

Auroville Today

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Facing a land crisis

In April, the Land Consolidation Committee made a radical proposal to secure the remaining land in the city area. In their words, "We have to act. Now."

On a hot afternoon in June, 1999, Guy Ryckaert stood in the amphitheatre and told his fellow Aurovilians that 'the house is on fire'. He was referring to the fact that a large plot of land in the Green Belt had recently been bought by a developer who was planning to build a housing estate (called 'Peaceful City') upon it. Today, in spite of plans by the new Secretary to speed up securing land in the city and to deal with a specific development in the greenbelt (see Auroville Today, January, 2007), the situation is grimmer still. For while the Peaceful City site was eventually bought by Auroville, other large plots in the same area remain in private ownership, and a women's college is being constructed in the middle of the Green Belt east of the city area.

The present situation

It was against this background that the LCC called for a general meeting of Auroville residents to present a radical proposal. They began by laying out the present situation. Today, Auroville holds 955 acres in the city area: 196 acres still need to be acquired. In the greenbelt Auroville holds about 1,000 acres and needs to acquire another 2,000 acres to consolidate the whole area. For the past thirty years the tendency has been to purchase land in the city and greenbelt areas whenever it became available. However, the price of land has now skyrocketed all over India – over the past three months alone it has doubled in value in our area.

This has a number of implications. First and most obviously, it will cost much more money to secure all the land in the city and greenbelt areas, money which Auroville does not have.

Secondly, many landowners no longer want to sell because, given its swift rise in value, land is a superb investment. The only people who want to sell, explained the LCC, are those who need the money desperately, and these are being approached by private parties who, in spite of the grossly inflated prices, are actively looking to purchase land in the area covered by Auroville's Master Plan. For Auroville is now a desirable and potentially profitable address. "This means," said LCC member Paul Blanchflower, "that if we do not act fast there could be hotels, private houses etc. in the city and the greenbelt. Without government protection, outsiders will do whatever they want to do with the land. And this is the endgame. Within six months to one year it will all be over."

The proposal

And the LCC's proposal? Noting that of the 3,000 acres of land that Auroville owns, 1,000 acres fall outside the city and greenbelt area, the LCC proposed that we exchange some of this outlying land for the 196 acres we need to consolidate the city area. The LCC pointed out that land exchange is not a new strategy – we have, in fact, been exchanging land for almost 20 years, although not on the scale now proposed and not land which has already been developed. Moreover, some of the landowners – who hold, in all, about 50 acres in the city area – are open to exchanging land as this way they will retain and, in most cases, increase their investment. The LCC also emphasised that this is a strategy we can carry out ourselves, without the need for government intervention.

The LCC went on to present a suggested list of Auroville lands they want to exchange (see box). This Auroville land is either given over to cashews,



The imposing gate of the latest development in the greenbelt

or has commercial potential, or a minimum of infrastructure on it. It also took into account the wishes of the landowners in the city area regarding their preferred location and the value of the land they would acquire in the exchange. The list included, in addition to some cashew and tamarind topes, three beach communities, three outlying farms and parts of some other outlying Auroville communities.

"It doesn't come to exactly 196 acres," explained Francis, "but hopefully in terms of value it is the equivalent of the land we want to acquire in the city."

"We know what we are bringing is not very pleasant," concluded Paul, "and our proposal may seem too radical for some people. One year ago, when the LCC was created, it would have seemed too radical for most of us – at that time we all had different opinions about how to secure the land. But after months of discussing it among ourselves, of talking to local villagers and to people who have bought land, all the members of the LCC have come to the conclusion that this is the only strategy which will work in the present situation. But we have to act now."

After the presentation there were requests for clarification. Why was the LCC concentrating upon acquiring land in the city rather than in greenbelt where we are threatened by a lot of unwanted new developments?

"Because in the city area the bubble hasn't burst yet. In the greenbelt it has burst – some areas of the greenbelt we may never secure in our lifetime. However, if we can achieve our target in the city, then we can move on to the greenbelt area."

What will happen to those Aurovilians living on land that is slated for exchange? "Money will be put aside to relocate them. They will be encouraged to move into the city or the greenbelt." Will people be forced to move? "Any exchange has to happen with the consent of the larger community. We are simply making a proposal, it's up to the community to decide whether it supports it or not." Can Auroville buy land elsewhere and offer this land in exchange for privately-owned land in the city? "In theory, yes, but prices are going up everywhere, and we can only exchange for land that the landowner wants." Should we also be concentrating upon fund-raising? "Yes!"

Reservations

At the first meeting at which the LCC's proposal was presented, the response was generally appreciative. In two subsequent meetings, however, opposi-

tion to the proposal hardened. One comment was that there is no urgency to acquire all the land in the city now: it's more important to improve our relationship with the local people. Others felt that no Auroville land should be exchanged because it is 'sacred'. Instead, we should initiate a massive fund-raising to purchase all the land we require, or seek government protection for that land or both.

Many people, while not dismissing the option of land exchange out of hand, questioned the LCC's priorities. It was pointed out, for example, that no land which had been afforested or organically-farmed should be offered for exchange as this would give the wrong message about Auroville's environmental aims and ideals. Others wondered if the LCC had considered the commercial potential to Auroville of some of the land slated for exchange, and the need for good access to beach land if one day we may want to construct a desalination plant by the sea. Yet others felt that the LCC should concentrate first upon acquiring strategic land in the greenbelt (by the road, for example) rather than upon consolidating the city area.

There were also one or two 'out of the box' proposals, including allowing Aurovilians to buy and develop land without restriction in the city, and making it possible for far more people to join Auroville. "Because once we have more people here, the land problem will take care of itself." There was also a call for a "more ecological and sustainable Master Plan which addresses the environment of Auroville and India today, because if we are seen to be taking into consideration real needs like water etc. we will get protection from outside organizations." Finally, Aurovilians were exhorted to rededicate themselves to the ideal.

"Only then will everybody – the government as well as the local villagers – want to actively help us protect the land."

How should one interpret the opposition to the

LCC's proposal? Clearly, there are genuine concerns about certain aspects of the proposal. For example if, as proposed, parts of existing communities are exchanged, this could lead to unwanted forms of development which might seriously compromise the work and atmosphere in those communities.

The personal factor

At the same time, personal factors are also involved. For example, members of two communities which were included in the exchange list protested that they had not been properly consulted before the list was announced. One family stewarding a beach community also felt that the LCC had not taken into account their deep emotional ties to the place and the huge effort they had put into developing the land.

Another Aurovillian charged certain members of the LCC with incompetence, claiming that past flawed policies were partially responsible for the present land crisis. He called for an enlargement of the present LCC and a change in those responsible for land purchase as, he claimed, the villagers were not willing to sell to those Aurovilians who are at present in charge of securing the land. Yet another felt that the LCC should start buying land with the funds they have accumulated as "money must be used in order to call more money".

Another factor which seemed to prejudice some people against the LCC's proposal was their feeling that this was yet another example of a secretive, bureaucratic group trying to impose a top-down solution. And then, of course, there are the less rational factors which may have caused people to reject the proposal. These include resistance to change, a wish to retain control over land which some people have come to think of as 'theirs', and personal antipathy to certain members of the LCC.

So what is the present status of the LCC's proposal? While one participant in a later meeting claimed that the community is "clearly against it",

this is, to say the least, unproven. (In fact, some stewards of land proposed for exchange have already agreed to the proposal, and others have come forward with certain conditions.) The criticism voiced at the two subsequent meetings is more likely a reflection of a familiar syndrome in which follow-up meetings tend to be attended by those with strong objections rather than by those who gave their assent to the original proposal.

Since the last general meeting on the topic, two other proposals to deal with the land crisis have been put forward, one of which opposes any exchange of Auroville land. Meanwhile the Council has announced that they

will chair a meeting of different parties at which they hope a consolidated proposal can be agreed upon.

However, almost everybody seems to agree upon at least two things. Firstly, we are facing a major crisis concerning the land and, secondly, any decision concerning a radical change in our land policy will have to be taken by the community as a whole. "This means," opined one Council member, "that we cannot take any decision until July when Aurovilians return from abroad."

Which highlights yet another problem....

Alan

List of Auroville lands proposed by the LCC to be exchanged

Eternity (beach)
Halcyon (beach)
Samarpanam (beach)
1 acre in Auromodel
Front of Felicity
Tamarind topes in Kuilapalayam
Service Farm
New Farm
Auroannam Farm
Front of Annapurna
Front of Aurobrindhavan
Cashew topes in Brihaspathi
Casuarina land by Alankuppam

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AUROVILLE
ARCHIVES

14 June 07

Wanted: a builder's manual

“Auroville exhibits a dichotomy between an overarching central idea manifested in the form of a galaxy plan and the wide variety of buildings it possesses. While the plan may be rooted in a particular spiritual worldview, the buildings are freewheeling experiments in architecture,” wrote A. Srivathsan in his review of the new *Auroville Architecture* book for the newspaper *The Hindu*.

Srivathsan considers the architectural experiments remarkable. “There are buildings that appear like habitable sculptures, some are construction virtuosos, while some remain modest abodes. The range of construction techniques displayed is equally impressive.” But then he makes a poignant observation: “The book certainly presses home the need for an elaborate and critical review of Auroville as an urban experiment.”

Does he have a point?

Architects David and Eugen can only agree. “The Auroville architects design what they like. There are few urban design parameters and there is a lack of guidance,” says David. “What we see today is the manifestation of individual dreams, without harmony with each other.”

“The architects have to sit together and work it out,” opines Eugen. “The first necessity is an in-depth investigation of what has worked and what hasn’t. This includes building materials used, an evaluation to what extent our houses are appropriate to the climate, the house sizes, the internal lay-out of the houses, and the housing density, and where possible, an idea of costing. We need to create a manual of the ideal Auroville house.”

He gives examples. Is low-cost housing an option or is it, in fact, expensive housing as it requires more maintenance in the long-run? Are tile roofs or domes suitable in our climate? Should ceilings be 3.5 metres high and walls half a metre thick, as in the colonial French houses? Should windows be small? Are courtyards useful, as in the traditional Tamil architecture? What systems of natural air-conditioning can be used? Is a design that includes artificial air conditioning acceptable or should it be rejected for environmental and financial reasons?

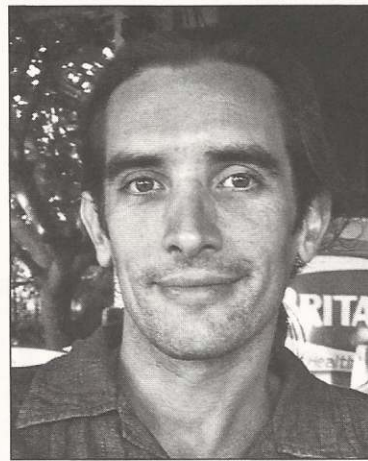
Should building codes include basic internal layout rules, for example that toilets cannot open into the living room? How can the house be made termite proof? What are the best lintels? What is the experience with foundations, window overhangs? How can noise pollution be minimised? What is the best way to make a house energy-efficient? The list is endless.

The idea of a building manual is not new. A few years ago, a handwritten version, made by architect Regina, already helped newcomers to understand the pitfalls of building in Auroville. Since that time, many new developments have taken place.

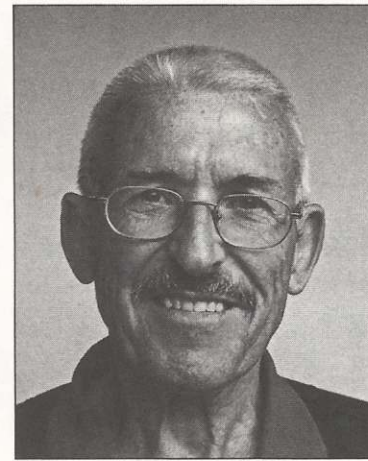
David proposes that a team of architects be funded for a few years to do this research. This group should not only evaluate the situation in Auroville, but also scrutinize the resources on the internet and contact professionals all over the world who work in comparable climatic conditions. They should publish the manual of the ideal Auroville house. “It should be a ‘manual of experience,’ both positive and negative, of do’s and don’ts for buildings in Auroville. Only with such a manual in hand can proper design parameters be formulated.”

Eugen brings in the social side of architecture, an aspect which the manual may not be able to cover. “What,” he asks, “do we want to say with the way we live? Is our key term ‘voluntary simplicity’ meaning ‘simple and beautiful’? If so, is it justified that ‘rich’ Aurovilians build larger mansions than those who have fewer resources? Should we at all prescribe how many square metres a family or someone living alone is entitled to?”

David recounts how someone once told him that Auroville should become a ‘yogic’ city. “The acute problem in trying to design for a yogic consciousness is that isn’t there yet,” he observes dryly. “Many people, moreover, will have a tendency to equate ‘yogic consciousness’ with ‘ascetic consciousness’. If we would follow that, we might design with an ‘I don’t care’ attitude as a yogi should be able to live in any circumstance



David



Eugen

PHOTOS AUROVILLE TODAY ARCHIVES

and problems such as noise pollution are then considered good challenges to develop your consciousness and equanimity. Whereas the true yogic city should aim to nurture greater awareness and consciousness in its inhabitants, through both the process which creates it as well as the beauty and clarity of the spaces which we build.”

“The design parameters are also essential to create formulas for a new form of urban design,” says Eugen. But David cautions against optimism. “I am not so sure how much of the visual aspect would be new. The essence of what will make Auroville is its aspiration for human unity. How to translate that in an urban language has to be discovered, and this may take decades. Moreover, we’ll have to be flexible.”

Eugen agrees. “Fixed urban design parameters can be a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing in the beginning, but we have to review them every decade or so. Every generation has to have the right to find new ways to build.” He mentions as an example the Indian city of Chandigarh designed by the French architect Le Corbusier. “It is a nice and functional city, but no new buildings have come up in the town because of its too stringent building codes which were developed when the town was conceived. People now build around the town. This Auroville should avoid.”

In conversation with Carel

ARCHITECTURE WORKSHOP

New tools for architects

In March a group of Auroville architects, assisted by Chamanlal Gupta and Kiran Keswani, formulated and coordinated the ‘Auroville Design Studio’, a two week workshop for young Indian architects. The workshop, which was certified by the National Institute of Advanced Studies for Architecture, Pune, drew young architects from all over India.

“The idea of an Auroville design school is an old one; there were many attempts but none of them took off. The two week workshop is a first step towards realizing this dream,” says Mona, one of the organizers. “I agreed to help,” says David, “on the condition that we offered something that nowhere else could.”

What could that be?

Three of the core faculty for the workshop, Mona, David and Tony, are active participants in the ‘Dreamcatchers’ group that meets weekly to share ideas, visions and dreams about the possible development of Auroville. One of the keys to the success of Dreamcatchers is the creation of a space in which participants can express themselves from a deeper level, synthesise diverse inputs, and support each other in making creative leaps. “So we realized,” explains Mona, “that in Dreamcatching we could offer architects a different kind of design tool, something which could enhance their creativity.”

“In other words,” says David, “we decided to focus in the workshop more on process than on product. We wanted the participants to experience an environment which nurtures the possibility of people working together as a team to bring out the highest common factor; to create a platform where synergy takes place.”

“At the same time,” says Mona, “we realized there had to be a theme for the participants to focus upon. For some months I had been participating health practitioners’ meetings where the idea of an integral healing centre had been discussed. This seemed a promising focus because the healers were very much behind it. There was also a larger momentum as a recent economy seminar had identified health and healing as having big economic potential for Auroville.”

The core faculty, consisting of Helmut, Tony, David, Mona and Kiran, eventually decided that participants would work on two concepts for an integral health enhancement centre: one would be reality-based, the other more visionary. The brief was that the centre

should be planned for collaborative interaction between the people using it, while the whole built environment should be healing and ecological.

So how did the workshop go?

“During the first five days,” says Mona, “we didn’t allow the participants to sketch anything. We gave them an Auroville tour, we introduced them to some of our architects and, on the third day, we did Dreamcatching and a Co-creation Café where we asked them to focus on two questions: What do you think is necessary in a healing centre? and How to create an atmosphere conducive to healing?” “Dreamcatching,” explains David, “is a quiet meditative space, whereas the Co-creation Café, where people circulate between small groups, is more dynamic and prepares them for action. But the key elements remain the same. No censoring of ideas, respectful listening, and a moving away from the idea that this concept is ‘my’ concept. I explained that whatever was put in the middle of the circle was ‘copyleft’ (the term used for the protection of Open Source activities from copy-right), because the aim was not to ‘own’ ideas but to synthesise them at the highest level.”

“Architects, by nature, are ego-possessed,” says Tony, “so we were trying to change their normal behaviour by getting them to work in a more collaborative mode. I see this as similar to what we are attempting to do in Auroville itself. Another positive aspect of activities like Dreamcatching and the Co-creative Café is that they raise the level of the dialogue that an individual has with him or herself.”

At the end of five days Sen Kapadia, a well-respected Indian architect and teacher who was the visiting lecturer, took matters into his own hands. He said he wanted to see completed designs by the end of the workshop, so now the participants had to get down to work. He divided them into two groups: one group was to work on designs for the so-called SPARK centre (a spa+park concept which is already being explored by some Auroville healers and therapists), the other on the visionary one.

“His intervention was good,” says David,



PHOTO ALAN

Architects Tony, Mona and David evaluating the workshop

“because we were floating in the process and the participants had had enough of talking: as one of them put it, ‘the champagne cork is about to burst’. During the next ten days they came up with a very rich palette of ideas. Then Balkrishna Doshi (the eminent Indian architect and townplanner) came and turned up the flame even higher. As a result, some participants worked through the following night and two new projects emerged.”

“One of them was inspired,” says Tony. “It was real architecture in the sense of it being a synthesis of many layers of thinking and then suddenly, boom, you see this bird flying.”

So the workshop was a success? “Partially,” says Tony. “Clearly, there was this tremendous energy. While I don’t think we succeeded particularly in harnessing individual creativity to a more cooperative endeavour, we introduced the germs of the idea and I think the impact was real.”

“Dreamcatching and the Co-creative Café took up only four hours of the workshop,” says Mona, “but it made a real impact. In the final feedback session, almost every participant said how much it had helped them in their design process. At the same time, they felt that the workshop was too ‘top-down’; they had expected a more collaborative relationship with us.”

“As organizers we have to admit to hidden agendas,” says Tony. “Mona, for example, sees such workshops as a way of bringing together Auroville architects as a first step, perhaps, to

the setting up of an Architects’ Forum in Auroville. In this context, it was good to see senior Auroville architects, like Piero, Gloria, Helmut and Poppo, helping plan and participating in the workshop. But there is also a real need in Auroville at present for alternative ways of approaching, receiving and sharing community issues and techniques like Dreamcatching and the Co-creative Café could help here. They offer a joyful, gentle way of getting everybody to reengage with the larger Auroville.”

“Many architects are utopian,” says David. “I entered architecture to try to make the world a better place. I think we’re at a point now where we have been given the tools to help the world change, to create a built environment which will have a positive influence upon people. And one of those tools concerns how we come together and communicate with each other.”

So what happens next?

“Doshi, who has set up one of the most dynamic learning environments for architects in Ahmedabad, is keen on us doing something together,” says Mona. “We also thought we could do a longer design workshop to explore some of these ideas further.”

And the designs which came out of the workshop, what will happen to them? “The proposal for the SPARK centre was presented to the healers at their monthly meeting,” says Mona, “and they are definitely interested. But what will manifest and where, is beyond our control.”

Alan

More 'government' control?

In an article in the March 2007 issue of Auroville Today, fears were expressed that the reconstitution of the Funds and Assets Management Committee by the Governing Board was a prelude to an increasing intervention of the Board in the affairs of Auroville. The fears seem to be warranted.

On April 10th, 2007, the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation issued an office order to the executives of the Unity Fund that he, or a person authorised by him, would henceforth be co-signatory to all bank and other transactions of the Unity Fund.

This Fund, started on March 31st, 2006, receives all grants and donations, both Indian and foreign, for all Auroville projects: for Matrimandir, for education, for scientific research, and for projects of the Auroville Fund. It also receives the surplus income of commercial units, the guest contributions, and all interests on deposits. The Budget Coordination Group (BCG) of the Unity Fund, a subgroup of the FAMC, decides on the allocation of the income. Specified donations are transferred to the concerned unit or pro-

ject. Unspecified donations are allocated by the BCG.

Strong emotions arose regarding the order. A delegation of members of the Working Committee and the Funds and Assets Management Committee went to New Delhi to express their concern to the Chairman and a member of the Governing Board. They argued that there is no need for any co-signing of cheques by the Secretary as the Secretary is also a member of the FAMC as well as of the BCG, which decides on the allocation of funds from the Unity Fund. Co-signing, therefore, would only be an administrative headache, add to needless bureaucracy, and also be a token of increasing involvement of the Board in the day-to-day affairs of Auroville which is not required.

These arguments failed to convince the Board members who stressed that the need for co-signing was just an administrative matter, required as the Board is ultimately responsible to the Indian parliament. The Board Members, however, conceded that mistakes were made in the process of issuing this order, as no prior consultation with either the Working Committee or FAMC had taken place.

The arguments of the Board failed in turn to convince the community. A general meeting on May 6th, 2007, unanimously rejected the Office Order. Since then, the Unity Fund executives have refused to submit any cheques for co-signing, thus effectively blocking the implementation of the office order as well as the operation of the Unity Fund itself. The Working Committee has meanwhile sought a legal opinion on the matter, in particular on the relationship between the two 'authorities' of the Auroville Foundation, the Governing Board (GB) and the Residents' Assembly (RA). Does the RA simply have to follow the directives imposed by the GB? Or are both equal parties with equal rights?

If anything, the dispute highlights the fact that the Governing Board and the Secretary are still overwhelmingly seen as 'outsiders' to Auroville, representatives of the 'government', instead of being integral to Auroville's functioning. Consequently, few in the community talk about 'intervention by the Board,' while many express fears over 'more government control'.

Carel

Why so little kindness?

I recently attended a series of General Meetings at which the land crisis was discussed. At the end I went away feeling depressed. This is nothing unusual for me after such meetings, but this time it had a particular focus. For I felt that the group which had been working on intractable land issues for many months had been unfairly treated: instead of appreciation for the hard work they had put into drawing up their proposal, there was widespread criticism.

Now, heaven forbid that we have to accept everything that any group brings as a proposal to a General Meeting. But it seems to me that the manner in which we work out our disagreements is crucial – perhaps even more crucial than the final agreement. And one of the things we lack in the way we treat each other in our public forums is, for want of a better word, kindness.

'Kindness' is an interesting word. Literally it means acting towards others as if they are 'kin', or members of your family. Of course, this doesn't mean that family members don't get into fights. But, generally, even when the conflict is fiercest a line is not crossed, a certain understanding prevails, something fundamental remains unbroken.

Is this true of our collective meetings? I used to think so. Of course, they've always been messy on a human level because of our propensity to elevate 'truth' above love, spontaneity above regard for the feelings of others. Yet even in the 'bad, old days' it was not uncommon to see bitter adversaries of a few moments earlier sharing a post-meeting joke and beedie.

But now? I'm no longer sure. For what saddened me during the recent meetings was not so much the knee-jerk reactions – I've grown used to these – as a lack of contact, a profound failure of understanding, so that people holding different positions did not so much engage with each other as slide past, like inhabitants of different planets.

Why? Some people suggest that it's because we are increasingly isolated from each other, that many of us only have contact with a small, relatively homogeneous group of friends so we are not pushed to understand other viewpoints. Others see this as an inevitable consequence of our size. With a population that is closer to 2,000 than 200 it's unlikely we will know everybody, much less understand them.

But this cannot be the whole story. You don't have to know somebody well to be willing to listen to him and to try to understand his viewpoint. In any case, many of the people at the recent meetings I attended are long-term Aurovilians who have known each other for many years. Of course 'knowing', in this context, often means stereo-

typing. It means remembering one incident, or all the stories from the past 30 years or more, and locking the shutter upon that one-dimensional image.

Yet in one sense perhaps we are one-dimensional, and maybe this touches more closely on the root of the problem. I may be wrong here, but when I observe the emotional charge which some people bring to community meetings I get the impression that many of our discussions and conflicts are not primarily about the issue we appear to be debating, but about ourselves. About our personal dissatisfactions, insecurities, frustrations, about our doubts concerning Auroville and our place here, about what we have or have not achieved. And all this manifests not in honest self-examination but in dogmatic espousals of high ideals or in attacks against authority, against the 'other' whom we claim is oppressing us or leading us astray. (And Auroville, it must be admitted, is stuffed full of people and groups who provide a lot of ammunition for such projections.)

So how can we break out of these cocoons? How can we make the quantum leap from the world of our little selves into a larger understanding of each other and of what the community needs?

Perhaps we could begin by learning to step back, if only by a millimetre, to ask why we are acting in the way we are. Is it really that particular proposal that outrages us, or is it more to do with the uncomfortable fact that it requires us to re-examine what we are doing here? Why do we distrust that person so thoroughly? Is it something he has done, or is it because he reminds us of somebody who we think betrayed us in the past? Or, even more uncomfortably, does he remind us of an aspect of ourselves which we would prefer to stay hidden?

That, of course, is only the beginning. Because even if we grasp that many of our positions, including even our highest ideals, may at least partially be motivated by personal fears and insecurities, we still need to do something about it. And here we almost certainly need support.

This is where kindness comes in. Kindness comes when, through self-observation and suffering, we recognise in others the general human tendencies that we have found in ourselves. It comes with the realization that everyone, at some level, may be fighting a great personal battle. This doesn't mean we have to ignore stupidity or unfairness but, somehow, it draws the sting, it makes it easier for us to understand and support each other on our stumbling journeys towards greater knowledge.

For, the moment we recognise that we are all in the same boat, all desperately in need of help, the weapons drop from our hands...

Alan

L'Av d'Av constituted

L'Avenir d'Auroville, aka L'Av d'Av – pronounced 'lovedove' – is the new Auroville Township Planning and Development Research Organisation.

Joint efforts pay off. This was demonstrated in autumn last year, when members of the Auroville Planning and Development Council (APDC) and of Auroville's Future decided to explore the possibility of forming one planning and development body. Both groups acknowledged that they had been working at cross purposes at the cost of Auroville's development. The APDC, in consequence, had ceased functioning from October 1st.

Auroville Vision 2012, an unofficial group of individuals, was asked to facilitate the process to create a new Planning and Development organization for Auroville. This implied conducting discussions with Aurovilians who over the years have been engaged in various aspects of planning work, in order to assess the human resources and optimal structure and determine the process agreements for Auroville's planning. That work took more than four months.

In its final report to the community, Vision 2012 reported on "months of work, struggle and sharing" and on the attempts of those involved "to overcome mistrust, polarized positions and the lack of belief that it could be different." Though quite a few participants were not able to overcome their mistrust and dropped out at various points along the way, a core group persisted.

In January this year the core group proposed a new organisational structure, called L'Avenir d'Auroville (the name given by The Mother to Auroville's first planning body) with as sub-name 'The Auroville Township Planning and Development Research Organisation.' The new body would have as its task the planning, developing and constructing of the Auroville Township and the planning and developing of its socio-economic fabric. The organisation was spelled out in details. L'Avenir d'Auroville would have nine areas of work, each managed by a competent coordinator. Together, the nine coordinators would comprise the management team. A citizens' body made up of concerned residents would be formed to do in-depth reviews of development proposals. The new body would be committed to communication, and feedback would be integrated for the best end result possible.

The proposal was subject to questioning in two general meetings before, on February 19th, it was discussed in a meeting of the Residents' Assembly. The Residents' Assembly approved the proposal subject to two conditions: that it would have the right to approve the coordinators and that L'Avenir

d'Auroville would submit major planning and development decisions for approval to the Residents' Assembly. The core group heaved a sigh of relief.

But it was too early to rejoice. It proved difficult to find team leaders. More core group members dropped out making accusations of foul play, or that some of the proposed individuals were not competent or it was all 'old hat' – meaning that they suspected that there would be no real change. When finally a team was proposed to a Residents' Assembly meeting on April 16th, the team failed to obtain approval.

The meeting then proceeded to vote on the acceptability of the proposed individuals. But the outcome was challenged by both the Auroville Council and the Working Committee, which, after studying the process of the Residents' Assembly meeting, concluded that the evaluation of support to individual members "was not organized perfectly and hence it is not possible to defend the decisions supposedly taken as decisions of the Resident Assembly." The Council and Working Committee then recommended a different proposal.

Angry outbursts followed, particularly from those who considered that they had been elected. Finally two members each of the Council, the Working Committee and of the proposed planning team sat together for a long afternoon. Focusing on 'what shall we do next?' they hammered out a proposal. The following day, in a full meeting of all three groups, this proposal was accepted with minor modifications and published in the News and Notes, the weekly newsletter.

A novelty in the way L'Avenir d'Auroville will function is that the meetings of its coordinators will be open to the public. This is a historic first (for Auroville!) To prevent misunderstandings and coordinate activities, monthly meetings between the Council, the Working Committee and the coordinators have been scheduled. And the groups agreed that the Working Committee and Auroville Council will evolve a fair workable system to resolve appeals against decisions of working groups, including those of L'Avenir d'Auroville.

Joint efforts have, indeed, paid off. And one other major point was gained from the process: all agree that the functioning and method of decision making of the Residents' Assembly has to be finalised. The Working Committee has promised to submit a proposal to the Residents' Assembly soon.

Carel

In brief

New Matrimandir web presentation

An extensive presentation of several aspects of the Matrimandir has been published on the Auroville website in the last two weeks. It includes a brief history of Matrimandir's conception, its symbolic meaning, the relevance of the number 12, and much on the architectural concept and construction. Visit www.Auroville.org

Developing the Crown road

The first instalment of the funding pursued by the Secretary for the development of the Crown Road (Rs. 64.5 lakhs) has been received. L'Avenir d'Auroville has created a task force called CrownWays to look into the most effective way to utilize these funds as the development of this particular road is somewhat controversial, particularly for those living in its immediate vicinity. The task force will be exploring different options for developing the Crown road, such as developing 'prototype' sections to see how they feel. The full Crown Road will cost between 5 and 10 crores of rupees, depending on the time frame and the options chosen.

Psychiatric help

A psychiatrist connected to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, has agreed to give professional help to deal with psychiatric patients in Auroville. Westerners who hold a similar qualification in their country of origin are only permitted to work in India with special permission, which is not easily given. At present nobody in Auroville has this permission.

Foodlink upgraded

Foodlink, started in 1997 at the initiative of the Farm Group as a collection and distribution centre for all Auroville farm produce, has decided to expand its activities. Operating from its office in the Solar Kitchen, it will now not only deal with dry goods, such as rice and grains, but with all crops and other Auroville farm produce. Foodlink will also ensure that everything sold under its label will have been grown in Auroville, which means within a radius of 20 kilometres of the Banyan tree at Matrimandir. Items will also be labelled to indicate which farm they come from and whether the farm grows organically or not. The initiative hopes to benefit farmers and consumers. Foodlink also intends to expand to markets outside Auroville.

Canyon cleaning

The canyon from Udumbu to Bommayarpalayam has been thoroughly cleaned, as has the small tank between Pour Tous and Aquadyn. The tank in Sadhana Forest has been enlarged and some check dams are being raised to ensure that the maximum rainfall in the next monsoon will be stored.

Passing: Sujata Nahar

Sujata Nahar, the partner of Satprem, left her body on May 4th, barely a month after the passing of Satprem with whom she so closely collaborated for the major part of her life. She was 81 years old. Sujata lived in the Ashram from the age of 9 and did much of the typing of Mother's Agenda. At a later stage she wrote the 'Mother's Chronicles', an 8 volume biography of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

I had to deal with my resistance to being incarnated

B (formerly Bill Sullivan) revisited Auroville recently after a gap of eight years. As he was a founding member of the Auroville Today team, we were naturally interested to find out why he left and what he has been doing since we last saw him.

When B left Auroville in June, 1998 he told us that he was going on a retreat and would be back in a couple of months. So what happened?

"Let me back-up a bit. I first unexpectedly returned to the U.S. in 1997 to care for my mother. She lived alone and had just received news that she had a fatal cancer. One day, not far from the house, I went to a Health and Harmony fair. While walking through the exhibits someone suddenly shouted: 'Hey, you want to go to Auroville, talk to him, he's from Auroville.'" Very surprised, I turned around to find Wayne Bloomquist (former Director of the Sri Aurobindo Association in California) selling books on yoga. He introduced me to some people from the Adena de Joya Centre for Spiritual Education. They asked me to come to their centre and give a talk on Auroville.

While I was there, they asked me if I would like to meet their spiritual teacher. 'Sure', I said. We were sitting on the terrace and this woman came round the corner and said, 'My name is Adena'. She looked right at me and I saw in an instant there was some inner work I needed to do, and I needed to do it with her. But, at the same time, I resisted because I wanted to go back to Auroville."

Adena asked B questions about Auroville, including about how the Aurovilians were transforming through the sunlit path given by Mother. She knew Sri Aurobindo and Mother from her inner experiences of them. They had guided her through a difficult childhood as an orphan in Italy during World War Two. Only later in life did she come to know who they were. Also Mother healed Adena in two near-death experiences. After that, Adena understood she was here for a specific purpose and became a spiritual teacher in 1977.

"When I returned to Auroville after meeting Adena, I couldn't settle back into what now seemed like a former life. I felt I had to go back to California and complete something by working with her. My inner experiences confirmed I really needed to do this. So I went, consoling myself with the thought it would take a month, maybe two, but no more than three months, and then I'd be back. But, wow, I'm still there!"

The work

So what, exactly, was the work he felt he had to do with Adena? "I liked my life in Auroville. Reading Sri Aurobindo and Mother, well, it all made sense, but I was not transforming significantly as a result of it. I felt Adena had received something from Mother that I had missed.

"Adena is not an intellectual," explains B, "what she expresses she receives from various



B

Teachers. The Mother specifically gave her the understanding of the 'resistance' that every soul brings with it into the incarnation. This is because before we were born we were free spirits. Obviously, when I incarnated I felt terribly constrained. My mother told me that I rattled and shook my crib so much that I wore its wooden wheels flat. Still, I needed to come into this plane of being in order to evolve.

"Adena has verified through her work that most people who are born don't really know why they are here, and actually don't want to be here. This 'resistance' is a fundamental feeling. She describes it as the 'root link' to all our apparently different feelings which manifest in negative behaviour and a sense of not being grounded, settled, or happy. Most people are not willing to take responsibility for how they feel, but blame some circumstance or condition as the cause. This 'victim' consciousness leads to 'victimizing' responses towards oneself and others. Addictions are a clear example of the victim/victimizer pattern, and why they are hard to change. People and events will continually trigger my root link feeling until I die unless I clear it through acceptance and awareness. This is the work. Mother summarized it very well in the Auroville Charter where she wrote about the need to be a 'willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness'.

"My own resistance was also compounded by my biological mother's resistance because the cells of my body were created in her field of vibrations. Her love and her negativity were both absorbed in the womb and in my early childhood. So one of the things I had to work on was separating my mother from myself. I was fortunate to be with her in her last days. Both of us benefited

from that time. I had already met Adena by then and that helped me with my mother who was open and left happily.

"Adena always puts it very simply: you have to learn to love yourself and to see that you have a purpose, and every day you get up and affirm: 'I am a good person who is here to do good in the world'."

Reconciliation

Another part of B's work was healing everything he had rejected – "with polite arrogance" – when he left the U.S. in 1974 to start a new life in Auroville. "This included my family, the Catholic Church, and the politics and economics of America.

"I enjoyed being with my brother and sisters when we were working together in selling my mother's house and putting her affairs in order after her passing. I realized a true love for these people. As for the Church, which I once disdained, now I'm actually employed by them!" B is referring to the fact that he is a coordinator for Catholic Detention Ministries assigned to twenty-four institutions (prisons, jails and work camps) in northern California. "It came as a way of making a living, but it's challenging and fulfilling. We organize volunteers to provide interfaith services, counselling and even meditation classes for the inmates. A Bishop is legally my boss, but in the ministry where I work, everyone is, as we say in Auroville, an honorary voluntary worker, including the Board of Trustees. I am the only paid worker!"

Failings of the U.S. penal system

B's work has given him some experience of the U.S. criminal justice system. "It's a real mess. The prisons are overcrowded and they are doing little if anything for the inmates except making them worse. The public is scared by the media sensationalizing crime; then the politicians and prison industry respond with 'tough on crime' policies. The laws and sentencing get stricter, which means more prisons, more police, more surveillance."

B works with a solution called restorative justice. "Restorative justice is based on the fact that when an offence has been committed, a community needs healing. Unlike punitive justice, it takes into account the victim, and part of the restorative justice approach is a victim-offender-community dialogue to work out a way of restoring the balance that has been violated. In this way something can be resolved, healed and even moved to a better place than before. Ultimately, you can judge a society by how it treats its criminals. From this perspective, the U.S. is a cruel society. New Zealand, for example, has changed to the restorative justice model thanks to the input of the indigenous Maori people. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa is another application of restorative justice."

Another thing which B finds personally fulfilling is his film work. "I've always enjoyed

making films, and now I have invented a film production corporation called Cinema Verite International. Thanks to the Community Media Centre of Santa Rosa I have access to millions of dollars worth of digital film and editing equipment and studios. Last year, I did a film about Bo Lozoff, a spiritual teacher who works in prisons. He started the Prison Ashram Project. He tells the inmates that the State is taking care of them now, so here's a great chance to liberate themselves, to free themselves from everything that has made them what they are. In other words, they are not imprisoned by walls but by themselves. In fact, as Bo sees it, we are all in prison. That's why he wrote a book called *We're All Doing Time*."

B also filmed two talks by Sister Helen Prejean who wrote the book *Dead Man Walking*, based on her own experience of counselling Death Row prisoners. "She's much more powerful than her character in the film (Susan Sarandon received an Oscar for her role as Sister Helen)," says B. "She just puts it out there: 'I have witnessed six executions, I walked with these people whom we killed. And I want to tell you that the death penalty is a system of torture because human beings are locked up in a tiny cell with the prospect of being killed any day and with no opportunity to develop or change.'"

The future?

Does B see himself returning to live in Auroville again? "I have no idea. It's great to be re-experiencing Auroville physically, and to have Adena accompany me this time. I'm revisiting now because I had to come back to clear my desk and pick up the pieces and explain to people what had happened. I'm not settled in America, I could move anywhere at any time. I do want to write more books and make more films. The Dawning of Auroville book needs an update from 1992! In 1973 I had an agreement with an American company to do a film on Auroville. They backed out. Now, even that becomes possible: I've already started shooting footage in Auroville.

"Then, there are projects at the Adena de Joya Centre in California. Adena's been teaching for over 30 years, and the Centre has more than 2,000 of her lecture on ageing audio tape. So I'm working on transferring these tapes to more permanent formats."

B also mentions how the Auroville link is unavoidable. Two years ago, the manager of the Catholic Retreat Centre where B has his office mentioned that he would like to put a shrine in the garden. "He asked me, 'What kind of shrine should it be?' And I said, 'To The Divine Mother'. 'Right,' he says, 'Our Lady of Guadalupe. Great idea.' But then he said it would be way too expensive: builders don't come cheap in California. So I told him I knew somebody who could do the whole job at a reasonable price. So that's how we had Ed and Satya, former residents of Auroville who now live in California, build the shrine! And the message that Our Lady of Guadalupe gave over 500 years ago sounds rather familiar: 'Don't worry, do you not know that I am your Mother?'

"Finally," says B, "Auroville is my home, it remains my reference point. So how can I leave or return?"

Alan

Savitri Bhavan, a beautiful place to work

Ram Kumar comes from Edayanchavadi. He has one brother and one sister. His father worked for twenty five years in Auroshika, the incense unit, but when it closed he was unemployed, as many of the villagers were, and that caused a lot of hardship.

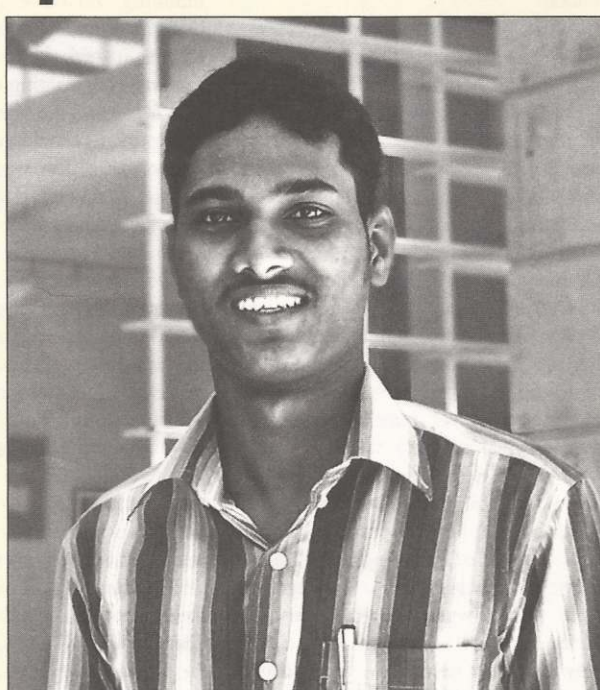
He gets very little work now. Every few years a man from England comes and buys some incense sticks from him, but it is a very precarious existence. I am now the only wage earner in the family. Luckily I was somehow able to attend secondary school in Pondicherry and loved biology and physics but definitely not chemistry.

Twice a week I teach Sanskrit to the older students in New Creation School and this has given me the idea that my true vocation is one day to be a fully trained teacher. I know the Delhi Ashram offers three year courses for young people to train as teachers and I've just heard that I've been accepted, it's a dream come true.

A few years ago Shankar, the principal of the school, suggested that I apply for a one

year training course with Shraddavan at Savitri Bhavana, and that changed my life completely. I have been taught reception work, how to handle audio visual equipment, editing, and all the basic skills to help in running such a wonderful project as Savitri Bhavan. There is no boss or worker here, everyone is equal and tries to learn from each other. Shraddavan even cleans her own glass!

It is such a beautiful place to work. There are so many words in my heart that want to express this but they won't come. I feel Savitri Bhavan can teach you to cooperate with your soul. You can find for yourself who you are in this place. I cannot believe how different it is from my other life. I have learned patience here. Before I used to get irritable with things and was narrow and tense, but now I can listen to the banging of the endless construction work here and imagine it as music. I love meeting the many different people here from all the countries of the world. I meet great people like Dr. Nadkarni and Shraddalu and Nirod who come here to give talks.



Ram Kumar

Savitri Bhavan is a bridge between Auroville and the Ashram and there is a constant flow of activities between the two which I love to be involved with.

Savitri Bhavan is now in a new and exciting phase as we are just starting to work on the gardens and creation is evident everywhere with mountains of earth and Helmut trying to organize all this activity. Last month the new amphitheatre was opened but the banging continues as work is still in progress on the rooms behind.

The maintenance of this beautiful building at a high standard will always need much work and dedication. In the future many important events will take place here and it will be a world centre for those who want to study Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*.

I am happy and proud to have the privilege of working for the Savitri Bhavan.

In conversation with Dianna

Running the Auroville Vehicle Service

Raju was born in the Kulilapalayam Health Centre twenty six years ago and has lived in that village all his life.

"There were six children in our family; two died of chickenpox in the epidemic of 1986 and my father died when I was six months old. My mother worked as an amma in Auroville houses to support us, while my grandmother cared for us. Despite all these difficulties I remember my childhood as being very happy.

When I started going to New Creation School it gave me all the difference in life and introduced me to sports which have been a big part of my life ever since.

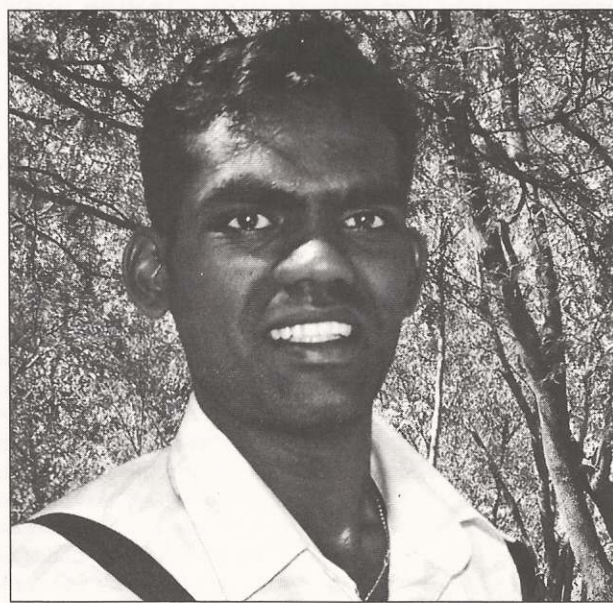
I then went to Auroshika, now Udavi school and loved it as I was treated with special attention as my mother and my sister were working there. When I turned eighteen I realized I should try and support my family who had given me so much, and so I stopped my studies. This made me feel very sad and frustrated but I knew it was the right thing to do and eventually I would find my way.

I worked as a carpenter for a while then got a good job in Aureka

learning to be an engineer, but after only two weeks I had a bad accident to my leg. For three months I could not walk. As I was only a temporary worker they could not pay me and that was a very hard period for me.

Ashok, a friend, realized my plight and in the year 2000 asked me if I wanted to work at the Auroville Vehicle Service which he was setting up. I started doing half days being trained in the work which at first seemed quite complicated. Auroville did not financially support us and so we had to take an 80,000 rupee loan from the Financial Service, and we set up office in Bharat Nivas.

After a few weeks of sitting in front of the computer I felt like a robot and that I was not in the right place. For some reason my Tamil friends used to tease me and call me a 'broker'; 'in Tamil that means something like 'fixer', though in retrospect maybe they were only



Raju

jealous of me, I don't know. Ashok encouraged me to stay on and I gained confidence in this new world and was very glad I did. In 2005 Ashok left to study journalism in Bangalore and so I began to run the Vehicle Service on my own.

It is a tough job for one person. Sometimes I work a twelve hour day as the job involves an awful lot of running around and is very tiring. I

have to go to Tindivanam two or three times a week which is forty kilometres away, as all the papers go through Tamil Nadu, and then to Pondicherry every day. People think I should be there sitting in my office doing the endless Indian paper work, but I can't as I have to rush around to these other places trying to keep everything together.

New vehicles often have faults like being the wrong colour or there are problems with the insurance papers and understandably Aurovilians get impatient. They do not understand that this is India and things do not run as efficiently as in Europe.

We have now moved to a new office next to the Town Hall but the building is very hot and I have to share it with Auroma workers which is not very satisfactory for either of us. It was originally built as a Post Office but the Bharat Nivas Post Office staff did not want to move so we ended up here.

Despite these difficulties I really do enjoy doing a service for Auroville. What would really help me to improve the service would be for someone to sit in the office in the mornings; it really needs someone to be there. I would like to have more time to try to solve our traffic problems and to experiment with an electric vehicle service that could run from the Town Hall to Aspiration. As Aurovilians we are utterly dependant on our motor bikes, unlike any other town. Two years ago Auroville's Future asked me for data about the number of vehicles in Auroville. I put a notice in News and Notes asking people to let me know how many vehicles they had, and I was very frustrated when only about thirty people responded. We don't even know how many cars we have; this is a ridiculous situation. I read we have about eighty cars, but I don't even know if this includes the taxis or not.

I play a lot of sports and this helps me to let off some of the work pressures. I love cricket and volley ball but my favourite way of letting off steam is playing basketball for the Pondicherry higher nationals.

In conversation with Dianna

Working at Pitanga

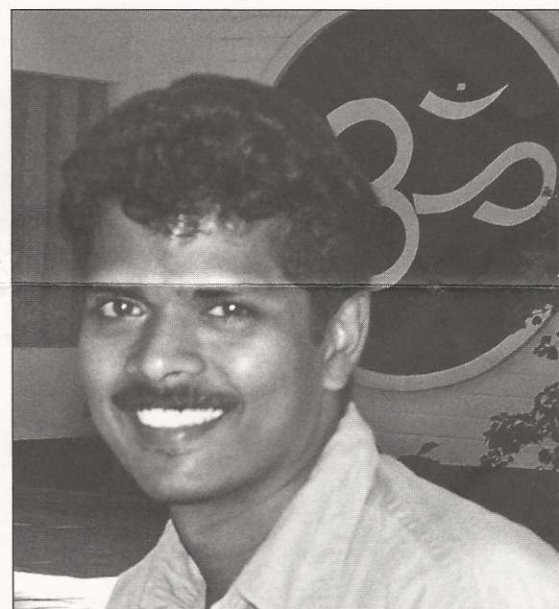
Kumar is working at Pitanga which is 'a dream come true'. Earlier he had worked for ten years in Matrimandir. When he was fifteen his father had a bad accident and died.

A tree had fallen on the electric line and when he was cutting the tree to remove it someone turned on the electrical current and he was electrocuted and died. Because of this all the children in our family who were in higher school had to quit school and start working to support the family.

I became a helper, painting the Matrimandir columns, then a welder, then a marble cutter, so I feel I know Matrimandir very well from the inside. This was my very first opportunity to work with foreigners and at first I was nervous but once I got used to them I enjoyed their company. It was wonderful for me as my English was very poor and I had little confidence, but gradually I picked up English from them. In 1996 a Spanish man and a French man paid for me to accompany them on a trek in the Himalayas. This was an amazing experience for me as it was the very first time I had been out of station. The people on the mountains said they had never seen a Tamil trekking!

When I came back I realized I really wanted to feel what it is to be an Aurovillian, and I wanted to live in Auroville. A friend let me stay in his house in Sve Dam and at first I found it difficult as I had never been alone before. In Tamil families we all live very closely and here I was living in the forest completely on my own. My mother was very much against me leaving the family, as in our tradition sons always stay with their families. At first she made it difficult for me, but little by little I made her understand my dream. In the beginning I used to stay for one night in Sve Dam then go home for a few nights, and I told her not to worry and that I would always visit her. A few years later when I had my own house she came to visit me and told me she was very proud of me and that I had chosen a good place.

After ten years of working in Matrimandir I was asked by Nolly, who ran Pitanga at that time, if I would like to be trained in reception work. I jumped at the opportunity and for three years worked part time with Nolly where I learned a lot of new skills. In the afternoons I worked in the Solar Café and these two jobs gave me a fantastic opportunity to learn English and develop my confidence with foreigners.



Kumar

When Andrea took over Pitanga, she devoted a lot of time to me. She is a very disciplined and organized person and I learned a lot from her. I learned accounts, computers and many other skills. This is truly my karma yoga and she is my teacher. When I started here in 2000 Pitanga was a quiet place but now it gets more and more busy each year. It is a service by and for Aurovilians, though we do take in guests as long as space allows. Financially this is also a help.

We now run almost sixty activities per week, plus many different therapies run by ten Aurovilians. Also I like the cultural activities here. Last year we even had twenty evening performances and our exhibitions are also quite popular.

The building is now sixteen years old which hardly shows. Unfortunately, the beautiful wooden floor in the Yoga and Dance room is regularly attacked by termites so we are making an appeal for funds to repair it.

My future? Just more and more of the same! I would like to see Pitanga be more of a pucca place and expand as we need a big hall for martial art practice and workshops.

Of course, that will take a lot of money but by Mother's grace and Aurovilians' generosity it will definitely happen.

I am now married to Gayathri who teaches crafts in Udavi school and we have two small boys, Barath who goes to Kindergarten and Harish who goes to Transition School. Harish does Aikido, swimming and sports and even horse riding. I cannot believe this is happening to my son! I am very grateful to Mother and happy with my life.

In conversation with Dianna

Teaching at New Creation

Selvaraj comes from Kulilapalayam. He went to the village Trust School till 12th grade. With five people in his family it was difficult for his parents to help him financially so the school helped pay his fees.

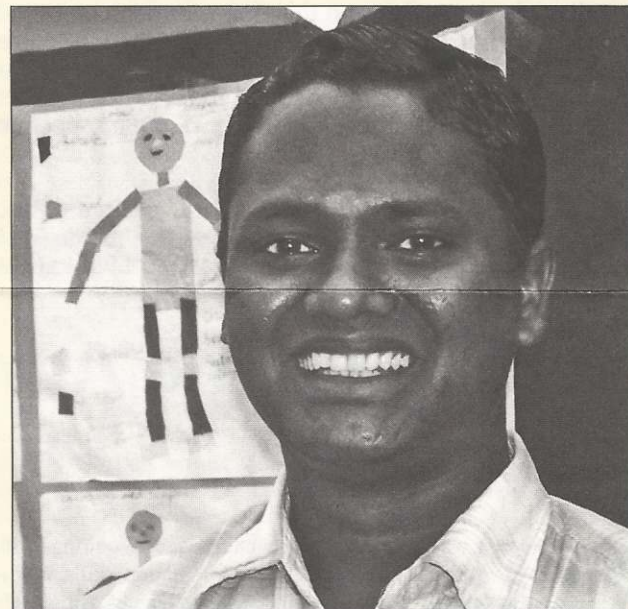
"My father worked in a printing workshop and was poorly paid and my mother worked in Roma's Kitchen and later in New Creation Corner, but it was never enough. My mother could see I loved studying as I always got top marks, and so she borrowed money to send me to Gandhi Secondary School.

When I was in the Kulilapalayam School I used to often study there in the evening, then sleep in the school as it was impossible to study at home. We only had two rooms and there were constant interruptions with people coming in and out and men drinking outside and shouting. At the age of nineteen I had to stop my education as there was no money for me to continue and I was devastated. I worked as a gardener, a mason, then in a leather workshop for three years but couldn't believe this is how I would have to live for the rest of my life.

In 2002, Ashok, a friend, became the project holder for the new Kulilapalayam Cultural Centre and asked me if I would like to do three months work there as a volunteer.

I jumped at the chance and began to work from five to eight in the evening and after a while he paid me 500 rupees a month. Up to one hundred children used to come to the Centre for lessons and to learn English after school and it was a great success. But gradually the numbers fell as the parents didn't like the children going out at night when the village was dangerous and the Centre was next to the busy road and near the cremation ground. They believe in ghosts and are afraid of that area at night.

Then I met Christine, an elderly German lady who had built a house in New Creation Field and lived there on and off for fifteen years. She would come to the centre at seven o'clock each morning to teach the youths English and I eagerly joined her classes. We became friends and she changed my life with her good heart and our talks on spiritual knowledge. Before I met Christine I knew little English and didn't have much self confidence, but I can say I was brought alive by her, that she gave me this life; she was a light to me at



Selvaraj

that difficult time.

I told her my dream was to be a teacher and when Mike and Sue, an English couple were running New Creation Bilingual School, she asked them if I could be an assistant teacher.

They agreed and although I was terribly nervous, the teachers made me very welcome. Christine paid my salary of Rs 3,000 a month and I was extremely happy as I love being with children. My parents are very proud of me which is nice and I am able to support the family. Shankar who is now the principal and was my teacher in 6th grade also gave me a lot of support. He comes from the same background as me and therefore understands the difficulties. I am so proud to be working with him.

In the evenings I do a correspondence course to get my B. Lit in Tamil Studies.

I have just been allocated a room in the new teacher's resident house in Protection and am overjoyed. At last I will have a room to myself where I can close the door and work in peace.

I have one more dream; to become an Aurovillian. I went to the Entry Group two years ago and felt very nervous sitting in front of them. They told me to learn about Auroville from reading and talking to people and to come back in two years, so next month I will go before them again. I have been doing what they suggested and now I know why Auroville was created and I really want to be part of its aspiration, not just for security or prestige. Auroville is next to my village and all these years I never really knew what it was trying to do.

Now I understand that Mother said Auroville is for growing souls and improving the situation of the world. I want to be part of it!

They shake hands when it is all over...

Mediation as a conflict resolution system is increasingly accepted by the Indian judiciary.

“Mediation is making fast inroads into the Indian legal system,” says Sriram Panchu, a senior advocate of the Chennai High Court. Sriram is one of the Organizing Secretaries of the Tamil Nadu Mediation and Conciliation Centre, an honorary assignment which he performs in addition to his law practice. He is also an old friend of Auroville, and it is in this double capacity that we visited him to learn first-hand about the work and remarkable successes of the Centre, and to find out what Auroville can learn from it.

“India has more than twenty five million cases pending in different courts,” explains

Sriram. “It would take a good thirty years to clear the back-log if no fresh cases are filed. This means that for many cases the well-known cliché ‘Justice delayed is justice denied’ will apply. It has become an unacceptable situation.”

“In many other countries in the world, mediation as a system of alternative dispute resolution has quickly gained ground, and was later picked-up by the courts. But this development did not take place in India,” says Sriram. Here, there was little trust in privately initiated mediation.”

Sriram’s personal interest in mediation began at a Salzburg seminar in 1991. It was deepened during a teaching spell at New York University’s School of Law in 2000-01. “That same year I began the Indian Centre for

Mediation. It had a difficult start. Mediation was new and untried. It took a few years before it was appreciated. But then, in 2005, the Chief Justice of the Madras High Court created the Tamil Nadu Mediation and Conciliation Centre as a court-annexed mediation centre. This was a big step for mediation and a historic first in India. The first two batches of mediators – mostly lawyers and retired judges and IAS officers – were trained by the Director of the Dispute Resolution Services department of the Supreme Court of Virginia, USA. Later batches were trained by the organising committee of the Centre.”

‘Court-annexed’ means that Madras High Court judges may refer suitable cases to the Centre, which appoints the mediators. The mediation sessions are held at the Centre, which is located in the High Court building itself. Parties attend with their lawyers, usually after working hours. There is a time limit of 60 days, or a shorter period if the judge directs. On the conclusion of the mediation, the Centre makes a report to the Court attaching the agreement, if reached. The court then passes orders enforcing the agreement. The cases referred by the Court include personal and family matters, contracts and civil disputes, property and partition suits, and company petitions.

“The system is working well,” says Sriram. “Litigants are reassured when they are told that no decision can be imposed on them, that the process is voluntary and can be terminated whenever they want, and that they have to participate and arrive at the decision themselves. They are appreciative of the savings in time and cost, and are happy that disturbed relationships are often restored. They like the round table format.” And the lawyers? “Most of them are supportive of the process” says Sriram. “They come with their clients to the mediation sessions and often help to come to a settlement. They benefit by having satisfied clients, and are also able to earn their professional fees.”

However, it is not just the professional and monetary factor that are at work. Sriram believes that the mediation process also taps into a long-neglected need of the members of the legal profession to be recognised as



Sriram Panchu

resolvers of conflict, who bring about a better relationship and harmony.

The Centre has meanwhile received further support, from the Chief Justice of India as well as the President of India, and more court-annexed mediation centres have been opened: in the High Courts of New Delhi, Calcutta, Allahabad, and Madurai. In Tamil Nadu, mediation centres have moreover been annexed to various District Courts. The Centre gives advice on operating the mediation centres and has trained over 400 lawyers in different parts of the country to be mediators. It has also taken the lead in establishing an Association of Indian Mediators.

While the importance of mediation is increasing, it is no panacea for all conflicts. “Some cases permit of no remedy other than a court,” writes Sriram in his book *Settle For More*. Mediation, in his experience, works best in disputes where there is a relationship between parties; of family ties, commercial interaction, social connections and the like. In these cases mediation prevents the rupturing of relationships and their litigational backlash which is often felt for years after a court has passed judgement. Says Sriram: “Instead of walking out of the court room in anger and frustration, here they mostly shake hands when it is all over.”

In conversation with Elvira and Carel

What is mediation?

Mediation is a process in which the mediator, an external person neutral to the dispute, works with the parties to find a solution which is acceptable to all. The most important aspect of mediation is that the mediator cannot impose a decision on the parties. The mediator controls the process, but the outcome is always in the hands of the parties.

Mediation is completely voluntary, both in the decision to try it as well as to continue with it. This is best illustrated by saying that a party is free to leave the mediation table, without needing to give reasons, at any time if it feels that it is not being served well by the process. In its focus on non-coercive and consensual processes, mediation is, thus, radically different from the formal adversarial system. Mediation creates an atmosphere of confidentiality and enables the participation of parties, with their legal counsel or just by themselves. And while attention is paid to the law in so far as it impacts on the matter, the objective is to arrive at a solution acceptable to the parties which will end the dispute.

The process can be summarised by saying that the mediation opens up communication, focuses parties on their long-term interests, gets them to be realistic about their case and its prospects, encourages them to come up with options for settlement, and helps them to refine those options to yield an agreement that both parties see as a fair and proper end to the dispute. The mediator is a facilitator: moving parties from the extreme ends of the disputing spectrum to the common ground of settlement.

Sriram Panchu in *Settle For More*, p. 22
Settle For More has been published by
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Setting up the Auroville Mediation Centre

“It was one of those chance remarks. But it changed my life,” says Elvira. “A visiting filmmaker talked to me about joining a course on *International Conflict Transformation*. It sounded interesting. I checked the internet, liked what I read, and applied.” Elvira had been working for the Housing Service, and had later joined the Auroville Council, but resigned before the end of the term as she got deeply frustrated with Auroville’s politics. “I was at a bit of a dead-end in Auroville,” she says “and was looking for ways in which I could make a meaningful contribution to Auroville. This course seemed to be the answer.”

Though her application was two weeks over the deadline, Elvira got accepted. The 4-months residential course took place partly at the Academy for Conflict Transformation in the city of Königswinter, Germany, and partly in Israel and Palestine.

The course covered conflict analysis, conflict transformation and provided hands-on teaching in mediation and facilitation. “We learned about peace and conflict dynamics, and how to use professional and modern methodologies to analyse a conflict situation,” says Elvira. “This included the social, societal, economic, political and gender aspects of a conflict. Then we were trained in mediation and facilitation.” Afterwards the students were given internship placements in various countries. Elvira was sent to Palestine, where she studied the conflict resolution work done by the International Center of Bethlehem and other NGOs. “It was an extremely useful period. I’ve begun to understand the complexity of the situation in the region and got an idea of how civil peace work and conflict work interrelate.”

Acquiring mediation and facilitation skills was one part of the course. More challenging for Elvira was acquiring the relevant social and personal skills. “It meant letting go of patterns and habits and being open to different and sometimes challenging or even provocative perspectives. The exercise is essential for a good mediator, but it’s a tough one,” she says.

Back in Auroville, Elvira found the field wide open. A proper conflict resolution system is yet to be evolved. “I would love to set-up an Auroville Mediation Centre,” says Elvira. “But for such a Centre to function well, we’ll first have to train the mediators.” Elvira contacted the Tamil Nadu Mediation and Conciliation Centre, and received a positive reply to her request to train a number of Aurovilians. “It is an interesting challenge for them as they normally train lawyers. The majority of interested Aurovilians do not have a legal background,” says Elvira. “But they have assured us that that is a minor issue. What’s required is some background in social work, counselling, organisational development, and proper communication qualities. We must also make sure that the group of mediators represents the diversity of the community in language, gender, and cultural and economic background so that they resonate with different sections of the community.”

Once properly trained the mediators can offer mediation in Auroville, and gradually, the Auroville Community Mediation Centre could be built. Says Elvira, “Eventually, the work of such a



Elvira

Centre could widen from mainly being involved in Auroville to providing mediation to people living in the villages of the bioregion, to outside organisations and individuals. But this is still a distant dream.”

Meanwhile, Elvira’s knowledge is being put to test. Since returning to Auroville, she has successfully completed two mediations and has been asked to do more. Based on her experience, Elvira has come to the conclusion that the system of conflict resolution where someone or some group takes a decision over the heads of the parties is not very suitable to Auroville. Mediation as a consensual system of conflict resolution works better and is more in accordance with Auroville’s ideals.

Carel

Auroville conflict resolution so far

What do Aurovilians do if they have a conflict with their partners, their neighbours, a community, at work? Usually they first try to solve it themselves – alone or with the help of friends, family or colleagues. If that fails, the next step leads to the Auroville Council. This group is responsible for all internal issues which are not covered by the mandate of any other group – and by default, therefore, for conflict resolution.

Depending on the case, the Auroville Council may decide either to deal with the issue itself or ask a few of its members to solve the issue together with the parties. The Council may also refer the case to so-called ‘arbitration’. Some years ago, a list was made of people who were prepared to help solve conflicts and act as ‘arbiters’. The arbiters selected by the parties or by the Council would discuss and assess the situation, and then come to a decision which is binding on the parties.

This system has a number of disadvantages. A major one is that members of the Council are seldom experienced in conflict work. Those on the list of arbiters suffer from a similar lack of training. A second problem is that, if the selection of the arbiters is done by the Council, they may be biased, choosing those who are most likely to agree with them. Then there is the problem of executing a decision made by the arbiters: the working groups that are supposed to execute the decisions sometimes say that they are not bound by the arbiters’ decisions, particularly if they don’t agree with them. Last but not least, this system tends to occupy a disproportionate amount of the Auroville Council’s time, preventing it from doing other essential work.

An area which has not been addressed is how individuals can appeal against a decision of an Auroville working group. Recently, the Working Committee and Auroville Council informed the community that they will evolve a fair, workable system to resolve appeals against the decisions of working groups.

EM for soil cleaning and malaria eradication

In February this year, the Efficient Micro-organisms (EM) International Partners Conference in Kansas City, USA, honoured Aurovilian Margarita Correa for "A life dedicated to Social Responsibility with EM." The award was in recognition of Margarita's work in using EM for cleaning contaminated soil in a factory near Pune and for the eradication of malaria in a tea estate in West Bengal.

Al over the world concerns are being raised about soil and groundwater pollution caused by industrial effluents. In the city of Loni Kalbhor, near Pune, the firm of Royal Philips Electronics discovered that the soil below and around its factories had been polluted by 1,1,2-trichloroethene (tri, trichloroethylene, TCE), a chemical used for removing lubricants (oils). It estimates that about 1800 kg of TCE is present in the soil and groundwater up to a depth of 15 metres.

A conventional method for cleaning soil and ground water contaminated by TCE is the so-called "Pump and Treat" method. In this method, contaminated water is continuously pumped up, cleaned and injected back into the groundwater. Another conventional method is cleaning the soil through chemical oxidation. Both methods have serious setbacks. They take many years (two to thirteen years and beyond depending on the extent of contamination) and the results are difficult to predict.

For technical reasons, none of the conventional solutions could be used to solve the problems at Kalbhor. Philips India then decided to clean the soil by using Efficient Micro-organisms (EM).

EM is a generic term used for innumerable combinations of over 80 strains of beneficial and efficient

micro-organisms. EM was pioneered in the 1970s and 1980s by Dr. Teuro Higa, University of Ryukyus, Japan, for use in agriculture to replace fertilizers and chemicals. Over the past twenty years many more applications of EM technology have been explored which include effective treatment of hazardous industrial waste and effluents. One of the pioneers here is the firm Sustainable Community Development (SCD) in Kansas, USA. SCD developed its own brand of EM, SCD EM™, primarily designed to improve soil conditions.

"To test if EM could clean soil polluted with TCE, we dug five holes of varying depths in a test area of 2 x 1.5 metres," says Margarita. "Each week in a six months period, two hundred litres of SCD EM solution were dripped continuously into each hole. This volume was later reduced to 100 litres a week." The methodology used was basic. "We connected dripper lines to a few large containers," says Margarita. "There was no need for electricity, elaborate infrastructure or qualified manpower." The process was monitored daily and samples of soil and ground water were regularly sent to the Netherlands for analyzing.

The results showed that, after a mere 12 months, the presence of TCE in the soil and groundwater had been brought to below Dutch intervention values. It was also found that the heavy metal concentrations in the soil and the ground water had come down during the period of the SCD EM treatment and that the hydrocarbon contamination of the ground water had been drastically reduced.

Philips India has reasons to rejoice. Not only can it now embark on an efficient soil and groundwater cleaning programme, but the process also involves substantial savings. The estimated cost of removing TCE by any of the conventional methods ranged between Rs 32 – 50 million (US \$ 700,000 – \$ 1,200,000) while decontamination by SCD EM is estimated at Rs. 1.5 million (US \$ 34,000), less than 5% of the cost of decontamination by conventional methods.

Another advantage is that the SCD EM process showed excellent results by the end of 12 months. The conventional methods for this particular plot would take an estimated 24 months for decontaminating the soil and up to 60 months for decontaminating the ground water.

Margarita is extremely happy too. "All over the world, million of tons of TCE pollute soil and groundwater. It has now been shown that EM can be used to efficiently and cost-effectively to clean such a difficult pollutant. The results also indicate that the method may be used to treat soil and water contaminated with chlorinated pesticides, heavy metals and hydrocarbons."

Malaria eradication

Malaria has become a 'near epidemic' in the Dooars region of North Bengal. In the first months of 2006 alone, it claimed 88 lives and infected 20,000 people. DDT spraying had failed to control malaria. In August 2006, the city of Kolkata (Calcutta) was also declared a malaria zone.

There is one exception in the area. It is the Puthajhora Tea Estate where, for the last 3½ years, malaria control has been done 'organically.' Puthajhora's organic and bio-dynamic tea has been accredited and certified by agencies in the USA, Europe, Japan, India and Australia. Puthajhora uses a synergy of two sustainable and eco-friendly technologies to achieve this accreditation: the use of Efficient Microbes (SCD EM) and Neemazal, a neem extract based pest control product developed by the Indian firm of E.I.D. Parry. The results have been dramatic.

In the malaria peak season of May-August 2003, 734 people out of the Estate's population of approximately 6,000 were affected by malaria. In May 2004, the last DDT spraying on the estate was done. In June



PHOTO COURTESY MARGARITA

Margarita

2004, monthly spraying with EM and Neemazal started. The synergetic effect of the two technologies reduced the number of infected persons to 136 in 2005 and 41 in 2006.

The technologies have also proven to be cost-effective. The Tea Estate pays substantially less for medicines as fewer people are infected (about 11% of the costs incurred earlier), while the costs of EM and Neem spraying are about one third of the cost of controlling mosquitoes using traditional methods. Another important benefit of using SCD EM and Neemazal is that these products are environmentally friendly, unlike DDT.

In January this year, Margarita applied for funding from the Bill Gates Foundation to demonstrate that the Puthajhora Tea Estate approach can be used on a large scale. The project aims at introducing the technologies in three tea estates which have a combined population of around 20,000 people. Under this project, the entire area, including the surroundings of houses, water bodies, drainages, garbage dumps and other potential areas for mosquito breeding, will be sprayed monthly with a combination of SCD EM and Neemazal during the malaria peak period for a period of 4 years.

Margarita hopes that the project will be approved. "It is absolutely necessary that we demonstrate that these low-cost and eco-friendly technologies are sustainable on a larger scale, and that they are not only realistic alternatives to chemical treatment processes, but the best solutions to control malaria and achieve its near eradication in the area."

Carel



PHOTO COURTESY MARGARITA

Spraying EM and Neemazal on the Puthajhora Tea Estate

Lessons from an uphill battle

Auroville's bio-pesticide campaign is stuck, notwithstanding years of effort at education and awareness-building.

Despite years of campaigning for a pesticide-free bioregion and the abundant availability of neem-based organic alternatives, chemical pesticides are still being openly applied in the cashew topes within and surrounding Auroville. From January to April, a fine mist of pesticides is sprayed over the cashew topes in the area, poisoning t-mosquitoes as well as other, often beneficial, insects and, in passing, the human population. The spraying teams too are in danger, as they have little protection, not even face masks.

In early April, an Aurovilian suffering from the side-effects of pesticide spraying got together with the 'No more pesticides team' and put out a community-wide appeal, particularly to Tamil Aurovilians, for a brainstorming session on the topic, 'How to make Auroville and the bioregion pesticide free in 3-5 years.'

The timing was perfect. It was right in the middle of the spraying season. Many residents both in Auroville and the villages were suffering from symptoms of poisoning – headaches, sinusitis, runny noses, burning eyes, and nausea – notwithstanding the availability of Okoubaka, a homeopathic first aid remedy made available by Auroville's homeopaths.

On behalf of the 'No more pesticide team', Njal reported on the work of the anti-pesticide movement over the last seven years. They have published and distributed over 50,000 informative leaflets in Tamil and English; used street theatre performances, video showings and presentations at schools to spread the

message in the surrounding villages; and they ran the successful cashew 'Trial plot' demonstration site opposite the Solar Kitchen where cashew trees are organically cultivated with natural compost and neem-based sprays. Over the past five years, the cashew harvest from the trial plot has shown a consistent increase, with the exception of the last year, when unseasonable rains destroyed the flowers.

Yet, said Njal, the campaign has not given the effect hoped for.. Why? He gave several reasons. It is difficult to do the work with a small team of only two or three individuals. The work, he felt, needs the support of the entire community.

Another reason given was that farmers do not altogether trust neem-based pesticides, despite efforts at education and awareness building. Though neem-based pesticides are often given for free by Aurovilians to their Tamil neighbours, the farmers often mix them with chemical pesticides "to make the concoction more effective".

But the Tamil Aurovilians questioned the approach itself and said the efforts of the 'No-more pesticide team' were too much based on a Western



The cashew trial plot in May: waiting for the next season

approach. Logical explanations won't work, they said. A more culture-oriented approach, or even a religious one, might have succeeded better as neem is a tree associated with the Goddess Mariamman. They also pointed out that, in the early days of the campaign, several alternatives were promoted, which led to confusion amongst the villagers.

Then there is the financial side of the problem: cashew is a major part of the farmers' income, and

they can't afford any risk. That's why they still spray with chemical pesticides and continue to use chemical fertilisers. Couldn't Auroville offer to buy the entire harvest on the condition that it won't be sprayed? One Aurovilian is already doing that, paying his neighbour farmer the money he would have made on his cashew harvest on condition that there is no spraying whatsoever. As a result, the plot is pesticide-free.

The idea is an old one. Auroannam, in the past, tried to do it for selected fields but failed. To undertake such an operation for the entire Auroville area might well be beyond Auroville's means. But the idea merits studying once again. Organic cashews fetch high prices, but for these plots to be certified organic, no spraying can take place for a minimum of five years. If an

Auroville unit could be created that would purchase all locally-grown cashew nuts from the farmers with a best-price guarantee, a win-win situation for all concerned would be reached – even more profitable once the plots are certified 'organic'.

Meanwhile the 'No more pesticide team' has this to say: "This is not a campaign of a few years; this is a campaign of a lifetime".

Priya Sundaravalli

Cosmic cows in Creativity

The exhibition Cosmic Cows in Creativity not only served to buy two much needed cattle grids, but also created awareness about the need for a community studio and cooperation among artists.

Creativity honours its name. Unique to this community are its collective art studio and the Hall of Light. The studio atelier is open to all residents - from professional artists to those who want to explore art material for the first time. One day a week, there is a 'Drawing Experiment' offered, where those who sign up, investigate their unique expression through explorations on paper. The Hall of Light, on the other hand, a much larger space, hosts exhibitions as well as serves a wide range of activities: Valeria teaches ikebana, the art of Japanese flower arrangement; there are regular classes in pilates and salsa, and the occasional musical jamborees. Their common denominator: it's all highly creative.

'The Cosmic Cow' was the most recent art exhibition at the Hall of Light. Its highlight were the paintings of blue and white cows floating benignly in placid galaxies of the Milky Way. They were the work of Audrey, a professional artist from California who joined Auroville in October last year. Works of fellow resident artists, Adil and Marlenka, plus Ingaborg, a Drawing Experiment regular, were also on display.

The objective of the exhibition was to raise money to pay for cow-grids at the community gates. "Creativity needed to keep cows out of its flower beds, but lacked the funds. So we pooled our works and offered it for sale," Audrey said cheerfully. The exhibition was a success. With the works made deliberately affordable by Auroville standards, almost all creations found a happy home. Now, cows and residents live in peaceful co-existence, separated by sturdy iron grids.

"Why 'Cosmic Cow'?" I asked Audrey.

"Aerial views of the earth have affected my work for years. Here cows are such a powerful symbol. It was natural for me to want to present them from above. That led me to putting them in the cosmos. I was at that time doing large paintings of galaxies anyway. Also I found a rooftop over the barnyard at Pitchandikulam where I could draw and photograph the backs of cows. It's quite a landscape with their bone structure, massive girth, and all of it supported by those little hooves."

She went on to say, "It's fascinating to me how the concept of the universe has changed during my lifetime. I was profoundly affected by the landing on the moon and the picture of the Earth rise from there. It was a powerful image, which made us realize that there we were on that beautiful little blue-green ball... While camping in the Sierras, I woke up before dawn one morning and spon-

taneously said "Here we come, Sun!" My body had realised that it was the earth which was turning around the sun, rather than the sun coming up. This experience made me think I was on the right track; the track of what I am still not sure!" Since then, Audrey has explored the view of the earth from hot-air balloons and small airplanes, making aerial photographs that became raw material for her work.

More art gyms please

Though Creativity's art studio is fulfilling its purpose, Audrey feels that it is limited in space and could serve a larger group. "Using one's hands to make images can be a healing activity, both for the mind and for the body. There is a wrong conception that one has to be an artist to enter a studio. It is for everyone. We've known for centuries that art balances the brain; it helps to articulate, and develop one's being integrally. Time and again, I've witnessed people working out some problem by just doing a drawing or a painting. When they concentrate, go inside, and create from there and not from the mind, something happens. What is expressed is not important - it's the process that matters. And whether it was intended or not, it affects the body favourably, and a balance or resolution is reached."

"Seen from this perspective, I feel Auroville needs to consider its lack of collective art studios or art gyms, as I like to call them. There are several gyms to take care of the body. But where are the spaces to explore and express oneself through images? Such art gyms should be open 24 hours of the day, so that people can come at any time they feel they want to work. It just needs a large and simple space, with plenty of light, good ventilation, ample storage space for inks and material. Anybody should be allowed to come: artists, guests, newcomers, villagers, workers, on a minimum of conditions - quiet respect for the space, the materials, and the fellow workers. Such art gym would also answer to the needs of visiting artists who would like to do creative work in Auroville. Right now, there is no place for them to work or even to meet other artists, and this needs to change."

Changing the artist's attitude

"All over the world we see artists coming together for multi-disciplinary projects. They



PHOTO PRIYA SUNDARAVALLI

Audrey

work together, and sometimes live together forming artists' communities. Why not in Auroville? We artists can pool our resources, so that those who are well-established and sell their works can help those who are not so successful and have to buy their materials from their limited Auroville maintenance - which is almost impossible."

Audrey is sufficiently realistic to doubt that will change fast. "Artists are very much attached to their identity. Those who have worked hard to get a reputation usually don't like to be associated with artists who don't have one." One of the ways to promote this, she feels, could be to have group shows, something that is already beginning to happen in Auroville. "I have heard of other ideas too, like the new website AurovilleArts.com that will showcase the works of all Auroville artists. Another is the idea for an Auroville art lending library! But most of all, we need a place to work together - to support each other and to learn from one another."

In conversation with Priya Sundaravalli

To our readers

This summer issue of *Auroville Today* contains fewer pages than normal due to the family circumstances of two of the editors. This will be rectified in subsequent issues.

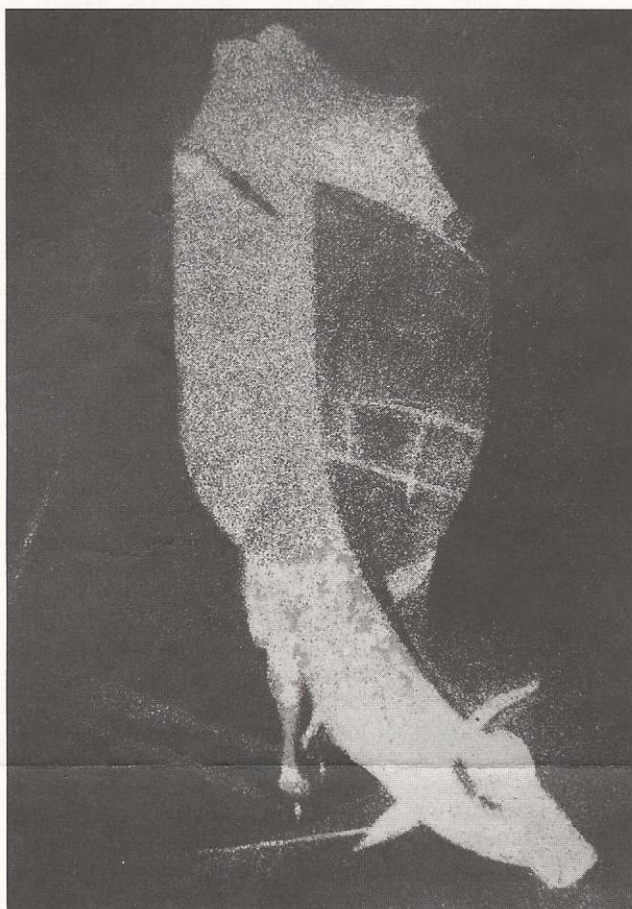


IMAGE COURTESY AUDREY

One of Audrey's cosmic cow paintings

AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL

AVI meeting in Kazakhstan

Kathy reports from Almaty

We have just come to the end of our 4 day Auroville AVI meeting in Almaty, Kazakhstan. It has been a typically action-packed few days at the Sanatorium Tau Samal about 20 kilometers outside of the Almaty in the mountains.

The Auroville group arrived after uneventful travel the night before the meeting was due to begin. We were heartily received by a welcoming committee of Ruslan and his brother Nurlan at Almaty Airport, and swiftly taken by bus to our place of stay and venue for the meeting over the coming days. Martin and Elizabeth from UK had arrived earlier in the day while Camille from Switzerland joined us for breakfast the next morning. Those of us who had gratefully escaped the heat of Auroville were delighted by the novelty of hot showers and blankets!

About 50 visitors attended the programme and stayed throughout the day. By the end of the day when we were all quite saturated with information, we enjoyed a walk through the hills where we appreciated the cool mountain air, the spectacular backdrop of green hills and a few snow-capped peaks before dinner. The evaluation after dinner first revolved around the topic of ticks - it seems the hills were infested with them, and some carry encephalitis virus. Ruslan made us realise this was no joke and soon we adjourned to our rooms in pairs to check each other for ticks(!) - a few people unluckily had been bitten and had to be given medication.

Over the coming days, there was a growing bond of warmth and connection that

Conference highlights

- Introduction to the meeting by Elizabeth Edema (AVI UK)
- Address by Ms. Tarja Virtanen, Head of UNESCO Almaty Cluster Office
- Address by the Director of Institute of Cultural Policy and Art Mr. Auezhan Kodar.
- Film screening: "Dream of the Divine"
- Talks by Prof. Kittu Reddy on Auroville and India, The concept of Auroville as given by the Mother; and the idea behind Auroville.
- Talk by Auezhan Kodar on the way that landscape affects the consciousness, on the similarities that exist between India and Kazakhstan and on the traditional shamanistic ways that were close to nature.
- Concept of the International Zone and National Pavilions
- Auroville's technologies, inventions, experiments, research, and environmental work over the years.
- Open day at the old music hall in Almaty city

developed amongst those of us who stayed in the sanatorium, in spite of language difficulties which were not insignificant!

The last day of the meeting, a public event was planned in the city to be accessible to more people, but this was somewhat disappointing seeing that only about twenty people came; this in spite of Ruslan speaking to a university student group and placing posters in a dozen universities and in the local media. Quality-wise however, the interaction was good and intense.

All visitors were presented with a card with the charter of Auroville and some soil from the Matrimandir gardens.

Throughout the four days of the meeting several people expressed how touched and grateful they were for Auroville's existence. Some even said that they plan to come to Auroville, and that they were preparing just for this. Such stories moved us very much.

After the meeting was officially over, we participated in a banquet lunch at a beautiful Kazakh restau-

rant, a gift of Ruslan from Moscow, who will be hosting a meeting later in the year about Auroville. He will receive the posters and remaining books and products that were not sold at this meeting.

That evening we walked through the town and could finally open our eyes to our surroundings and take in the place. The light drizzle did not dampen our good spirits. Ruslan and André went off to organise accommodation in Almaty for the coming days, and we met up later and made our last trip up to the mountain together, tired but satisfied!

In the coming days we will have the chance to experience more of the culture and scenery of Kazakhstan. We stay now in two different rented apartments that are somewhat quirky; but fortunately we are all getting along well together, and managing the 'intimate' conditions.

With the glorious sunshine, the warm-hearted Kazakh people, and the spectacular snow capped peaks as a backdrop of this city, we are all smiling!

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