum of the day. Whatever you had, you put in a common pot; whatever you needed you took out. Food was bought centrally and distributed in baskets by the group in charge of 'Pour Tous', (meaning 'For All') a name Mother had given to the central food distribution system. But acute shortages stimulated individuals to start handicraft units in an attempt to make ends meet. Still, the pot soon became empty, and many of these fledgling units lost their money. It led to a lack of trust in centralised common pots.

By the end of the seventies a new system came into existence called 'the envelopes'. Money was allocated to various 'envelopes' for urgent needs such as food, community maintenance, electricity and water. There was no personal maintenance. Around this time 'Nandini' was born which received donations 'in kind', such as clothing, from the young commercial units, for people to collect on a need basis. But the income remained insufficient to cover the needs. People who had personal funds started to share less.

The upswing

The first upswing came in 1984, when Auroville got the first maintenance grant from the Government of India for the Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research (SAIER). But even this boost was insufficient to meet the collective needs. The commercial units were asked to not only maintain the Aurovilians who worked there, but also make general contributions for community maintenance. Aurovilians who worked for projects had to ensure

that their needs were met by their project. Only Aurovilians who worked directly for community services would be maintained by the community. In this way Auroville's maintenance system was born, along with the concept that Aurovilians who work for commercial units or projects are maintained by those units and projects.

November 1988 marked a second upswing. A well-attended economy seminar led to the beginning of the Central Fund to be managed by a new group, the Economy Group. Yearly budgets for all community services and other collective responsibilities were drawn up and it was agreed that all Aurovilians and Auroville units would contribute monthly to these budgets. The system prospered. It brought nutrition, clothing, health and dental care plus a wide range of goods and services. But the system also highlighted problems and inequalities.

The central financing of the services led to inefficiency within some of them – the more so as the central financing was insufficient. To rectify this, a process evolved in subsequent years that a number of service units should charge for their services, and that these charges should include development costs so that they could finance their own growth. This allowed unit executives the financial freedom to be creative. This system was a success in services such as Pour Tous, but could not be applied to a 'free' service like education.

The other serious concern was that the level of maintenance that could be provided to those working for community services was lower – often considerably – than what was taken by those running commercial units. To counter this, a movement was started in 1999 called 'The Circle Experiment'. The idea behind the experiment is to create 'extended-family' groupings where people with more resources share with those with less. Circle members pool their maintenances in a common pot, and each member draws from the pot whatever s/he requires. Those with sufficient personal resources contribute additionally. Circle deficits are covered from a buffer provided by one of Auroville's commercial units. But the circles have not been the success hoped for. About 80% of the participants depend on inadequate community maintenance. Though the Circle participants receive more income, it remains insufficient. The experiment failed to convince the larger community to participate. At present only five of the original nine circles survive.

The commercial units

Contrary to the 'outside' world, Auroville's commercial units did not develop as privately owned entities – even though they were all privately financed – but as part of various Auroville trusts in an attempt to manifest Mother's principle that "At Auroville nothing belongs to anyone in particular. All is collective property."⁷ After the Auroville Foundation Act was passed, the Foundation became the owner of all units and delegated the management to individual Aurovilians. At present, there are more than 100 units that can be termed 'commercial'. While all of them provide a maintenance to the executives and employ local labour, the economic base of the majority of them is weak. Only about 40 commercial units make regular donations to the community.

The slow growth of the commercial sector is a cause of concern. In

April 2002, Prof. Henk Thomas from The Netherlands and chartered accountant Manuel Thomas from Chennai, presented the *White Paper on the Auroville Economy*. Based on the key issues of Auroville's economic development from 1968 till 2002, taking into account inflation and population increase, they concluded that the 'carrying capacity', that is the yearly contribution to Auroville of all commercial units per capita Aurovillian, had gone down by more than 20% in the period 1993-1999. An update of this figure is expected soon, but the indications are that the situation has not improved, which will make it difficult to sustain the maintenance levels for those maintained by Auroville. The Paper warned that, with the changed conditions in the outside economic world, Auroville's current economic structure cannot be sustained. It concluded that Auroville's current situation is loaded with risks and uncertainties which threaten the survival of

do not fund the subsequent maintenance and repair costs, which have to be borne by the community. However, a falling income will make this impossible.

Individuality versus fraternity

The economic context of Auroville is largely determined by two structural features. The first is that individuality is paramount. Each individual is free to determine his or her own line of action and development. Anyone wishing to create a commercial unit, for example, has little more to do than fill in a form and get permission. The flip side is that from that point onwards the individual stands alone. There is no guidance with respect to issues such as accounting, marketing and pricing policies in order to survive; and no financial support is offered. Neither is there any form of control. Small wonder then that unit executives as a rule are closely identified with 'his or her'

equality, but on the basis of the most elementary necessities; then, once that is established, everyone must be free to organize his life, not according to his monetary means, but according to his inner capacities."⁸ In other conversations She indicated that there should be no exchange of money in Auroville.

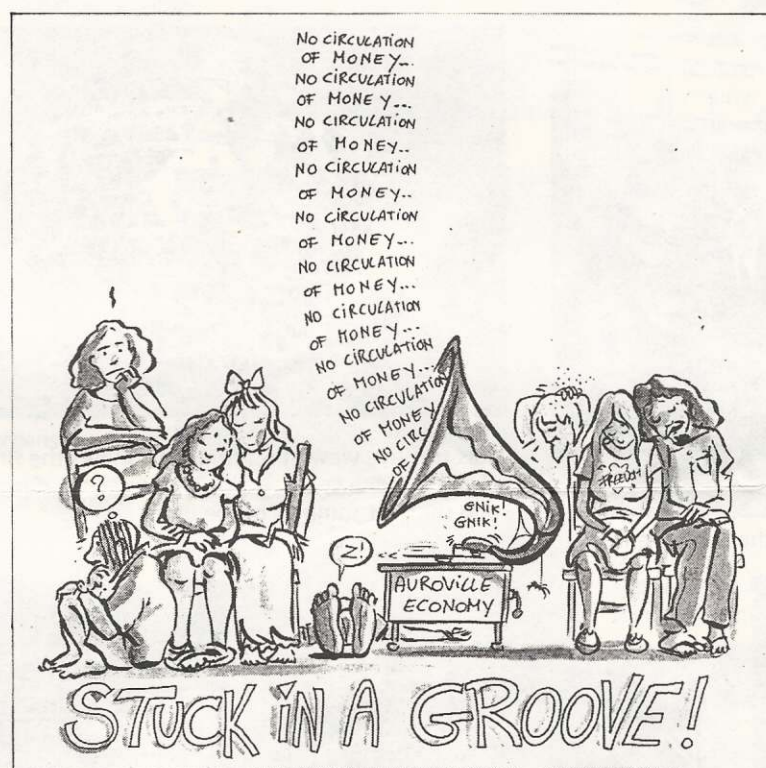
If both statements are read together, it appears that, as a first step, the city should make essential goods available to each Aurovillian in kind. But where will the money come from? The city does not levy taxes. It has no income apart from the voluntary donations from commercial units, from projects, from guests and from the Rs 1200 scheme (a scheme under which each unit contributes Rs 1200/month per Aurovillian working in that unit). This income falls short of the budgetary needs and there is no easy way in which it can be increased to provide for the basic needs of each Aurovillian.

It has been argued that if Auroville would copy the business model of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, which receives and re-allocates all profits of all its commercial units centrally, a no-exchange of money economy providing for the basic needs of each Aurovillian could easily be established. As Auroville is the ultimate owner of all the units, this option is technically feasible. But it does not seem to be a realistic option as it repudiates the principle of the freedom of the individual. If imposed, it may even lead to a dampening of business initiative and motivation.

Is the only option then that Auroville continues to balance its income and expenditure, asking commercial units to increasingly donate more and service units to spend less? This is an unenviable task. It has been the job of the Economy Group ever since its inception 15 years ago. But in March this year the members of the Economy Group decided to call it a day. They felt unmotivated to continue the present system, without a promise that at some time there would be sufficient income to maintain all Aurovilians in accordance with Mother's vision.

Perhaps a joint effort of individuals and unit executives is the only way out. A proposal to that effect, introducing a partial no-exchange of money economy and promising a substantial improvement of the maintenance of those depending on Auroville, is presently circulating in the community. The proposal can only materialise if wealthy Aurovilians and unit executives cooperate to find the necessary income without feeling that they are "being taxed under another name". The principle of fraternity and the ideals of Auroville demand that such a step be made soon.

Carel



CARTOON: EMANUELE

Auroville even in the short run, and made a number of recommendations to improve the commercial sector. Foremost is the need to recognize businesses as providers of employment and economic value to the community. Auroville has to promote commerce; provide access to capital; limit product liability; allow units to enter into joint ventures with external companies; and stimulate outsiders to participate in Auroville's development through injecting venture capital. The Paper stressed that institutions like the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) and the Auroville Board of Commerce should take up an active role, if the goal of expanding to a township of minimally five thousand people is to be achieved rapidly.

Sadly, hardly any of the White Paper recommendations have been followed up. The Governing Board has not yet acted; the FAMC took almost a year before it found the time to discuss the recommendations; and the Auroville Board of Commerce died a few years ago due to serious internal disagreements and has not been revived since. Neither has any other group come into existence for a strategic planning of business development.

There is another way in which the diminishing 'carrying capacity' affects Auroville's growth. Most of Auroville's new buildings are funded from donations. But as a rule, donors

unit, even though the legal ownership rests with the Auroville Foundation. One immediate consequence is that efforts to collectively market Auroville's products have barely taken off. Another consequence is that unit executives determine for themselves what maintenance to take – regardless of the levels of maintenance taken by those working in the service sector – and freely determine whether or not to allocate part of their profits to Auroville. The commonly heard justification is that those Aurovilians who have private incomes deal with their money in the same way.

The second structural feature of Auroville's economy is that of fraternity, the underlying basis for the manifestation of Auroville's ideals. In economic terms fraternity translates into solidarity. If a diminishing 'carrying capacity' of the commercial units will make it difficult to sustain even the present inadequate maintenance levels of those who depend on Auroville, other means must be found. For if this economic principle of solidarity is not addressed, only those who have sufficient income will be able to stay in Auroville.

No exchange of money

The ideal which Auroville has not been able to manifest is to provide each individual with the basic needs. Mother stated that the city should take care of the needs of each individual, 'not according to notions of right and

1. Early 1965. When published on 8 October 1969, Mother changed 2 answers.

2. 18 September 1969, Collected Works of The Mother Vol. 13 p. 208. The text found in Mother's Agenda is slightly different: Auroville is the ideal place for those who want to know the joy and liberation of not having any more personal possession. Mother's Agenda Vol. 10 p. 336.

3. Mother's Answer in 1965: As long as human habits will be such. In 1969, Mother changed this answer into the wording used above. See footnote 1.

4. Bulletin, August 1954, Collected Works of The Mother vol. 12 p. 93-94

5. 30-12-1967, Mother's Agenda vol. 8 p. 429.

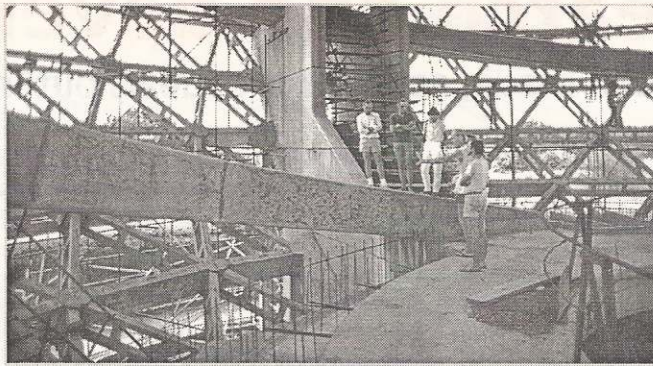
6. Auroville Housing Policy section 1a..

7. 14 May 1970, Collected Works of The Mother vol. 13, p. 213.

8. 30 December 1967, Mothers' Agenda vol. 8 pp 425 - 428 and 429.



The 'spaceframe', as the Matrimandir was known, in 1988.

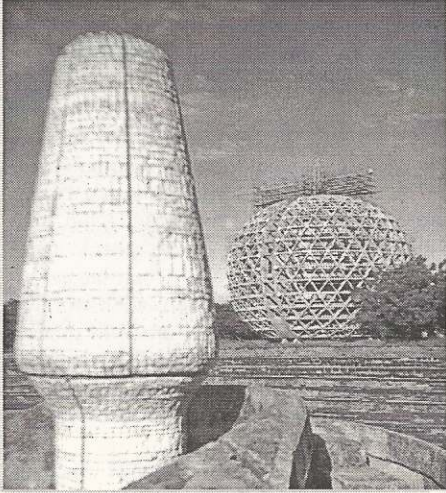


View from the inside: Discussing the ramp.



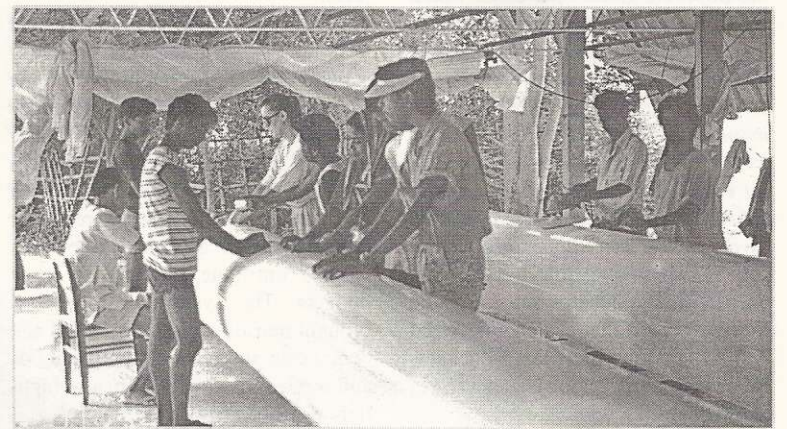
Top: The hole on the second level.

Right: Aerial view showing the unfinished amphitheatre (down left) and the 'spaceframe' (1989).



Top: Installing the marble in the chamber.

Left: The Urn, with the Matrimandir behind. The scaffolding served to lift the crane, to make place for the heliostat.



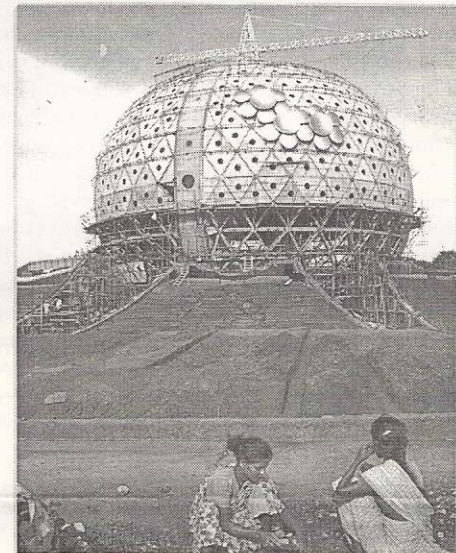
Polishing work to transform the pipes into pillars.



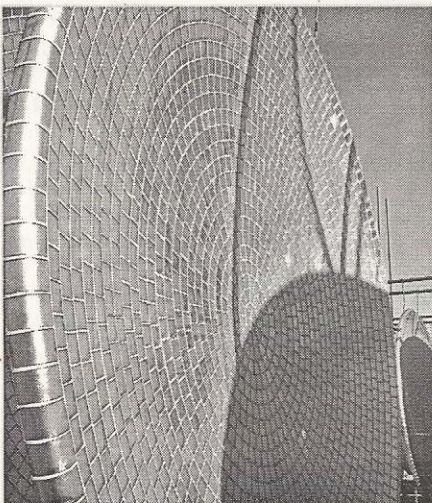
Piero takes delivery of the crystal at the Zeiss premises.



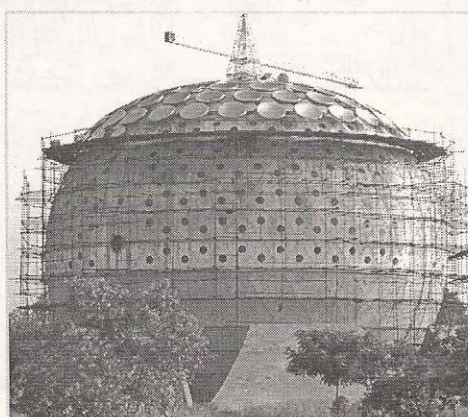
This fish-eye view of Matrimandir shows the first try-outs to fill the space-frame with ferrocement triangles, and the first samples of the discs.



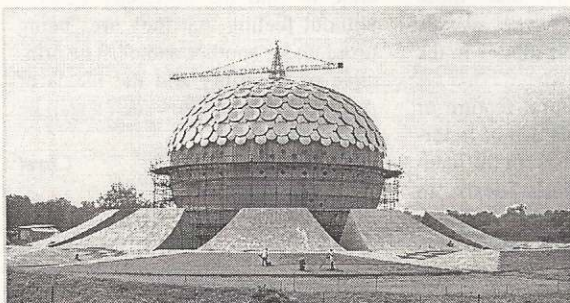
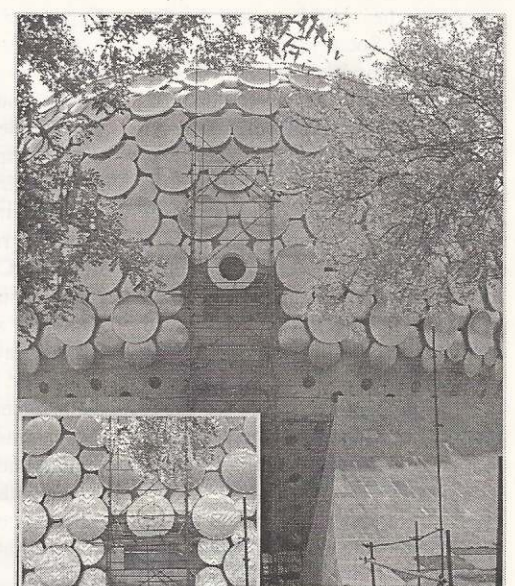
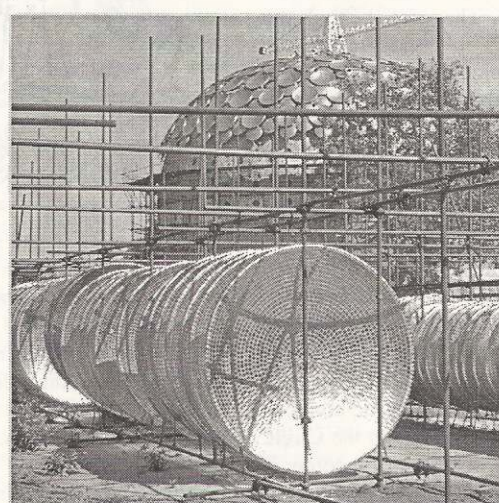
Left: The space-frame being filled-up with triangles. The first discs made of fibre glass reinforced polyester gilded with pure gold leaf by the German firm of Mayerhofer have been installed for testing. This experiment was unsuccessful as birds damaged the discs.



The final solution for the golden discs: Tiles consisting of two layers of glass with a foil of gold leaf in between.



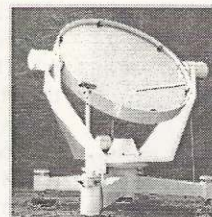
The discs being installed from top to bottom. Right: Discs awaiting installation



The central staircase clad in white marble.



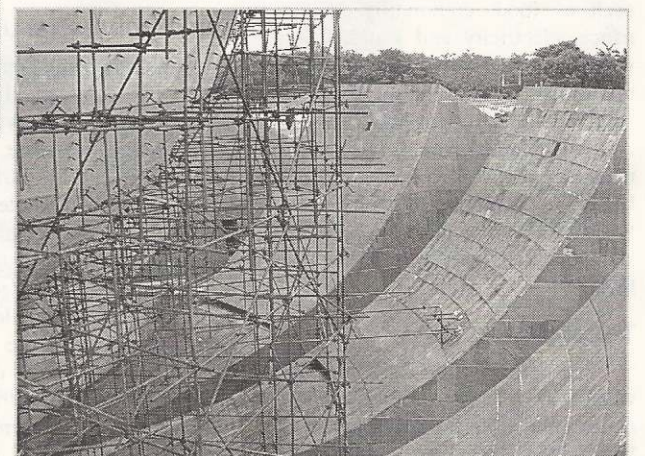
Top: The dismantling of the crane. Left: One of the last photos of Matrimandir with the crane on top.



The new heliostat awaiting installation.



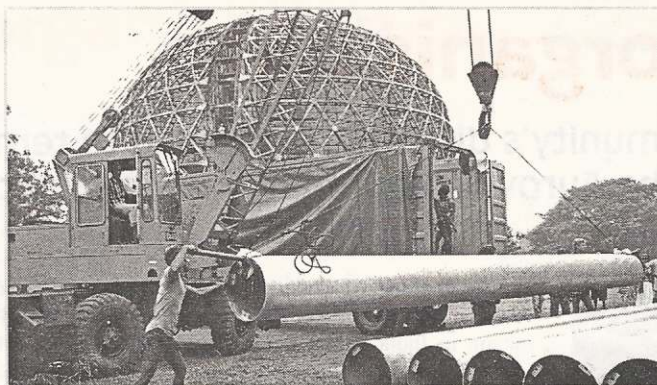
The checkered pattern of the grass and red Agra stone on the large and small petals.



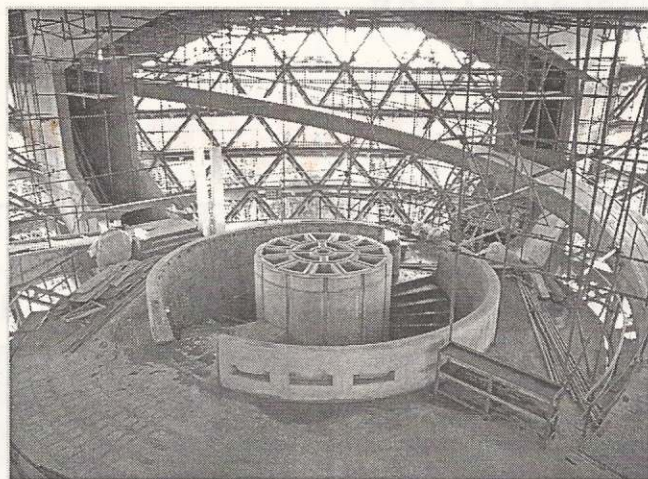
The inside of the petals dressed with red agra stone.

Right: The entrance with a mosaic of grey granite and white marble.





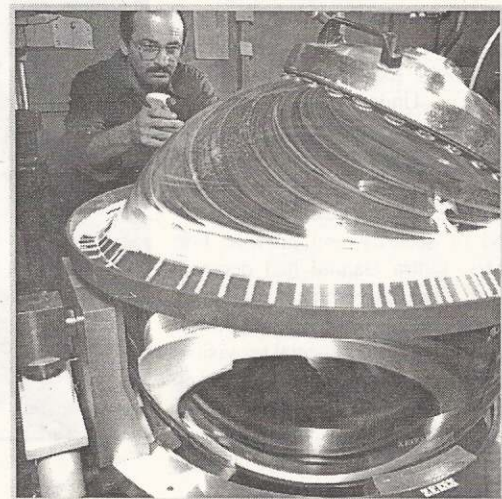
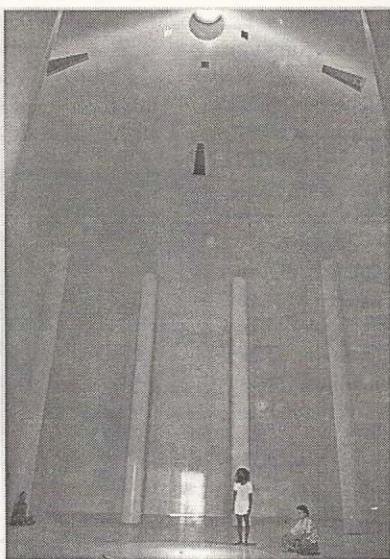
Unloading the twelve pipes.



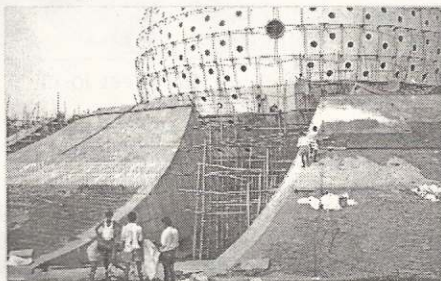
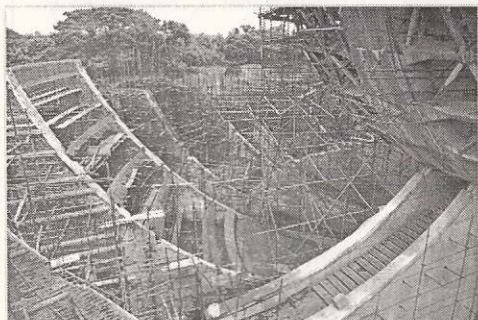
The staircase on the second floor with Mother's symbol.



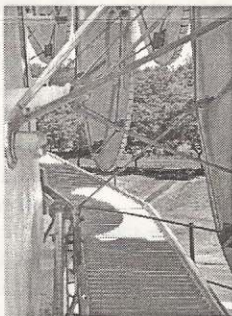
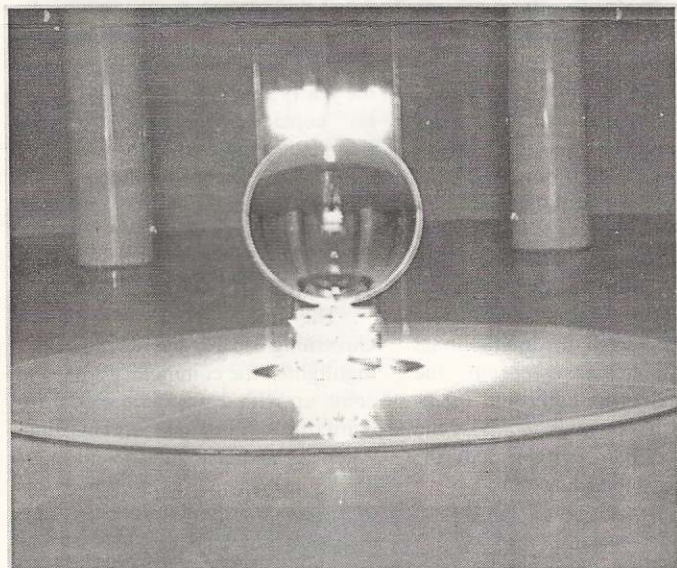
Lifting the pillars to their places in the chamber. Right: The chamber with pillars in place but still without the crystal



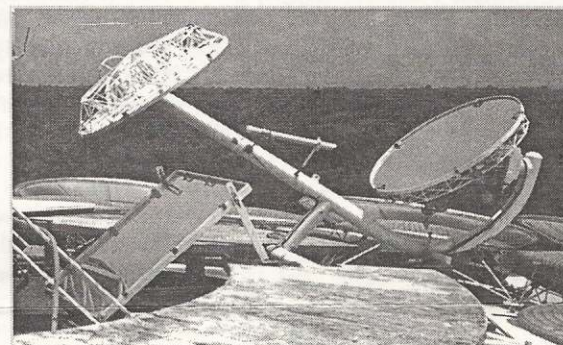
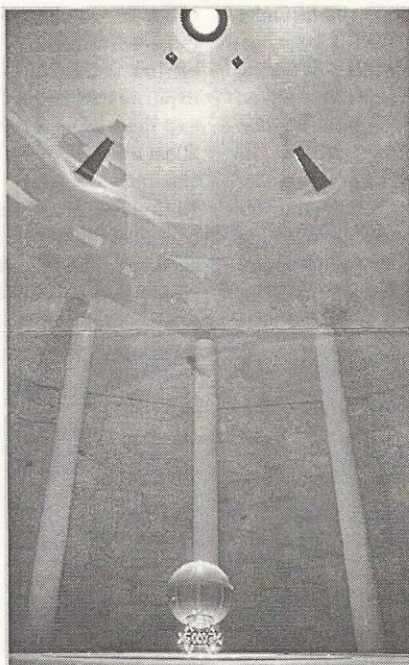
Left: Birth of a crystal at Schott, Mainz, Germany. Top: The crystal being polished by Zeiss, Oberkochen, Germany.



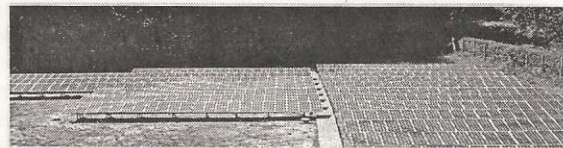
Shaping the petals. Left: towards Matrimandir. Right: towards the gardens



Walkway behind the discs.

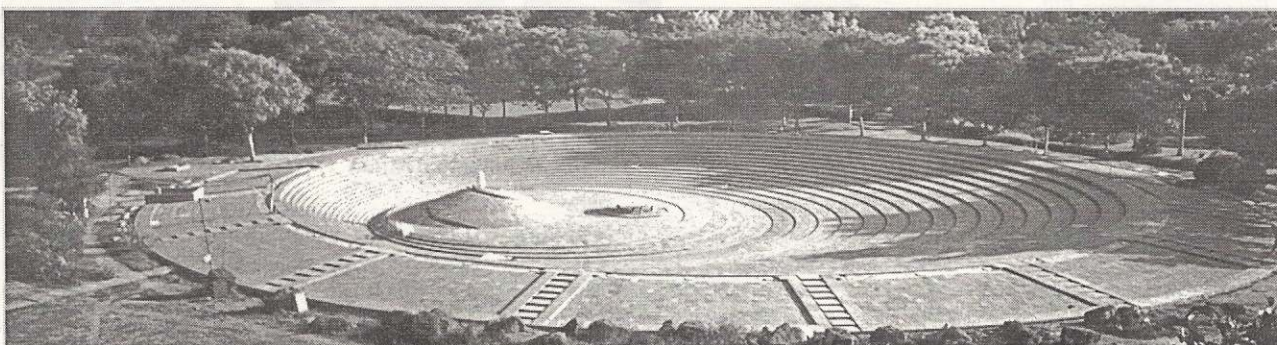


Left: The crystal arrived in the chamber in May 1991. Top: A provisional heliostat took care of the solar ray that lights the crystal.

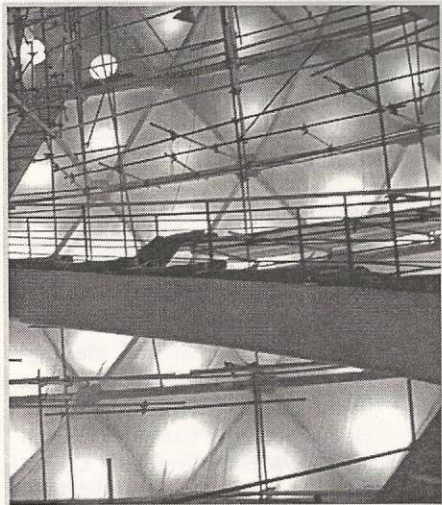


The Matrimandir solar power plant.

Each sunrise on April 4, the day Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry in 1910, the sun strikes the crystal directly from the east (photo top) through a hole in a disc (photo left, with insert showing the hole closed) and through the east entrance of the room.



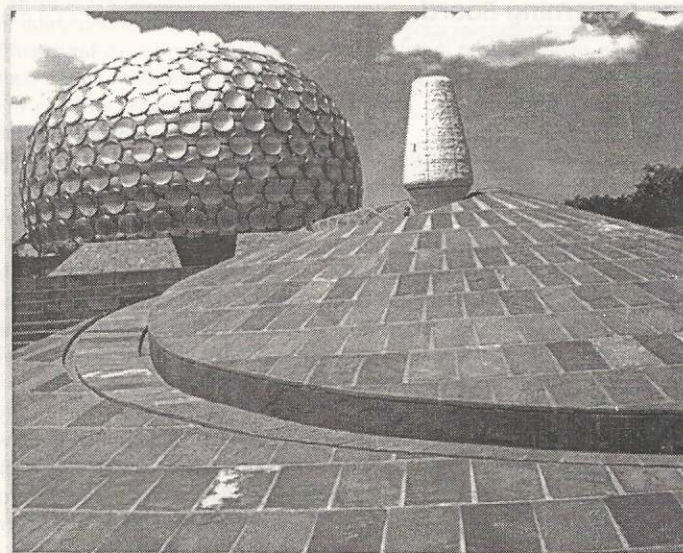
View of the amphitheatre in red Agra stone.



The inside of the Matrimandir skin will consist of triangular pieces of white glass that are illuminated from behind with a soft salmon-orange light. In picture: Test with butter paper.



Aerial view in 2002.



Matrimandir and the Urn in August 2003.

The struggle for organisation

The last 15 years have seen the community's difficulty in coming to terms with the external organisation laid down by the Auroville Foundation Act and with the necessity of finding a solution for its internal functioning

Fifteen years ago, in September 1988, the Auroville Foundation Act came into force. It was the successor to the Auroville (Emergency Provisions) Act 1980, by which the Government of India under the then Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, had taken over the management of all assets related to Auroville for a limited period of time. Under this act a Government-appointed Administrator had ensured that Auroville was able to develop in accordance with its Charter, resulting in a period of security and growth. For Mrs. Indira Gandhi had decreed that "The government of India does not want to control Auroville", and a special provision had been incorporated in the Act guaranteeing the freedom of the Auroville residents to implement the ideals laid down in the Charter of Auroville.

When, in 1988, four years after her assassination, the date for the Act's expiry neared, a new arrangement was considered necessary and the Government of India promulgated the Auroville Foundation Act which incorporated Mrs. Gandhi's earlier directive. The Government acquired, in the public interest and without paying compensation, all the assets of all organizations related to Auroville, with the intention of transferring them at a later time to a statutory body called 'The Auroville Foundation' to be created under this Act. This Foundation would have three authorities: a Governing Board; an International Advisory Council; and a Residents' Assembly. The members of the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council are appointees of the Government of India; the Residents' Assembly consists of all the residents of Auroville of 18 years and older. An officer of the Government of India would be the Foundation's Secretary residing in Auroville.

It would take four years before the Foundation became fully operational. The Foundation was created in January 1991, when its first Governing Board, chaired by Dr. Karan Singh, was appointed. The community responded a few months later by electing its first Working Committee, the representative of the Residents' Assembly. In February 1992 the first Secretary took office and the Government then transferred to the Foundation the Auroville assets. The members of the International Advisory Council were appointed by the end of 1992.

The Governing Board

When details of the Act became known, there was concern about the extensive powers given to the Governing Board. But real problems only surfaced when the Secretary endeavoured to delegate the management of the various properties now vested in the Foundation to individual Aurovilians. He proposed to do so by means of an 'Office Order'. But the authoritarian wording of the Office Order was objected to, and the Secretary's attitude was seen as an attempt to impose his views. The outcries became louder when the Secretary made remarks about "The necessity to close units whose unit executives refuse to sign" and questioned the presence of certain Aurovilians in Auroville, referring to



Dr. Karan Singh

them as "guests of the Indian government." The conflict focused attention on the perceived danger of outside interference in community affairs and the role of the Foundation came under increasing scrutiny. Was it a springboard or a straitjacket? Working Committee members at the time talked about the "confrontation with the Foundation" as "the heaviest aspect of their work" and framed a proposal that the Governing Board would transfer certain of its powers to the Working Committee so that the community would be responsible for its own affairs. The Secretary stressed that

there be no individual utilisation of the resources that belong to the collective and pointed out that the community had not evolved anything to regulate that. Though the office order imbroglio was ultimately solved, the Board's attempts to lay down Rules and Regulations and to create a Funds and Assets Management Committee were kept pending by three successive Working Committees.

Though many Aurovilians were grateful that the Indian Government had taken the trouble to pass a special Act for Auroville, community views after the Governing Board's first four years in office were not positive. The Board had been instrumental in securing a unique income tax exempt status for Auroville, obtaining a continuous power supply and bringing in a modern telephone exchange. But the Board had not been able to materialize any meaningful donations, in particular for acquiring the lands for Auroville. It also had not been successful in solving the persistent visa problem. The community became aware of just how feeble the protection of the Foundation was when in 1991 three Aurovilians – two of them had been living in Auroville for more than 20 years – received official notice to leave India without any reason being given. In the years that followed, more Aurovilians received Leave India notices (reasons were never given) and this has continued till May this year. Aurovilians

learned that the final judgement as to whether a foreigner has the right to remain in India or not lies with the Government of India, and that a Residential Permit issued on the guarantee of the Auroville Foundation does not offer protection. Though the Governing Board's efforts to request the Government to withdraw Leave India notices were successful in many but not all cases, successive Governing Boards have not been able to work out a permanent solution for Auroville with the Indian government. As this article is being written, three Aurovilians await permission to return to Auroville.

The slow acceptance of the Governing Board as an effective tool for the development of Auroville dates back to this difficult start. The Board, initially, was not looked upon as a partner to help Auroville, but as a power that had the potential to harm and should therefore be constrained. It was largely due to the personal qualities of the third Secretary, Mr. N. Bala Baskar, that the fears started to lessen. When he joined office in October 1996 the community was reeling from the impact of the expulsion and threatened expulsion of some of its residents, and there were strong apprehensions about the roles of the Governing Board and the Secretary in the life of Auroville. When he left five years later, the Auroville Foundation had become a widely respected part of Auroville's collective life and he himself was seen as a trusted friend and

helpmate. Looking back at the rather limited achievements of successive Governing Boards in the beginning of the Auroville Foundation, one cannot but conclude that Auroville's difficulty to come to terms with the Foundation has hampered the board members

from giving their full help towards Auroville's development. Under its first Chairman, Dr. Karan Singh, the Governing Board had mainly been trying to bridge the gaps of fear and mistrust. The Board under its second chairman, Dr. M.S. Swaminathan, was already able to do more, for example in initiating the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity (SAWCHU) in an attempt to raise funds for Auroville; but many of Dr. Swaminathan's suggestions for fundraising went unattended by the community. The Board under its present chairman, Dr. Kireet Joshi, has met with a more open community and has become increasingly active and involved in the life of Auroville. Topics manifested with the active participation of the present Governing Board include the approval of a Master Plan for Auroville by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Science and Technology (the ministry responsible for Auroville); a Rs 11.5 crore (US \$ 2.45 m) development grant from the Indian Government spread out over a period of five years;

and a public address to the Aurovilians by the Human Resource Development Minister Professor Murli Manohar Joshi, on New Year's Eve, 2002. But more than that, it is Dr. Joshi's personal push for the realisation of key objectives of Auroville in the areas of education, internal economy and internal organisation that characterises the work of the present Governing Board – even though, as could be expected, that push is not always being appreciated by all Aurovilians.



Dr. Kireet Joshi

The International Advisory Council

From December 1992 till December 2001, three successive International Advisory Councils have been functioning as an authority of the Auroville Foundation. From December 2001 onwards, this body has become defunct as the Government of India has not appointed new members.

"The International Advisory Council is intended to guard against outside forces interfering with the freedom of the Aurovilians to conduct their own affairs according to the ideals of Auroville. The Governing Board is basically an executive body, while Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi envisaged the International Advisory Council as representing the international community and therefore being in a position to advise the Governing Board," explained Dr. Kireet Joshi, the guiding hand in framing the Auroville Foundation Act, upon being chosen chairman of the Council in January 1999. In an interview in June 1999, when he was in addition appointed Chairman of the Governing Board, Dr. Joshi explained that the Council and the Board are conceived as a check and balance on each other, so that the freedom of Aurovilians to pursue the ideals would not in any way be hampered.

The question to what extent the successive Councils have been of help to Auroville's development is difficult to answer. Without exception, the members of the Council have come from the highest national and international echelons and Auroville cannot but be grateful that persons of such eminence have consented to be connected to Auroville. For it is a great support that such prominent outsiders are joining hands to help manifest what Aurovilians are working on. The International Advisory Council has had a constructive effect on a number of fairly important

The members of the last International Advisory Councils were: Mr. Kireet Joshi (chairman); Ms. Mary E. King, President Global Action, Inc., Washington; Dr. A.T. Aryaratne, President Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement, Sri Lanka; Prof. Norman Myers, CMG, environmentalist; Mr. Bernard F. de Montferand, Ambassador, Embassy of France, New Delhi. Former members include: Mr. Maurice Strong, former Secretary-General UNCED; Dr. Ervin Laszlo, Director World Future; late Mr. J.R.D. Tata, foremost Indian industrialist; Snr. Federico Mayor, Director General of UNESCO; Mr. Bertrand Schneider, Secretary General of the Club of Rome; Mrs. Hanne Strong, President Manitou Foundation; late Mr. Nani Palkhivala, eminent Indian lawyer; and Prof. Amartya Sen, Indian Nobel laureate and economist.

issues, such as the Leave India notices, the need to acquire the lands for Auroville and to recommend that Auroville International be granted observer status at the United Nations. But, in the words of one them, "The community has made but little use of the goodwill of the members of the various Councils to further Auroville's cause. Meetings in Auroville, as a rule, were rather badly prepared so that the members' time was not optimally used. In between the yearly meetings, there was little or no contact with the Auroville Foundation nor with the Working Committee. The Aurovilians should try to capitalize on this potential more."

The internal organisation

The initial problems with the Governing Board and its Secretary highlighted the community's need to come up with a workable model for Auroville's internal organisation. Attempts to create an efficient inter-



Mr. N. Bala Baskar I.A.S.

nal organisation had been made since Auroville's early days. Under one name or another, a kind of a three-tier system always existed: the community came together in meetings called 'Pour Tous' or 'General Meeting'; there was an executive body alternatively called 'The Cooperative' (1980-1983), the 'Executive Council' (1984-1987), the Auroville Council (1987) or 'Core Group' (1988-1989) while sometimes specific problems were dealt with by a specially appointed Task Force, or by individuals on their own steam and initiative, who bypassed the community.

continued on page 7

The struggle for organisation

continued from page 6

In the third tier were the specialised working groups such as the Entry group, the Economy Group or the Development Group that were fulfilling their separate roles.

While the third tier has continued its work more or less uninterrupted, certain problems recurred with the second tier. The community had to come to terms with such issues as giving 'authority' and 'powers' to an executive body. The executive bodies, in turn, often struggled to have their decisions accepted, since none of them ever enjoyed the full support of the community.

The first tier too was having problems. General meetings are rarely functioning satisfactorily. They are reasonably good forums to

system of decision making. Neither was considered suitable for Auroville's needs. In these years more specialised groups developed such as the Funds and Assets Management Committee, the Auroville Board of Commerce, the Development Group and the Land Use Coordination Group. Later attempts to realise an internal organisation included 'Platform' meetings, which promoted the spirit of listening but were otherwise ineffective. And a host of workshops stimulated Aurovilians to search for models of harmonious decision making.

Governing Board interference

The lack of a proper organisation was not only a problem of the Aurovilians. "My concern in conceiving the Foundation Act was that the Aurovilians would use it to create a new form of social and political organisation in the light of Sri Aurobindo's writings," stated the third Chairman of the

who explicitly wanted to participate in decision-making on community issues, which would replace the Residents' Assembly. But in March 2002, after much general discussion and six revised drafts, the document failed to gain community approval.

In those months Auroville's executive bodies had come close to being dysfunctional: the Executive Committee had ceased to exist and the Working Committee had been reduced to one person. Dr. Kireet Joshi strongly objected and successfully pushed the community to form a Working Committee, so that the process to come to a revised organizational structure could continue unimpeded. The new Working Committee so constituted held office for 6 months. In September 2002 it was succeeded by the present Auroville Council of 15 people, of which the Working Committee is an integral part.

At that time, the Residents' Assembly also approved a one year trial of a proposal called 'The Experiment'. It envisaged an 'Auroville Resource Group' to facilitate the development of policies; and so-called 'Task-Oriented Residents Assemblies', ad-hoc groups that would be constituted to come to decisions if an issue could not be resolved by consensus after two Residents Assembly meetings. This Experiment failed to generate sufficient community interest.

Search for the Divine's Will

The latest attempt was made in

C'est bon.

Si personne ne peut être un chef exclusif - tout le monde doit apprendre à collaborer. C'est une très bonne discipline pour la vanité, l'amour propre et l'importance excessive de la personnalité.

Here nobody can be the exclusive leader - everybody has to learn to collaborate. It is a very good discipline for the vanity, self-love, and the excessive sense of importance of personalities.

Blessings, Mother

final say in matters and to keep a system of checks and balances between the Residents' Assembly and the executive body. But then, in July, Dr. Kireet Joshi addressed the residents on the subject of 'Self-Governance in Auroville'. He emphasised that self-governance for Auroville means that Auroville is governed by the Divine's will and that the Divine is recognised as the sole authority. Auroville's search should be to create a system which doesn't blunt the life force by its rigidity but has a possibility of variation according to the needs, the circumstances and the people. He considered democracy unsuitable for Auroville, for then Auroville would have the kind of constricting machinery that is used by every Parliament in the world and there would be no experiment to reach higher levels of organisation. Dr. Joshi requested the community to deeply study Mother's indications how Auroville should be organised and suggested that the Residents' Assembly be a place for coming together in quietude, searching together for the Divine's Will, instead of a place to discuss agreement or disagreement with a proposal. "Auroville's procedure should not end in a decision or decision making. For then it will be a decision made by the people, not by the Divine. Decisions should not be made, but evolve at every step by the guidance of the Divine." Dr. Joshi elaborated on the role of the Auroville Council as trustees, upholders of the trust of the Aurovilians which should arrive at decisions by consensus. He also advised that, in case an issue is completely blocked, the Auroville Council request three Aurovilians dedicated to the Divine to be umpires and decide the issue. These people do exist, stressed Dr. Joshi.

A critical juncture

"We have extraordinary conditions here. No other group in the world has the possibility of experimentation that we have got here," said Dr. Kireet Joshi in an interview with AVToday in August 2002. "We often tend to say in Auroville 'Oh this is not possible, we've not reached that level, it will happen in due course'. This is entirely inadmissible. Our path is a steep path, but Mother will not propose something which is not implementable. It requires a higher level of consciousness, but that can be developed..."

"The connection between Auroville and India is very intimate. If we don't take up the work Mother calls us to do, the imperfections will invade us. Even the provisions of the Foundation Act will not save us from the various forces in India and the West which are bound to invade - which have begun to invade - this little place. Therefore we are at a critical juncture, and we have to suc-

Organisation is a discipline of action, but for Auroville we aspire to go beyond arbitrary and artificial organisation. We want an organisation that is the expression of a higher consciousness working to manifest the truth of the future. An organisation is needed for the work to be done - but the organisation itself must remain flexible and plastic in order to progress continually and to modify itself according to the need.

The Mother

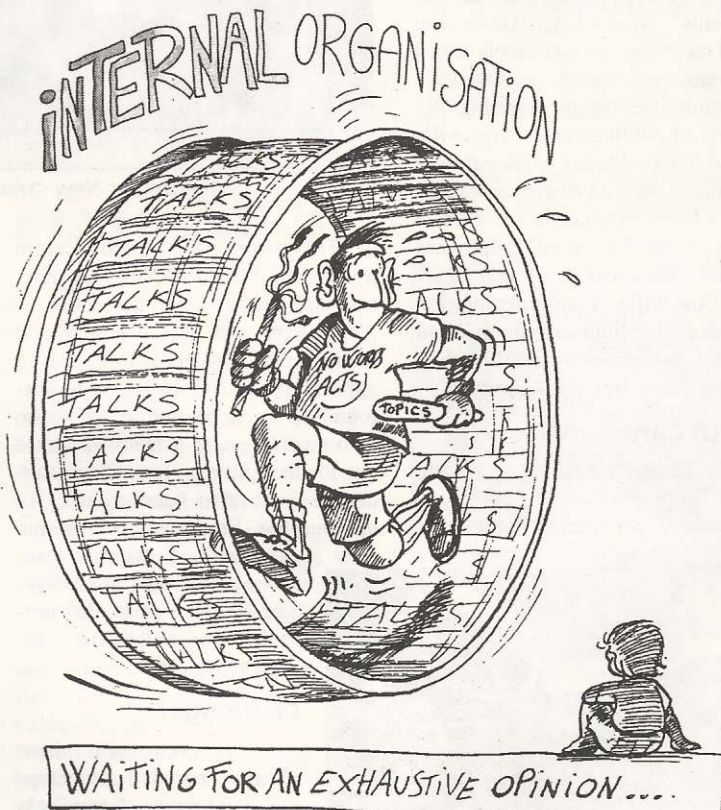
February 6, 1969, CWM XIII p. 204-206

air opinions, but a meaningful dialogue is not likely to happen when over 60 people are assembled in one room. Normally, between five and fifteen percent of the residents of Auroville attend such meetings but it is not always clear whether those five or fifteen percent carry the power to make decisions that affect all other residents. For those reasons, general meetings were often found to be unsuitable for decision-making.

After the Foundation came into force, these problems continued. Meetings of the residents became known as meetings of the Residents' Assembly or General meetings, in case matters needed to be discussed rather than be decided upon. The executive body became the Working Committee, but as it was closely interacting with the mistrusted Foundation, it was soon considered a body that could not deal with 'internal affairs'. Experiments with additional groups were made. In December 1993 there were four groups: a Representative Group to develop policies; a Management Group to implement the policies; a Working Committee for the external relations; and a Charter Council to identify the general direction of Auroville. In 1996 the organisation consisted of a Working Committee, an Executive Council, a Concept and Communication Committee and a Charter Council. Residents were supposed to discuss issues in Local Area meetings before they would become a topic in a General Meeting or a Meeting of the Residents' Assembly.

None of these elaborate organisational models worked. A review two years later showed that all groups had failed to attract sufficient members to do the work. Because of low interest in the community, only two groups continued: the Working Committee and the Executive Committee, both with an insufficient membership. Could lessons be learned from similar organisations? The Findhorn community model was studied, and, sponsored by the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier, four Aurovilians went to the Netherlands to study the sociocratic

Governing Board, Dr. Kireet Joshi, in May 1999. "This whole Act was so conceived that mature individuals would be able to devise a new form in which individual freedom and social fulfilment would be reconciled. My aspiration was that by now you would have been able to create an alternative form to what we call democracy. But this has not happened - and it is one of the pains in my heart." The Governing Board took action. In September 2000 it constituted the Unity Committee, a sub-committee of three of its mem-



bers to look into the internal organisation, and co-opted three Aurovilians to this committee a few months later. They drafted a document called "Towards a Divine Anarchy", a detailed proposal for making and implementing decisions in Auroville. One of the main changes proposed was the introduction of an Active Residents' Assembly consisting of Aurovilians

June this year. It proposed a partially democratic method. Under certain circumstances - which were fully defined - an issue would be decided by voting; depending on the type of proposal in question, a greater or lesser majority would be required for ratification. This proposal introduced a kind of direct democracy, which was considered necessary so that the community could have the

In brief

Petition against violence

A petition against the increase of violence and theft in Auroville has been addressed to the presidents and members of the surrounding village Panchayats and Natamai, with copy to the Collector. This petition became necessary after two Aurovilians were assaulted in Udumbu. A few weeks later a young man from Kulapalayam was murdered, due to which the daily activities in Kulapalayam and Auroville were interrupted for two days.

New Matrimandir executives

At the behest of the Auroville Council and in the overall interest of a better and collective management of the Matrimandir affairs as well as its speedy completion, the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation appointed four new executives for Matrimandir, replacing the former executives. The Council invited the community to a Silent Gathering under the Banyan tree on Wednesday, October 15th to call for a peaceful transition and a renewed spirit of collaboration.

News and Notes

The Auroville News summary has got a new title: News and Notes. It contains the usual weekly reports, announcements and cultural programmes and there will be a creative part. Constructive criticism and legitimate enquiries, formulated in a civil manner, will be published. But the News and Notes will not carry comments on national or international policies, statements about someone's belief system or religion, anything that can harm or discredit an individual or the community, and false, incomplete and biased information. Due to the important role this news publication has for Auroville and the possible impact on the community and its relationship with the Indian government and international community, the News and Notes' editorial team is responsible to the Auroville Council.

Visit of Panchayat members

Twenty-two representative from Irumbai Panchayat (representing Kottakarai and Edayanchavadi) Bommayapalayam Panchayat (representing Kulapalayam, Bommayapalayam and Pillaichavadi) and representatives from Mudaliarchavadi and Kottakuppam visited Auroville for a day and were shown the Matrimandir and the work done at Pitchandikulam, Discipline Farm and Isaiambalam school.

Security Service

The Auroville day guard and night guards have merged to form a single security service. This should be more efficient and cost-effective. Guards are recognisable by their yellow t-shirts.

Planning and Development Council

An Auroville Planning and Development Council has been constituted to replace the Interim Development Council. The APDC is following the membership model of the Funds and Assets Management Committee in that its members represent working groups. Additionally a number of members are selected for their personal qualities. The APDC's main task will be to draw up five-year development plans and secure the implementation of building permission guidelines and procedures. The first review of mandate and membership is scheduled for end of December 2003, after three months of functioning.

Bridges Between Neighbours

With the dream of unity and fraternity surrounding us, a complex relationship between Auroville and its neighbouring villages has developed throughout the years

Over the last fifteen years, Auroville Today has covered a variety of aspects on village life such as education, youth groups, history, health, village action, women's groups and cultural events. Going deeper we have also tried to examine the complex relationship between the rich local culture and the variety of international cultures which have been coexisting for the last 35 years. To attempt to summarize in one article the dynamics of such relationships is unrealistic. But a brief insight into some of the trials and triumphs of such an experiment can be given.

At the time of Auroville's inauguration, the surrounding area was one of the poorest in the south of India. The land had been robbed of its natural flora, leaving it desolate and dry. The working population consisted of small farmers, skilled and unskilled labourers and fishermen. Families worked night and day to make ends meet. The whole area was certified as "backward and in need of development" by the Collector of South Arcot District in 1984.



Village children goat herding by Aspiration's first huts

When the first foreigners came to the local lands, there were mixed feelings among the people who had been living here for generations. "Some of the villagers were very scared because they felt that the white people would come and rule them again," reported an elder from a local village. "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" (Auroville Today, May 1995). During Auroville's first few years, the Mother's physical presence calmed many fears and bridged understandings between the diverse backgrounds. Her Dream reached out to all the people coming to and already inhabiting the area of Auroville. It was a chance for new beginnings and growth on both external and internal levels.

The first years are often recalled with affection. Life seemed much more simple and straightforward. A larger percentage of the newly formed community participated in local customs and activities which created a feeling of 'doing it together.' Furthermore, the Matrimandir, which was very much the 'soul work' of Auroville at that time, brought everyone together in a harmonious

routine. However, as the years rolled by, life became more complex. With the growth of the Auroville community as well as the villages, new dimensions appeared and gaps between common understandings seemed to grow. As one villager said, "In the beginning 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 villages 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" (Auroville Today, June 1993). Though some of the Aurovilians turned their focus in directions that were not entwined with that of the local people, others of this growing population dedicated themselves to building bridges between the varying backgrounds and striving to achieve the 'fraternity' Mother spoke of. The following summary touches on a few of the many projects that have been started

over the years and continue to succeed today.

Education

In the beginning of Auroville, Udavi school was started by the Mother to provide an ongoing education for local village students. Today, this school, located in Edayanchavadi, educates 250 students who come from Edayanchavadi, Kottakarai, Alankuppam, Irumbai and even Kuilapalayam. Udavi school is unique as it has remained a project of both the Ashram and Auroville. Under the Udyog Trust of the Ashram and SAIIR of Auroville, the school is situated on Ashram land while being managed by Aurovilians.

Isaiambalam School in Kottakarai was started in 1979. Today there are 120 children attending from Edayanchavadi, Alankuppam and Kottakarai. Along with pre-school and primary education, Isaiambalam School teaches many teenagers who have not had primary education and now hope to educate themselves for future possibilities.

New Creation School opened in 1983, offering children from the neighbouring villages (largely from Kuilapalayam) a well rounded education which incorporates dance, pottery, singing and theatre. Currently, there are over 250 students in New Creation, 37 of whom live in the community.

Other schools such as After School, the Kuilapalayam Trust School and a recently constructed

school for the children from Bommayarpalayam continue to grow and succeed.

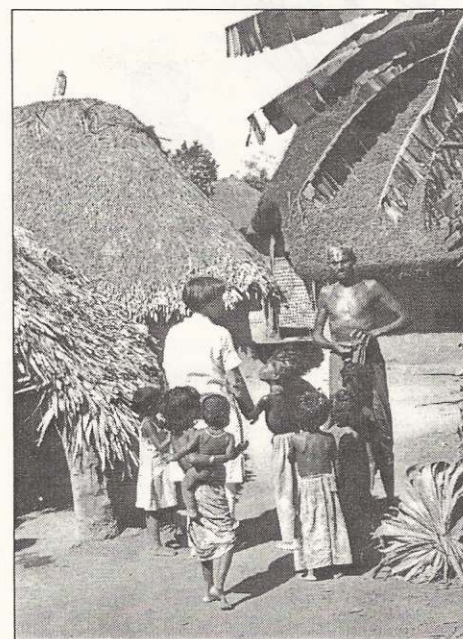
Village Action

The Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG), which started in 1983, actively works today with 40 villages in the Auroville bioregion. The work of AVAG not only improves the lives of villagers through education and employment but largely empowers individuals to take charge of their lives and their community development. Approximately 2000 women and 750 men have joined the network of AVAG and are monitored by a group of 50 development workers consisting of men and women from neighbouring villages who have been trained by AVAG in community development and social work. Last year 2000 women participated in the AVAG's Women Power Program. An example of women's empowerment can be seen when in village elections in October of 2001, twenty women with the encouragement and support of AVAG ran for office; fifteen were elected as Panchayat ward members and one as Panchayat vice president. Such successes have encouraged the women today to believe in themselves.

An Auroville Village newsletter called *Auroville Grama Seydhi Madal* was started in 1998 by Meenakshi, a Tamil Aurovillian well known and appreciated throughout Auroville and the villages alike for her continual optimistic outreach. This newsletter covers such topics as village life, school celebrations, and includes quotations of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, stories of Tamil culture and heritage as well as reporting on aspects of Auroville such as the Residents' Assembly, Governing Board meetings and commonly asked questions concerning the Auroville community. Currently entering its 7th year of publication, the *Auroville Grama Seydhi Madal* sends out over 300 copies per month and is read by over 1,000. Meenakshi is also a founder of SEWA (Small Employees Welfare Administration) that deals with Auroville conflict/resolution forum, pension fund and employment services, and she is currently active with the Tamil Heritage Centre.

Health Care

The Dental Clinic of Auroville treats approximately 250 non-Aurovilians per month, and does



Neighbourly interactions



Collecting water at the local well

extensive work with the villages. In an experiment started in 1994, the first sub-centre was opened in Edayanchavadi training women to become Dental workers. The success of this outreach led to the introduction of ART (Atraumatic Restoration Treatment) promoted by the World Health Organisation in 1999. This program further trains workers to deal with caries (tooth bone decay) and small cavities. It also promotes training in oral hygiene. Currently there are 32 women from local villages, some of whom have no more than a 10th standard education, but have been sufficiently trained through these programs. To their credit, the Auroville Dentistry is the only clinic working in 'rural dentistry', through the ART program in India.



Children at New Creation

The Auroville Health Centre treats over 30 and provides medication and advice to another 300 non-Aurovilians per day. It has trained many health workers who go out to approximately 20 villages in the surrounding area, providing for those who cannot get to a medical centre outside their village. Six village sub-centres have also been created for this purpose. Education on hygienic care and prevention are given alongside treatment. The Health Centre also provides an ambulance for emergency cases.

Challenges

Yet, even with these clearly positive developments regarding Auroville's relationship with the surrounding region, there have been some more controversial aspects which have led to resentment and frustration. Though Auroville's presence and Mother's dream brought much into the lives of the Tamilians, it also brought rapid change among a people whose place in society is very defined by their culture. For example, "There is no full caste system in every village. There

is mostly one caste, and a separate Harijan (untouchables) colony. Sometimes Harijans from the colonies are not even allowed to walk into the main village. Many Harijans have found work in Auroville and benefit by the absence of caste restrictions here" (Auroville Today, January 1990). Some employers in Auroville found those of the Harijan caste to be willing, hardworking and honest, but their employment and economic raising brought in contradictory feelings from other village members.

There was also a change occurring on the home front of many village households. Whereas before, women were typically at home caring for the household at large, they began to get jobs in Auroville and their absence demanded an adjustment from the rest of the family.

Children being raised in Auroville soon became young adults with views and outspoken opinions contradictory to that of their parents. Family crafts and trade were sometimes disregarded by the son assigned

to carry on the tradition. Increasingly daughters wanted to continue their studies and postpone marriage while elders sought to secure their lineage. The whole concept of 'love' marriage or even relationships without marriage as seen in Auroville, caused some to question what had not been questioned before.

Furthermore, with the economic rise of the region, consumerism has grown and continues to grow within and around Auroville. The differences in personal income can often be seen, leading to feelings of resentment, jealousy and frustration between the villagers themselves as well as between the villagers and Aurovilians. When Mother was asked how the Aurovilians should relate to the villagers, she responded, "The best way, you see, is education. To educate them not by words and speeches but by example. If you can make them mix with your life and your work, and they get the influence of your way of being, your way of understanding, then, little by little, they will change" (21 April 1970, CWM, XIII, p.333). However, with materialism and the lack of economic equality visible in the Auroville community, the examples are sometimes different from those that Mother envisioned.

continued on page 9

Bridges Between Neighbours

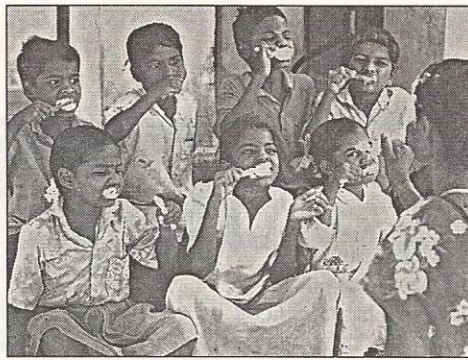
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Another common upset revolves around feelings of racism and discrimination. One Tamil Aurovilian said, "In the past there was less theft and everyone moved freely and received a warm welcome. These days Auroville is not a free city. Whites enter places easily, while we must answer many questions. Our own people, who work as watchmen, respect foreigners more!" (Auroville Today, August

ing been encouraged to sell their land in the early years of Auroville's development. Though at the time the land was not so high prized and selling it provided money for family functions such as marriages, the money was not being re-invested, leaving a family twenty some years later in the same economic state, knowing that the piece of land they sold is now worth much more than what they got. Furthermore, some villagers recall being promised

lians represent 38% of the Auroville community. The number has increased from 25% in 1993. "People who wish to join Auroville from the neighbouring villages are in something of a special situation. They are born into a culture where certain traditions are still strong and as their families are just 'across the road', the demand made upon them to fulfil certain family responsibilities and traditional religious practices can be overwhelming" (Auroville Today, June 1993). Many of the Tamil Aurovilians grew up in Auroville surrounded by its ideals, freedoms and possibilities.

Particularly in the 80's and early 90's, a clear economic division could be seen among the young adult Tamil Aurovilians and those from the village. This led to a build up of resentment. One young villager expressed his views, "The Tamil Aurovilians could do so much for the village, but they've turned their backs on us, forgotten us completely; they behave like foreigners now. If some villagers dislike Auroville, it's because of the arrogance of these people" (Auroville



Dental hygiene campaign

Today, May 1995). But for a Tamil Aurovilian the balance is not easy to find.

Today, the complexities of our neighbouring relationships continue to be a challenge and new avenues are sought in building stronger, more trusting relationships. Just this past month, 22 Panchayat leaders and village representatives met with a group of Aurovilians for a very successful day of cultural exchange including visits to Auroville's farms, schools and the Matrimandir. Future events of this kind will hopefully help to bridge our communication gaps and strengthen our mutual respect while working toward the true fraternity Mother spoke of...one step at a time.

Sunaura



Delegates at the Women's Day organised by the Auroville Village Action Group

2001). From a different angle, many Aurovilian women have found themselves being judged and approached by Tamil men who have preconceived perceptions towards women in general and a discriminating attitude toward Western women in particular because of different cultural backgrounds and sometimes because of socially inappropriate behaviour of visitors to Auroville. With such a mixing of cultural sensitivities, it is not a surprise that these issues arise.

Trust is a very important aspect in building a strong relationship between Auroville and the villages. While there are many trustworthy relationships between Auroville and its neighbours, there are also areas that could use more work. For example, some of the villagers around Auroville, especially from Kottakarai, feel cheated by hav-

jobs in Auroville. "Everybody in the village wanted to sell land to Auroville," explained an elder from Kottakarai, "because they could have good food and a good life. They stopped doing crops, and the land spoiled. When they sold their land, they didn't buy more. They lived well, but afterwards they had to go to Auroville for work. But sometimes there was no work. I sold 15 acres of land to Auroville and I understood my son would get a job with Auroville. But, he never got one. If people sell land to Auroville, Auroville should try to help them by giving them a job" (Auroville Today, Feb. 1989).

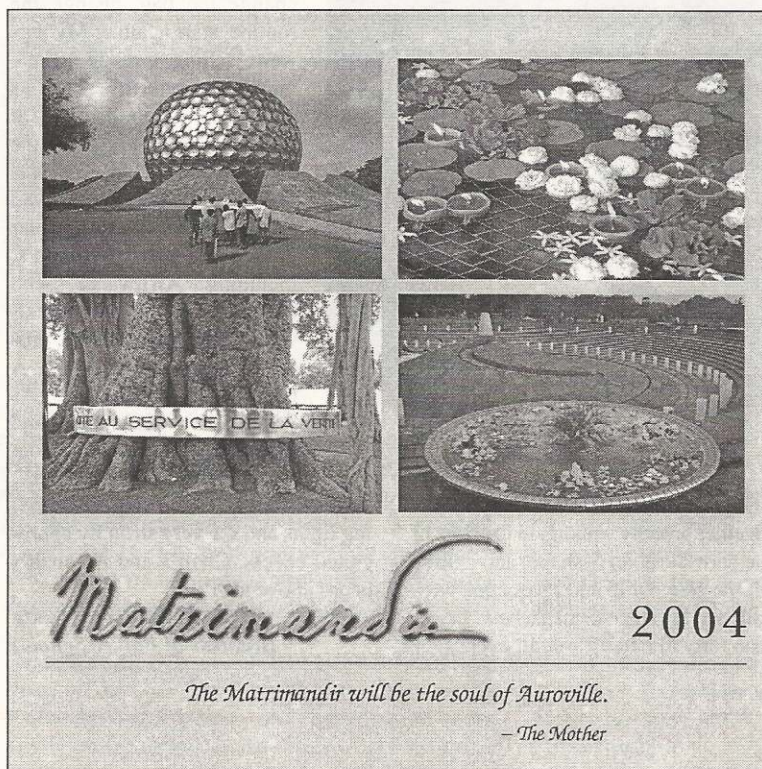
One of the most important links between Auroville and the surrounding villages is in those who walk between both worlds: the Tamil Aurovilians. Today, Tamil Aurovi-



Gathering of Panchayat leaders and Aurovilians, September 2003

MATRIMANDIR

Matrimandir calendar 2004



The Matrimandir 2004 spiral-bound wall calendar is out. Sized 27cm x 27cm it features 12 large photos of Matrimandir by different photographers. Four smaller photos illustrate the cover. The back of each page carries a presentation of an aspect of the Matrimandir, such as the golden discs, the inner skin, and the crystal.

The price in India including mailing charges is Rs 150. To order, contact the Auroville International Centre in your country or email tine@auroville.org.in. The profits from the sale of the calendar will be donated to the Matrimandir.

RESEARCH

Auroville research spotlighted

On Sunday the fifth of October, around fifty Aurovilians and guests met in Vêrité for a seminar on research in Auroville. The seminar, arranged by the Centre for International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU) was intended as the first in a series. All research projects which were presented will be funded under the auspices of the SAIER/CIRHU project.

The first researcher to be introduced by Alan (the facilitator of the day) was Aurelio. He took the audience on a journey into the world of sound, and demonstrated a variety of instruments aimed at 'a new music pedagogy'. In his research he is trying to expand our notion of music by going to its very roots. Mita and Tapas followed up the exploration of sound in their presentation on the French scientist Dr. Tomatis' method of learning language, which is soon to be applied in Auroville. The method builds on the observation that the voice can only produce what the ear hears. By exposing the ear to the unique sound frequencies of a certain language, one can overcome many of the problems in learning it.

Next Wim presented his research on the development of a curriculum of integral studies in Auroville. He showed how any research project can fit into a model where different levels ranging from body to spirit, are combined with any of three different ways of understanding: subjective, inter-subjective, and objective. In the last presentation before lunch, Alain Bernard and Ashatit talked about value-oriented education. Their research group is about to publish a book with biographies of historical persons who have embodied a number of different human qualities in remarkable ways.

Those who did not leave for other Sunday afternoon activities first listened to Ruslan and Sergei presenting their multi-faceted research on the International Zone, and then took part in an interactive session, which most found engaging and rewarding. Splitting up into groups, appropriate areas, methods, and support for research in Auroville were examined and, in so doing, brought a sense of collective awareness.

Svante

In brief

Orientation programme in Tamil teaching

A ten-day Orientation Programme in Tamil teaching for teachers of the Auroville region was conducted by the Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore Institute in collaboration with the Tamil Heritage Centre, Auroville.

Sanskrit classes

Samskrita Bharati, an organisation devoted to the revival of Sanskrit as a language of daily life, gave its fourth camp in spoken Sanskrit.

Launching the new intranet

The new generation Auroville intranet, the internal electronic medium for Aurovilians, has been launched. It is specially designed to assist online collaboration and teamwork within the various groups of Auroville. Developed by 7 people over a period of 8 months, it is organised in 3 levels: community (with a section on decision making and petitions for collective mobilisation, chat rooms, and searchable databases of Auroville's libraries); groups (any set of people can form a group); and people.

Jazz

The Academic Genius Brothers (Johnny, Wazo, Paul and Auroson) hosted an exciting jazz evening featuring Matt (saxophone), Julien (bass), Suresh (drums), Holger (violin), Maurizio (guitar), Roy (guitar), Stephanie (vocals) and Wazo (bass) at the Visitors' Centre.

Dance

The Auroville Dance Lab organised a dance performance at Bharat Nivas featuring Dil Sagar, Daivika, Grace, Poojarini and Roopa.

'Aurovilians'

An exhibition of portraits of Aurovilians painted by Sarah Bowyer was held at Pitanga.



Dolma with her son

Auroville eggs

A note from the Auroville Farm group justifying the prices of Auroville eggs explained that "in Auroville, the eggs come after the chickens have been well taken care of. Consequently they have nice yellow yolks instead of grey ones tasting like cement that are laid by chemically fed and antibiotically dosed chickens from battery farms."

Passing

Rosa Lahori Geb Stehle, of Arati, left her body at the age of 48 on October 1st after a protracted battle with cancer. Her body was cremated at Adventure.

Correction

In the October issue of Auroville Today, the design of the Centre for Human Unity was attributed to Helmut. The building is called 'Unity Pavilion' and is designed by Piero.

Auroville Horse Tournament

From September 27th-29th, the Auroville Horse Tournament 2003 took place at the Red Earth Riding School, which is situated in the village of Edayanchavadi. Riders from Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad and from the Indian army came to compete against each other.

I was one of the competitors. I had one disadvantage – I had no choice but to come riding all the way from Kottakarai, compete, and then ride all the way back to Pony Farm, where my horse is stabled. All that, while respecting my horse, who has to eat at specific hours of the day.

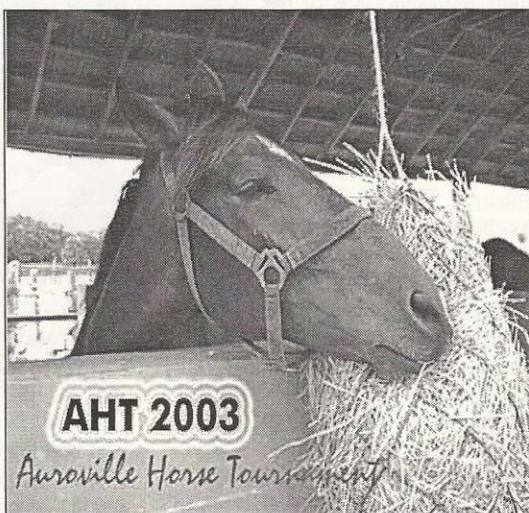
The first event in which I took place was the Equitation. It was an amusing test and a good way to get into the competition atmosphere. It consisted of small jumps, a labyrinth, and a test on whether you can stay immobile for five seconds on a wooden plank. Then came the hardest part, a narrow path between big blue barrels. Bottles cut in half with tennis balls resting upon them, were placed on those barrels. At first my horse refused to go through these strange looking things but impatiently I drove him through without knocking the tennis balls off the bottles. I was amazed when people told me this because Shadow (my horse) has a tendency of swishing his tail around once in a while, in order to get the flies off his body.

The second event in which I was to participate was a complicated dressage test called Preliminary II (the name alone already sounds complicated). Unfortunately, while I was on the way it started raining. When I arrived in Brihaspathi I was soaked and so was Shadow. Luckily the test was postponed to 2:30 in the afternoon. The thing that bothered me was that I was supposed to be back in Pony Farm at

3:00 because that's when my horse needs to eat. Luck came my way because I got to ride first, as the rule says that anyone without his name on the rider's list has to go in before the others. But I was missing a needed tie and a jacket. I had about 30 minutes to go till I was to ride. The test, which I had learnt four days before and ridden only once, kept on messing up inside my head. When I finally managed to borrow a tie and a jacket it was time for me to go. I realized that day that people are really suspicious and very egoistic. It took me about 30 minutes to find a jacket while almost everybody had one, but would not let me borrow it, finding absolutely ridiculous excuses.

My horse looked tired and he was sweaty, which made his coat look grey and dirty. His hooves were full of mud and so was the fur under his knees. The soles of my shoes were coming off, and worse was that the rest of the riders looked so "pucca" in their elegant postures, on their freshly groomed horses. I was getting nervous, I couldn't recall the test and the thick jacket, which was suffocating, kept me from moving freely.

When finally the judge rang the starting bell I trotted down the centre line and started working on my test. Halfway through I heard the bell again, meaning that he had spotted a mistake. I felt Shadow as a big ball of energy that was resisting my commands. I couldn't blame him, he was nervous,



steaming, and fed up. When finally I was done, I saluted the judge, smiled at the familiar faces that had been watching me with anticipation, and walked out. I had no competitive spirit left. I only wanted to go home and be alone with Shadow, away from the whole competitive atmosphere, where I could ride without an annoying helmet, without a hot jacket and tie, and, most of all, where I could ride in harmony with Shadow.

I came back later for the prize giving, without my horse. I was disappointed to find out that the prizewinners were the big bullies who spurred their horses and put double reins on their bridles. I couldn't admit to myself that horse riding was still an Art. What is left when one rides in such a way? Where is the beauty when one gets one's horse to move by force? Competition brings forth one's aggression... For nobody competes without expectations... And that's where the problem lies.

Inge (student of Future School)

FASHION

Dedicated followers of fashion

On October 13th, the Alliance Française catwalk was bombarded with a fresh set of models. They were none other than eight students from Future School!

Sporting Hidesign's Spring-Summer collection 2004, Poongudi, Filip, Jochem, Suryamayi, Hilde, Peter, Shanti and Jivatma strutted their stuff accompanied by whistling and yells of encouragement from the crowd of spectators, alongside professional Indian models.

The atmosphere within the building was tense and excited. The show didn't begin until an hour after schedule, which left people with plenty of time to bustle to and fro transporting snacks (samosas, hummus on baguette, and curious little fried pastry balls) and wine.

Then suddenly, going on 8.30 pm, whilst many people were still milling around the snack room, the stage was illuminated and the music began. Flashes of paparazzi-induced light constantly spun around the building, near blinding both the models and any overly-eager audience member who sat down too close to the stage. Experienced cat walkers and fresh Auroville attitude in spanking new leather gear alternated appearances.



Jivatma strutting her stuff

The grand finale featured all the models together proudly walking to the front of the catwalk in an S-shape, and exiting off the side. Dilip and Jacqueline were called to the stage to take a bow. In less than forty minutes it was all over.

Here is what one of our models (Suryamayi) had to say about her one-day insight into the world of fashion: "At 11 o'clock we all met in the Alliance. Walk (on heels) – up, down, up, down, pose, hold the pose, back straight... This bag, that jacket – no, change the bag, change the routine, start again... My legs were aching already in the morning from the previous night's non-stop dancing at Dilip's... By the end of the day imagine the state I was in... But I loved it, loved every minute! Prasad (trainer of the three past Miss India's, including Aishwarya who became Miss World. Yikes!) was sweet, sophisticated, professional, and considerate. A pleasure to work with. As were the rest of the crew, and the models – some of whom didn't spare joke or advice... And as we walked on stage... blinding lights and the very strongly appreciated cheers, Chali's and Afsaneh's heard above all!!!"

Impi and Mukta (students of Future School)

Aurelec goes arty

There's a new gallery in Auroville. The rather unlikely setting is Aurelec Cafeteria which for years had been a no-nonsense canteen for I.T. techies. Franz is the moving force behind this facelift. 'I'm an artist, and the problem with being an artist in Auroville is that there's very little chance to display your work. Pitanga cultural centre, for example, is already booked up for the whole of 2004. So I wanted to create another space, but one where all kinds of people come, not just the cultural elite. Why? For me it's an educational process. In this part of India there are very few galleries, so people have no experience of art: their only programming comes through television. But if you're eating here every day and you're surrounded by art, even art you don't like or understand, it is doing something to you. You're absorbing a different way of looking, of perceiving the world.'

The first exhibition featured the work of Yvonne Artaud – strong expressionist paintings dating from the early 1950s – which was followed by an exhibition of modern Japanese woodcuts. Jérôme Mesnager, a well-known Parisian wall artist whose trademark white man appears in unlikely places all over Auroville, then exhibited his playful tribute to Ganesh. It portrayed this popular Indian god in all kinds of unfamiliar situations – including playing badminton with an identical twin! – evoking some strong responses. "I love to see Ganesh involved in everyday activities," commented one person, "it's so simple yet profound." But a number of other viewers deplored the "bad taste" of representing the god in this way.

Recently Asma Menon, a Chennai-based artist, held a show simultaneously in Aurelec Cafeteria and at Pitanga. For many years Asma worked only in black and white, but a few years ago she rediscovered her confidence in colour. Her new work is large, dense and employs many different techniques. Her central figure is always a woman, surrounded by archetypal images – moons, stars, mermaids, chess pieces, dragons. Each canvas is a kind of story in itself, generated by Asma's unconscious self and by her research into myths and fables. The

exuberant energy of her work cannot be doubted, but some people questioned whether there was that much depth or coherence to her work.

The latest exhibition is by another Parisian, Dominique de Varine. This is an installation which he terms 'Around the Garlands' Net'. As he puts it, "My garlands attempt to express precariousness, they put on hold life's small events... Here are my garlands, made up of small things of no intrinsic value – yet the bit of rope, the scrap of paper, the pictures, the golden threads are part of a movement which aims at imposing



Asma Menon showing her work

them on reality in an absolute way. I wanted to put in relation places that I love and to celebrate Auroville, which is a laboratory for the world." The installation was made up of small cards strung on a web of string across the room. On the walls were small photos of places he loved – Brittany, Valparaiso – and images from his other profession: he is a design consultant for sporting products. Did it work? The most common response was incomprehension. But at least nobody asked Franz to take it down.

The next exhibition will feature Maggi Liddchi's paintings, followed by reproductions of classic Japanese woodcarvings. Franz would also like to diversify into poetry readings and quality video showings. Aurelec Cafeteria as a centre for the arts? With Franz's energy behind it, I wouldn't bet against it.

Alan

THE TEAM



The Auroville Today team, October 2003. From left to right: Roger H., Carel, Sunaura, Emmanuelle, Alan, Charudutta and Priya Sundaravalli.

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Editorial team: Alan, Carel, Charudutta, Emmanuelle, Priya Sundaravalli, Roger, Sunaura. Guest contributors: Svante, Inge, Impi and Mukta.

Proofreading: Navoditte. All photos, unless otherwise attributed, have been taken by the editors. DTP and Photo editing: Matthia. Printed and published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation, and printed at All India Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.