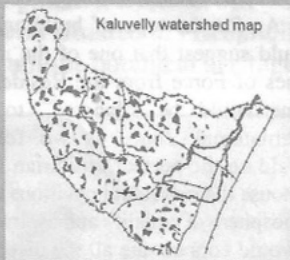


Cover Story:

Environmental Outreach



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Water: a common resource

An ambitious project aims at establishing village water user associations.

The Palmyra resource team has begun to address problems of shifting water use patterns and degeneration of natural irrigation tanks in the villages in Auroville's bioregion, by getting the villagers themselves fully involved.

Palmyra is the name of an Auroville resource team, with ten years of field experience in water and land reclamation work in the local region. It has recently undertaken an ambitious five-year project funded by ICEF, a trust founded by the Indian and Canadian governments in the broad area of environmental development. The aim of the project is to restore and desilt village tanks in the Kaliveli watershed as well as evolve co-operative approaches to sustainable water and resource management in the region. If successful the project could provide a model for addressing pressing water issues in the state.

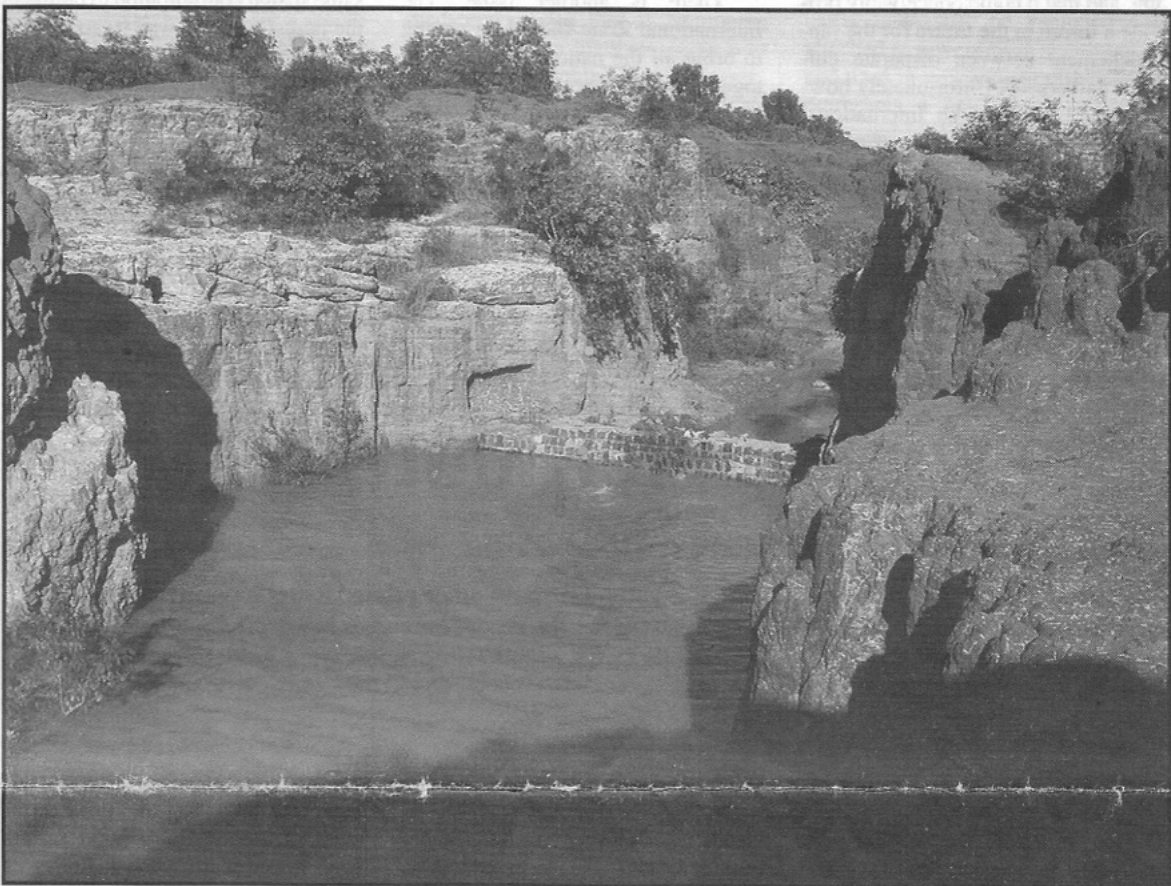
It is estimated that irrigation tanks, which are basically enhanced natural depressions often covering 40 hectares, account for about 38% of the total irrigated area in Tamil Nadu and over 30 % in South India. Many of these tanks, which become lakes when full, were constructed hundreds of years ago and are in an increasing state of disrepair, and their storage capacity is greatly diminished by silt deposits due to unsustainable land use

patterns. Other problems include inefficient and inequitable distribution of tank water. "The patterns of water use in the region have changed over the centuries due to shifting social and economic factors and population growth," says Jürgen Putz, the project director and executive of Palmyra. "Originally the tanks were not only for irrigation but for drinking water as well. Water had a spiritual dimension. This can be seen in the many small temples that in some areas still surround the tanks."

Social and economic factors

Essential to the project's success is both the backing of the panchayats (elected village bodies) and the full-fledged involvement of the villagers themselves in its implementation. This is done through the establishment of village water-user associations.

"The project has been underway for six months," says Ravi Bhalla, a trained ecologist and one of its co-ordinators. "So far we've contacted about 65 villages in the Kaliveli watershed, out of which we've short-listed seven for the first year of the project. Ten more villages will be chosen in the second year and another six in the third. Our definition of a village is a revenue village that comprises many hamlets and low-caste colonies—which other Auroville working groups treat as separate villages in their own right. We choose



A new check dam in the Utility canyon, as yet unfinished, still managed to hold 10,000 cubic metres of water after the recent heavy rains.

Environmental outreach

During the first years, Aurovilians put all their efforts into restoring the plateau where they live. Today they are reaching progressively further out, both into the bioregion and India as a whole, sharing their expertise and learning from indigenous traditions of knowledge.

In our cover story on this page and the centre pages, we profile some of Auroville's most exciting environmental outreach activities which are intertwining us, more and more, with the lives, the concerns and aspirations of our neighbours.

Editors

STOP PRESS

Developers' land bought

On the 28th March, Auroville signed an agreement with Saravanam Real Estates, Pondicherry, for the purchase of the 50-acre plot which the latter had acquired in the Green Belt. Saravanam was planning a large-scale residential development there. (See Auroville Today no. 134.) Auroville also has the possibility to purchase two further 50-acre plots in the vicinity. This would greatly diminish the risk of large-scale development in the Green Belt in the future.

villages where people are willing to work together and at this initial stage avoid villages where there is caste or inter-village conflict which can occur when more than one village shares a tank. Five of the seven villages chosen have already set up farmers' associations and we have established nine women's groups in seven of the villages." Community mobilisation precedes actual physical work. "Our

mobilization team of about fifteen people, mainly drawn from Auroville's neighbouring villages, goes out and introduces Palmyra and what we're doing. First they meet with the panchayat presidents and traditional leaders of the village. Tanks are situated on paramboke (government) land and if the area exceeds 100 acres it belongs to the Public Works Department. An area of 50 to 100

acres belongs to the Agriculture Dept., and below 50 acres, to the local panchayat. The panchayat is the development arm of the government and the institution that is meant to develop the village, and as we intend to pull out after five years, the long-term sustainability of the project depends on its backing.

Once a village has expressed an

(continued on page 4)

Auroville Entry 2000

A new proposal

The entry process into Auroville has often generated controversy. Are we too lax? Too open? Should we trust that the one year probationary period will ensure that the right people join, or should we impose stricter initial conditions? (And who, by the way, are the 'right people'?)

Today a new attempt is being made to draw up material conditions for those coming to live in Auroville. We take a critical look at the draft document.

See page 2

The Sappadu project

Helping those who cannot help themselves

What happens to the old, the widows and the handicapped who live alone in the villages? Often they have been abandoned by everybody and are condemned to live in dilapidated huts and beg for food. But now this is changing, thanks to the efforts of dedicated Aurovilians, friends abroad and outreach workers in the Village Action organization.

We tell the story of a project which is bringing back hope to those who are at the bottom of the pile.

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Building the City

A group of architects suggests an alternative to the International Zone...

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Population

Auroville population charts showing our age, our nationalities and growth rate...

Page 3

Research

Auroville's Solar Kitchen started using its huge solar bowl concentrator.

Page 3

Open forum

Carel suggests Auroville adopt a conflict resolution model to cope with the pain of the past...

Page 6

Auroville & India

Bindu visits the Meenakshi temple in Madurai

Page 8



Urban Musings

LINES, a group of architects working in Auroville, suggests an alternative approach to the development of the International Zone.

After the recent acquisition of a further 22 acres of land in the International Zone, and the resultant resuscitation of the International Zone Co-ordination Group, we felt it both important and timely to suggest an alternative approach to the development of the International Zone. Few people would disagree that Auroville could potentially be the ideal place to bring the nations of the world together in an atmosphere of peace and understanding, and that it could conceivably provide a forum in the future for the rapprochement between disparate cultures and creeds. Unfortunately however, we feel that the International Zone is presently in danger of merely becoming the Indian equivalent of the

EPCOT Centre at Disneyworld in the USA, where each nation has been caricatured both architecturally and culturally with a resulting tepid, kitsch eclecticism. If each nation or cultural group is given its own site (as *The Mother suggested—eds*) and allowed relative free rein in the design of its own pavilion, we may once again be served with the typical excesses of an international Expo site with its commensurate plethora of style, quality and ostentation.

There is another issue. The International Zone should be aiming to bring all the nations of the world together without prejudice or preference. But so far we have been grouping the countries together by continent. This may well seem to facilitate

some degree of clarity and ease of orientation, but in the long run it is also quite likely that global stability and misunderstanding will occur exactly along these continental divides, especially with the economic super-blocks that are in the process of being formed and strengthened.

Under one roof

Our suggestion is to bring all the nations of the world under one roof, where each centre would be given the same spatial configuration to define in the purest possible way its *raison d'être*. Individual exhibition space would be minimal, as each centre is to be seen as a channel and as a catalyst for the exchange of information—directing people through the Internet

to appropriate sites and locations. Any communal exhibition space would be utilised by each country as and when required. The centres could similarly be channels for the dissemination of new research to and from Auroville on subjects important to Auroville's continued development.

As for the type of building, we would suggest that one of the many Lines of Force from the Residential Zone could be "donated" to the International Zone, as we feel it would be the perfect utilitarian form to house the individual pavilions in an atmosphere of equality and aspiration. It would concentrate all the disparate energy presently being expended in the design of individual pavilions, and free up the majority of the International Zone for the development of a landscaped park. We envision this park as the setting for a select number of pavilions with no permanent exhibition or particular affiliation—they

would instead be utilised to highlight those changing global themes which hinder the world from attaining the peace and harmony the majority of its citizens so desire. Long term regional and cultural disputes could be addressed, and appropriate solutions proposed in the light of the Integral Yoga. Similarly those cultures with no independent home could be given temporary space to bring awareness to their plight, as has already occurred with the Tibetan pavilion, and as could similarly happen with the Kurds or the Palestinians, etc. Thus in this way, rather than re-creating a cultural theme park, we could begin to address relevant global issues and hopefully make a much-needed bold step in the direction of the Human Unity that we all keep referring to.

(This article first appeared in Auroville News # 823 dated January 8th, 2000)



Organization & Economy

Old wine in new bottles?

Auroville Entry 2000: a new proposal

Discussions about the process of joining the community and other related issues have involved many groups and individuals over the past months. One of the recent outcomes is a draft document, yet to be approved by the community, called 'Auroville Entry 2000'. This proposes new guidelines for the entry process.

Housing

Auroville Entry 2000 is the latest in a long series of attempts throughout the years to translate the aims and ideals of Auroville into practical conditions for living here. The latest attempt, like many earlier ones, seems to have been motivated primarily by the perception of some Aurovilians that Auroville has drifted off course, and that both newcomers and Aurovilians should be encouraged to live in a way that is more in conformity with Auroville's ideals and objectives. For example, regarding housing the draft states that, "The newcomer will have the choice between various possibilities which will be presented to him by the Housing Group." Behind this statement lies the concern that, at present, newcomers who have money are often able to find or build adequate accommodation relatively quickly, while those with limited or no resources often have to live in what are generally considered to be sub-standard conditions. One of the suggestions to solve this is that the community itself would in future construct and allocate all housing. The ideal, as somebody expressed it, is that accommodation is allocated according to an individual's true needs rather than to his personal resources. However, for the time being it was felt that newcomers should have a limited say in what they receive.

The economy and education

Regarding the economy, Auroville Entry 2000 states that all newcomers will be required to participate in Auroville Economy 2000—the new experiment which aims, among other things, to lessen the exchange of money between Aurovilians and to allow individual needs to be fulfilled on a more equitable basis.

Regarding education, it was felt that the aims and ideals of Auroville should be widely disseminated, not

just in Auroville but in the surrounding villages, so that everybody understands what joining Auroville really implies. As to the form education should take in Auroville, the draft of Auroville Entry 2000 puts it like this: "The applicant should be aware that education in Auroville essentially aims, according to The Mother, at enabling children 'to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their soul; education would be given, not with a view to passing examinations and getting certificates, but for enriching the existing faculties and bringing forth new ones.' Therefore the applicant should be aware that Auroville cannot support, financially or otherwise, a kind of education which is not in line with the ideals of Auroville."

The declaration

It is also proposed that once the applicant has fully understood the aims and ideals of Auroville, he or she should sign a declaration or pledge to observe a few basic principles for living in Auroville. In the draft copy these include:

"I want to dedicate myself exclusively to the promotion of tasks which flow from the ideals of Auroville...I agree to promote and practice the principles indicated by Mother for living in Auroville...I agree to devote at least five hours of work for the community of Auroville, Sundays included, and to have an activity that corresponds to the needs of Auroville...any money or properties that may belong to me in legal terms, but which are outside Auroville, will be looked upon by me as a Trust, and will be utilized by me not for personal use but for the promotion of purposes which are consistent with the aims and ideals of Auroville..."

A huge gap

While acknowledging the need to re-evaluate the entry procedure and

the enormous amount of work that has gone into preparing this draft document, Auroville Entry 2000 suffers from many of the same faults as its predecessors. In particular, a huge gap exists between the vision and wide-ness of Mother's statements and the the drafters' attempts at translating them into material conditions. For example, in the draft document Mother's invitation,

"Greetings from Auroville to all men of goodwill. Are invited to Auroville all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life."

is immediately followed by this 'translation':

"First and foremost it is essential that people who join Auroville be convinced... that the principles given by The Mother for living in Auroville constitute the best formula for preparing favourable conditions for the actual manifestations of these aims and ideals."

The latter attempt at translating Mother's words is not only verbose: it also completely changes the vibration of the original into something dry and dogmatic. Similarly the statements in Auroville Entry 2000 that Auroville can henceforth not support "a kind of education which is not in line with the ideals of Auroville"—which means exam- and diploma-oriented education—and that Aurovilians should utilise any overseas resources they might have only for purposes consistent with the aims and ideals of Auroville, have the flavour of diktats rather than of invitations to a free unfolding of individual potential (the reference to how individuals should use their resources abroad goes beyond anything Mother explicitly suggested). In a similar vein, the Executive Council in a recent letter

Matrimandir

Fixing a disk

Eight men are quietly and peacefully sitting on the narrow scaffolding planks, 29 metres above ground level. There are some shouts from down below and the crane starts moving: a disk is being hauled up. As soon as it reaches the scaffolding, the men jump into action, guiding the large disk onto the platform. As the remote control up here does not work well, the disk comes down with a thud. They look concerned: seven of the gold-fused glass edges are cracked. It is the first time this happens.

Slowly the crane moves the disk towards its final location, lowering it onto a padded stand. The damaged tiles on the edge with their minute cracks are examined. By now the news has already reached the gilding workshop and replacement tiles will be brought up soon.

Next, the three steel 'legs' have to be fixed to the disk. Pipe wrenches start their racheting sound and the 'legs' are attached.

Now the disk has to be manoeuvred into place. The pulley on the crane is brought into position. But unfortunately the remote control again does not work. All the men crawl under the disk taking shelter from the midday sun, while one of them goes down to see what the problem is. After a few minutes it all works again. Thick ropes are attached to the legs and there goes the disk! Slowly it moves towards the outer skin, and is carefully placed on the steel bars, in between two smaller disks. This is precision work. With feet, arms, legs and backs some of the men support the disk while others tighten the bolts. Number four is in place! They all look happy and walk back to where disk number five is slowly coming up.

Tineke

has questioned why newcomers should be made to join an economic experiment which has hardly been tried, and which has not been imposed upon Aurovilians. They are also concerned that the wording of the pledge may turn Mother's words into dogma and religion, creating a climate which would make it very difficult for individuals to freely seek the truth.

In fact Auroville Entry 2000, for all its references to individual freedom, feels like yet another attempt by individuals with a particular perspective to force the community to take a certain path: a path which those individuals feel confident to define. And the newcomers, because of their vulnerability, become both the victims and the tools of this exercise.

The underlying question

The essential question that underlies many of these exercises, as well as the inevitable reaction they will

provoke, remains this—how will this outwardly diverse and motley collection of individuals move towards the goal of Auroville as articulated by Mother? Do we Aurovilians need to be more active in asserting guidelines, in creating material structures which may facilitate and channel a certain way of acting and being? Or should we trust that an ever-increasing pressure or Force will naturally make it less and less possible for those without sincerity to remain here? The problem with the former perception is that when we begin interpreting Mother's words we often kink them with our own hang-ups and desires, resulting, at worst, in a form of spiritual fascism. The problem with the latter perception is that it can lead to apathy and fatalism and, in the short-term at least, the triumph of very mundane values.

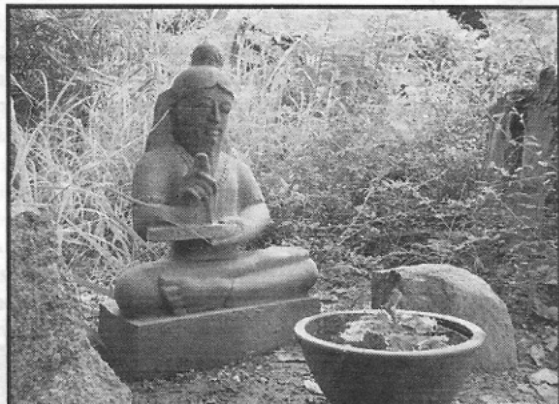
Alan

Preserving our natural wealth

A Seed Centre inside an Auroville forest helps preserve endangered flora and herbal medicine traditions.

Auroville is situated in a region that is botanically defined as a tropical dry evergreen forest. This is a unique type of forest that used to swathe the Coromandel Coast as recently as a few hundred years ago. But now, except for a few scattered patches, it has all but disappeared—along with its botanical wealth. The 55-acre ethno-medicinal forest situated in Pitchandikulam is an inspiring and instructive attempt to replicate and safeguard this unique botanical heritage.

A granite statue, representing a seated Rishi Agastya composing a text on medical plants guards the entrance to the Seed Centre located in a handsome exposed brick building in the Pitchandikulam forest. As I arrive, the project's co-ordinator Joss is showing a group of German University teacher trainees around the museum. Every month, the Resource Centre receives dozens of groups of teachers and students, NGO groups, local villagers and Forest



Rishi Agastya, inscribing a text on medicinal plants, at the entrance to Pitchandikulam Seed Centre

Officials. Hundreds of photos and 368 varieties of medicinal plant seeds are displayed in two rooms along with botanical information and posters. There are also the raw drugs—plants or parts of plants that are used in medicinal preparations. Dozens of jars containing varieties of seeds line the shelves, along with displays of baskets, fish traps and brooms. Copper and brass measuring cups, wooden combs and what looks like a lady's fan are artistically displayed on a table next to where I sit down.

When Joss joins me, he explains that the fan in question is actually a two-hundred-year-old Talipot palm leaf manuscript of a medical text in Tamil. Before setting out on our walk he explains to me that the seeds, cuttings and seedlings that have been gradually introduced into the 55-acre forest are all species collected by the Pitchandikulam Bio-Resource Centre team. Although collections of local indigenous species have been made since 1973, over the last seven years

there has been a concentrated effort to gather tropical dry evergreen forest plants from the sacred groves and remnant patches of the Kaliveli bioregion. Seed collection trips and botanical surveys have taken them from the Koli Hills at Salem in the South, to the Ellageiri hills at Thirupatur in the North.

A walk on the wild side

As we stroll along a winding labyrinthine path strewn with leaf litter, Joss points out different trees and bushes to me, then describes their medicinal properties. The fruit paste of one tree is used for boils. The leaf paste of what looks like just another thorny bush is used for bone setting. He bends down to rub the leaf of another bush which he then plucks and hands to me: it smells sweet and tastes like liquorice. Another tree has leaves that purify water and a bark that is ground to powder and used by fishermen... for stunning fish!

In one section of the park, tradi-

tional products made from indigenous wood are playfully arranged like natural sculptures: wagon wheels, a brightly coloured sugar cane press, a jaggery mould, a variety of stone pestles, each of which is used for a specific medicine. Throughout the park painted stone slabs provide botanical information in Tamil and English. Some depict local fauna: owls, butterflies, snakes, tortoises, paradise fly-catchers in vivid colours. Another one shows a rishi sitting on a tiger skin surrounded

by the tools and ingredients of his medical trade: animal skulls, bones, shells, pestles and peacock feathers. In a clearing he points out a *Pterocarpus Santalinus* (Red sanders) seedling. It is a rare indigenous tree that has propagated naturally ten metres away from the fifteen-year-old mother tree. Indigenous species have been introduced into another area that was already under mainly cashew, acacia and eucalyptus cover, and as they took hold the exotics were gradually replaced.

An exciting development for the project is the possibility that our region with its endangered flora could be chosen as a tropical dry evergreen (TDEF) 'hot spot' in a link-up with a project to map India's geography and biological wealth by satellite. (See article below—eds.) The regenerating Auroville forests could help to identify floristic signatures that will be of use in localising other TDEF patches

along the Coromandel Coast. This could lead to a concerted multi-disciplinary effort to preserve and revitalize what remains of this eco-system.

Networking

The ethno-medicinal forest is the result of years of dedicated work and research into the indigenous flora and fauna of the tropical dry evergreen forest of this region by the 15-member Resource Centre team. To date the Centre has collected some 700 local medicinal species. Part of the process of identification involves going into villages and establishing community registers of the medicinal and cultural

of local tradition."

Assessment and validation

A two-day meeting is scheduled for the March equinox in a sacred grove. Three allopathic as well as Ayurvedic, Siddha, and Unani doctors, together with 35 community people and nine local healers, will go through the lists of diseases and the plants that treat them, which have already been identified in previous workshops. If the treatments are validated they will be included and attached to government health policy and used in government clinics. This represents a new development, as



Girl sorting indigenous seeds

uses of plants—450 species have been documented in this manner.

Joy has been working for the past two years on an ethno-botanical data base project. This information is then shared with the Foundation for the Revitalization of Local Health Traditions (FRHLT) in Bangalore with whom the Centre here has been networking for the past seven years. The FRHLT is an organization that has twenty centres in five Southern states, including Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra, researching local health traditions and customs surrounding the use of medicinal plants. The importance of this—given the threat from pharmaceutical and biotechnological companies who are attempting to patent the components of medicinal plants—cannot be underestimated.

"The data base project is an attempt to counter this threat," says Joy. "We hope to be able to have intellectual property rights patented in the area of traditional knowledge of medicinal plants and thereby safeguard the botanical wealth of the country."

Some 125 herbal gardens have also been established in the last year alone in 40 villages of the bioregion. A map of our region with a constellation of dots comes up on his computer screen: it shows the eighty or so villages in the Marakanam/Tindivanam-Pondy triangle with which they have been working. Joss recalls that in several of the workshops they organized with these villages, some of the participants were initially reticent to share their information. But then they realized that others from different villages often had similar knowledge, and by the end of the week everyone was sharing and pooling their experience. "The process was a celebration

until recently it has been difficult for traditional healers to practise. "The information we've gathered so far is now being used to create a curriculum for the training of 17,000 village health nurses in Tamil Nadu in the use of 120 medicinal plants."

"Collaboration is essential"

Joss feels that it is important to develop strategies in collaboration with local communities to recreate healthy forest systems in the area. Last year the resource centre worked together with Tamil Nadu Forest officials and spent a couple of days planting species chosen by the seed centre. He hopes, in collaboration with the Tamil Nadu Forest Dept., to be able to reintroduce indigenous species into areas of degraded forest. He feels that planting indigenous species in the right places, particularly in the upper catchment areas of the watershed is as important for safeguarding the water table as repairing tanks or building bunds. The time has come, he feels, for Auroville greenworkers to reach out to share, communicate and apply their expertise and skills elsewhere than in their own personal domains. He hopes that a new \$400,000 Shared Forest Management project funded by the EU for the region will motivate them to do so, as it provides the opportunity to bring back large swathes of tropical dry evergreen forest into degraded reserve forest area in our larger bio-region.

He concludes by saying, "We look forward to working together more with other groups like Palmyra Water Harvest and Village Action, because we all have our area of expertise and can enhance each other's work. Collaboration is essential."

Roger

Satellite monitoring

The Department of Space is offering a powerful new tool for environmental outreach and regional collaboration.

One of the most exciting ventures in terms of environmental outreach and regional collaboration is the offer from the Department of Space (DOS), Government of India, to monitor the ongoing environmental work in Auroville and the surrounding region through satellite imagery. This offer comes from Dr. Kasturirangam, Chairman, Department of Science and Technology, (DST), and is supported by Dr. V. V. Bhatt, Joint-Secretary, DOS, who is an old friend of Auroville.

In making the offer, DOS officials expressed their interest in monitoring the positive environmental impact of Auroville on the region. They also offered to conduct aerial surveys of Auroville and to compare present-day satellite maps of Auroville with satellite images of the region taken during the last 20 years.

Photographs of the region taken by satellites provide a wealth of environmental data, such as the area of forest cover, the state of underground aquifers, soil quality, cropping patterns etc. DOS offers Auroville the use of regularly updated satellite

images or maps. Auroville, in turn, will corroborate the findings indicated by satellite maps, with ground surveys to produce an accurate picture of the environmental conditions of the bioregion.

Additionally, social and economic data of the bioregion regularly collected by Auroville units can be juxtaposed with the environmental data in a comprehensive database called Geographical Information System (GIS). A good GIS software package allows for easy access of information and different study-modules that can be used for various types of work from town-planning to environmental regeneration. DOS has also offered Auroville, hardware and software for a complete GIS package as well as training to have the database conform to national standards. Mr. Diwakar, liaison for Auroville, Regional Remote Sensing Service Center, a unit of Indian Space Research Organization, DOS, visited Auroville in March to start preliminary work and get an idea of Auroville's requirements and goals in this context.

All of Auroville's environmental

outreach units as well as the town-planning services have evinced a keen interest in this project. Some of the units already have some rudimentary hardware required for a GIS database like plotters, scanners and Geographical Positioning Systems (GPS). There is a need however to obtain high capacity hardware and required software to start a central GIS resource centre for various units. It has been agreed that the proposed GIS unit will be an autonomous unit under Auroville Foundation comprising executives of participating Auroville units, namely Cynergy, Aurofuture, Water Harvest, Palmyra and Pitchandikulam Bioresource Centre with the Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) in Auroshilpam as its headquarters. One hopes that the project, still at an embryonic stage, will materialize successfully. For there is no doubt that this venture of creating a top-quality GIS unit will revolutionize the present grassroots approach of the environmental outreach units and make Auroville a significant partner for regional and national collaboration in this field.

Bindu



The Sappadu Project

Villagers in desperate need are at last getting assistance

Kuppu, 70 years, no children, no house, takes food from any house.

Valambal, 60, deserted wife, collapsed house, takes food from any house.

Rajammal, 90, widow, no children, no house, takes food from any house.

Sampoornam, 62, handicapped, one son who doesn't care for her, no house, takes food from any house.

This litany of human misery is taken from a recent survey of villages near Auroville. Traditionally the extended family network cares for those who are aged or handicapped in the villages, but when somebody is old and has no children, or is a widow or deserted wife, they are often abandoned: not even the neighbours will look after them. Some years back an Aurovilian, Ries, decided something had to be done about this situation. "I wanted to make the villagers aware of the situation of these deserted old people, and to take responsibility for them. But first these people had to be helped."

With the help of Muthu he started, on Independence Day, 1996, a free noon meal scheme—called Sappadu ("food" in Tamil)—in Edayanchavady village for neglected old people. Just rice and dhal, served in the front room of Muthu's house, but soon 25 old people were coming regularly, some from far away. It was election time, and Muthu was standing for office in the village. He didn't win, but as he went around campaigning, he spoke about Sappadu and everybody got to know about it.

"At that time," recalls Ries, "I was already in contact with Village Action. They felt we were doing good work but didn't want to take it up as

one of their projects: they felt it was too much like charity, which was not their approach." However Morris, who has directed Village Action projects for many years, remained interested and supportive.

Pension scheme

Ries realized that the free meal scheme was not a long-term remedy because it would make the recipients dependent. Then he learned that there is a government pension scheme for old people. "It's not much, about Rs 150 a month, plus two free saris or lungis a year and some rice, but it could make a difference to their lives. But to get such pension is a hell of a job for these people. They have to fill in big forms, they have to prove they have no property, no son over 18 years etc. etc. Many of them have no birth certificate, they can't read, they have to pay bribes to get certain documents. So it's not surprising most of them don't bother."



One of the beneficiaries of the Sappadu free meal scheme

Meanwhile Djoewie, a nurse from Holland who was visiting Auroville, became interested in the Sappadu project, and decided to work with Ries on developing it. "Although we had no experience, we decided to fund-raise in Holland for it. We started with family and friends, then contacted some churches. The first year we raised \$5,000. A big breakthrough came when Wilde Ganzen, a well-known and trusted funding agency in the Netherlands, lent us its support. This helped us to collect a further \$8,000."

The free meal scheme was discontinued after one year, but then the funds raised paid for a social worker to survey the villages, and identify and assist those villagers who qualified for pensions. The money was also used to repair the roofs of indigent old people before the monsoon, and for small loans to a new target group of needy adults—widows and the handicapped—to enable them to start up small businesses.

A change of mind

In the meantime, Village Action changed its mind and decided to support the Sappadu project after all. Their social workers adopted the pension scheme as one of their ongoing programmes in the 50 villages in which they work.

"It's as much a learning process for them as for us," points out Djoewie, "because before they were focussed on education, improving village hygiene and the water supply etc. rather than on doing something for the old and the abandoned. But with Village Action's support we are definitely becoming more professional, and we reach far more of those in need. So far nearly 100 of the most desperately needy have received pen-



Ries (left) and Djoewie

sions or are in process of being helped."

Ries's original objective was that the villagers themselves would assume responsibility for their needy neighbours. Has this happened, or has the government (through the pensions scheme) and Village Action taken over the responsibility instead? "It's true that the villagers are still not taking full responsibility for these people," admits Ries. "However, there is much more awareness now in the vil-

lages about the problem, and groups like the Youth Clubs and Women's Groups are actively involved in repairing roofs and identifying those who need help. In fact, we've encountered no opposition in the villages to this programme: all the village groups have been supportive."

"I've learned so much from working with these people," concludes Djoewie. "Even when they live in the most terrible poverty, or have the most serious physical handicaps, they have pride in themselves and they smile. It's an incredible lesson."

From an interview by Alan

(More information from Ries Korse, Quiet, Auroville, email: korse@auroville.org.in or Djoewie Leegwater, tel: (Netherlands) 023-53 55 530)

Inspiration

A Blessings Story

In the early forties, the private bank of a Calcutta banker was about to crash. Bad reports were circulating which entailed the risk that depositors might withdraw their money. The banker sent a telegram to the Mother explaining the difficulties and asking for Her blessings. Nolini, who was handling the telegrams, read it to the Mother, then sent back a telegram which said, "Mother is sending you Her Blessings".

The banker began meeting the Mother's disciples in Calcutta and in Pondicherry, requesting them not to withdraw their money and even to deposit additional amounts. But soon afterwards, some members of his family withdrew their money and the bank went bankrupt.

One of the depositors went to the Mother and asked how it was possible that a venture which had received Her Blessings could fail. The Mother answered that people take a risk when they ask for Her blessings. For when She gives Her blessings to a project, it means that She is putting Her Force behind it. This means that if the project is conducted in a truthful way, it will grow and develop fast. But if there are some elements of falsehood, it will collapse more quickly than it would otherwise have done.

The moral of this story is that we should scrutinise very carefully the origin of any text with the Mother's signature. If She has answered a letter by writing the words "Blessings" or by sending a Blessings packet (i.e. a tiny envelope filled with dried rose petals), it does not necessarily mean that She has approved of it, but that She is putting Her Force to accompany what is proposed to Her. If the text has been written by the Mother Herself, or if it has been submitted to the Mother and She has written Her approval, or if it has been read to Her and She has expressed orally Her approval—such as "C'est bien"—then we know that the Mother is encouraging us to go in that direction.

I remember asking Roger to read an eccentric proposal of mine to the Mother. Today I am 100% sure that the Mother did not at all in favour of it. She could have expressed this. She did not. She merely sent me a Blessings packet. I knew that it was an invitation for me to find the answer by myself. I did...

Alain Grandcolas



Goodbye to the pain of the past

Does Auroville need a conflict-dissolving model? Yes, says the author, because in Auroville too many hurts from the past have been stored in the cellars of the subconscious.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu gave a speech at the University of Toronto in which he described the unique way in which South Africa has dealt with the problems of its past. While many observers expected a blood bath of immense proportions to accompany the transition from injustice and oppression to freedom and democracy, the transition was peaceful. And those who predicted that the blacks who had suffered so grievously in the past would engage in a fearful orgy of revenge and retribution against the whites, were proven wrong.

"Instead," said Archbishop Tutu, "the world saw something quite unprecedented. They saw the process of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, when perpetrators of some of the most gruesome atrocities were given amnesty for a full disclosure of the facts of the offence. Instead of revenge and retribution, this new nation chose to tread the difficult path of confession, for-

givenness, and reconciliation." And Tutu described how ordinary people, whose life had been destroyed because they had been maimed or whose families had been killed or tortured, testified before the Commission. "The daughter of one of four African National Congress activists, whom the police ambushed and then killed gruesomely — their mutilated bodies were found in their burnt-out car—came to tell her story. When she finished, I asked her whether she would be able to forgive those who had done this. We were meeting in a city hall packed to the rafters. You could hear the proverbial pin drop, as she replied, "We would like to forgive. We just want to know whom to forgive."

South Africa had followed its own unique way. It did not go for retribution as in Rwanda or Northern Ireland, which would only have led to a cycle of reprisal and counter-reprisal. It did not go the way of Nuremberg, to bring the perpetrators

of the crimes committed in the Second World War to trial. It also rejected the extreme of a blanket amnesty, as happened in Chile after the rule of General Pinochet, which, in trying to let bygones be bygones, victimised the victims a second time around. "Our country," said Tutu "chose a middle way of individual amnesty for truth. Some would say, what about justice? And we say retributive justice is not the only kind of justice. There is also restorative justice, because we believe in *ubuntu* — the essence of being human, that idea that we are all caught up in a delicate network of interdependence. We say, "A person is a person through other persons." I need you in order to be me and you need me in order to be you. The greatest good is communal corporate harmony, and resentment, anger, revenge are corrosive of this harmony."

"The Commission discovered that people experienced healing through telling their stories," said Tutu. "The process opened wounds that were fes-

tering. We cleansed them, poured ointment on them, and knew they would heal. A young man who had been blinded by police action in his township came to tell us the story of that event. When he finished he was asked how he felt now, and he said, "You have given me back my eyes." We were exhilarated as we heard people who had suffered grievously, who by rights should have been baying for the blood of their tormentors, utter words of forgiveness, reveal an extraordinary willingness to work for reconciliation, demonstrating magnanimity and nobility of spirit. And thus the nightmare of apartheid ended, giving the world a model of dealing with post-conflict, post-repression periods."

Could Auroville take advantage of this conflict-dissolving model? Perhaps. Does Auroville need one? Yes, and I think badly. Because in Auroville too, many hurts from the past have been stored in the cellars of the subconscious. For example, the fight between Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Society (and the Neutrals)

and the fight between Satprem and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram have scarred many individuals on both sides, in Auroville as well as elsewhere. Many of those who lived in Auroville left in pain. Others have stayed on. In both, a little scratching often suffices to bring those past hurts out into the open again. And then there are all those who feel hurt deeply because Auroville did and does not develop as they believe it should. It is easy to say that one has to bear those pains with equanimity, as it is part of the yoga. But isn't it also time to honestly look at our past, and heal the wounds? Can we really live together if no true attempt at understanding and reconciliation is taking place? If people in a country like South Africa who have suffered so much can do it, can't it be done in place that aspires for Unity?

Carel

With thanks to our ex-Auroville Today editor Bill Sullivan, who sent us the text of Bishop Tutu's speech. It originally appeared in the Toronto Globe and Mail of February 17, 2000.

Six hundred kilos of steam

The Solar Kitchen finally goes solar

During early March, about two and a half years after its inauguration, Auroville's Solar Kitchen started using its huge solar bowl concentrator.

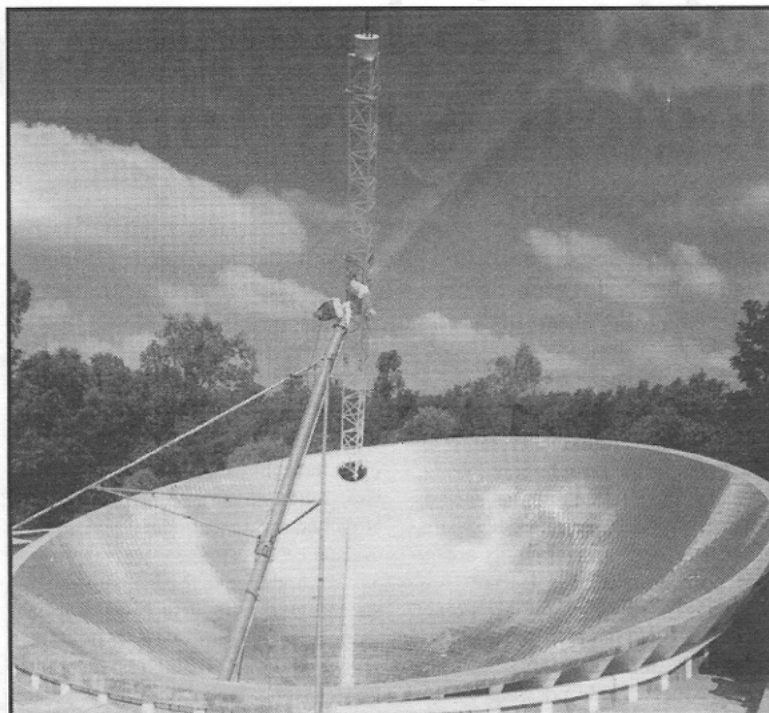
"It has taken a bit more time than we anticipated," admits Gilles, who for more than five years has been the driving force behind the kitchen. "It was a question of a lot of perseverance and perspiration," he adds with a laugh, indicating that it has not been easy to overcome all the technical difficulties.

The mirrors in the 15-m diameter spherical solar bowl reflect the sunlight onto a receiver. As the focus of a sphere is not a point but a line, the receiver has been built in the form of a cylinder four metres long with a 23-cm diameter. A computer-steered stepper motor, programmed like Matrimandir's heliostat (sun-reflector to direct ray into Chamber—eds.), ensures that the receiver remains in the bowl's focus during the day. Heat transfer fluid, a kind of oil, is pumped in a continuous loop through the receiver to a heat storage and

exchange tank and back. Inside the exchange tank is a coiled stainless steel tube, through which water is pumped. The heat transfer fluid ensures that the water in the stainless steel tube immediately turns to steam, ready for use by the kitchen. When there is no need for steam, the heat gets stored in the tank, as the fluid only cools down very slowly. While the working temperature of the fluid is approximately 250 °C, the temperature of the steam will only be approximately 150 °C. It has been calculated that the solar bowl will generate 600 kilos of steam on a clear day to produce 2000 meals.

As the presence of the sun is an uncertain factor, the final cooking system is a hybrid. Steam will be generated as by a diesel-fired boiler on cloudy days.

"The system is a success," says Gilles, "but when the bowl's maxi-



The Solar Bowl on the roof of the Solar Kitchen. The receiver cylinder is now in place.

mum capacity is reached, we will have to look for alternatives. One such alternative is to use parabolic collectors, the so-called Scheffler system. There are community kitchens in Mount Abu and in Abu Road in Rajasthan that use this system. In Abu Road they installed 84 collectors with a surface area of 10 sqm each, which,

they say, can feed 20,000 people. As a test, we have installed one such mirror of one square m. surface area on the roof of the solar kitchen. These kind of systems could also be used for Auroville's food processing industry. In other words, the days of experimenting with solar for community food purposes are not over." Carel

Population

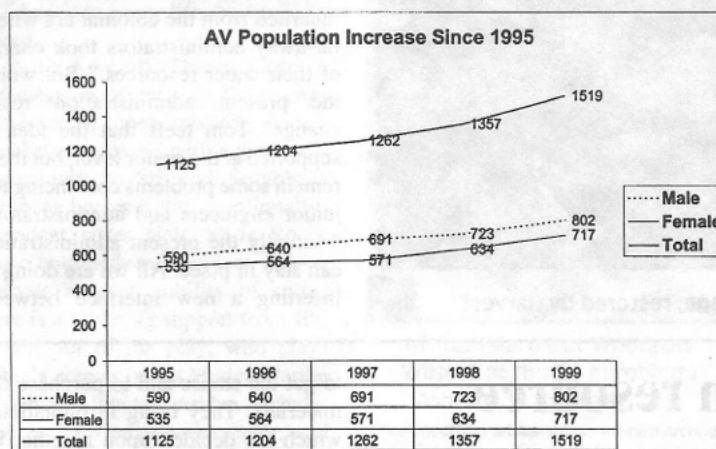
Auroville is growing...

Auroville is growing... fast! The total population increased by over 10% during the past two years. Over the past five years, the total of Spanish nationals has increased by 75%, Italians by over 60%, Indians by 40%. Two out of three Aurovilians are either Indian, French or German.

Auroville is made up of 33 different nationalities (excluding those with dual nationality). The figures are courtesy of the Auroville Visa Service.

Auroville Population (by nationality)

Nationality	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999
Indian	362	377	416	449	507
French	221	242	243	246	272
German	176	181	191	205	230
Dutch	53	51	49	55	65
Italian	45	49	56	61	73
American	44	43	49	53	55
British	37	40	37	36	36
Swiss	22	31	30	39	44
Russian	25	30	25	27	26
Spanish	20	25	27	31	35
Belgian	19	19	19	19	26
Canadian	17	20	16	17	19
Swedish	17	17	16	18	16
Ukrainian	11	14	13	16	18
Australian	10	10	16	22	23
Argentinian	7	7	7	11	10
Brazilian	6	6	9	10	10
Austrian	7	13	9	9	9
Tibetan	4	4	5	5	5
Slovene	2	2	2	2	2
Colombian	1	1	1	1	2
Moroccan	1	1	1	1	1
Tunisian	1	1	0	0	0
Irish	1	1	1	1	1
Japanese	2	2	1	1	1
Sri Lankan	2	3	3	2	3
Bangladeshi	1	0	0	0	0
New Zealander	2	2	2	2	2
Armenian	2	2	2	0	0
Belorussian	0	1	0	0	1
Czech	0	0	1	0	0
Estonian	0	0	0	2	2
Hungarian	0	0	0	0	4
Korean	0	0	0	0	2
double nation.	7	9	15	16	19
total male	590	640	691	723	802
total female	535	564	571	634	717
grand total	1125	1204	1262	1357	1519



Auroville Population 2000 (by age)

age	male	female	total
0-5	61	40	101
5-10	54	52	106
10-15	50	48	98
15-20	45	49	94
20-25	47	46	93
25-30	86	52	138
30-35	84	58	142
35-40	70	83	153
40-45	83	86	169
45-50	90	61	151
50-55	64	61	125
55-60	48	34	82
60-65	17	15	32
65-70	9	15	24
70-75	5	7	12
75-80	5	6	11
80-85	2	1	3
Totals	820	714	1534

In brief

Climate shift?

Nobody can remember anything like it. We received over 40 cm rain in February, traditionally one of our driest months, 20 cm of which came down in one night.

Miramukhi teachers move on

A few weeks ago, the Miramukhi teachers announced they were discontinuing the Miramukhi educational experiment. They are starting a new organic farming community in another part of Auroville. Discussions continue concerning what should happen to the Miramukhi school buildings.

Special dates

On February 21st there was a silent meditation under the Banyan tree calling for Mother's guidance to secure the body of Auroville. The traditional bonfire on Auroville's birthday, February 28, happened in spite of the torrential rain spells, and on the 29th February there was a silent gathering to mark the Golden Day. Mother's organ music, originally composed for the 29th February 1960, was played.

Auroville Youth Survey

The results of a recent survey organized by the AV Youth Council were published recently. Among the findings: 75% of the youth felt that Auroville should give greater priority to the needs of youth; 67% felt that youth should be more involved in the Auroville decision-making process; and 61% felt they needed a better education than what is presently available in Auroville. Regarding the future, 44% want to stay in Auroville, 40% want to leave and come back later. Only 3% want to leave permanently. The most unsurprising finding? Only 27% want more contact with adults.

Annual AVI meeting

The meeting will be held from June 28th till July 2nd at "Lebensgarten," one of the biggest intentional communities in Germany, in Steyerberg (between Hannover and Bremen.) The main topic will be "international understanding". Friends of Auroville International, Aurovilians and interested individuals are warmly invited to attend this meeting. For further information contact AVI Germany. (c/o Wolfgang J. Schmidt-Reinecke, Danziger Str.121, D-104077 Berlin. Email:wjsavid@aol.com

Two corrections

In our last issue, we inadvertently mentioned that Navajata was the Chairman of the Sri Aurobindo Society in the 1960s and early 1970s. The Mother was the President, he was the Secretary. And we omitted to refer to Wolfgang J. Schmidt-Reinecke, Chairman of Auroville International, by his full name. We regret the mistakes.

The real problem is human, not technological, says Tom

Water management in the bioregion

Tom is the coordinator of Harvest, another Auroville organization aiming to improve water catchment and management facilities in the Kaliveli watershed region, an area which covers 750 square kilometres and includes around 160 villages. Here he talks about his vision for the region, and the challenges he is encountering.

In the early years, Aurovilians put a lot of energy into rehabilitating the Auroville plateau. This was a necessity but it also led, according to Aurovilians like Tom, to a certain neglect of the larger bioregion in which Auroville is situated. "Actually," says Tom, "when we began Harvest a few years back, the motivation was still very egocentric: we thought Auroville's water situation was so connected to that of the surrounding region that we had to improve the entire region in order to survive ourselves. Around 1997, however, we realized that, with proper management, Auroville could be self-sufficient in terms of its drinking water needs. At the same time, our investigations showed that the water future of the surrounding region is very bleak. So, are we to live as a beautiful island in the middle of a devastated area? It just isn't possible."

Many centuries ago the bioregion was covered by an interconnected network of rainwater storage tanks, or "erys", which not only provided farmers with irrigation water for many

months after the monsoon rains, but recharged the groundwater table as well. Over the past two hundred years, these erys have fallen into disuse and, as a consequence, many are now silted up and their embankments are in poor condition. So far Harvest has rehabilitated 15 tanks and ten ponds ("ooranis"), and plans to do two more major ones in the coming year. This work has been made possible by the generous donation of two big excavators by the Tata Foundation.

An integral approach

"However," says Tom, "we very soon realized that the real problem is human, not technical, and that we had to consider the institutional and social development of the region; in other words, to work with the people." The key, as Tom saw it, lay in developing an integral approach to the management of water and other resources, for watershed management involves not only renovating catchment ponds, but also related activities like bunding, afforestation, improved methods of farming, and education in environ-

mental awareness. Above all, Tom wanted to make the region self-sufficient in terms of resources and expertise, rather than relying upon overstretched and inadequate Government assistance, as is presently the case.

Each village in the Kaliveli watershed region will form a water-users association to improve and monitor, with the help of visiting experts, their water resources. Each group of about twenty users' associations from the same region will form a federation. The ten or so federations in the larger region will together make up the Kaliveli Watershed Development Corporation.

Harvest has been working on this for two or three years. So far one federation has been formed: it held its first meeting on 29th February.

"When you group twenty villages together in a federation," explains Tom, "you generate the socio-economic potential for them to be self-sufficient. With a small contribution from each participant, the federation can pay for the permanent services of five qualified engineers in areas like drip irrigation, agriculture, forestry and drinking water provision. And these guys will have to do their work, because they will be paid directly by the beneficiaries!"

Do the villagers then welcome this new concept? "Very much so," says Tom. "They realize that at last they have a tool to break the spell inherited from the colonial era where far-away administrators took charge of their water resources." But won't the present administration resist change? Tom feels that the idea is supported at the senior level, but there remain some problems convincing the junior engineers and administrators. "Actually the present administration can stay in place. All we are doing is inserting a new interface between

them and the villagers, we're tapping a potential which nobody else is tapping at present," explains Tom.

The biggest obstacle

Ironically, the biggest obstacle at present to the fulfilment of Tom's vision comes from within Auroville itself. Harvests work in the region is funded by money from government agencies and schemes. Tom planned to form the second federation of water users and to begin work in the area north of Kaliveli Tank, and submitted a proposal to this effect to the authorities. However he was soon to hear from the perplexed Collector that another Auroville organization working on watershed management—Palmyra—had submitted its own proposal for the same area. This touches upon a problem which has hamstrung Auroville outreach activities in the region for many years—the lack of co-ordination and, sometimes, outright conflict between different Auroville groups involved in outreach work. Why does this happen?

"I think it is due to both personality issues and differences in approach," says Tom. "Each of the Auroville groups working in the region has as its 'engine' a strong personality. This is a necessity. The problem comes when these 'engines' start stressing their egos or going on power trips. This is a particular problem when dealing with the villagers because they are often so grateful for what you do that they build up your feelings of self-importance: one village even wanted to erect a statue of me!"

"Then, on the level of concepts, there are different approaches—some

Aurovilians promote more of a Gandhian approach, others a Marxist or a USAID kind of thing. At the level of concepts the clashes can be very intellectual, and very nasty."

"What makes it so frustrating is that Auroville is very rich in its human resources, and therefore ideally suited to do integrated work in the bioregion. But at present those of us working in the region sometimes tend to be competitors rather than complementing each other. I hope this will change. Both Harvest and Palmyra are now going to see how they can work together. In fact, we no longer have any other choice."

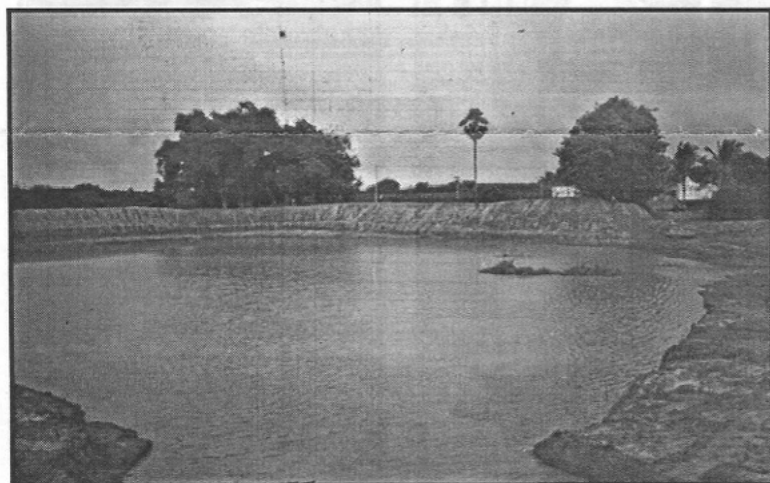
Joy is the key

For Tom the key, both in his work with the villagers and with other Aurovilians, is to work in a spirit of joy. "I always remember that conversation between Sri Aurobindo and Paul Richard in which they discuss what constitutes the basis of creation. Richard said it is desire. No, said Sri Aurobindo, it is joy. As long as we develop our visions with desire, power, as the concept," continues Tom, "we are bound to fail because we will always run into somebody more powerful. But if we put ourselves in the mood of the joy of creation, then all the doors are open..."

From an interview by Alan



MAP OF RAINWATER CATCHMENT TANKS IN THE KALIVELI WATERSHED SHOWING THE BOUNDARIES OF THE PROPOSED WATER FEDERATIONS. SCALE: 1 CM = CA. 5 KM.



An "oorani" at Appirampattu village, restored by Harvest

Water: a common resource

(Continued from page 1)

interest in participating we set about mobilizing different groups. These include farmers', women's and youth groups. These groups in turn elect two representatives each to a micro-watershed association. This association has a written agreement with the panchayat that entitles it to control the natural resources to be created by the project in the tanks and their catchment areas. These catchment areas will include timber, fisheries, fodder, reeds and clay for brickmaking. As water recedes in a tank there is extremely fertile soil and often it just needs to be seeded.

The associations are heterogeneous in composition, with members ranging from the traditional caste Hindu landowners at the top end to dalit (untouchable) women. The set-up is democratic and each member has one vote. One condition of the project is that the landowners make a thirty per cent financial contribution towards the work to be done. This is seen as a profitable investment by the farmers as many of the tanks are conserving only a third of their potential, and increasing the aquifer potential by as much as two thirds could provide more water for irrigation and even a

second or third crop. "It might surprise you," says Ravi, but we've also had contacts with landless people from the dalit colonies who are asking us to do this work as it will result in more employment for them."

Training

In a parallel initiative, women's credit groups have been formed in the villages. Typically a member will invest 20 or 30 rupees per month into a common fund which is managed by women elected from within the same group. The group then processes requests for loans (i.e. Rs. 300 for school uniforms and books) and interest on these loans is paid back into the fund. This helps women to save money as well as free themselves from the clutches of village moneylenders. "We hope that these women's groups will be able to bid for contracts when the association starts leasing out its resources."

Part of the project will also involve training villagers in certain skills such as surveying, bookkeeping and fixing hand pumps. "We're telling them that we're willing to help them, but that it's up to them, for instance, to get the vehicles arranged,

to get the stones and to purchase the materials. They bring in quotations, which are decided upon together by their treasurer and ours. Our intention is for the farmers to take initiative and responsibility for the work. It is after all their project. And so far the response has been enthusiastic."

Research

Research is an important component of the project and will involve socio-economic and political monitoring of its progress. And, on the environmental side, studies will be made of rainfall and meteorological data, water recharge rates and soil sampling, and tree growth and productivity will be analysed. A half million

mostly indigenous trees will be planted along and within the catchment areas of the tanks. This part of the project is being undertaken by FERAL (Foundation for Ecological Research and Advocacy), a Pondy-based NGO, which has a team of eight researchers, scientists, and GIS experts working on the project. The research serves two main purposes. "We are trying to create cropping models that can be predicted to an acceptable degree of accuracy," says Ravi. "A farmer wants to maximise profits and minimise risks and what we do is calculate the agricultural inputs such as fertilisers, pesticides, labour, and water for the four main crops of the area. We hope through our study to be able

to tell him which crops give the best mix of the two. Also, the research can be of value to policy makers, to help them see what will happen if certain changes are made on a policy level. For instance, if fertiliser rates go up again how will that impact farmers? The 100% electricity subsidy for groundwater is leading to over extraction and a depletion of groundwater levels. Policy makers can be pushed. What happens if you impose a water tariff? Say you put a two-paisa charge on water consumed per unit. The database we have compiled shows that there would be a shift from sugarcane to paddy crops."

Dr. Rauf Ali, a trustee of FERAL and also a co-ordinator of the project, feels the research and data compiled will be of importance to our planning in Auroville. "Water planning is presently the most neglected aspect of planning in this region. We need to know how much area should be under forest, how much given to agriculture and how much can be under housing so that we don't in the long run deplete the water table. Apart from empowering the communities in the region to manage their own water, this project will generate information that will be extremely valuable in determining how Auroville should use its water."

Roger

About Palmyra

This new five-year water project, which is presently employing 76 researchers and field workers is a natural extension of Palmyra's varied activities over the last ten years. These include the planting of one and a half million trees and the construction of more than 60 checkdams and a large number of field bunds on common and government land for the National Wastelands Development Board in the Ousteri and Kaliveli watersheds. They also run a biannual watershed management training program for farmers, NGOs, and Indian Forest Service officials, and a project funded by the Ministry of Science and Technology, New Delhi for an evaluation of plant based pesticides for paddy and cashew crops. Palmyra's village work has included support for higher secondary schools in a number of villages, the formation of youth and cricket clubs, and the construction of public toilets as part of the Danida water and sanitation programme in over a dozen villages.

The most prolific film-making country

A seminar in Auroville on Indian cinema

A three-day seminar on Indian film, led by Mr. P.K. Nair, former Director of the National Film Archive of India, was offered by Aurofilm at the end of January. A gentle soft-spoken man who has devoted his life to film, Mr. Nair's knowledge of film history is wide-ranging. His sense of the craft, the ease with which he speaks about French, American and Indian films infused the programme: we were caught by his intelligence, his enthusiasm, his intimate relationship with his subject.

Punctuating his lecture with clips from Indian films, Mr. Nair shared with us the early days of Indian cinema, some examples of which have been preserved by the National Film Archive. At last count, the Archive had 9,050 films, 12,511 scripts and 4,272 wall posters, plus innumerable booklets, press clippings and stills. "With an annual output of over 80 features in 14 languages apart from the national language of Hindi, independent India continues to rank as the most prolific film-making country in the world today," writes Mr. Nair.

"Cinema is an emotional experience," said Mr. Nair, in his opening lecture. "Its importance to the people of India lies in its ability to act as a catharsis, freeing the viewer from the pain of daily life." In fact, from the villager to the city dweller, Indians listen to film music, buy video cassettes, see gigantic wall posters of their favourite film stars plastered on billboards every day. Young people read cinema fan magazines devotedly, follow the private lives of its stars and yes, even elect them to public office. The pantheon of actors and actresses coincides with their devotion to the pantheon of gods and goddesses of Hinduism and sometimes, it's hard to tell them apart.

It all began with D.G. Phalke, the father of Indian cinema. "To D.G. Phalke, who directed *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913, mythology was not just a vehicle for transporting his god-fearing audiences to a fantasy world of gods, goddesses, demons and heavenly damsels, but a cinematic device to sensitise them to the manifold problems of contemporary soci-



Scene from the film *Meghe Dhaka Tara*, 1960. Director: Dr. Ritwik Ghatak, Bengali

ety." The filmmakers who followed broke new ground in cinema technique, poetic expression and touched something of the beauty of India and its tremendous struggle with social problems and family life.

The Indian film-maker best-known in the West is Satyajit Ray, whose movie *Panther Panchali*

(1955) brought "a new consciousness to Indian cinema." To Mr. Nair, "this triumph of Ray in creating a new genre of Indian film had its influence abroad as well as at home. Indian cinema became universally important, not just a national passion." Mr. Nair compared Ray with Ritwik Ghatak, a contemporary of Ray. Ghatak's symbolism, he commented, was as powerful as Ray's realism, but this was recognised only later by the French critics.

Although he retired as Director of the Film Archive in 1991, Mr. Nair continues to be actively involved in Indian cinema, programming Indian film festivals as well as promoting Indian films abroad. As we sat with him after lunch on Sunday, he bemoaned the fact that modern-day cinema is dictated by rich film stars and directors who cater to Westernised tastes. "Making films can be an inspiration to the common folk, too. Why not give the farmer, the villager, a chance to use film to tell his story in his way? It is a shame it has become so exclusive. It could be a powerful tool for social awareness and social change."

Jill

Nishta

Auroville premieres Seyril Schochen's play

Seyril Schochen, presently living in the USA, is a long-time devotee of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother who lived in Auroville during the early years. Her play, 'Nishta', is about a difficult choice faced by the eldest daughter of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson during her stay in the Ashram.

One of Sri Aurobindo's first American disciples was Margaret Woodrow Wilson, the eldest daughter of President Woodrow Wilson. She was first introduced to the wisdom of the East through the works of Ramakrishna. Later she discovered Sri Aurobindo's *Essays on the Gita*, and this led to a correspondence with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother culminating in Sri Aurobindo giving permission for her to come to live in the Ashram. Sri Aurobindo called her 'Nishta'—the one-pointed—and her determination to realize the Divine was like a continuation on another plane of an idealistic movement begun by her father. After the First World War, Woodrow Wilson fought hard to materialize his dream of The League of Nations as a means of preventing future global conflicts. The dream was flawed and the U.S. Congress refused to ratify it; yet, as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, the attempt was "of capital importance and meant the initiation of a new era in world history".

A day of decision

Seyril Schochen's play, "Nishta", takes as its central axis the day when Nishta has to decide whether to remain in the Ashram or to return to America. The Japanese have bombed Calcutta and America is arranging to bring its citizens in India home, partly so that its neutrality will not be compromised by

its nationals being involved in the conflict. Nishta is visited by old American friends and memories, as well as by U.S. Embassy officials, who want to take her back. However she feels the Ashram is her spiritual home, and she has a wonderful opportunity to type out Sri Aurobindo's newly-completed manuscript of *The Life Divine*. At this difficult moment of decision she re-encounters her old flame, Tom Eliot, who first introduced her to Ramakrishna's works and who is now a sannyasin. Finally she runs into the sea, is rescued by Eliot and Pavitra and is taken to

Mother, who finally gives her the manuscript of *The Life Divine*. "Where was I... tonight?" she asks Pavitra. "Perhaps being born? In the sea? And into a new life, Nishta?" he replies.

In the Auroville Theatre Group's performances of the play, the strong-willed yet, at times, inwardly uncertain Nishta is played with a great deal of sensitivity by Srimoyi. Surabhi is superb as her neurotic, emotionally-dependent sister Nell, as is Roger whose buttoned-up President Wilson conceals a quiet nobility of spirit. There is also strong support from Jill, the director of the play, who plays Nishta's actress friend Madge, Partha as Nishta's attendant Ambu, Anandamayee as the Embassy secretary, and Charu as Jagannath, the Nazi-sympathizing Ashramite. Swar had difficulty in conveying the inwardness and compassionate detachment of Pavitra, while Otto has real stage presence, but his portrayal of Tom Eliot is at times too strident to bring out the inner strength of the sensitive Englishman.

Caricature

This is not entirely Otto's fault. Seyril tends to write with the loud pedal on, and some of her characters—like the southern Presbyterian preacher Reverend George, played with relish by Nico—sail perilously close to caricature. It's also rather overdoing it to give the Bengali Nazi sympathizer a German accent, while Martanda has perhaps the most challenging task of all in making believable a ship's doctor who is required to deliver lines like "Time to ship off, mates! On His sea! And Hers!"

In fact the beginning



Nishta (Margaret Woodrow Wilson) at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, in the early '40s.

Photo courtesy Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives

and middle sections of the play, in which Nishta is subjected to greater and greater pressure to give up her Ashram life and return to the U.S., are in many ways stronger than the final scenes which tend towards melodrama. There's a particularly touching moment when her sister Nell, after listening to Nishta explaining God's love, asks her, "But if you know there's no death or disease in God's love... why did you take all those medicines to India on your doctor's orders? And don't you still have arthritis? And take medicines for it?" Nishta can only reply faintly to herself, "Because I am still... Margaret Wilson. Unable to realize God."

"Nishta" is an attempt to stage the inner conflict of a formidable woman who, in the words of one of her letters to The Mother, is "haunted by the fact that I am doomed in this life to remaining just a pseudo-mystic..." The fact that the play held a large mixed audience for over two hours is a tribute both to the quality of the acting, and to Seyril Schochen's portrayal of an extraordinary individual whose story deserves to be better known.

Alan



A flashback scene: Nishta (Srimoyi) returns to the White House after a singing tour of the U.S.

Photo: Aniruddha/Lines

Culture briefs

Lectures

◆ Dr Dorjee Rabten Nashar, Chief Medical Officer, Tibetan Medical & Astro Institute, Bangalore, gave a general introduction to the principles of Tibetan medical science at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture.

◆ Penpa Tsering-la, member of the Tibetan Parliament, held a lecture on the democratization of the Tibetan society under the leadership of the Dalai Lama.

◆ A series of lectures on the Tamil heritage and literature were held at the Centre of Indian Culture. These were the first activities of the proposed Tamil Pavilion.

◆ Readings on Savitri were held by Narad (who began the Matrimandir Nursery), Manoj Das and Dr. Nadkarni at the Savitri Bhavan.

◆ Georges van Vrekhem also read excerpts from his forthcoming biography of The Mother at the same venue.

Music performances

◆ A concert of Indian classical instrumental music was given by visiting artists Diviprasad (sitar) and Aprubo Mukherjee (tabla) in Pitanga.

◆ A visiting group from Madras gave a well-received concert of classical Indian music.

◆ Bossa Nova, jazz, rock, folk, reggae and blues performances were given at the Jazz Café.

◆ Marcello (cello) and Pushkar (piano) performed works by Martini, Bach and of their own composition in Pitanga and in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

◆ Visiting artists Ladislav (violin) and Christina (piano) gave a concert of classical western music at Pitanga of works of Mozart, Brahms and Von Cube. This was the first performance in India of a sonata by the latter composer.

◆ Auroville's rock band Shireen gave a concert of "soft" rock music in Auroville and at the Alliance Française in Pondicherry. Many of the songs were composed by the lead singer, Kerstin.

◆ The Auroville Choir gave a performance of sacred music spanning ten centuries, conducted by

Exhibitions

◆ Mother's explanation of *Savitri*, Book One with paintings by Huta were exhibited at the Savitri Bhavan.

◆ Light Station, an art installation by Pierre Legrand, was exhibited in the Matrimandir outer gardens.

◆ An exhibition of sculptures by a Dutch newcomer, Cornelius, was held at Pitanga.

◆ An exhibition on the potential development of the Auroville city centre was held earlier at the same venue.

Dance performances

◆ Visiting dancer Searah gave a performance of the classical Korean dance Salpuli in Pitanga. (More about this in our next issue.)

◆ Visitors Charlie and Pascaline gave a performance of Butoh and contemporary dance in Bharat Nivas to music by Aurovilian Igor Wakhevitch.

◆ Dancers from the Samskritiki Shreyaskar Dance Academy, Calcutta, accompanied by live music, presented an evening of Kathak Indian Dance.

◆ Anuradha, an artiste from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, gave an evening of Bharat Natyam dance, accompanied by live music, at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium.



"It is a plunge into the void."

Mayaura, an Aurovilian artist, talks about her work.

"**M**atisse was born a few kilometers away from my home town," Mayaura tells me, with a hint of a smile on her lips. We're comfortably installed in her workspace, and a calm, serene atmosphere prevails, despite the continuous noise of work going on nearby. Palettes and palette knives lie strewn on the floor as if work had been suddenly interrupted. Amongst several works a canvas—her latest—faces us. It is there: large, vibrating with an electric tension. Gold spreads like the drops in a Pollock painting, alive, unexpected. Mayaura explains that it was commissioned and recounts how she suffered to finish it. The canvas wasn't turning out as she had expected. She spent hours and nights asking herself where it was going and why it wasn't working. At last the moment came, a moment of grace, when everything fell into place and the finished canvas was hung.

Born in 1954 in Hirson in the north of France, Mayaura spent her adolescence absorbed first in poetry and later in music. It was only after a couple of trips to visit her uncle and aunt in Paris that she began to buy

books on art.

Apprenticeship

Then she decided to take the plunge and went up to Paris on her own. She enrolled herself in the studio of Henri Goetz and the adventure lasted five years. In order to make ends meet she worked in an architect's office on the side. "Henri Goetz had this capacity to draw out each one's personality, to enable them to see." A multitude of temperaments expressed themselves in Goetz's studio. "During our sessions, he would point out to us a small detail and say: you see, this here, that works! By dint of looking at all these fragments we began to discover and understand."

Rembrandt was to have the strongest influence on Mayaura. One day she found herself in front of a self-portrait of the master at the Prado. And she observed an amazing detail: a dab on the nose as if the painter had just applied it. "It was incredible because this painting had been done hundreds of years before. It is this living aspect that moves me." It is this sense of living detail that she seeks to capture. This concern for detail comes out in the Sanskrit letters and mantras



Mayaura

she paints on wood. In her more recent work in this genre the lettering has become an invisible but underlying thread.

The paradox of colour

After her first journey to India and an exhibition in Paris, Mayaura returned to Auroville. The contrasts of India fascinated her. Her work remained figurative until the day she came across a black and white photo

of Capra representing one of the postures of Shiva in movement. It overwhelmed her. "Behind the apparent chaos there was perfection, a sense of order. It was as if I could see the whole process of life in that one photo. Everything that created that movement seemed to open everything up to the unfolding of creation."

She began to do hundreds of sketches of that photo in order to enter into its energy. Then the figures began to fade softly and give way to a feeling, the pure expression of colours. Through a technique of superimposition that creates a depth in matter, matter becomes living. "The paradox of colour is that it is simultaneously matter and light." It is this paradox that fascinates her, and which she explores in her work. In our conversation we are using words such as "abstract" and "figurative" and they bother both of us. But it is difficult to find other words, should one invent them? As Mayaura justly observes, there is always a mental reference as regards an object. Most people when they find themselves in front of a painting will say, "It looks like an apple, a bridge..." This mechanism acts more or less as a barrier that impedes the viewer from entering into the space of a work. Instead, one

should say to oneself, "This work creates such and such a feeling in me." For her, the figurative element is not important as it blocks the way.

Vertigo

I can't help but pursue this question that has always intrigued me: "What goes on inside a painter when she finds herself in front of a blank canvas?" "One must accept vertigo!" she tells me. "It is a plunge into the void." I think immediately of Nicolas de Stael writing to his friend Pierre Lecuire: "But, vertigo, myself, I love it. Sometimes I'm attached to it at all costs." Mayaura's work carries that same force, that same energy in colour with perhaps a little more delicacy, or should we say, femininity?

To paint is, for her, to be both very present and very absent at the same time. Her only desire is to be as transparent and open as possible, to be a blank canvas herself. Everything happens in another space. Mayaura quotes Paul Klee: "To attain the mystery of being beyond forms." However these states are not constant as there is always the moment when life draws you back, and here doubt and uncertainty begin. "How to hold on to that state?" she wonders, "is it at all possible?"

As the day begins to fade, a golden light fills the atelier and I take leave of Mayaura's warm presence.

Emilie



Auroville and India

The merging of the worlds

Bindu visits the Meenakshi Temple in Madurai

Madurai—the town

Madurai is a woman. Languorous in the heat of the South Indian sun. Comforting with the earthy smell of steaming idlis wafting from roadside stalls, and cows nosing through the garbage and stolidly munching discarded banana-leaf plates. Familiar. And yet, teasingly seductive with the charm of the unexpected. The hurrying steps of young shaved apprentice-priests, the jingling bells of the temple elephant as it ways through the streets, and the air redolent with the smell of rose and jasmine all beckon one towards the temple.

Here all roads lead to the Meenakshi temple. Meenakshi, the warrior goddess, incarnated as a Pandya princess who dared to challenge Shiva to battle, and then recognizing him as her Lord and herself as his eternal consort, throwing down her arms to fall into his.

Despite all the trappings of modern civilization, the noisy cars, the internet cafes, the slick tourists, Madurai breathes something of the eternal India. Something subtle and intangible, but persistently calling to the very blood in my veins.

Meenakshi—the temple

It is this sense of eternity that one feels when one first enters the temple. Hindus lay great importance on the proportions and orientation of their temples. They believe that the architectural perfection of a temple wields

an occult influence on the evolving perfection of the world. The southern gopuram leads directly to the large open tank where it is believed that Indra, the king of the devas, once paid homage to Shiva. It did not matter that the tank, where according to the legend golden lotuses once flourished, is now stagnant, devoid of the rich paintings that once adorned its walls. Leaning against a pillar in a quiet, sunlit corner of the tank, I had almost a bird's eye view of the temple with the gopurams rising to the north and the east and the pillared halls running along the sides of the tank. And once again I felt humbled, with the sense of the infinite pressing on me. It was as though each stepped niche of the temple architecture had been carefully thought out and put in place, in a strictly defined order. Time was somehow encapsulated within the space of these temple walls. The cobbled granite stones were ground smooth by the bare feet of millions of god-fearing pilgrims; the pillars, sculpted with mythical animals, bore in nude majesty the weight of centuries of belief and worship. The temple seemed to contain some secret wisdom that mere mortals like me were not privy to.

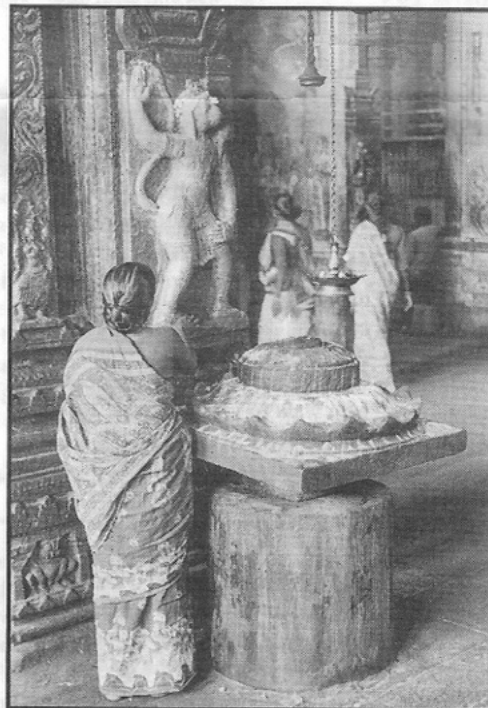
As I joined the impatient stream of pilgrims heading to the sanctum sanctorum for the ritual worship however, dissatisfaction welled up within me. I have to admit I have never liked the inner sanctums of Indian temples,

the unadorned, dark, roughly hewed spaces that house the main deity. They symbolise the fertile womb of the earth, the hidden core of matter ensconced within the divinity. But I find them dirty, claustrophobic, with the oil of the lamps, the ritual ablutions, the petty greed of the officiating priests currying favours for men for a few extra rupees. Such a sharp contrast to the pure, white silence of the inner chamber of Matrimandir!

As I walked round the temple, I stopped in awe at a beautiful five-metre high statue of Shiva dancing the tandava. The pose was that of the udharva tandava, where Ishwara consents to dance for the pleasure of his Shakti, represented by a companion image of Kali. The left foot was raised up to the head in imperturbable ease, and the tranquil unseeing face of the Lord seemed unmoved by either the importune pleas of the pilgrims or my inner turmoil. The ancient and the modern world coexisted here without touching, without influencing each other.

Meenakshi—the Goddess

Despite my lack of faith, I could not stop myself from going to the temple, driven by some half-understood inner urge to seek out anew the wisdom enshrined there. To find what lessons, if any, it still could teach modern India. And so it was that on a Sunday evening I found myself again entering the temple through its west-



Woman at the Meenakshi temple.
Photo: Olivier Barot

ern gopuram, desiring to view Goddess Meenakshi, adorned in golden splendence (so said the guide-book) for the evening rituals.

I could not proceed much further however. The entrance hall was cordoned off and neatly divided into sections by bamboo poles and ropes. And seated, cross-legged on the floor, back-to-back, knee-to-knee, were thousands of women. Rows and rows of women, in all directions as far as the eye could see. Resplendent in fine silk saris woven in the warm colours of the south—green, maroon, peacock-blue and yellow—and edged with golden brocade. Packed together into a narrow space, but smiling with blissful ease, not in the least impa-

tient. Each woman had in front of her a brass plate with a ritual offering of rice, betel leaves, sweets and flowers, and at the centre, a traditional South Indian oil lamp cast out of bronze and designed to hold six wicks or more at one time. The lit lamps spun a soft suffused glow. The flickering flames danced off the colours of the saris, brightening the brown peaceful faces of the women, and charging the atmosphere with a sweet sense of purity.

I did not make it to the sanctum sanctorum. It was no longer important. I was mesmerized by this collective act of devotion before me. I learnt that it was a very auspicious day, determined by the stars, that comes once in four or five years, when Goddess Meenakshi consents to incarnate again on earth. The women first invoke the Goddess to incarnate in the form of fire, represented by the flames of the bronze lamps, and then worship her. They pray not for progeny or for the good of their families, as is usually the case, but for the welfare of the whole community. There were 10,800 women that day, united in their prayers. And as their voices rose and fell with the simple intoned chants to the Goddess, I felt the worlds merge. I felt India, the ancient spirituality of India, surge alive into our present world.

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