

Auroville Today

MARCH 2004, No.182

MAIN ISSUE: Matrimandir progress

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The Banyan tree near the Matrimandir

In memory of Sydo

An Aurovilian was murdered in his house on January 31st, 2004

Sytze Douwe van Loo, known in Auroville as Sydo, joined Auroville in August, 1996 at the age of 33. He was one of those regular 'greenbelt guys', easy-going, tundu round his head, always on his bike. He worked hard on the environment and with his jokes, clowning and good-natured, somewhat anarchic take on life, he was much loved, particularly by the children.

On the morning of Sunday, February 1st, Sydo was found dead in a pool of blood in his house. The disbelief and grief in the community was overwhelming as people tried to come to terms with this indescribable loss and the realization that one of us had been killed, for reasons as yet unknown.

Matrimandir, the schools, most workshops and all non-essential services closed for a three day period of mourning. There was a collective meditation under the Banyan, large community meetings as well as dialogues with village elders. There was

also a very moving 'open mike' evening at the Visitors Centre during which friends celebrated the Sydo they had known.

Sydo's body was cremated in Adventure and a friend took the ashes to Sydo's family in Holland. The family sent a wonderful letter in which they expressed their gratitude that Sydo was in the loving care of the community and praying that the memory of Sydo as a 'loving, creative and funny marvel' would live on.

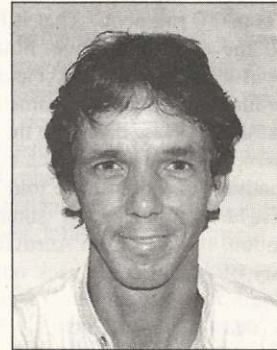
On Sunday 7th, in the light of Sydo's death and a deteriorating law and order situation in the surrounding area, over a thousand Aurovilians and villagers made a quiet Unity Walk through the villages of Kottakarai, Edayanchavadi and Kuilapalayam, ending up at Sydo's

house in Udumbu where masses of flowers and tributes were laid.

Subsequently there have been meetings with senior police officers and the Dutch Ambassador has visited the community.

Now begins the work of understanding, introspection, even while urgent measures are being taken on the external plane to improve security – a Security Task Force has been set up – and ensure that the guilty are brought to justice. If, as many feel, Sydo's death is a wake-up call, a catalyst which is forcing us to look more closely

at the way we are living in relationship to the ideals and to radically change our relationship with each other and the villagers, it may not have been in vain.



PHOTOS PAGES 1 AND 2 COURTESY FRIENDS OF SYDO

Dear Sydo,

It has become clear since you left us last week the extent of the contribution you made to the lives of so many people here. I think that maybe you didn't realise how many people you touched, how many people loved you and admired your laughter, energy and spirit.

Your relationships with children, whether socially with friends or while working at the Kindergarten and at sports, was something extraordinary and very special. I remember your patience, your love to them, and the endless childish fun that you had with so many of them. You were so glad to have taken the step to engage in the work at the Kindergarten and sports, and I am very happy that you took that on and that your last months with us contained the lightness and joy of interacting with children. That added a much-needed contrast to all the pain and anxiety and fear that was also present in these last months. Your contribution to children was also very thoughtful – I remember in Berijam last year when you researched activities for children in nature, aiming to combine that joy and fun with developing the connection to nature that you felt so strongly. And I believe that you succeeded.

Your connection to nature was strong. I think of you in your little house in the open field, gazing at the horizon, watching the sunsets, the trees you planted growing around you, playing the flute under a vast

starry sky. We shared this recharging power that nature can give – I remember talking about it, and experiencing it, with you in Berijam and also other places. And it was reflected in your commitment to the Forest Group and Green Group. Despite frustration at the often apparently dysfunctional group processes of Auroville, you maintained the effort to be part of the Auroville Planning and Development Council and to engage with all the little conflicts and issues that arose in the Green Group. I know that you wanted to quit last year after the attacks on you, but your commitment to, and faith in, Auroville and Her dream made you continue. One thing that we both expressed strongly, and that you managed to stand for far more effectively than me, was the need to totally abandon the 'us and them' attitude that exists in so many aspects of Auroville. I admired your perseverance in this, and I personally promise you that I will continue with it and manifest as much as I can this particular part of the dream that you had for Auroville.

Maybe the strongest thing that many people remember about you now is your sense of humour, your laughter, which you brought to almost everything you did. Especially of course on stage, when with Jeff or in one of Johnny's plays you could play that clown that you liked to play so much. And you made

so many people laugh so much when you did that! I mean, let's face it, you were pretty silly at times. And what was great was that you weren't afraid to make a fool of yourself while you did it. You brought humour to almost everything, lightening the atmosphere often through pretty tasteless jokes. In fact the other day when we were collecting the ashes of your body at Adventure I felt you there very strongly, enabling us to laugh



and make those tasteless jokes at what would otherwise have been a very macabre scene. You were definitely there then.

Drama was not the only expression of your creativity, although it was the one that allowed most for the clown to be played. You were also a gifted artist and musician. I remember that you had been frustrated at not doing the art which you loved to do, and again I am happy that you did in recent months put more energy into that. Your paintings were beautiful and evocative, and you managed to capture a spirit of the people you painted that was certainly thought-provoking. And then, again contrasting a serious part of you with lightness and fun, there were the doodles and sketched portraits that entertained you in meetings.

Music also gave you a lot, recharged the batteries. You played the flute beautifully, both alone and with others, both seriously with self-expression and also lightly, improvising with other instruments. Again, music was not only a serious thing for you – you almost always carried around things to bang and rattle and shake – a huge seed pod, a plastic egg, two sticks. A rattle, a shake, and a song and dance.

Your spiritual aspiration was the foundation for your entire life, and also contributed to the very serious aspect of you that not many people saw. I see you as someone who was painfully frustrated by the limitations of the human condition, and constantly striving to be in contact with the higher force, to surrender to Her will. You believed so passionately in Auroville and in Her

dream. Thank you for that.

As I said already, you have touched so many people in your time here, Sydo. That circle of people you touched is wider I think than anyone else's I know. And yet at the same time so few people really knew you. You found it so difficult to let people in, into the vulnerable and serious and troubled places that were deeper inside you. You were always always giving – giving to your friends, to the kids, to the groups you were part of: to Auroville. But it was very difficult to get you to receive anything, to take from the people who loved you as much as you could give to them. This makes me sad; but then I wonder about it, and wonder if the deepest part of you knew your destiny in this lifetime, knew that you had to leave early, played a part in preventing you from engaging too closely with many people here. It made you more free to leave, and maybe reduce the heartache for those who are left behind. Maybe. I don't know.

Sydo, you have now given this community which you loved and believed in so much, more than anyone ever has. What has happened in this last grief-stricken week since you left has been truly amazing. The community has been more together than ever before, and this is thanks to you. On Saturday evening when we, your Auroville family who love you, celebrated your presence among us, we were more of a family than we have been before. We are there for each other, supporting and loving.

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An approach of love



Tribute to Sydo

Sydo, our beloved brother and friend.
 We came for a dream,
 A dream for a more conscious world,
 Living in harmony with each other,
 And healing the earth.
 You planted the trees,
 Took care of them
 And created a beautiful diverse flora around you.
 You played with the children,
 Pruned the trees in the Matrimandir gardens,
 And removed the parasites from them.
 You had the courage to stay after the attack,
 You struggled hard with the trauma.
 Friday you expressed you didn't feel safe anymore,
 You wanted to move out.
 How the soul knows...
 Now it's too late,
 Our dream scattered and broken.
 Now we have to struggle with the trauma.
 Dear Sydo, your task is done.
 May our love be strong enough to guide you on your way to the Divine Mother.
 May she take you in her arms and heal you.

Kireet (Gerard Jak)

"Sydo, have you recovered completely from the attack?" I asked him about a fortnight ago when I saw him in perfectly good shape at the ACUR (Town Hall). I was naturally expecting an affirmative response, but to my surprise he moved his head in negation. That spoke of the severity of the first attack about 3 months back. But it also told that something within him was feeling that the dark shadow of that first attack was on him,

was still lingering in his environment. That it had not left him. I gave him Mother's blessing packet and an incense packet that I sometime send to those donors to the Land Fund who ask for such things. I wish I would have told him at that time to go somewhere far away from Auroville or India, and come back only when he felt completely "recovered".

But now, recalling the sight of Sydo after that first attack, I see that some deeper part of him was awake. He

looked at the life and world with an innocent gleam that wanted to know ... know life, the world, the meaning of it all... As Satprem writes in *On the Way to Supermanhood*, that quest is like a pure flame and that is the only thing that matters, it builds up its secret reservoir in the being until the entire inner and outer geography of man is consumed by it. A life ends but that flame burns!

Aryadeep

The strangest person I know



Reflective moment in Berijam

I meet him or her (don't ask for exact details) every morning. Though you would say that this means this person is no stranger to me, still I find (let's say) him the strangest person I know. So, he is talking about himself most of the time which makes him extremely self-conscious and that makes him guard over his daily life as if he had to shield it from something. This something he doesn't want to know, doesn't want to see. That seems to be his waking state, to shield it from the light of awakening, from the probable shock of it. He goes about his life by means of habits, customs, taking the beaten tracks and hobbling along with all the others who are actually just as strange as he is.

So I could have talked about any one of the many 'strange' persons we all know, but they are just people who are different somehow; nothing strange about them. No, it's that strange person we wake up to that amazes me again and again for his strangeness to a world he has already been in so long, from his own point of view that is. I hope one day he will become so strange to me that I don't know him anymore; as if he had never been there.

Sydo (writing for 'AXIS' magazine)

Dear Sydo,

continued from page 1

Yesterday's Unity Walk was probably the largest gathering in Auroville since the inauguration — an incredibly moving display of togetherness and aspiration by Aurovilians and villagers. And this you gave to us.

Sydo, as I try to piece my life together again I know that I will never be the same. I will ensure that you stay alive in my heart. We all here have a responsibility now to acknowledge what you have given us, and to make changes in our lives accordingly. And I for one promise you that it will happen, and that your precious gift to us and to the Dream will stay alive.

I love you.

Gemma



Sydo with his parents

Message from the family

Dear people of Auroville,

Sydo was brutally taken away from us. We are unable to understand why this had to happen to him, why this is happening to us.

We are so grateful to know that at this moment, when we can't be there, he is in your loving care. Please give him all the warmth and respect that we now can only give from a distance.

We know that some of you are filled with anger and fury, with feelings of revenge. We can understand that, but we beg you all to stay away from violence, the violence that killed our son and brother.

Let there be no eye for an eye!

More violence will only make the suffering that we are going through bigger.

Sydo was a man of peace, of love.

When he was attacked in August he was only able to stop the attackers by softness. We cry out to all the love in the world to give us all the strength to stay calm and wise.

We pray that the memory of Sydo will live on, not only as the beautiful person who was brutally murdered, but most of all as the loving, creative and funny marvel he was.

Let's hope that in time the world can once again become as good as when he was still amongst us. We have to let him go

Because we love him so.

Dear Sydo,

We are getting used to not seeing you every day any more, but the idea never to see you again is extremely heavy for us. We are infinitely grateful that we had spoken with you the weekend before your death.

And, even if it is terribly difficult, we will have to

let you go.

We give your breath here to the sky in India and your bodily remains later to the earth in The Netherlands. But you will never disappear from our hearts.

Depart in peace. Our love for you no one will ever take from us.

His father, mother, Bert, Marcia, Luc, Petra and Zsofi

Letter from Sydo's brother

On Wednesday, together with you in Auroville, here in Balk we said goodbye to Sydo. We have been silent, we wept, but also listened to classical music. We read the texts we had sent to Auroville and poems we had selected for each other. We also listened to music by Al Jarreau, music that Sydo, Luc and I shared in our youth. Luc will sing a bit of that on Tuesday, when we put Sydo's ashes in the ground. "Could you believe in a dream..."

It has been raining here for days, as many times as my sweet mother has crying fits. My tears come in waves, but I can say nevertheless that since Wednesday (the day of Sydo's cremation in Auroville) we do feel lighter and freer. For others, who have come for a visit, this is sometimes difficult to understand. They come in very sad, but when they leave it is as if they go away with our lightness. They often tell us, when leaving, that they are very grateful for this.

We are very happy with the messages of sympathy from Auroville. Also through Suzie my parents received a lot of mail. The messages, photos, anecdotes and good thoughts reinforce in me and my parents the feeling that Sydo lived and died in the right place.

A spiral of violence

A dastardly and cowardly act. The verdict on Sydo's brutal murder has been unanimous, both in Auroville as well as in the surrounding villages. But it has been very difficult to get information on the background of the spiralling violence that has manifested during the last years. People are scared to speak and feel that the situation has gone beyond their control. "If I speak out, I may be the next to be molested or worse... Look at the recent murder in Edaiyanchavadi. It happened in broad daylight, at 7 o'clock in the morning." The following report attempts to give an insight and raises some questions. But given the lack of willingness to speak, it is probably far from complete.

Violence is not new to Auroville. In the early days, during the fights with the Sri Aurobindo Society, Aurovilians were attacked by *goondas* who had been hired to scare them and discourage them from remaining in Auroville. After the government take-over, this type of violence ceased. But other types of criminal activities gradually surfaced: assaults on women, thefts, and robberies on motorcyclists. In those times four notorious thieves prowled the area. One disappeared after having been caught a few times; another was killed in the Auroville green-belt; the third died in a village row a few years ago; and the fourth passed away last year.

However, the situation was different in the village of Bommaiarpalayam. From the end of the 1980s onwards, tensions had been played out between supporters of the Mailam temple - which owns more than half of the lands in that village and in



Over 1000 people from Auroville and the surrounding villages walked together for peace and unity

hanging out with friends. This attitude also reflected a change in power structures. Many village elders were no longer respected, and the natural leadership gradually disappeared. A new political leadership was making its presence felt.

Last but not least, there was the influence of Tamil films and television. Of all Indian states, Tamil Nadu has the largest number of cinema theatres and television stations and it has a vast film industry. Most movies are full of violence. In consequence, violence has, unconsciously, become accepted as part of life.

For a few years following the 1996 murder there was an uneasy calm in the village of Kuilapalayam. But two rival groups, composed of young men, had come into existence. In April 2001, at a function in the Auroville community of New Creation, tempers exploded. Members from one group disrupted the children's performance, while members of the other group came to the rescue. It led to bloodshed and a few broken limbs. However, it did not stop at that. A few days later, a member of the group that came to the defence of the children was murdered. The police arrested the suspects. However, they were soon out on bail, and a retaliation murder followed. Once again the police rounded up all suspects as well as some innocents individuals, including some family members who were Aurovilians, and placed them in jail. Afterwards, peace between the two groups was brokered which held for some time.

But the peace notwithstanding, thefts increased. In a short period, more than 25 cases of motorbike and other thefts were registered with the police. Also, an attempt to kidnap some people unrelated to Auroville was made, which led to a few more arrests. The gangs, whose members were mostly in prison for a short while, being freed on bail, gained influence. Apart from thefts, they resorted to extortion and blackmail. Rumours have it that gang members were even hired by individuals from Pondicherry to do their 'dirty' work and that, for fear of retribution or for other reasons, many people in the village tacitly supported one or the other of these gangs.

Also the number of violent scuffles involving Aurovilians increased. In a number of incidents, Aurovilians were beaten up, and a few rapes were committed. While some of these incidents were attributed to one or other of the gangs, mostly they were independent occurrences, demonstrating the general deteriorating situation.

In August 2003, an armed robbery with possible intent of murder took place on an American Aurovillian, Steve, in Udumbu. Steve heard some noise in his house in the evening, went to see, and was immediately assaulted by a group of six or seven men armed with knives and *katthies* (billhooks). They slashed his body severely while he called for help and defended himself with a steel bar. His neighbour Sydo came to the rescue but also got badly wounded by the criminals, who finally fled. Both Steve and Sydo had to be hospitalized for an extensive period to recover from bodily and mental injury. During their convalescence in hospital, the police arrested a number of suspects and brought them

before Steve and Sydo. A few of them were recognized by Sydo, who, in doing so, became the main witness in the case. It appeared that these suspects were members of one of the gangs. Some of them were soon released on bail once again. The Auroville police liaison issued a warning that the released might try to eliminate the witness against them, but no action was taken.

In October 2003, the gang war flared up once again, and another murder took place, this time in another village close by Auroville. The victim was a homeopath who had connections with one of the gangs. It did not take long before the retaliation murder occurred. On January 19th, 2004, one of the senior members of the other gang, who had just been released on bail a few days earlier, was killed in broad daylight in Edaiyanchavadi.

The series of gruesome murders came to a head when, in the evening of January 31st, Sydo was murdered in his house in Udumbu. The 'why' of this murder has not been resolved but theories abound. One theory is that Sydo was the target of one of the gangs because he successfully intervened a few days earlier when a Western woman was being harassed by the members of the gang. Another theory is that the murder took place because Sydo and Steve had gotten into an argument with some villagers over the ownership of some trees that were being cut by the villagers in or near Udumbu. Another theory is that he was killed to be silenced as the witness in the previous assault. And perhaps the reason is a combination of more than one theory. In one of his last messages, dated 19th January 2004, Sydo had written:

"Dear All,

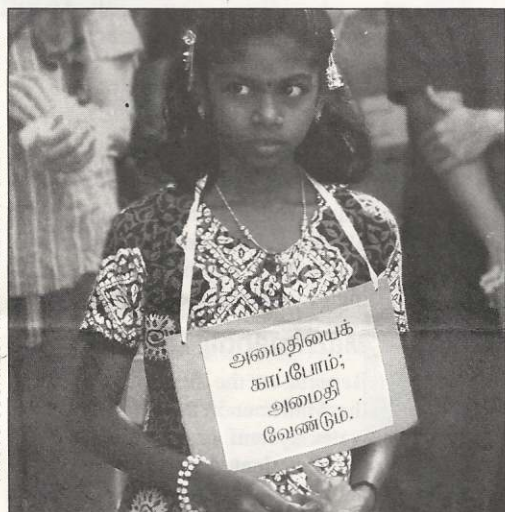
I would like to add that there is a serious threat that Steve, I and others are potential targets for these criminals since we are witnesses in a case against them. Tampering with witnesses can therefore not be ruled out and serious brainstorming and subsequent actions must be considered. The past and present show that these gangs don't stop at anything. Sydo"

As can be expected, Sydo's murder has raised a lot of speculation and endless discussion. Auroville failed to recognize the cries for help and assistance which the police liaison had given so many times. Questions like these can no longer be ignored and need to be answered. Auroville may have little direct possibility of controlling the gang wars. But it can no longer, in the name of respecting individual freedom, refuse to see or tolerate actions of individuals that endanger the safety of villagers and fellow Aurovilians alike.



People walked from Matrimandir to Kottakarai to Edaiyanchavadi to Kuilapalayam to Udumbu and finally back to the Matrimandir

PHOTO COURTESY AUROVILLE'S FUTURE PHOTO ARCHIVES



A participant in the peace walk carries a placard "Peace we will protect; peace we want."

the neighbouring villages of Kuilapalayam and Pillaichavadi - and those who oppose it. Skirmishes flared up with distressing regularity, resulting in quite a lot of physical violence and subsequent court cases. The situation took a turn for the worse in 1996 when, after 10 years, the first panchayat (village government) elections in Tamil Nadu were held. Both Bommaiarpalayam and Kuilapalayam are administered by the same panchayat. In the celebrations that followed the election, the son of one of the village elders, someone who was universally respected and had met The Mother and promised her that Kuilapalayam would collaborate with Auroville, was murdered. He had been affiliated to the losing party. As some Tamil Aurovilians, who had family in these villages, had been active in the elections and had given their support to the winning party, the elders complained to Auroville. Upset by the murder, the Auroville Working Committee issued a stern warning that Aurovilians were not to engage in politics. But everybody was aware that one could not expect Tamil Aurovilians not to show an active interest in the happenings in the village where they were born. For in the Tamil culture, family connections are extremely strong.

This murder was a sign of a vanishing social structure and a changing power situation. Auroville, unwittingly, had contributed to the change of the social environment. There were the more affluent lifestyles displayed by the Aurovilians. There was the influx of people from other areas who were employed by Auroville. There were the Auroville construction projects which needed a large number of workers. Many youngsters had found jobs in Auroville and, for the first time in their lives, earned a decent income. But, contrary to Tamil traditions, the income was often only partly shared with the family. In many cases, large parts of it were spent on the fulfilment of the youngster's personal desires such as a vehicle, a walkman, jewellery or simply for

In brief

Matrimandir

The Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation has been widely criticised for taking important decisions concerning the Matrimandir in an informal Board meeting held on February 17th, 2004 at New Delhi without any dialogue with community representatives, thus affecting Auroville's autonomy. The Board decided to cancel the order of the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation of October 13th, 2003 whereby four new executives for Matrimandir were appointed, and appointed instead a Steering Committee consisting of three Board members. It directed that the four current executives and one former executive "will assist the work" and that all issues regarding proposals or suggestions should be presented to the Steering Committee which should take decisions on the basis of the consensus of all its members. If there is dissatisfaction among any section of the residents of Auroville in regard to any decision of the Steering Committee, the matter will be referred to the Governing Board. The Working Committee and the Auroville Council have expressed their sense of disappointment at the contents of the decisions and the fact that they are being imposed upon the community. Also the relation the Steering Committee and the five "assistants" is unclear. The Board has been requested to put the decisions on hold "as any attempt to implement them will further strengthen the forces of Disharmony and Falsehood, which are trying to have a foothold in Auroville" and have invited the members of the Board to dialogue with them on the issues. The decision of the Board has apparently been made in the belief (also prevalent at the the Human Resource and Development Ministry, the nodal ministry for Auroville) that only a relatively small number of Aurovilians were agreeing to the change of Matrimandir management. In order to now "sufficiently demonstrate" that the movement and decision of October 2003 to replace the then executives and start an entirely new phase was carried by a large number of Aurovilians, the Working Committee has asked all who agree with the stand taken by them to express this by signing a statement.

Board of Trustees

The FAMC reported that attempts to establish an Auroville Board of Trustees consisting of trustees of the commercial trusts of Auroville has not taken off. The main obstacle is the envisaged necessity to remove the hierarchical nature of the envisaged Board which is now viewed as simply one more layer of red tape.

Transition School

Transition School intends to expand its present maximum capacity of 144 students to 200 students by building four more classrooms and a teacher's room. The expansion is necessary as the school is working to nearly full capacity and cannot accommodate the expected increase of students. It has appealed for donations to the amount of Rs 31 lakhs (US\$ 65,000). For more info contact mary@auroville.org.in

Five-year plan

The Auroville Planning and Development Council (APDC) has drafted a Scope of Work for the five year development plan, containing the parameters and broad lines required for the drafting the plan.

PHOTO AUROSON

PHOTO COURTESY AUROVILLE'S FUTURE PHOTO ARCHIVES

Matrimandir progress report

The recently appointed executives of Matrimandir have issued an extensive progress report. Here is an abridged version.

The Matrimandir will be the soul of Auroville.

The sooner it is there, the better it will be for everybody and especially for the Aurovilians.

The Mother, 15.11.70

"The completion of Matrimandir will be coincidental with the establishment of Peace and Harmony in the world."

Nirodbaran quoting The Mother in an interview with 'Auroville Today' in 1991

The need to hasten the completion of Matrimandir has been felt by the Auroville community. Measures have been taken to this effect in October 2003, when a new management was put in place by the Secretary at the request of the Working Committee to bring about a renewed dynamism and a greater collaboration between all parties concerned – especially between the architect and the team of Aurovilians who carry out and supervise the work.

Since then, collaboration has

opening as the ray of sunlight. A successful experiment using a single spotlight was done on New Year's Eve. However, the bulb of this spotlight costs Rs 10,000/- with a life time of only 500 hours, which would require a second spot light as standby. Alternatives are being researched.

The work on top

The air-conditioning ducts are being adjusted so that they will emerge on the roof and then enter the Chamber through the new central inlet. A stain-

less steel box placed between the outer skin and the disks will house these ducts and will be covered with golden tiles.

The old heliostat needs to be replaced by a new one, designed and manufactured many years ago. A computerized tracking system will need to be designed and two more fixed mirrors installed. The new heliostat complex will be partly encased in a stainless steel box

covered with golden tiles, so that it will not be visible from the ground level.

The work in the Chamber and on the roof is scheduled for early 2005. The Chamber will then have to be closed for a period of two to three months.

The entrances

The four access doors to Matrimandir will be made of rectangular steel pipes, which will be covered with glass and golden tiles in a pattern in harmony with the 'shields'. The structural design and decoration of these doors are being finalised. These doors will automatically open by sliding underneath the Matrimandir when a visitor approaches.

The first level

A new ventilation system is being installed within the cylinder of the central staircase to refresh the air within the Matrimandir at night. The system will also allow for a positive pressure inside, so that less dust enters when an entrance door opens.

Plans are afoot to modify the existing air-conditioning plant from the present 'split' type to a simpler system that will have lower operating costs.

The blocks that will frame the entrances to the staircase have been made in ferrocement and will be covered with marble slabs.

The wood and brass railings of the two staircases are being installed. The inside of the railings will be covered with small marble tiles.

The second level

The landing of one of the spiral ramps is nearing completion. A sculpture will be placed near each landing. These sculptures are still to be ordered.

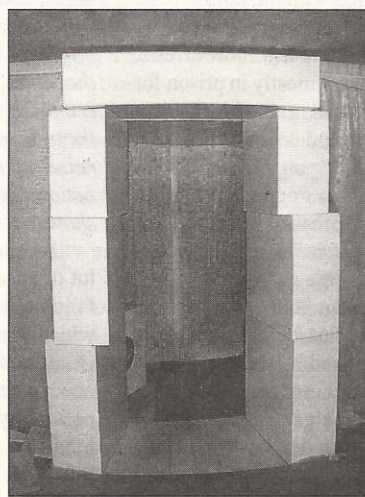
The glass parapets on the ramps are yet to be installed. Unfortunately, this glass, which was specially imported from Germany, is held up in a glass-bending factory at Kolkotta because of a lockout. Attempts are being made to retrieve this glass and send it to another factory of the same company.

At the bottom of the East and West ribs, marble slabs with the Auroville symbol and a mantra will be installed, which are yet to be ordered.

Each of the four ribs will have a narrow stream of water flowing through it and ending in a pool located in the bottom of the rib. One of the ribs is almost complete, with gold-tile joints. Work on the other three ribs is progressing.

The inner skin

The design of the inner skin is almost finalised. It consists of aluminum triangles. A non-flammable fibre-glass fabric will be stretched inside each triangle. During the daytime, the sun will light up the inner skin through the salmon-orange coloured portholes behind the disks. In the evenings, Light Emitting Diodes (LEDs) of 3 different colours will be used to obtain the required colour. Tests have been carried out successfully. A simple computerized control system is being designed to allow the light in each triangle to be adjusted in intensity and colour.



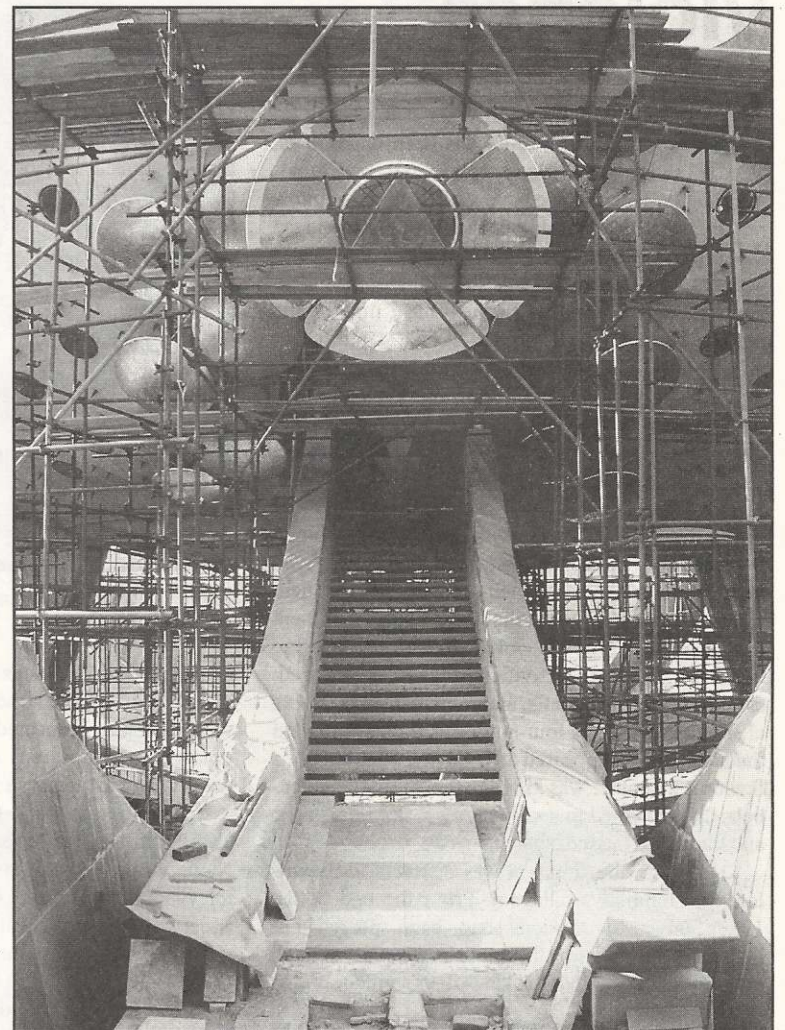
Model of the blocks that will frame the entrances to the staircase from the first to the second level.

The outside

The "Kemperl" waterproofing which was applied some years back has been peeled off in some places from the ferrocement skin due to the use of the wrong primer. The work has been guaranteed by Kemperl and will be redone.

The gilding team completed the last disk in November 2003. Work is ongoing to install the structure of the 4 golden shields around the entrance doors. The design of these shields is yet to be finalised.

Above each entrance there will be a four-petalled flower, each with a different geometrical figure at its centre. These figures will correspond to the four Aspects of the Mother as



Above each entrance there will be a four-petalled flower, each with a different geometrical figure at its centre

mentioned by Huta in her book "The Spirit of Auroville".

Work underneath

Beneath the Matrimandir one more symbol of The Mother will be placed to camouflage the staircase and ventilation system. Its design will be finalised when the tests of the ventilation system are conclusive.

The area below

The RCC structure of the "lotus pond" underneath Matrimandir was cast according to the architect's latest design. Outside contractors have been asked to submit quotations for the marble work.

The petal chambers

Though work is progressing rapidly, outside contractors may be invited to submit quotations for the meditation chambers in the petals, the service rooms and the connecting corridors. A first meditation room is being completed.

The gardens

The architect has invited proposals from all parties (Aurovilians and others) for the design of any of the 12 gardens, or all of them.

A presentation of the main flow-ers of the 12 Gardens will take place during the Mother's 126th birthday on February 21st, 2004.

The amphitheatre

Completion work on the amphitheatre has started. Stone workers are dressing the granite slabs, which will be placed around the rim of the amphitheatre. Fourteen pairs of lighting benches in granite are also about to be made. Other lighting arrangements are being studied.

Garden of love

The 'Garden of Love' (rose garden) is being maintained. The architect, however, wishes to change this garden quite drastically but his plans are not yet known. Changes will only be made in agreement with parties concerned after a community process.

Matrimandir Nursery

After 30 years, the time has at last arrived where the Matrimandir Nursery can start supplying all the plants required for the gardens. In the nursery, maintenance and pruning of valuable trees are proceeding.

Matrimandir Lake

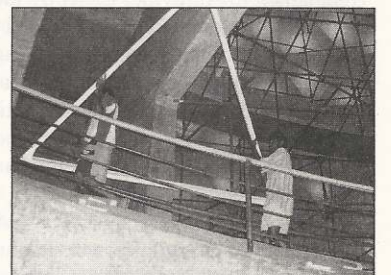
Reports on the feasibility of using the Matrimandir lake for the entire water system of the township are being evaluated by a Dutch specialist. The conclusions are expected soon. Major works will only start after a community process.

Outer gardens

No development will take place and no trees will be cut (or allowed to die) as long as the exact size of the lake is not known. Prior to any changes, plans will be made public and a community process will take place. Here too, valuable trees are being pruned.

Access and usage

An 'Access Group' has been set-up for taking care of visitors and formulating a new access policy that would admit visitors while simultaneously preventing Matrimandir from becoming a mere tourist destination.



An aluminum triangle is carried up the ramp

Finances and Fund-raising

Matrimandir's expenditure amounts to Rs 14 - 18 lakhs/month and will increase as the work picks up. Income from donations is Rs 8 - 12 lakhs/month. Fund-raising efforts have intensified.

February 15, 2004



Model of the marble slabs with the Auroville symbol and a mantra that will be installed at the bottom of the East and West ribs

improved dramatically; activity has noticeably increased and productivity has improved. Some 50 workers, mainly skilled, have been added and the number of workers having to leave construction work each afternoon for visitors' duty has been substantially reduced.

The priority is to complete the inside of Matrimandir so that it becomes usable at the earliest, hopefully in 2-3 years. As work is also going on in other areas, we expect to be able to complete at the same time Matrimandir's outer face and also its immediate surroundings, the twelve small and large petals and their meditation chambers.

Detailed studies of infrastructure and gardens have now started. Studies are also underway to find out how to create the lake. At this stage, it is not possible to foresee when exactly the gardens and the lake will be completed.

Though Matrimandir has now four active 'executives', all practical and financial decisions relating to the construction work are taken collectively. The architect attends meetings with his aides, when he is in town.

The following overview presents in a nutshell the work that is being done.

The Chamber

The four existing air-conditioning outlets in the ceiling will be closed and replaced by one ring-shaped outlet around the central opening through which the sun ray passes. The exact shape and diameter of this ring-shaped outlet is being studied by a German expert in aerodynamics so that this ring is as small as possible and no noise is heard.

The four spotlights will be replaced by one spot-light whose rays will pass through the same central

Healing the Banyan

"I have faith that everything will be done according to the Divine's Will," says Narad

Narad (Richard Eggenberger) was asked by Mother in 1969 to design and build the Matrimandir Gardens. In the early 1970s he set up the Matrimandir Nursery for collecting, studying and propagating many rare and beautiful plants from all over the world. Twelve years later he returned to the U.S. where he continued to extend his deep knowledge of plants and trees and to collect specimens for the Ashram and Auroville.

He has revisited regularly. On his most recent visit he spoke about his concerns for the Banyan Tree by Matrimandir and about his continuing involvement in finding new varieties of plants for the Gardens.

AVToday: Do you feel you have a special relationship with the Banyan Tree by Matrimandir?

If you were to ask me, 'What are the two most sacred trees in the world today?' I would answer without hesitation, 'The Service Tree over the Samadhi of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and the Banyan Tree at the centre of Auroville'. Mother gave me the work of caring for the Service Tree for the rest of my life. It is an inestimable blessing carrying with it a great responsibility, and it is in this light and with the same sense of devotion that I speak of the Banyan Tree.

Recently you expressed concern about the Banyan.

Yes. Firstly there is the matter of size. One must keep in mind the proportion of the Banyan to the Matrimandir and the perspective and balance of the entire area. We measured the tree the other day and its diameter is now fifty metres, an increase of thirty metres in twenty-eight years! The eastern side of the tree is now at the edge of one of the western petals. It is not difficult to calculate what could happen if this rate of growth is allowed to continue.

Then there is the problem of the grass under the Banyan. It is certainly attractive but it has led to serious problems; for example, frequent watering may have contributed to the fungal condition now in the central trunk. Also, the first rule in tree culture is to water deeply but infrequently to encourage the roots to move down into the earth so that they can eventually find their own sources of water. Trees are not at all averse to keeping their roots at ground level or slightly below to take advantage of free water at the surface. This is why they often go into shock when someone who has been watering the grass goes on vacation or forgets to water or an irrigation system breaks down.

The Banyan is a strong tree and can survive long periods of drought. But when it has been force-fed for years things become a lot more precarious. I would not recommend removing the grass immediately, except perhaps for the inner area around the main trunk, but suggest that the interval between watering is gradually extended until the minimum amount of water needed to keep the grass alive is determined. At this point a decision can be made as to whether to continue with minimal watering and keep the grass or remove it completely. I would recommend removal.

As for the aerial roots, I would not recommend that further roots be encouraged to descend without serious study of the necessity of such roots for the support of essential

branches. One has only to see the size of some of these roots to realize that if many of them are not removed now they will grow into each other, creating an impenetrable wall that will be totally lacking in beauty. I never prune more than is necessary and if extensive pruning is required, as is the case here, I undertake that in stages to stress the tree as little as possible. For the same reason I don't think it wise to shine strong lights on the Banyan, as happened recently, although low-key lighting to illuminate the path beneath seems a sensible idea.

Finally, our Banyan has numerous limbs with extensive rot and decay that have never been attended to in the twenty-three years I have been away. These will have to be cleaned out and some of them removed.

Is your view shared by others?

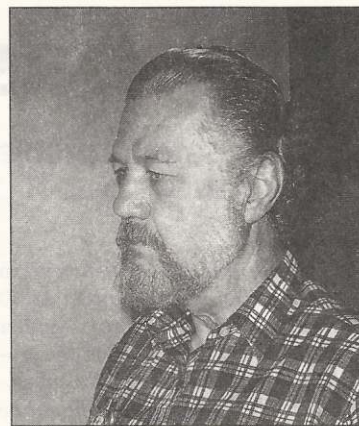
Yes. I met Juan, a professional tree-pruner, and we're in total agreement about the work that has to be done. He and I will work together on pruning the Banyan (we've agreed not to use any power machinery, which is the policy I've always adopted for the Service Tree in the Ashram) and we will also go all over the outer gardens and discuss the pruning of the rare trees there. Roger is also very happy

I would be taught what to do. Nevertheless, Mother asked me to do a design and when it was complete, to present it to Her. I never managed to do this: this is what I mean when I say I failed Her.

Today it's a new chapter. Perhaps we could just start with our hands, with the harmony of our labour and our shared aspiration for the realization of the Gardens, and see where it leads. Actually my faith is that it will eventually be done exactly according to the Divine Will. We may stumble, we may go through trial and error, but in the end it will be That.

Over the past twenty years there's been a shift in emphasis in afforestation in Auroville. Now almost all the trees planted in the greenbelt are indigenous rather than exotic. As you continue to bring plants from all over the world for the Gardens, do you feel in conflict with this movement?

There is no conflict. Our work differs in its focus but that is the only difference. We have the greatest respect for each other and I always visit some greenbelt communities every time I return. I was amazed to see the amount of work accomplished by these rugged pioneers who are realizing and have already realized to a vast



Narad

and power of beauty they must manifest, but in size a small fraction of the Greenbelt around the township. The planting of indigenous species and the return of the natural forest has been the aspiration and aim of those who have worked in the Greenbelt since its inception. I am in full accord with this plan. Some may not be aware that in the early years from 1970 on we grew thousands of trees at the Matrimandir Gardens Nursery for planting throughout the Greenbelt. Many of the species we planted were indigenous to South India, collected on visits to forest and jungles with some of the finest Conservators of Forests in the Indian Government.

However, there are also some excellent tree species that were introduced from other areas of the world that accept the same climatic conditions and add to the beauty and diversity of the forest, and these are being cared for as well. When the Supramental force is fully active on earth and the climate changes, we will see wonderful changes in the plant world. That is, however, something of the future of which we cannot now speak.

And your own involvement? Do you see yourself returning to live in Auroville?

I no longer have any attachments to America or to anything. I aspire only for a complete surrender to Mother: She will tell me where I must go and what I must do. Actually, those with inner sight say they don't see me returning here for a couple of years, but going round the world and bringing back plants for the Matrimandir Gardens. This is something I've been active in for many years. I've visited many Botanical Gardens and nurseries and the remarkable thing is that, whenever I've requested plants or seeds for the Ashram and Auroville, nobody ever refused. On the contrary, people always try to give me more than I can carry!

The morning after Sydo's death we transplanted about 18 new varieties of lotus from seed that was sent to me by Peter Slocum, the owner of the largest water lily and lotus firm in America. Mary Helen and I had met him on our world tour of plant collecting in 1977. I had written to him saying that I wanted to bring seeds of the finest lotus hybrids created during the last twenty-five years for Auroville and the Ashram. He then sent me the seeds of their most beautiful cultivars.

Recently we planted these in one of the Ashram gardens and Kabul of the Ashram has worked out the best method for propagation. In just over two months from seed the lotuses have developed excellent tubers and we were able to take 22 plants to Kireet at Gaia's Garden. As these tubers increase and divide and are shared in gardens throughout Auroville, I would like it to be known that they were planted to honour Sydo that all might remember him in the beauty and fragrance of the flowers.

Based on an interview by Alan and Narad's notes



The Banyan before some aerial roots were trimmed

with my involvement. I met him recently under the Banyan and there was a wonderful feeling of harmony and peace between us.

The last time you visited Auroville you were very concerned about plans for a large lake which would submerge many trees in the outer gardens.

I think that until we solve the problem of the water supply, the decision about the size of the lake is way down the line. I'm willing to work with everybody to help resolve this issue harmoniously and see if we can't achieve both the harmony of the lake and the beauty of the trees. Actually, I think things will work themselves out.

Do you feel that also about the design of the inner gardens?

Yes. Originally Mother gave me the full responsibility for the Gardens. And She told me, 'I'd like you to start with the Garden of Unity'. What a telling statement, what layers of meaning are there! But I failed her. There wasn't a lot of time and we needed to set up the Nursery, but more than this I felt that the way ahead would be revealed by the plants themselves, through my communication with them, rather than through my drawing up garden designs. I thought that if I began working with the plants

extent the Green Belt which is creating the beneficial microclimate Mother envisaged. I feel, unfortunately, that their sincere efforts have been largely ignored by the greater body of Auroville.

A recent walk through the Green Belt with Jean of 'Two Banyans' and Patrick of 'Revelation' was truly a revelation for me. Jean pointed out tree after tree received from the Matrimandir Gardens Nursery which is now a towering giant. I acknowledge humbly that their knowledge of all the forest species, trees, shrubs, vines, far exceeds all that I learned in the first twelve years of Auroville. To know that two species of civet cat have returned to the forest, to realize that when we arrived in Auroville there were approximately thirty species of birds and today's count is in excess of 300, is a tribute to all the communities of Auroville who have devoted themselves to planting trees and flowering plants. Mother's charge to me to create a beauty never seen on earth before has yet to be realized, but the Green Belt is already on the way towards accomplishing Her vision.

The Matrimandir Gardens are something quite different in aim and expression from the afforestation work, though all work with and for the Earth is essentially one. The Gardens will be intense in the concentration

A walk in the Outer Gardens

I had the opportunity in the last week of January to walk through a section of the Matrimandir outer gardens with two friends. It was an extraordinary hour spent in the presence of massive, kingly trees, flowers and fragrances. The eucalyptus were awe-inspiring, towering to great heights. *Eucalyptus ptychocarpa* was truly magnificent with its brilliant clusters of reddish-pink flowers. All was a revelation of Nature's loveliness.

Many of the large pits for these children of ours, planted in the early to mid 1970's, had been dug by the Ashram boys who came out at midnight to work by the light of lanterns. Many are now truly majestic and have grown in beauty and scale to inspire all who look on them. Substantial numbers of the *Eucalyptus* and *Callistemon* (Bottlebrush) species were acquired in a seed exchange program with the Matrimandir Gardens Nursery and the Queensland and Townsville Botanical Gardens in tropical northern Australia. This was part of a program begun by the Nursery with eighty botanical gardens in thirty countries, including Russia! The work was later taken up by Walter and Tina who continued to publish and expand the Index Seminum.

The Rainbow Gum, *Eucalyptus naudiniana*, was in splendid form showing its rainbow-coloured bark and exhibiting an amazing ability to cover old wounds and stubs, an energy seen in very few species. Long before we arrived at the hill of *Michelia champaca*, 'Supramentalised Psychological Perfection', we were greeted by waves of sweet fragrance born on a gentle breeze. *Michelia champaca* 'Alba', 'Divine Smile', was also in bloom in this wonderful group which has been increased by Amrit with new and rare species, including a double form. Today it is perhaps the finest collection of species and cultivars in India.

It is my hope and my prayer that these rare trees will soon receive better care than they have in the past.

A brief tour of the Matrimandir Gardens Nursery yielded more delights for the soul. *Saraca thapinensis* was just coming into bloom with its large clusters of golden flowers. This is a relative of *Saraca indica*, the Asoka, immortalized by Sri Aurobindo in a line from Savitri. An interesting note is that Mother's spiritual significance for the Asoka is 'Without Grief' and the common name is 'Sorrowless Tree of India'. Another beautiful species in full bloom was *Bauhinia blakeana*, the Hong Kong bauhinia or Hong Kong Orchid Tree, possessing the largest flowers of this beautiful genus. Its magenta purple blossoms appearing like butterflies from a higher world are borne in profusion. Mother gave us the spiritual significances for a number of Bauhinia species but I could not get this flower to Her in time when, in late 1972 She said, 'The time for naming flowers is over.' Still, of the nearly 900 significances Mother gave over a period of more than 50 years, more than 65 were named from the Matrimandir Gardens Nursery in less than two years. Many of these bear profound significances that will be remembered for all time, including the many hibiscuses named for Auroville and carrying the double name, 'the New Creation'.

Narad

Meeting the basic needs

More than a hundred people discussed the problems of Auroville's economy in a two-day seminar on January 25 and 26. But the issues are not yet resolved.

"Hello. Just a short note regarding economy. Lately I have been listening to and talking to many teachers who are really worried about their finances. I know it is not only the teachers, but these are the people that I have been talking to. As you know this is a work that requires a lot of commitment and focus. But some people are wondering if they have to try to think of a second job in order to make ends meet - some are already doing it and are stretched beyond their limit. At the same time, we have a couple of young teachers who do not have houses and they do not have the money to build a house. What should they do? If they leave our schools, the children and Auroville will suffer. I don't have any general solutions - but something has to be done or we will not be able to get and keep teachers."

This poignant note was one of the many sent to a small group of people who had taken it upon themselves to try and find a solution for the economic problems of Auroville. After months of study they presented a proposal to provide every Aurovilian with the basic necessities, partly in cash, and partly 'in kind', which means that certain goods instead of money would be made available to the individual. The proposal was based on The Mother's ideals for Auroville's economy. She envisaged that Auroville "would provide for each individual's subsistence" and that

"there's no circulation of money." In a conversation with Satprem of 30 December 1967, The Mother explained what she means by providing for each individual's subsistence: *"The organization should be such, arranged in such a way, that everyone's material needs should be met, not according to notions of right and 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."*

Based on these statements, the organizers suggested changing the present maintenance system, which has led to insufficient levels of maintenance, into a system where the basic needs of everyone in Auroville are taken care of. The present maintenance system was created in the early 1980's, when Auroville received the first government grant for the Sri Aurobindo Institute for Educational Research (SAIER). Though the grant brought fresh input and possibilities, it was insufficient to meet all the collective needs. This led to the decision that only those who work for community services would be maintained by Auroville, while those working for commercial units and projects would support themselves from the income of these units and projects. While this decision solved the immediate problems to some extent, over the years it led to a ever widening disparity between

the levels of maintenance of those who depend on Auroville and those who run a commercial unit or project or have private means. Due to a lack of income, the community was simply unable to meet the needs of those who depend on it.

The new proposal envisages the creation of a "Pour Tous Fund" (Pour Tous means 'For All') that would receive all maintenances paid in Auroville, irrespective of their source. Private individuals, commercial unit executives, project holders as well as the Auroville Central Fund would transfer all their maintenance payments to this Pour Tous Fund. In turn, the Fund would transfer a certain sum (the proposal is Rs 2,000) to each individual's cash account, to spend as they wish; another sum (Rs 1,500) to the individual's kind account to spend as they wish in Auroville for their food and community expenses; and the rest (Rs 1,500) would be used by the Fund to directly pay for expenses such as electricity, telephone, health care, Nandini (for clothing) and a certain petrol allowance. The amounts to be paid for expenses such as electricity and telephone would be limited to a maximum.

For each individual, a minimum amount of Rs 5,000/month would need to be transferred to the Pour Tous Fund. In case a unit transferred more for an individual, the extra would be transferred to the individual's kind account. As it is not yet certain how the community can get

the required income to provide these basic needs to each Aurovilian, the proposal does not envisage a (necessary) increase of the maintenance that at present is provided for children.

For how can the community increase the maintenance of the approximately 600 adults who now fully depend on Auroville? The working group calculated that an additional sum of approximately Rs 5-6 lakhs (US \$ 10,500 - 12,500) per month would be required. It made a number of suggestions to raise this amount. Most important is the proposal to increase the minimum profit contribution of all commercial units and guesthouses, which at present is 33%. Non-profit making units (about 80) would be asked to contribute Rs 1,000 per month and also wealthy Aurovilians would be asked to make a commitment for a fixed monthly contribution.

Though some people rejected the proposal as "raising the taxes to better share the wealth among us" or "a mere redistribution system, simply administering poverty", the principles of increasing the maintenance by providing goods in kind was generally accepted. But which goods? Is telephone a basic need? Wouldn't it be better to finance collective transport instead of promoting the use of individual motorbikes by giving a petrol allowance? Shouldn't dental care and house repair be considered basic needs? And what about the future education of Auroville's ado-

lescents? Also the idea that some expenses would be paid centrally met with objections. Wouldn't it be better if each Aurovilian define his or her own basic needs and decide how to spend Rs 3,000 instead of only Rs 1,500 in the kind account? And how efficient are Auroville's services? Can they provide periodic reports to assure the community that they function well? Similarly, the proposals to raise the required money were subjected to the criticism that they amounted to scraping the bottom of the barrel instead to promoting more economic development. Some people proposed to create a Business Task Force to facilitate new business ventures, improve the existing ones and help the smaller units to grow efficiently in order to assure a better profit contribution to Auroville.

But these ideas, however good they may be, do not address the urgency of the immediate problems, which is exactly what the working group tries to address, though in doing so, it only touches the tip of the iceberg. At the conclusion of the seminar participants were invited to join the working group to see what can and should be implemented immediately. But there was an outcry: "More study after all the work which has been done? More talk? Please let's start implementing the system. The need is now!" Nobody disagreed. Soon a new system should start.

Carel

PROFILE

Mireille Albrecht: an interview

"Auroville reminds me of the French resistance..."

Mireille Albrecht is the author of two books on the role of women in the French Resistance. She first visited Auroville in 1984, missioned by the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs to write a report on Auroville for the French Government, which had been contacted by the community for the project of a French pavilion. She has visited many times since. She shared some of her impressions with us recently before going on to give a series of talks on the French Resistance at Pomona University in California.

"When I first came to Auroville in 1984 there were only four hundred or so Aurovilians, no telephones, hardly any guesthouses and most people were on bicycles. Messages were sent around the different communities by a messenger on a bicycle. I stayed in a keet roofed hut for a month with a mattress on the floor that was kindly lent to me by an Aurovilian who moved out. A fridge was nonetheless bought for me as the Aurovilians thought I should at least have cold drinking water as I was an official of the French government! It was quite an object of curiosity and people would come and look at it as there weren't many fridges in Auroville back then!

"My first impression was that I was faced by a bunch of real pioneers. The conditions of living weren't easy at all. There were lots of people lived in huts like in the villages. There were very few proper houses but there was something very

friendly. There was a fraternity in Auroville in those days. It was very different from today. It was difficult at first to understand the spirit of the place and the Aurovilians weren't much help. When I asked them what it was they would refuse to answer saying "You must understand by yourself" which didn't make my job any easier. I came to understand that the yoga done here was karma yoga. The karma yoga Sri Aurobindo spoke about. Aurovilians worked a lot, and it was in action not meditating under a banyan tree, that yoga was done. It was a big difference from an ashram or a monastery in our country where people spent their days praying. I have nothing against that mind you-but it is not the same thing.

"The French Ministry of Foreign Affairs supported the idea of a French pavilion for twelve years and the French ambassador - a very cultivated man- came down from Delhi for the ceremony of the laying of the cornerstone. A French naval ship was anchored offshore from Pondicherry and its captain lent us a sailor who played the Marseillaise on a bugle at the gathering and J.R.D. Tata and I planted two service trees on the site. After the French Ambassador had visited the inner chamber of Matrimandir with the Captain of the French naval ship he turned to me and said 'But Mireille, how is it that no one knows of this? It is the eighth wonder of the world!' I answered something to the effect 'Perhaps it is because the Aurovilians don't want it to be known!'

"Plans for the pavilion in the form of a Provencal villa had been drawn up but then everything changed. It was decided in Auroville that there would be no individual national pavilions but a single European pavilion instead. This, of course got me into a lot of trouble with the French Ministry and I still believe Mother wanted pavilions of each country next to each other.

"I didn't visit Auroville for the next three years but then I wanted to come back again and be in Mother's atmosphere because there are many very beautiful things going on in Auroville - some very uninteresting things as well, but that's like anywhere in the world. Auroville reminds me of the French Resistance. In the Resistance we were fighting against received ideas and stupidity and trying to build a new society. The spirit of the resistance was fuelled by the desire for freedom and human unity. We worked very much on our own or at most with only one other person as we couldn't know the others because it was too dangerous. My mother, Betty Albrecht, was one of the leaders of Combat - the largest resistance movement in France. But today when we are asked about our



Mireille Albrecht

experiences in the Resistance its rare to find three or four people who will say the same thing. We all had the same aim but a different work to do. In the same way Auroville is different for each Aurovilian but you have a common aim, an aim that you should never forget because that's the real thing. I feel today that what is lacking in Auroville is a spirit of love. Lots of people criticize each other on a very mental level. Aurovilians can come together and unite they have already proved that but there should be more kindness and physical contact in everyday life. Now you see people stuck on their mobile phones, they

don't converse or meet anymore. People don't see each other but communicate by email like anywhere else in the world. Where is the expression of unity in all that I'm a bit afraid that Auroville will become a virtual society.

"But you have the Matrimandir and there is a quality of vibration in the inner chamber that is a justification of why Auroville exists. The world is heading towards a big change and more and more people are feeling this in France, but the people who feel it the most are the simplest people, not the intellectuals!"

In a talk with Roger

Home Sweet Home

Once there was a time when building a home in Auroville meant finding the spot meant for you, gathering your keet leaves, pakamaram and casuarina poles, and going for it. Today, creating a home in Auroville is a whole different story.

Over the years, the Auroville Housing Group has played a very important role in the development of Auroville. The ideal of housing in Auroville is that it is provided to those who are in need. But the reality is that there are not enough funds to provide everyone with this luxury. The Group aims to help Newcomers and Aurovilians find housing, deal with housing repairs and search for overall solutions for housing in Auroville while taking in many considerations such as past successes and failures, influx of residents, differing architectural styles, creating a community environment, youth housing, elderly

maybe you could think about giving this house to someone who needs it."

Clearly, the largest ongoing struggle for the Housing Group is the lack of available housing. With increasing material and labour costs, many who choose to join Auroville lack the needed funds for their housing. "Looking at the list," Elvira explained, "it is very clear that it is Tamil Aurovilians who have the biggest problem finding houses in Auroville as well as Aurovilians who have been here for a long time, live off a maintenance, have possibly lived in a keet hut for many years and do not have the funds to build some-

worth several lakhs, we will transfer it for cash because with this money we can make ten people happy. If the house is worth a few lakhs, we will discuss the option of a money free exchange and if possible, give it to someone who is in need of a house. It's not a perfect solution to generate money but at the point we are at now, we have little choice. Everybody is really trying to look into the next step of how it can be different, but we are not there yet."

Another issue that everyone catches glimpses of is houses in Auroville being rented out to non-Aurovilians. When I asked about this difficult situation Elvira responded, "If we come across situations which violate the Auroville policy and which go against our guidelines, we try to approach the people and ask them to attend a meeting where we can explain our guidelines and ideals. We point out how what they are doing doesn't fit and see if they are willing to talk about it. If that doesn't work, we usually proceed to the Council or the FAMC. Right now we are having a lot of problems of that nature and we are really trying to find a solution, which is very difficult because quickly you go in the same direction as in the West like making people pay fines or threatening them with consequences such as cutting off their electricity, and I find we are not here to work on that level. We should try to make people understand why we don't want it to happen this way and educate on the level of goodwill. And that takes a long, long time."

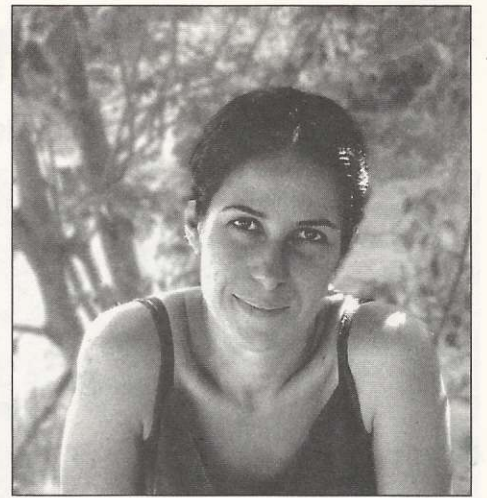
What about people from outside who are buying houses in Auroville? "We have a whole file on this right now and it's a headache, the kind of thing that you have to press the button when you leave the office and forget about because it can spoil your whole evening."

Elvira explained that building

'no, I'm sorry, this is over, you came too late for this'. And I think it is a big process of learning and accepting this fact. But I also think that for people who have lived here a long time and have their big garden and their big house and a wonderful community, it is up to them to maybe start thinking if they could deal with a garden which is only half as big and open up to a little individual house being close to them. Again it's about education on a level of openness, goodwill and really seeing that we are here to build a city together."

Newcomer housing, or lack thereof, is not a new challenge faced by the Housing Group. It seems there is never enough accommodation for Newcomers and, with the population increase, the future looks difficult and frustrating. Newcomers often feel let down by their housing situation once they have moved into Auroville. Many who have found Newcomer homes struggle with the monthly contribution (usually about Rs.1,500-2,500). While they otherwise are not paying for their 'temporary' housing and the Housing service sees to all repairs and maintenance, this contribution can be a large part of their monthly income. The money received from this housing situation is then used to build and maintain more Newcomer houses. "Another problem," explained Elvira, "is that sometimes when these Newcomers are about to become Aurovilians, they don't have a house. At the beginning they sign and say 'Ok, I will only stay till I am an Aurovillian, but once they turn Aurovillian and don't have a house and don't have sufficient funds, they just end up staying there. What can we do?'"

On a positive note, housing



Elvira

Housing Group get the job done. Few complaints arise in this area and it has been a great help to many.

With all these considerations, finding a home in Auroville can be an emotional and gruelling task and as Elvira passionately summarizes, "Housing is one of the basic needs of humans. It's where you feel protected, where you eat, where you sleep and if you don't have that it really can have a bad impact on your life. So, when people come with this instability already in their lives and we talk to them and tell them to be calm and tell them we'll see what we can do, I sometimes feel like 'Oh God, what am I asking of this person?' I can see why they suffer and why they are angry, but I still have to ask them to calm down and work together with us to find a different level of working on things."

"When I joined the Group," explained Elvira, "there were around 30 people on the priority housing list. We have found 20 solutions in the last year and now there are around 35 on the list; one goes, another comes. For me I find that working in one of these Auroville groups is part of the process of being in Auroville. I hope that more people will see that just criticizing the people that do the work is not going to bring us anywhere, that we all should try to find alternatives, talk about them, speak out our truth and express our point of view. If you find that something is not working in the way you think Auroville should, then don't just



Keet homes - housing of the past?

housing, low cost housing, and implementation of housing regulations.

Dealing with individual cases, which are more often than not emotionally-charged, while retaining the larger picture, is no small feat.

Elvira joined the Auroville Housing Group after returning to live in Auroville with her daughter and partner one year ago. She spent some years of her youth in Auroville and carried its ideals with her when abroad. In meeting with her, she was able to give Auroville Today an update on the housing situation in Auroville. The Housing Group, until recently, consisted of five people. Everyone has specific tasks and a meeting is held once a week with a representative of the Entry Group and Auroville Council, to discuss all topics and make necessary decisions. But realizing that there is so much more that could be done through the Housing Group, the team has recently managed to expand to ten dedicated individuals. "It is really nice," explained Elvira, "because the main challenge I think is to open up and expand from just day-to-day stuff, to really look at where our weak points are and how we can improve the housing situation. The main thing could be looking at new and creative ways of dealing with the housing shortage. For example, to get funds, to start projects and to involve individuals who are actually looking for houses, so they are not just waiting for project holders to build something but they are actually looking for solutions with architects and can begin the process themselves."

One of the immediate goals of the Housing Group is to get an updated list of the houses in Auroville, (the last list of this kind was made in 1999). "It would be good to go around and look at all the houses and see who lives in them because, it seems there are people who have two houses or even three. There is a possibility there to go and say, 'Look,

thing new.'" Over the past few years, there have been a few projects for 'low cost housing'. However, dissatisfaction in these projects leads to a need to review what went wrong and how to change. "I think there is a lack of technical knowledge about low cost housing. Low cost housing is being done, but the low cost is compromised by the low quality. I don't see that there are people here who have the knowledge AND want to do it. There are good architects here building really pucca high quality houses but they are not low cost. "One idea that has been circulated is to build more low-cost communities following an example such as Aspiration where homes are roofed with keet and everyone dines in the community kitchen. But, along with many other considerations, keet is an ongoing expense as it needs to be changed every three years (an expense that would be difficult for the Housing Group to regularly cover). "There must be better alternatives out there," Elvira stated with a positive smile. "They just have to be researched and looked at in regards to climate and local building materials to see what will work here and see what's being done in the rest of the world. Sustainable housing solutions could be looked into much more. I think that by expanding our group, it is more possible to take this up."

A major factor that contributes to frustrations amongst Aurovilians in regard to housing results from situations where someone new arrives with lots of money and is able to 'purchase' a house in Auroville while others who have been here for years remain on the waiting list. "We are trying to deal with this issue by re-establishing the spirit and possibility that houses are exchanged or given without the transfer of money. On the other hand we have to see that we need money in our housing fund to help people. Right now, if there is a house which is being transferred through the Housing Group that is



Construction nearing completion in the new community of Creativity

large individual houses is coming to an end due to city planning and lack of space. This is a harsh reality for many. "People see all these big residences with a nice garden around and say, 'I would like to build something like this,' and they come and we (along with the APDC) have to say

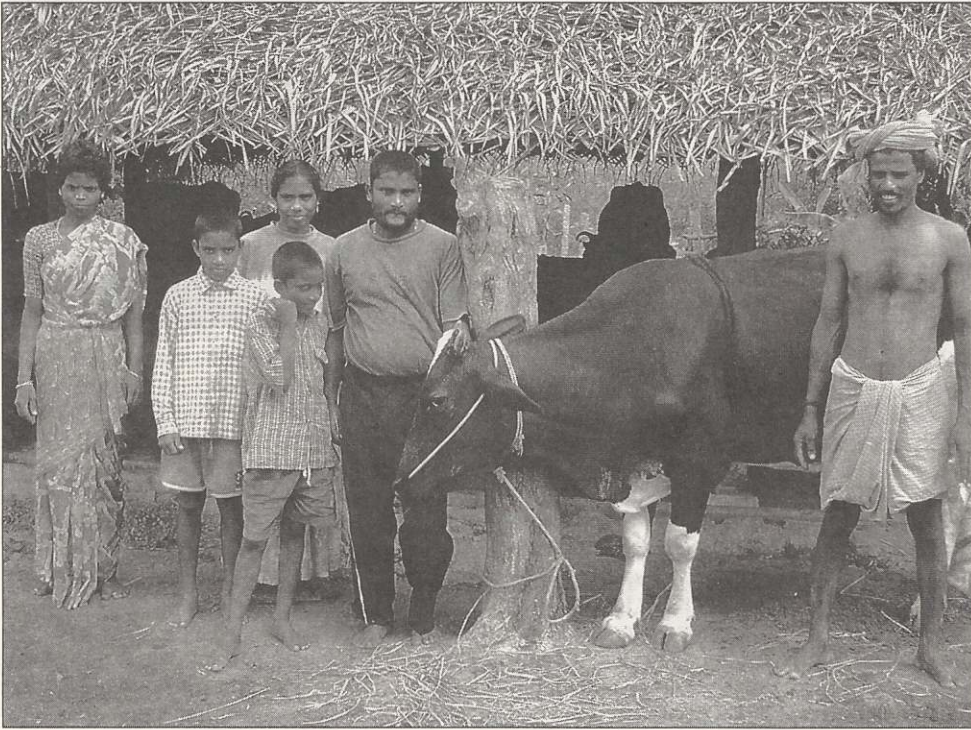
repairs administered by the Auroville Housing Group are running well. Should someone come needing help with repairs, someone from the Housing Group will go and assess the situation. Once it is decided to give money toward someone's repairs, a team of skilled workers hired by the

complain but come and join in. Even if it's hard to do the work or work with people who might be on power or ego trips, the only way that the direction can change is that we all come with goodwill and openness and participate."

Sunaura

Iyanar - Putting roots down at Brihaspathi

A young Aurovillian of Tamil origin stewards a 30 acre farm

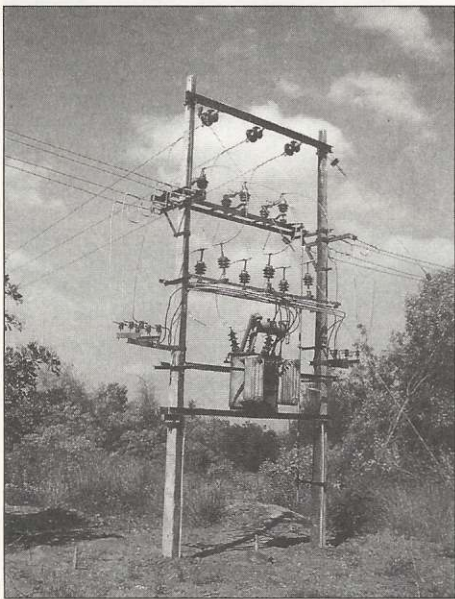


From left to right: Vasanthi, Gurudev, Tushitha, Anand, Iyanar, the cow Kalaiselvi and Segar

Over a year ago, I was invited to accompany a friend to lunch at Iyanar and Tushitha's home in Brihaspathi. I still remember the elaborate Tamil-style meal served on banana leaf with dishes prepared from the produce of the farm. The tasty finale was a cashew-nut rich milk *payasam* (pudding). At that time, Iyanar's situation at Brihaspathi was precarious, and talks were going on about his stewardship and farming of that piece of land. Recently at the Pour Tous vegetable counter, I bumped into Iyanar again. He was bringing in a large bag of fresh harvested produce – *podalangai* (snake gourd), *thanndu keerai* (a red-stemmed spinach), *palak* (a North Indian spinach variety) and cucumber. It appeared as if he had made it after all...

Brihaspathi or Jupiter in Indian mythology is considered to be the Guru of the gods, occupying the second position after the Sun in the Solar system – so goes the legend. In Auroville, Brihaspathi is a vibrant tract of land nestled in its Southwest corner, now a flourishing farm run by Iyanar. The story of Iyanar is a fairytale of sorts – the story of a young orphan who had to work his way through a turbulent life, grabbing whatever opportunities that came his way through providence, personal ingenuity and the benevolence of friends, and eventually securing his rightful place in Auroville.

Having lost both his parents at the age of five,



Electricity only came two months ago

Iyanar came to Auroville to live under the care of an uncle who was a watchman at an early beach community of Serenity. He grew up interacting with its residents, two of whom began to take special interest in the young boy. "This couple took me into their home. I learnt French from them," he recalls. "They were both into ships and sailing. Once when I was 9 or 10, we travelled to Cochin in Kerala from where I understood that we were all going to sail to France. There were going to take me with them and give me an education in France – it was going to be a great opportunity for me. But then some local newspaper published a

story that I was being abducted, at which point the police came and took me away." He was returned to Auroville, while his benefactors sailed away. Iyanar still wonders how his life may have turned out had he gone to France.

Back in Auroville, a new adventure began. His uncle had passed away and Iyanar was homeless. "Then Anne and Bhavana took interest in me and had me enrolled in the boarding under André and Babou, attending the school for Tamil kids at Fraternity." Iyanar enjoyed the regularity of school, being with the teachers and playing with the other children. "I had a great time growing up in Fraternity. We were made to feel very independent, being responsible for ourselves and our lives, and even living in our own keet huts." Though he was not too keen on academics, Iyanar picked up many skills from the activities he got involved in – gardening, landscaping, cooking... "But still I was very restless and feeling rather unsettled. And I think that was because I felt that I had nobody in this world," he muses. In his late teens Iyanar met the love of his life – Tushitha – the one who would bring stability into his life. She was also a student at André's boarding, and came from Kottakarai village. As the romance blossomed, Iyanar felt a deeper meaning to his life. He recounts, "From that point on, I began to live for her, wanting to make something of myself and to make her happy and proud of me." They began living together without the usual ceremony of a marriage, something quite unheard of in the Tamil community. "There was much opposition to this and people were constantly advising us to get married. But I believed in the words of The Mother – that marriage is not necessary to prove that one is devoted to one's partner. For 7 years we could do it, but finally I gave into marriage so that Tushitha's family in the village would be happy."

Life for the young couple was not easy. Iyanar tried his hand at a variety of jobs to make ends meet – from being a lifeguard at Repos, assisting in Discipline farm, setting up the community of Arc en Ciel, and even helping to run the restaurant there – it seemed like he tried it all. However his true calling seemed to elude him until a serendipitous conversation overheard at a tea stall in Edaiyanchavadi that proved to be the next turning point in his life. "There were a few French people discussing selling their farm and moving out of Auroville. Something came over me, and I boldly introduced myself, apologizing for intruding upon their conversation. I told them that I was interested in taking care of their farm and also confessed that I had no money to buy it!" To his surprise, the group heard him out and

promised that they would discuss amongst themselves and then inform him. The answer came back in the affirmative. The group invited him to move into one of the buildings in Brihaspathi and start working on the farm along with them.

"It felt so natural; as if farming was a part of my blood," confides Iyanar "and they were quite happy with me. I loved the work, and I think it showed." Soon, the original residents of Brihaspathi left for France, and Iyanar was all by himself managing the farm. The period that followed became the most challenging time of his life. Suddenly questions were raised in Auroville about Iyanar's commitment and capability of running a farm, and simultaneously several individuals were expressing interest in the Brihaspathi land. A special committee was set-up to look into the matter. "At that time, due to a bad example set by one Tamil Aurovillian, some people were suspicious about my motives and they thought I would behave the same way. There were afraid I would sell the farm equipment and pocket the money for personal use." Iyanar was outraged by these assumptions, "I have grown up in Auroville and I believe in its cause and ideals; and for anyone to think that I would treat collective property in such a manner – it was quite something!" But he also had the backing of good friends who trusted his abilities and encouraged him in his work. "It is to these people that I am truly grateful. They advised me to be calm and patient." A decision was reached to allocate large part of the Brihaspathi land to farming under the stewardship of Iyanar, while the remaining area was given to the Red Earth Riding School operated by Eric and



Red-tiled elegant houses in Brihaspathi

"Vasanthi, one of the ammas, would take a basket of whatever we harvested that morning and go street by street through Edaiyanchavadi to sell it. It was through those two rupee and three rupee sales, that we survived in the beginning." Now all his clients are within Auroville – the Solar Kitchen, the Visitor's Centre, and Pour Tous which get the produce, and individual Aurovillians who get their morning supply of milk (sometimes afternoon too) delivered personally at their doorsteps.

At Brihaspathi, Iyanar follows the concept of multi-cropping where companion plants are grown side by side resulting in a maximal use of space. Radishes flourish in the bunds alongside the cucumber vines and banana stems. "I observe a lot," he says. "I am always on the lookout to learn new techniques, and introduce good varieties to the farm." He shows off a few dwarf drumstick trees that he brought from Bangalore prized for their 'over a metre and a half' long drumsticks. In the banana *thoppu* (orchard), Iyanar points out two little trees, "They are the *rasthali* variety, and I picked up those saplings from a trip to Madurai." The *rasthali*, more available in the southern Tamil Nadu, is considered a king among bananas and renowned for its delicately fine flavour. He also has other fruit like papaya and cashewnut, and plans to diversify into others like lemon and chikoo in the future.

But theft is a problem that the farm has been facing, especially during the cashewnut season in summer. His past cashew harvest was a measly six bags. But Iyanar feels that there is not much he can do since the land is spread over a wide area with a few patches even reaching up to the main road. While he has erected a fence around his vegetable plots, he feels that such a treatment for the entire property would be an impossible task. His cows are also in danger of being stolen, and so the need for a night watchman. "Cows are expensive," he explains, "and it has taken me two years to build up to this present herd." In the cow-shed a dozen bovines are seen chewing cud benignly amongst four frisky calves. "I started with a gift of one cow



Cows peacefully chewing cud at the cowshed

Kalavathi who had a female calf, and subsequently two more!" He goes on to share how the birth of a female calf is a matter of great rejoicing for the dairy farmer, and that he has been pretty lucky in that respect. Besides the milk the cows give, the cowdung and urine are used as fertilizers for the fields. Like most Auroville farms, Brihaspathi is completely organic, using no artificial fertilizers and only natural pesticides. He adds that Lucas will soon be introducing EM technology to his composting efforts.

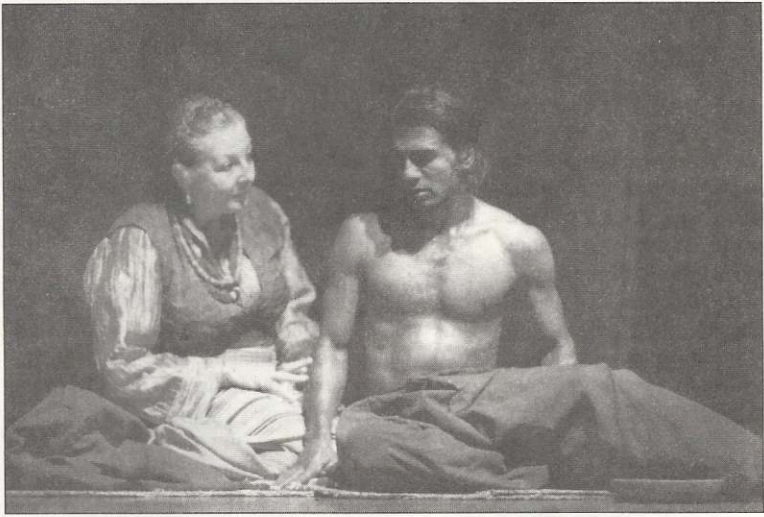
Finding time for his family is a challenge Iyanar faces, but his family understands and supports him wholeheartedly by blending their lives around the farm. His two sons 12 year-old Gurudev and 10 year old Anand who vociferously declare that while they 'love going to school at Transition' they also enjoy hanging out in the farm when school is closed. Tushitha, his partner, helps him more actively. Every morning, it is she who sorts out the produce for him to carry, before setting out to her own job at the Solar Kitchen. As an expression of his love for her, Iyanar has created a big flower garden where he tends some of her favourite flowers – *kanakambaram*, which The Mother named 'Supramental influence in the subconscious' and *saamanthi*, 'Plasticity'. "When she weaves them into a garland and puts in on her hair, it makes me very happy," he says shyly.

Priya Sundaravalli

Arts in winter

Traditionally, the spring season is brimming over with cultural events. On this page we report on some of them.

PHOTO JONAH



Liliana and Sumeet in 'Milarepa'

Somehow Auroville seems more creative from December to February. Maybe it is the winter or the presence of guests. Whatever it may be, December - February is 'ShowTime folks'! It is a time to entertain, to create...

I remember a dialogue between an art critic and an artist. After a long and frustrating argument with the artist who refused to accept the critic's view, the angry critic said, "But you don't even seem to have the basic talent for image-making!" "That's the whole point," retorted the artist, "The latest in art is about creating from what you don't have."

Jokes aside, some people can create from virtually nothing. Nothing is, of course, a matter of speaking. Surely they use things, but it is the creative element - the spiritual factor - rather than the material that impresses. There are currently on view in Pitanga wall hangings by Maggi Lidchi. Pieces of cloth, beads and the like are Maggi's 'nothing' from which she creates her witty wall hangings. The material she uses is not 'found' in the way a Robert Rauschenberg (American abstract expressionist) or a André Masson did, but rather a deliberate and careful selection of things. Nor are the paintings 'horrors' thrown up by the subconscious but are visions of beauty, consciously 'seen' and reproduced as art. Most of these wall hangings are mandalas (geometrical shapes arranged to form a circle) or trees. (But there are a few others that are not mandalas or trees, but birds and flowers and dolphins.) Each piece of coloured cloth, each shiny bead is painstakingly put together in a pleasantly surprising manner. The attempt

is not to create 'Great' art, but a modest design to delight the heart.

On the literature front, a couple of novels have been published recently by two Aurovilians, 'The City of Dawn' finds a reference to it in them. If in Norman Thomas' book 'The Thousand-Petalled Daisy' Auroville is covertly referred to, Jocelyn's 'Antithesis of yoga' is a non-fiction explicitly about Auroville. It tells us about the trials and errors, the agony and the ecstasy and small successes of Roslyn who was one of the first to start living here. It is the story of



Wall-hanging by Maggi

Roslyn who continues to live on in spite of the difficulties and the changes Auroville has had to go through over the last thirty years. Not only is this book about surpassing the us and them syndrome, but also, perhaps inadvertently, about getting stuck fossil-like, in the third position. A candid and funny book, 'Antithesis of yoga' is the story of Roslyn who cautions us about the pointlessness of making crocheted shoes in Auroville! It could even be a good novel if a copy could be borrowed, not so much because of the price (Rs. 800 only!) as

because of the preaching it does regarding sharing of property.

Sharing of property reminds me of the theatre where an actor plays more than one character; or a single role is shared by more than one actor. The Auroville Theatre Group performed such a play recently. 'Milarepa' was its name and it was about sharing.

It all starts with a dream. Against a background of high Tibetan Mountains a modern day Parisian, Simon, tells the story of Milarepa's uncle, Swastika. As Swastika shuttles between dream and reality, Simon 'becomes' Swastika and unfolds before the audience the story of Milarepa's life. Milarepa was the great Tibetan yogi of the twelfth century. His mother sends him away to learn black magic in order to take revenge on uncle Swastika who deprived them of their property. Milarepa kills many guests with his sorcery but spares the uncle and his wife. Swastika is spared because his karma is that he must tell Milarepa's story a hundred thousand times before he can attain liberation and escape the endless rounds of birth and death. Milarepa's own karma brings him in contact with Marpa the translator. Marpa makes Milarepa build nine towers (only four in the play), seemingly to torture him but really to cleanse him of his sins. He then teaches his disciple the 'ultimate' secret, whereupon Milarepa attains the supreme status of the enlightened Buddha.

Originally a one man show written by Eric-Emanuel Schmitt, the script was converted into a multi-cast play by Jill and Swar of The Auroville Theatre Group. The plot was so arranged that reality and dream coexisted simultaneously on stage making one ask what reality really is. Who is the 'I' who is reborn until liberation frees the soul from the shackles of death and birth? "Nirvana doesn't exist," says Milarepa towards the end, "it is only words - a matter of speaking."

In retrospect, the three winter months were perhaps not the best that Auroville has seen in terms of creative output, but they were not bad either. A few painting exhibitions, a couple of ceramic teapot exhibitions, a showing of fused glass, various dances and plays and music... the auditorium and the art galleries have been busy venues in the last few months. Yes, this winter has been a warm one.

Charudutta

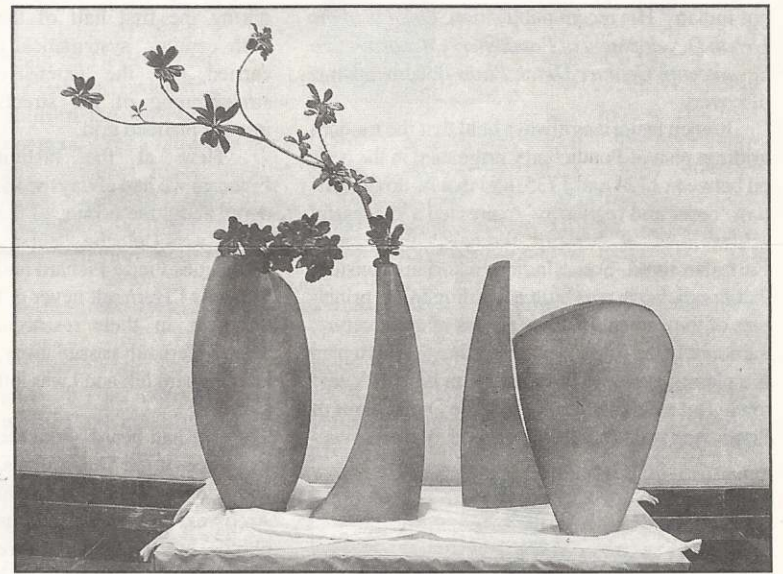
Mother in Trance



PHOTO COURTESY SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM DELHI BRANCH

An exhibition of rare photos of the Mother under the title 'Mother in Trance' was held at the Savitri Bhavan. The title of the exhibition was misleading. Trance means passing into another reality, thereby losing the awareness of the terrestrial reality and not remembering what has gone on in the other reality once one comes back to everyday circumstances. Mother kept her awareness throughout.

Pottery and ikebana



Man-sized ceramic vessels and vases, some of them with large Ikebana flower arrangements, were displayed at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. The ceramic pieces were designed and executed by Michel of Flame Pottery, the ikebana was arranged by Valeria and the wooden supports were made by Kenji.

Songs of Perfection

Less than thirty Aurovilians were fortunate enough to attend the solo concert of the Russian classical singer Ludmilla, in Pitanga on Monday the 9th of February. Starting and ending with Ave Maria and singing several Russian romances in between, the small audience was so spell-bound by the brilliance and beauty of Ludmilla's voice and skill that they clapped as if the hall was full. In the end no one moved, let alone left. We wanted more! After she was kind enough to sing a few more songs (even an improvised homage to Sri Aurobindo), many people got up and sincerely thanked her. High or low, loud or very soft and gentle, her voice was always crys-

tal-clear and fully controlled, and one could often feel the love expressed by her. Thank you for bringing a piece of perfection to Auroville.

Chris



Hymne à la compassion

Paintings by Martine Quentric-Séguy, the wife of the consul-general France, Pondicherry, were exhibited in the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. Left: *The Inner Room*, which she graciously donated to the Pavilion.

Thresh

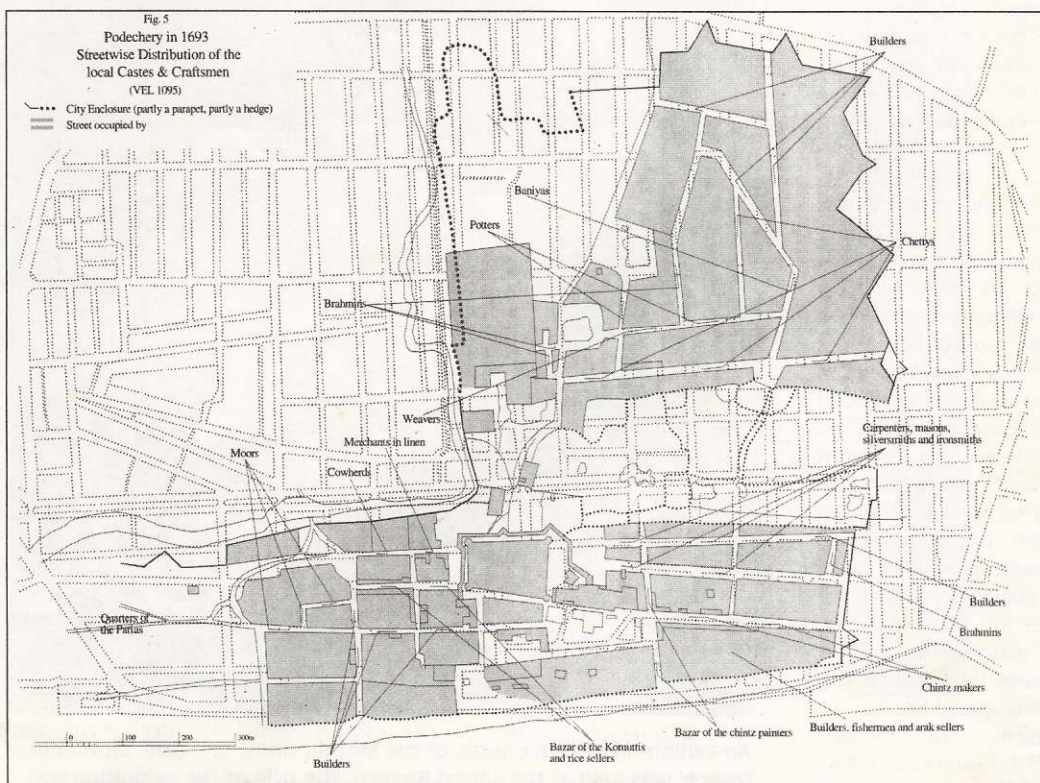
Recently the 'famous' Thresh dance troupe from New York gave Auroville the honour of their première India tour in the Bharat Nivas Auditorium. It is always wonderful to watch a great performance if you do not expect much, and it is likewise rather dreadful to go to an event that is announced and promoted in a way that makes you expect much, but then turns out to be quite mediocre. The three Thresh pieces called "Strings Unattached" did not seem to present anything new when it came to creativity and style. Even on the level of inner substance and communicating the spirit of their endeavour they did not shine too brightly. Only the stage lighting, which was undoubtedly excellent, shone.

Chris



The Dutch town plan of Pondicherry

Contrary to established opinion, the modern gridiron town plan of Pondicherry is a creation not of the French but of the Dutch proves French historian Jean Deloche.



Pondicherry in 1693 according to French plans, overlaid on the present gridiron plan

"I am afraid that my French colleagues will curse me as I have demolished one of their cherished beliefs," grins Jean Deloche. "But the proofs are irrefutable. The town plan of Pondicherry is Dutch, not French, and also not Indian." His recent publication, *Origins of the Urban Development of Pondicherry According To Seventeenth Century Dutch Plans* documents this discovery.

French historians always held that the modern gridiron plan of Pondicherry originated in the period between 1724 and 1735, and that its urban spirit of 'order and regularity' expressed a successful achievement of 'l'esprit français,' the French Cartesian mind. Some Indian historians consider that Pondicherry was built according to the principles of the ancient Hindu treatises of architecture, particularly the Silpa Sastra, and that the town plan is a classic example of the prastara type of Vedic town. But a detailed analysis of the Dutch plans of Pondicherry dating from the end of the seven-

teenth century, systematically carried out the extensive straightening of the streets into the planned grid.

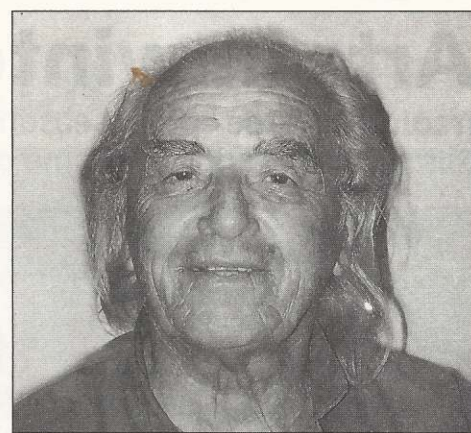
"Here at the Institut Français we had always wondered about the origins of the town," says Deloche. "But my colleagues Pierre Pichard and François l'Hernault never got very far in their research. Then l'Hernault passed away, later Pichard left and I was left alone.

"We had heard about the existence of the Dutch maps, and the Dutch National Archives had even sent us photos, but the legends were in old Dutch and illegible. And then, one day, Mr. Jan Lohman [a member of Auroville International The Netherlands, eds.] dropped in. When he expressed his interest in old cities, I told him he was a god-send, and that I needed a person who could visit the Dutch National Archives and get me all the details. Six months later I received from him all I needed, in great detail with translations of the legends. And then I discovered that everything which has been published about the French origins of the town of Pondicherry was wrong."

The first Europeans to come to Pondicherry were probably the Danes, who arrived as early as 1653. Old French documents speak about 'the Danish house' built with bricks. In 1673, François Martin, who is considered the founder of Pondicherry, arrived. He paid Raja Ram, the ruler of Senji (Gingee) to be allowed to build a fort in Pondicherry. But events in Europe influenced the happenings in the colonies. In 1688 the Nine-Year War started. England, Spain, Brandenburg and the Dutch Republic had allied themselves against France. In September 1693 the Dutch conquered Pondicherry, took François Martin prisoner and sent him back to France. Pondicherry would remain in their possession for five and a half years. During that period, the Dutch enlarged the territo-

ry under their control by purchasing a few villages from Raja Ram and planned a new town, based on a grid pattern. However, following the Peace Treaty of Rijswijk between the warring parties in 1699, Pondicherry was returned to the French and François Martin came back. "But the Dutch didn't want to surrender the entire territory," recounts Deloche. "They argued that the treaty of Rijswijk provided for the return of the city and the fort, but said nothing about the villages the Dutch had bought from the ruler. Finally François Martin had to pay the Dutch to get rid of them."

The Dutch had developed a unique trading system. They would purchase cloth in India, sell it in Indonesia, and from there bring spices back to Holland. "From all accounts it appears that the Dutch were intending to turn Pondicherry into their main trading post on the Coromandel Coast," says Deloche. "They must have been very active for half of the new town was built when they left. The northern part was occupied by weavers, who constituted about 3/4th of the town's inhabitants. They planned the city in such a way that each street was built for a specific caste or pro-



Jean Deloche

of the Dutch plan. Even the division of the city into 'the white town' and 'the black town' is a creation of the Dutch, who wanted the white people to stay on the seashore and the Indians to the west of the canal. The French simply continued this policy. In the beginning of the 18th century, for example, they asked all the Muslims to move to the roads leading to Cuddalore. And that is probably the reason why in that area of the town you find three diagonal streets instead of the grid pattern."

As the French started to turn Pondicherry into a big centre, a rampart was built around the city in 1724. "They had already implemented the Dutch plan. And now they made a big wall around it, rounding-off the corners. In 1820, when there was no longer any need for the rampart, they flattened it and turned it into the boulevard surrounding Pondicherry. And that is how Pondicherry got its oval shape."

Pondicherry, said French documents of the



The town plan of Pondicherry designed by the Dutch, overlaid on the present gridiron plan

fession. The map shows streets for weavers, merchants, farmers, artisans and Brahmins. There is even a reference to a street for 'hoeren' who were located nearby the Brahmin quarter. Very likely these were the devadasis, dancing girls dedicated to the service of a deity and generally to temple prostitution, hence the abusive name of 'hoer' (whore) given to them in the maps.

"If I had any doubt left, the findings in the recent book *Dutch Town Planning Overseas during VOC and WIC Rules (1600 - 1800)* written by the Dutchman Ron van Oers, clinched the argument," says Deloche. "Van Oers has studied all Dutch colonial settlements, and notes that they were preferably built on a strict geometrical design. He writes 'Where the Dutch could use it, they preferred this pattern. Symbolic of an ordered, well managed society, hierarchical but democratic, it was emblematic for the hard working, God-fearing Dutch Calvinists.' Van Oers makes but a brief reference to Pondicherry, but shows that its town plan is similar to that of other Dutch colonial towns."

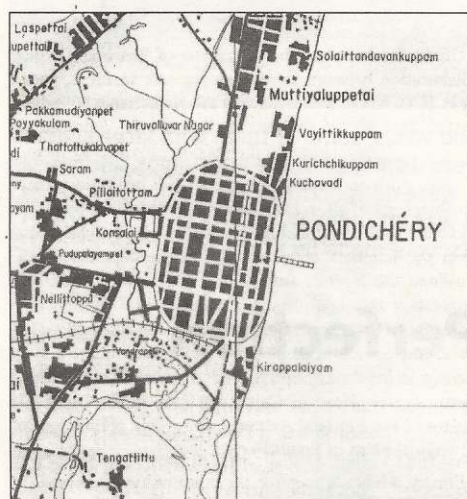
"Very likely the Dutch surrendered the plans they had made of the city to the French," continues Deloche. "For the first French town plan is a copy

beginning of the 18th century, is becoming a beautiful town with straight streets 'according to the ancient plans'. But nowhere was it mentioned that the ancient plans were Dutch. For the Dutch did not leave any particular monuments. "Probably, they simply didn't have time," concludes Deloche.

Carel

Origins of the Urban Development of Pondicherry According To Seventeenth Century Dutch Plans, by Jean Deloche. Publications Hors Série 3 ISSN: 0972-2457. French Institute of Pondicherry, PB 33, Pondicherry 605001.

Jointly published by the Institut Français de Pondichéry and the Royal Netherlands Embassy, New Delhi, on the occasion of the 50th Anniversary of the transfer of the French settlements in India to the Indian Union. As this study shows the major role played by the Netherlands and France in the creation of the town, it seems appropriate to associate the two countries with the commemoration of this event by the Government of India, Jean Deloche is also author of a number of books on Indian systems of transport and communications before the steam engine, on the Grand Trunk Road and on the Gingee Fort.



The map of Pondicherry showing its gridiron layout

teenth century (1693-1694) preserved in the National Archives at The Hague, the Netherlands, shows beyond question that the orthogonal street pattern of the town is a creation of the Dutch. Their survey plans of 1693 detail the irregular street pattern that existed in the then French settlement. In the plans drafted in 1694 by the Dutch town planner Jacob Verbergmoes one finds the design of a large new town, with a very regular geometric layout, rectangular blocks of houses, separated by

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Editorial team: Alan, Carel, Charudutta, Emmanuelle, Priya Sundaravalli, Roger, Sunaura. Guest contributor: Narad 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.

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