

Auroville Today

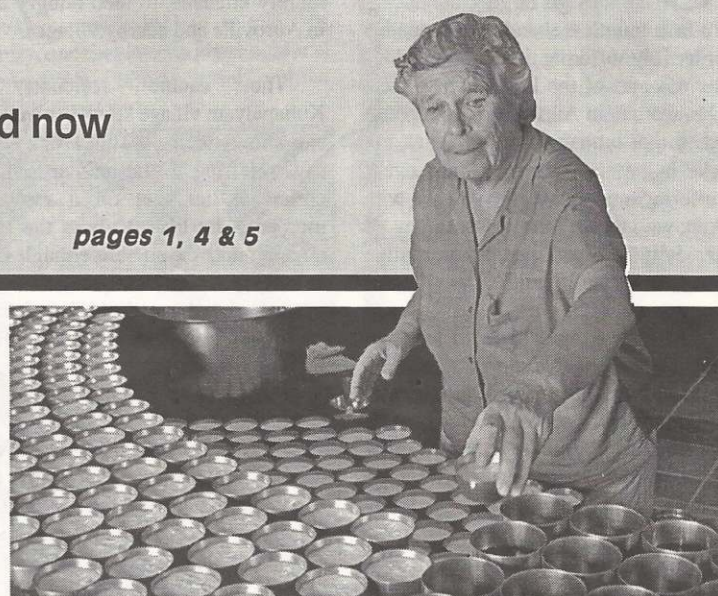
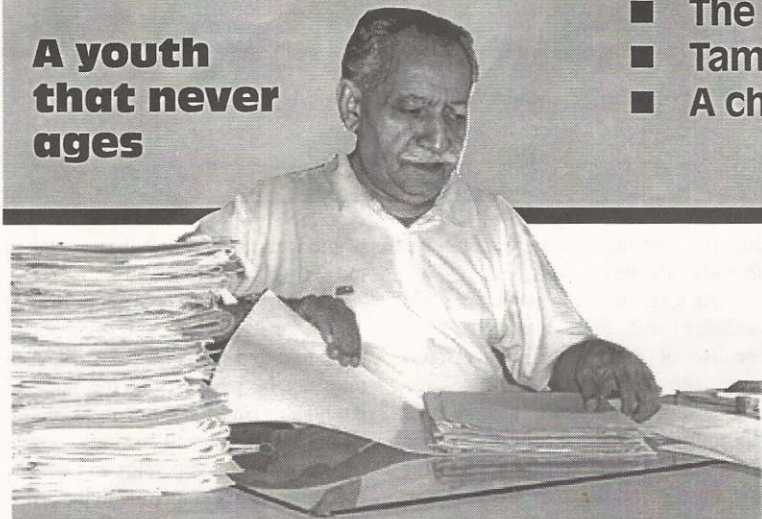
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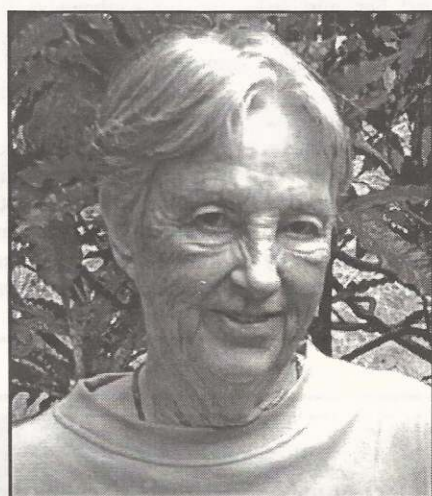
COVER STORY:

A youth that never ages

- Views from over seventy
- The third stage of life
- Tamil views on aging, then and now
- A change of Divine Plan?



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From left to right: top row, Krishna in the archives, Nergez, Ilse in the Solar Kitchen; bottom row: Ellen in the Library, Ursula, Erica, Kamla in the Health Centre.

Population statistics show that 27 Aurovilians, 15 women and 12 men, are aged 70 or older.

Some of them joined Auroville in middle age, others joined only after their official retirement. What they have in common is that they made a 'different' choice: instead of opting for the usual pattern of slowing down, they decided to start all over again and actively participate in the building of Auroville. What does it mean to be an older person in a city that, according to the second paragraph of its Charter, is intended "for a youth that never ages"?

Views from over seventy

You hardly notice them. The septuagenarians blend so easily into the flow of everyday life that there is little awareness of the fact that some of them chose to join Auroville at an age when others were contemplating taking life easy. The reason why they chose Auroville is a spiritual one - not bhakti or jnana, but karma yoga, the path of works.⁽¹⁾

Take, for example, the case of Krishna (78) and Kamla (73). They came to Auroville in 1976 after Krishna's retirement at 54 as a Major-General in the Indian army. Having been a man of action dedicated to the ideals of karma yoga for his entire life, Krishna felt that Auroville was the next logical step. "Those who wish to lead a spiritual life after retirement, usually go to an ashram and pursue a bhakti or jnana yoga. This is the case, for example, with the majority of those who join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram after their retirement. But here was the challenge to build an international township in an Indian setting! The idea was fantastic and both my wife Kamla and I liked the project immediately."

Kamla fondly remembers the meeting with Mother on February 22nd, 1972, and the day earlier when she and Krishna stood at the excavation pit for the Matrimandir during the deeply moving foundation ceremony. "At that moment something clicked. I knew then that Auroville was my place, and not the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. I knew I would come here, even if, at that moment, I didn't know when. The choice was made." And she adds: "It seems to me that many people come to Auroville because some aspect of Auroville appeals to them, not out of a

conscious choice for Auroville itself. For us it was different."

Ursula (76) from Germany also recalls her meeting with Mother as one that changed her life forever. "She did not speak but put her hand on my head and inwardly I talked to her and told her that I was not ready to join Auroville," she says recalling her meeting with Mother in 1971. "And The Mother answered silently, 'But you must!'" Ursula met Mother twice afterwards, and finally moved to Auroville in 1989, when she was 65.

"Mother's face was compassion personified," says Nergez (78), a Parsi lady from Bombay, who met Mother in 1972 - exceptionally as Mother had at that time stopped seeing people. "That was such an experience - it changed my life completely. For a few seconds the feeling of 'I,' 'me,' 'myself,' left: there was nobody anymore; it was as a drop that merged in the ocean. Initially, when I first saw Mother during the balcony darshan, I was very skeptical; but when I was face to face with Her in Her room, and looked into Her eyes... You see, I was a hairdresser and beautician, and would normally observe the colour of somebody's hair. But as of today, I still do not know the colour of Mother's hair! I saw the expression on

Her face and never thought I could see an expression like that...I joined Auroville in 1977 when my social responsibilities in Bombay had ended, having visited Auroville in each of the three preceding years. Mother surely prepared that step."

Ilse (70) from Holland met Mother only once, in 1973, "but that was more than enough," she says. "I still feel the little tap Mother gave on my head. It changed my life. After meeting Her, I knew inwardly that my time for Auroville had not yet come and that I had to go back home to continue my work. In 1996 I got the clear indication 'from above' that it was time to come, and I joined Auroville soon afterwards."

Not everyone had the good fortune to meet The Mother. Erica (79) learned about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in 1974 while flying from her native Germany to Australia. She re-routed her return trip to visit the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where she settled shortly afterwards and worked with Norman Dowsett on educational projects. She moved to Auroville in 1992.

Ellen (72), also from Germany, had read about the inauguration of Auroville in 1968 and knew about Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's teach-

ing. "But it was not really possible for me at that time to go to India because of my family situation. That changed after my retirement. Then I decided that I wanted to look forward, not backward, and start a new life in a new place. That place was Auroville, as it offers a future. Here the word 'yoga' is common parlance and there is the freedom to develop oneself inwardly in the way one thinks fit, without a living guru and a restrictive set of spiritual guidelines. Also, the experiment of a spiritual township, where such a variety of people from all age groups live together, greatly attracted me." The freedom to follow one's own path, with even the freedom not to focus on the teaching of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, also attracted Ilse. "In Auroville you can discover your own spiritual way, nothing is obligatory. That for me is the major attraction," she says.

Karma yoga

Notwithstanding the fact that all those interviewed are financially independent, most of them are working. "The Auroville Charter," says Krishna "mentions that Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress and a youth that never ages."

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A dog's best friend

Ann's work with animals

Of the many silent victims of Indian poverty, dogs and other animals go largely unnoticed. To face countless abandoned, wounded or terribly suffering tiny pups and dogs defines part of the Indian experience. One woman in Auroville has responded to that human instinct to pick up, take home and care for almost every suffering animal she sees. I spoke with Ann, who works with partner Kittu, on her daily feed and medication routine through Auroville and nearby villages.

After waking at 6am to feed the five dogs and twelve cats (not counting kittens) in her care, Ann climbs aboard an ailing, rusty scooter to feed, medicate and care for no less than 43 other dogs. On her scooter Ann carries a tub filled with 45 kilos of rice, cooked veg-



etables and water, left-overs from Auroville's assorted school and community kitchens, to feed hungry dogs in Auroville and nearby villages.

The canine residents of Kuilapalyam village know her well and she knows them. "That's Gobi" she says referring to the animal lovingly curled at her feet on a rare still moment, "he likes to boss the other dogs around". And sure enough Gobi is barking and growling commands to other passing dogs. "Gobi!" she berates "Be nice!" Gobi lovingly acquiesces for a moment before noisily pulling up a nearby mongrel for standing too close.

If Ann's morning is busy with feeding, than her afternoons and evenings are hectic with medication. Her every waking hour, if not dedicated to the redistribution of excess food to hungry animals, is focused on the acquisition and administration of medicine. Beside her established program of rabies vaccination, she's now dealing with a recent epidemic of canine distemper. Canine distemper begins with mild symptoms, but quickly advances through destruction of the nervous system and normally results in death.

"It's a terrible way to die," she says, "sometimes the dogs suffer for days before they go." A canine distem-

per vaccine exists, but it's expensive at Rs 200 a shot with a minimum of two required for puppies and more for older dogs. Through her contacts with vets and animal workers, Ann discovered that the cheaper (Rs 30 per shot) human measles vaccine also cures dogs of distemper and today effectively treats dogs with it.

To mistake Ann for a highly-dedicated vet isn't hard. From her punishing schedule down to her white latex gloves, syringes and multicolored medications, she looks and acts the part. I watched as she first treated a dog with distemper then sterilized the soles of her shoes in a fire lit by her, to limit the transmission of the disease to her other canine patients.

Five years after her work with animals began, Ann is considering a return to her native New Zealand to make money to fund her mission. "We're always struggling," she says. "I receive some money from the Indian Animal Welfare Association and donations from friends, but it seems like there's never enough." Amazingly, Ann says there is even opposition to what she does. "There are those here who hate dogs, and who feel what I do is bad," she says. "They feel that by feeding and caring I'm increasing the



dog population, and they think we should eradicate the dogs."

"As a result of our work pups are healthier and more attractive and because of that, people want them more, and there are less uncared for dogs wandering around," said Ann as she took me to see the results of her work first-hand. "There's a beautiful pup in a woodpile I'd like to show you," she said as I followed her through Kuilapalyam village. When she arrived, the mother who wasn't much more than a pup herself, seemed confused and the pup was gone. A man standing nearby said children had taken the pup the day before. "Ah, but this is not good," replied Ann. "The pups have to stay with the mother and breast-feed for longer than this." Nevertheless, the experience seemed evidence that her work is creating

wanted animals, even if they are taken too early by children.

Ann is anxious she's not portrayed as a latter-day saint: "I'm often short-tempered and selfish," she says. Ann may not be perfect, but the dogs of Kuilapalyam don't seem to mind. Although the small, skinny, sand-coloured almost-pup yelps and winces as she forces distemper medicine down his throat, the moment she finishes the procedure and walks away, the animal rushes to her side with the air of a living being recognised for the first time in its life.

Jesse

Ann and Kittu's can be contacted at the following address:

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C/o Kuilapalyam Post Office
Auroville 605101

FARMING

Women only!

Mechtild on her work at Service Farm

When Mechtild came to Auroville in 1987, she started working at the Matrimandir Nursery. Mechtild was trained and had worked as a professional fruit-tree gardener in Germany, but she did not want to continue working with fruit-trees. She reminisces: "I did not yet know within me where 'my place' was in Auroville. I just tried to remain open for some clue. One day in August 1989 I opened the book, Savitri, at random, and was struck by the lines:

*A simple word lets loose vast agencies;
A casual act determines the world's fate.*

Later that day I met a friend who told me that he had been asked whether he could take care of Service Farm. It was the first time I heard this name. I was immediately intrigued by it, for on the day that I was born, Mother had spoken at length about "service" and how to serve the Divine. The word "service" has always had an important meaning form me. That same day, my friend and I visited Service Farm.

"We wandered around trying to figure out the boundaries of the farm. There were no fences. There was an office, and inside there was this picture of the Mother and we felt Her presence very strongly. (The Mother had acquired and named the plot of land "Service Farm" even before the inauguration of Auroville.) As my friend had already taken up other responsibilities in Auroville, it was impossible for him to take care of Service Farm. In the evening, while brooding over the whole thing, it slowly dawned on me that maybe Mother meant me to be the steward, that She had offered

it to me. I then decided to take up the job. Service Farm is a gift and at the same time a task.

"My first work was to fence and bund the land. To the west the land slopes towards eroded canyons, and bunding was essential to prevent the rainwater and topsoil from being washed away from the farm. Fences too were a top priority to prevent animals from coming in. The villagers at first resented my presence as for many years they had had free access to the land. But finally our relationship changed. I feel safe here, believing that there is Mother's protection on this land. In times of serious difficulties the certainty that this place is wanted by Her helped me to endure."

The present situation

Mechtild employs only women now to tend to the farm, hiring men on a contract basis if there is some particularly hard work that the women cannot handle. "In general, I find the women work hard, are more gentle, and it is easier to teach them the finer details of the work", says Mechtild. "I tend to balance their workload. For instance, if they have spent the morning digging holes, then in the afternoon I let them do weeding. Also, without the men, the atmosphere has changed. The women now feel more free and confident in and support each other, for their lot at home is not easy. They come to me with their difficulties and we talk them over and solve what we can. At our weekly meetings on Saturday, we read a few lines of the Mother's words, translated into Tamil."

Of the 12 acres that comprises

the farm, six acres are irrigated and planted with coconut, mango, papaya, star-fruit, guava, chickoo, lime, custard-apple, bullock-heart and jack-fruit trees. The remaining six acres are planted with cashew. Like most farms in Auroville, Service Farm is totally organic. Recent organic experiments include using 'Effective Micro-organisms' (EM) both as a soil nutrient and as a preventive health measure. For the past few years, Service Farm has also been using a drip irrigation system. "While this tremendously cuts down on the wastage of water," says Mechtild, "the one drawback is that the drippers get clogged very easily and block the water flow. So I have to constantly inspect and clean the drippers." Also, Mechtild has recently acquired a set of solar panels that allows her to pump water from the bore-well into a tank. A second set of two panels then pumps the water from the tank into the fields through the drip irrigation system. It makes a big difference to be on solar energy as the cost of using electricity to pump water has become prohibitive, since the Government ruling in 1997 that Auroville farms, as 'institutions' of the Auroville Foundation, have to pay the highest tariff. Says Mechtild, "This ruling really makes a mockery of all farm economics. There is no way that the produce from Auroville farms could compete price-wise with that of private farms that are supplied with free electricity."

In other ways too, the checkbook



does not balance. While in recent years, Auroville has taken up a greater financial responsibility for its farms, Mechtild still has to invest personal funds, or funds donated by a few private donors in Germany, to keep the farm running. The produce gets sold at the Auroville outlets. "Sometimes when Auroville could not absorb my produce, I took it to the Pondy Bazaar and sold it for a few rupees. But last year I gave the surplus of mangoes to Arul Vazhi (the Auroville School for the children of Morattandi) instead. It is natural that the output of an orchard varies. Right now, for instance, I have all these young guava trees, but it will be a few years before they start bearing fruit and give a return on their investment."

The growth of a tree takes its time. I think a lot about Mother's words. I feel we are here in Auroville to work out and achieve something new. We need to remain open to the Mother's guidance. The aim is still that one day Auroville becomes self-supporting as the Mother wanted."

Bindu

MATRIMANDIR the largest employer

Recent figures show that as many as 320 people are involved in building the Matrimandir and its gardens. There are 260 non-Aurovilian employees and 60 Aurovilians, which makes Matrimandir the largest employer of Auroville. Below is a breakdown of how many people are involved in each department:

- 82 people are needed to make and fix discs.
- 67 people work in the gardens, either doing maintenance work or development.
- 33 people are involved in making the petals.
- 47 are working on the infrastructure development and maintenance, like the air-conditioning for the Chamber, electricity and water.
- 20 people grow and take care of the plants in the Nursery.
- 12 are working on the inner skin glass panels and the frames that will hold them.
- 16 people are involved in laying, polishing and grouting the marble on levels one and two inside the building.
- 16 people are employed as security personnel.
- 16 staff members work in the offices and at the visitor's reception.
- 11 people work as 'resource pool members' - these are Aurovilians who either are involved in publications, layout, or V.I.P. reception.

For the reception of visitors to the Chamber large numbers of volunteers are needed: 100 people are regularly giving their time for "Chamber duty" which entails handing out white socks, ensuring silence and proper conduct during meditation and the cleaning of the Chamber. An additional 50 people are needed on average between 4 and 5 p.m. every day to streamline the flow of tourists who visit Matrimandir for a quick look. On special holidays this number goes up to 70.

Tineke

Learning to listen

70 Aurovilians explore the deeper meaning of dialogue

It's a truism to observe that communication between different groups and orientations in Auroville is often poor and that this situation blocks progress in key areas like town planning, economy and community governance. The Executive Council, as the body which has to deal with many of the consequent problems, is particularly aware of the need to heal the rifts. Recently, as a first step in this direction, it invited Aurovilians to attend a one day seminar on 'The Art of Harmonization' at SAWCHU. Seventy people came, many of them long-term members of the community.

The inspiration for this workshop came from the book 'Synchronicity, the Inner Path of Leadership', in which Joseph Jaworski addresses the deeper problems of communication, but more particularly from the physicist David Bohm's concept of 'dialogue'. The late David Bohm believed that a pervasive incoherence in the process of human thought is the essential cause of all the crises affecting humanity, and he suggested a way by which we could help each other work upon our thought processes and patterns. "Dialogue", as Bohm and his collaborators describe it, "is a way of observing, collectively, how hidden values and intentions can control our behaviour, and how unnoticed cultural differences can clash without our realizing what is occurring. It can therefore be seen as an area in which collective learning takes place and out of which a sense of increased harmony, fellowship and creativity can arise." In other words, dialogue is not debate, it is not about 'winning' or 'losing' arguments. It is about consciously observing our reactions to others, and exploring those reactions within ourselves and together.

Since the dialogue process requires a focus and a minimum number of people to articulate different points of view, the Executive Council had chosen a theme – visions of Auroville – and pre-selected a group of about 30 Aurovilians with differing orientations to share their visions in the first session: later on everybody was free to participate.

How useful was the day? It's important to begin by acknowledging the commitment, honesty of expression and deep listening displayed by all the participants: this already represents a huge advance over the jungle-style meetings of the past. However, in

by a long-term Aurovilian who spoke of how, during our meetings, "something old always seems to settle over us". We had all been here before, it seemed, trapped in a predictable round of expression and lacking the leverage to bounce us into another dimension.

cover the Truth which can unite us."

Does 'dialogue' have a future in Auroville? It's too early to say. Two of the preconditions are that nothing should be excluded as a topic of inquiry, and that everybody should feel free to express him or herself without



terms of the content of what was expressed there was nothing very new. The visions articulated, for example, included images of a sustainable bioregion, of improved educational opportunities for all the surrounding villages, and of an Auroville which pooled all its resources and information while developing greater capacities of caring and compassion for all its inhabitants.

These are all highly commendable, but how far these constitute 'visions' in the highest sense rather than, say, wishes or opinions is a moot point. The fact that there was no discussion about this is one indication that we were not 'dialoguing': in other words, that the intended self-awareness and analysis of the thought-forms we were using was not taking place, at least outwardly. Moreover, as the day wore on there was a familiar tendency for expressions of negativity and frustration to predominate, something picked upon

In the concluding session Kireet Joshi, who attended the workshop as a participant, reminded us of the essential purpose of the day: "This is not an opportunity to express our grievances but to discover the major thought forms prevalent in Auroville and to understand how we use them." He pointed out how differences in the way we interpret terms like 'the community', 'freedom' and 'no exchange of money' have been the basis of many of our battles, and he suggested that we meet again to list out some of these commonly used phrases and clarify the different interpretations. He also warned against 'negative' questioning. "In Auroville asking questions should be part of the process of discovering the Truth – it should not become an end in itself. There is deadlock in the community at present because different parties only want to raise questions: there is no fire to go beyond and dis-

fear of recrimination: it's not at all clear that this is the case in Auroville at present. David Bohm also warned that it can take many sessions, and much frustration, before a group begins to work consciously upon itself. The danger, as happened with 'The Platform' experiment this summer, is that some participants will become impatient for material results and so subvert the frequently slow process of trust-building, clarification and realignment which is the indispensable foundation for effective united action. As one participant put it, "Learning to listen to each other is a crucial part of the work, and we've only really started to listen to each other this summer. It takes patience, endurance, flexibility. We perverted The Platform because old patterns reasserted themselves. Let's try to ensure that this doesn't happen again."

Alan

BUILDING THE CITY

A tree-house expert at 14

Suspended ten feet off the ground, fourteen-year old Shanti sits in the entrance to his fourth hand-made tree-house in five years. From the milled wood floor to the professional keet (dried woven palm leaf) roof, the structure speaks refinement of form. "I like the breeze up here," says

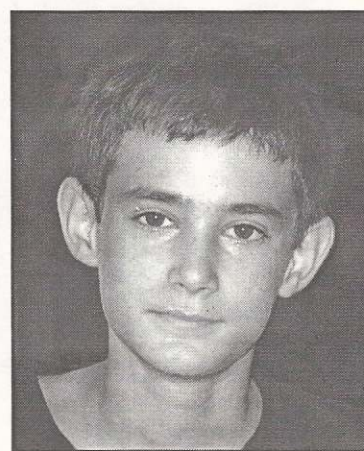
Shanti as we sway on a floor moved gently by the wind. "The building has been designed specifically to catch the cool fast-moving air found at the higher altitudes." A two foot gap between the floor's eighteen square metres and the roof's shaggy keet perimeter conducts a generous flow of cooled air

through the main and only living space. Electric light and a fan – for when there is no wind – add luxurious finishing touches to this lounge-room in the trees.

Although Shanti single-handedly built his first tree-house when he was nine years old, he now works with the help of cricket-buddy, Yelongu, who lives in the nearby village of Alankuppam. Yelongu and Shanti move freely from English to Tamil as they work with bickering camaraderie while tacking up a hessian (thin sackcloth) ceiling. "It stops the bugs and crap from falling and also gives more space for the squirrels to live," says Shanti before taking me up to see his new roof's first squirrel nest. "Every treehouse he's built has been specially designed to allow for squirrels," explains Shanti's mother Li Mei.

At fourteen Shanti's awareness of the world he lives in commands respect. He explains how he plans to fence the gap between floor and ceiling because soon "the babies in our community, Aurodam, will be children and will want to climb, especially into a tree-house. The fence will stop them from falling."

Although a great deal of experience, thought and work have gone into



the structure above, the structure below has by no means been neglected. At ground level, where ladder meets dirt, Shanti and Yelongu have built an elegant winding brick-paved path leading towards the community kitchen and dining room. On either side, extending to a rectangle roughly the size of the floor above, they have planted a garden nothing short of beautiful with simple plants borrowed from neighbours.

Are tree houses a viable option for the future town? Experts say they aren't. However, using local materials and a design refined through five years of trial and error, Shanti's tree house is a pleasure to be in.

Jesse



In brief

● The Governing Board, in its meeting of September 15th and 16th, adopted two resolutions. Appreciating the recent developments that are taking place in Auroville particularly in the fields of education, economy and collective consciousness, the Board constituted a Committee for Unity and a Committee for the Development of CIRHU (Center for International Research in Human Unity). The two committees consist of members of the Board who may co-opt additional members in consultation with the residents of Auroville. The function of the Committee for Unity is to promote unity, harmonious decision making and effective programme implementation. The function of the Committee for the Development of CIRHU is to facilitate the development of CIRHU. The committees are consultative in character "and may envisage a series of meetings with the residents of Auroville in search of solutions to the problems that have been felt to be crucial and which require special efforts so that harmony and enthusiasm prevail in our collective decision making" writes Dr. Kireet Joshi, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, in a letter to all the residents of Auroville.

● The Interim Development Council (IDC) in reviewing its functioning has observed that there is a lack of participation of the Auroville community at large in the work of the Council and the related Planning Group and Monitoring Group. The lack of confidence of the community of Auroville in their own working groups is cited as a disheartening factor. The IDC stated that major areas of the Residential Zone remain undeveloped due to either architectural concerns or high building costs, and that the development of parts of the Industrial Zone is blocked due to objections from neighbours and working groups. There is also a growing tendency of people wishing to build without prior permission; they are reminded to go through the Auroville community process of asking prior permission from the IDC. The Funds and Assets Management Committee, calling on all "to work things out together as this will lead to the manifestation of a truer Auroville", has reminded Aurovilians and newcomers that all immovable assets belong to the Auroville Foundation, and that all funds for the creation of immovable assets have to be channelled through Auroville Fund.

● The Executive Committee, observing that over the past years more and more outsiders and fewer Aurovilians have been attending the amphitheatre bonfires on January 1st, February 28th and August 15th, proposes henceforth to have only one annual bonfire – the Dawn fire at Auroville's birthday – and to have additional silent gatherings throughout the year at the Centre of Auroville "so that all these events may become again truly meaningful to all of us".

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I have always taken this as my leitmotif. The secret is to remain active as it is work that keeps you young. And it is important to pursue a variety of interests. Auroville gives that possibility as there is no hierarchy, and each one has complete freedom to do whatever he or she feels like doing. I worked at Matrimandir, then developed 35 acres of land (Amba Garden in Auromodèle, now Jardin de Mère) before I started the Auroville Archives." Kamla, who was a doctor in the Indian army, continues her practice in Auroville. For Ilse, the question of 'rest' never really came up. Even before she joined Auroville, her name had already circulated as one of the future coordinators of the Solar Kitchen – which she took up as soon as she entered Auroville. "They call me granny in the kitchen, which is quite funny, actually. For I feel like 50!" Ursula, too, fitted in seamlessly. She continued her work as a physiotherapist, giving massages and physical education classes until, in June this year, she had a serious fall and needed a hip replacement. "It slowed me down," she laughs, "but I think I will be active again soon." One of her classes was physical exercises for the elderly, as "keeping fit is a lifelong pursuit".

Isolation and loneliness

Kamla explains another advantage of work: it is a unifying factor. "There are people here who are growing old and isolate themselves. But I think they have partially themselves to blame as often they do not make sufficient effort to meet other people. People must seek help, and not hesitate to ask. On the other hand, the community should also make more efforts to call upon the elderly. Often they are not asked to participate enough. The community should pull them out more, for they have a valuable life experience to share. Auroville should particularly help new people to interact. After all,

we all come here for a work-oriented and collective approach." Ellen is one of those whose experience of trying to integrate has not been an easy one, notwithstanding her participation in work as well as in Auroville's cultural activities. "Aurovilians tend to be self-centered and do not show much care for the elderly. In the beginning I suffered from the fact that my attempts at true contacts did not work out and from the resulting isolation, and it was necessary to go back to the West to regain my perspective. I had to learn to live with loneliness and to understand my own need for social interaction. My work and cultural contacts did not necessarily develop into friendships. I finally learned not to bother anymore and have no expectation patterns. From that moment on, things went better. But there were times when I felt very lonely, even when eating in the midst of a crowd at the Solar Kitchen." Ellen's experiences are not unique. There are more elderly people who have not managed to find suitable interaction or work and stay at home as a consequence. Erica too often feels that her talents are unused. She worked at Matrimandir, the Information Centre and the Kindergarten, but is at present not actively participating in any particular work for the community. You can often find her sitting at her terrace, counselling Aurovilians in need. "I know that I am needed in Auroville," she says. "I think that older people have a long life experience, which they can pass on. I will keep myself together until the very end, but this I do with Mother's help. She is the only one I have long conversations with." While loneliness affects many age groups in Auroville, it appears that as one gets older, it is harder to make social contacts.

Social and medical care

Ellen's observations touch a sore spot: the community's social care for the elderly leaves much to be desired. For many of them it is difficult – or will

become so in the foreseeable future – to attend meetings, go shopping, visit the Matrimandir or go out for cultural events in the evening. Though the community has organized a bus service to Pondicherry thrice a week, regular bus services within Auroville do not exist. Those who wish to visit the Matrimandir but who cannot climb stairs have the additional difficulty of having to arrange their visit in advance, since the only way for them to go up to the Chamber is in a chair carried by four strong men. Says Ellen, "I think that the community should start thinking about these requirements. For example, can't it organize a transport system where a bus picks us up and drops us back whenever there is a cultural performance? That would be a tremendous help! For it is really no fun to drive alone on your moped at night." Ellen's suggestions are shared by other senior Aurovilians, including Nergez, who no longer drives a moped and so hitchhikes her way through Auroville.

Auroville's medical care-taking is better. Ursula, for example, is very appreciative of all the help she received from Aurovilians when she was in hospital. "But it was not an easy job to get all the people in time," says Sourya, a French nurse who organized the care-taking roster and the blood donation roster for Ursula. As Indian hospitals do not provide food and often have insufficient nursing care, constant attendance is required, which implies a minimum of three Aurovilians for each 24 hours. "That type of care puts a great strain on people. Auroville really needs to get an emergency team of qualified individuals together as there is an increasing number of people needing medical and surgical care – sometimes urgently. Auroville has no ambulance and no 24-hour emergency aid facility, not even a 24-hour emergency phone number. Victims of accidents – and elderly people have a higher chance to be among them – have to rely on a



Hitchhiking her way: Nergez on the back of Thanajayan's motorbike

taxi, or an ambulance from Pondicherry, and on Pondicherry hospitals for qualified medical help." Ellen wryly confirms Sourya's observations. Not too long ago she suffered severe burns. The doctor couldn't come and advised her to call a taxi. A friend helped out, but "without her I might have died," she says.

An old-age or nursing home

Is an old-age home the solution? Without exception, all the people interviewed by Auroville Today responded to this question with a categorical 'No!' Old-age homes are judged to be isolating places while on the contrary, a mixing of all age groups is seen as essential. "In India, in the old joint-family situations, the elderly took care of the grandchildren while the children went to work. Likewise in Auroville, a system of collective housing would create the necessary interactive unity among different age groups. That, and the fact that people should continue to contribute their work to this community till they really no longer are able to, would guarantee a social interaction," judges Kamla. But she feels that a proper nursing home, a facility where one can take care of the elderly in periods of convalescence after illness, is essential. Plans for a small nursing home with 24-hour service are ready, but the project lacks funds.⁽²⁾ Nergez too strongly feels the need for "a good holistic nursing home" where all approaches to healing are welcome.

An age limit for joining Auroville

Is the lack of medical and social care a reason to advise elderly people not to come to Auroville? "No, not at all," objects Kamla. "Older people are very important. They no longer have the turbulence of the youth but they contribute instead a mature life experience. If we would not invite them to become Aurovilians, we would not be following the Charter of Auroville. But they should only come if they

have an inner or higher reason to do so. Auroville certainly is not for those who want to enjoy 'a well-deserved rest' after their retirement! They would not be sufficiently motivated to stand the climate and the hard material conditions!" Inner growth and spiritual focus can mitigate the often harsh outward conditions.

"The attraction of Auroville," says Krishna, "is for the deeper things of life. Here you are introduced not only to the writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, which you keep studying as a matter of course and with increasing interest, but there is also the rich interaction with so many other seekers – I consider every Aurovillian a seeker – which is a great benefit. From the spiritual point of view (after all we are a spiritual project) the 24 years spent in Auroville have given me a deepening involvement. We would certainly have missed out on a large part of our inner development if we had lived our lives elsewhere." It is a statement with which the interviewed wholeheartedly agree. "I cannot express how very thankful I am to the Divine for bringing me here in my late fifties!" says Nergez. Ursula sums it up for all of them: "We came for the ideal, and it has become part of us."

Carel and Tineke

Based on interviews with Kamla and Krishna Tewari, Ellen Tessloff, Ursula Mack, Nergez Pesikaka, Ilse Breijman and Erica Schumacher.

⁽¹⁾ Jnana yoga: the Path of Knowledge aiming at the realization of the unique and supreme self by the method of intellectual reflection. Bhakti yoga: the Path of Devotion, aiming at supreme love and bliss through adoration and self-offering. Karma Yoga: the Path of Works, aiming at the dedication of every human activity to the Supreme Will. Hatha Yoga: selects the body and vital functionings as its instruments of perfection and realization.

⁽²⁾ For more information on the nursing home write to Anamika, Gaia, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, or email Anamika@Auroville.org.in

The third stage: life after 56

By Bhavana Dee

Bhavana came to Auroville in 1971. For many years she has coordinated the activities of Village Action. Recently, she celebrated her 56th birthday.

Rebirth can happen in this very life, I think. Since I turned 56 I feel as if I am newborn. It happened that I found out about the importance of the 56th year of life within a month of my last birthday. Someone gave me a book on astrological houses which explained the idea of a human lifetime being a developmental series made up of 28-year periods. But most importantly, from a psychological point of view, the 28-year period matches with ancient traditional knowledge about life. In the occult sciences certain rituals are not allowed to be taught to anyone younger than 56, and learned Hindus know of the four stages of life (corresponding roughly to quarter-century periods), as well as the Tamil tradition with its 20-year periods.

I was deeply moved by coming into awareness of a widely-based human tradition acknowledging the sanctity of this birthday, because it corresponded with the mixed feelings I was experiencing in my life. For while I was noticing with some trepidation the wrinkling skin and stiffening joints of my body, mentally I'd never felt more clear and stable, and on the vital level I was feeling excited and happy, full of eager anticipation, seemingly inappropriate to one "growing old". Now I understood: I was in the first year of my new birth in the third period of my life!

And this third period is a very pre-

cious one. During the first period of life, as a child and student, one's dharma is to learn. In the second period of life, as a householder, parent and career person, the adult puts the learnings of youth to work. The development of spiritual insights during the second period is important for the third. During the third period of life one resets one's goals from achieving outer accomplishments to developing inner qualities of appreciation of beauty, harmony and, most particularly, spiritual attributes such as intuitive understanding of life's meaning, goodness, equality, power, truth. While the second period is a time to make one's contribution to society, the third is the time to make one's contribution to evolution.

At 56 one has seen many patterns, one has had a chance to feel and understand the rhythms of life. In hindsight one has seen what seemed like calamities as crucial moments of inner growth, and one develops a certain sense of philosophical detachment. This mellowness is the basis for disinterested action, the particular dharma of people in the third stage of life. This is the time when the battles are to be fought primarily inside – to conquer one's own nature, rather than to seek outer success.

In fact, many spiritual insights and practices which seem very difficult at a young age seem quite natural at 56. Celibacy, abstemious diet, avoidance



of distracting entertainment, concentration on meditation, etc. are easier to do at 56 and fit right in with the new aim and mission of life: to progress spiritually.

For me understanding this was important because I've always been an active person, much involved in external work and organization. This perception of being in a new stage with a new law of life has allowed me to make choices quite the opposite of what past habit would have dictated. I don't feel guilty when I choose to meditate or study rather than taking on new projects or going to official meetings. I choose different sorts of meetings with other people (of any age) focused on the spiritual topics which now engross my mind.

For someone focused primarily on the outer life, aging is not a very agreeable process. But if one is focused on the inner life, it holds many promises.

Tamil views on aging, then and now

Traditionally the Tamils, like other cultures of India, divided a person's life into different phases – childhood, adolescence, family life, maturity and old age.

As life expectancy was not long, marriage took place early – around the age of twenty for a man and even younger for a woman. In rural areas, by the time a man was about forty he would be expected to have at least one son who could take over his work and become the main financial support of the family. Thereafter the father would spend more time in the house, being looked after by his eldest son's wife, while he would take special responsibility for the grandchildren, telling them stories which would inculcate traditional values. After forty, husband and wife were expected to forego the sexual aspect of their relationship and to spend the rest of their lives building 'punyam' – 'merit' – through works which benefited the community as a whole: their sphere of responsibility now extended beyond their family. The quality of an individual's 'punyam' would determine the conditions of his or her rebirth. Old age was considered to begin at sixty. Thereafter old people would lead a frailer and frailer existence until they reached the final stage of life as 'walking corpses'.

The traditional Tamil view of aging demonstrated the same inequality between the genders which is also

reflected in many other spheres of life. For example, if a man lost his wife he would continue to be looked after by his daughter or other relatives. But if a woman was widowed, she was considered inauspicious and became a second-class citizen: she might even be turned out of the house by her late husband's blood relatives.

All this is now changing. Women are now better educated and often have independent incomes, making them less vulnerable to traditional pressures, while sons, rather than taking up the father's work on the land, often leave home to take office jobs in the town. They may send some money home to support their parents, but when they marry they continue to live and raise their family in town, and consequently there is much less contact between the youngest and oldest members of the family. Moreover, old people are often no longer treated with the same respect by younger generations.

Are these larger trends reflected in the behaviour of Tamil Aurovilians? "Very much so," says Raman who was born in a local village and joined Auroville when still a young boy. "In fact, in some ways it's even worse here than elsewhere. When I was young we

would never dare smoke or utter bad language before somebody older than ourselves, but now this happens here as a matter of course. I'm not sure why this is, except that it's connected with this new 'illusional culture' which breaks down traditional values and elevates money above all else."

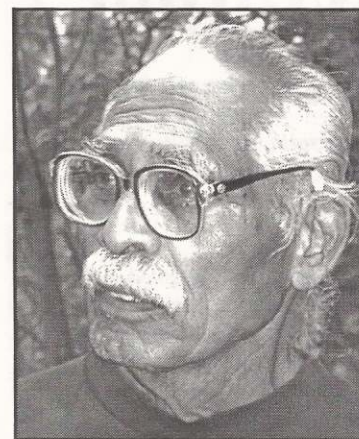
Raman is now 42 years old. Does he feel he is getting old? "Not at all, although some of the children have started calling me 'tata' ('grandfather') because of my grey hair! I don't have any particular image of how I'd like to be in my old age in Auroville – I look to older Aurovilians to see how they are coping and I'm influenced by that. For example, like Johnny I'd like to have young people around me and be telling them stories – but traditional stories from my Tamil heritage."

Raman notes that some Tamil Aurovilians continue to have property or a share in an inheritance in the village: "They don't trust that the community will look after them when they get older, and they want to have something to pass on to their children. I can understand this. When Dadu (who worked for many years at Matrimandir) grew old, he expected help from the community, but he didn't receive nearly as much as a good son would have given

him, and he felt resentful. This kind of support – and this means love, respect and care as much as money – is really missing here at present. That's why I know I must not die until my son is old enough to stand on his own feet."

Mahalingam takes a somewhat different view. Now 80 years old, he has had a long contact with the Ashram and Auroville, having attended his first darshan in 1945, and having helped excavate the foundations for Matrimandir in the 1970s. Today he lives very simply in a small room in Fraternity, translating texts of Sri Aurobindo and Mother for an Ashram magazine. "It's very easy for me to be in Auroville because here I have everything that I need, both inwardly and outwardly. I've never felt old – I just don't recognize that face I see in the mirror each morning because inwardly I feel about 35!" Mahalingam ascribes this partly to a disciplined lifestyle, and partly to the long walks he takes through the Auroville forests every day, which "make me feel refreshed and keep me young. I never go to bed tired..."

Mahalingam has had a long experience as a teacher, both in his native Tirunelveli and in many schools in and around Auroville. While he notes that



Mahalingam

in Auroville less respect is shown outwardly to teachers and old people than is the case elsewhere, he feels that inwardly there is generally a good contact. "But this also has a lot to do with the teacher's attitude. If he approaches teaching as a vocation rather than just a job, and if he really loves his students, they will love him in return. This is what I have experienced everywhere."

Should Auroville create collective facilities or old peoples homes as a means of caring for older Aurovilians? Mahalingam doesn't feel the need for himself: "I've never felt lonely or uncared for here because I have so many friends." Raman feels that separating out the old people would be too artificial. "Old people should continue to live mixed in with younger people: this is what will keep them young."

Alan

A change of Divine Plan?

Thomas and Dietra live in "Gratitude" where they run a dairy farm. They joined Auroville in the early seventies and have gone through often turbulent times. Aging changed their perspectives.

"I find myself often wondering," says Thomas, "if the Divine has had a change of plan with regard to Auroville. It is now over 30 years ago that I came to live here, and like all the others who joined around that time, I have seen and experienced a lot, in particular how many of our hopes and expectations from those early days came to naught. Inwardly I have acquiesced with that development, but still the question remains: why did the galaxy town plan, with which I felt inwardly connected when I first saw it, not come to be realized? Mother said that the town exists on the subtle level and has only to descend. Why then, hasn't it come down? Is the level of our individual and collective consciousness such that it prevents it from descending? Should we regard what has manifested at present as the maximum realizable in view of the quality of consciousness of the individuals who inhabit Auroville? For all changes of importance have happened in the world outside, not in Auroville. Today we speak of the 'garden city', the 'green city,' which expression reflects what can be called Auroville's biggest achievement. Mother was known to be very flexible – but would She change the plan?"

Thomas came to Auroville in 1970, though at that time he wasn't too pleased with the project. "There wasn't much of a choice," he says wryly. "I had come to India on a spiritual search, and I found Mother as the answer of that search. After I had met Her, I knew that without Her my life couldn't continue. Joining the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was out of the question, as I was very much attached to my way of life. That left Auroville, which I was scared about. I tried it, and after a very short time realized that there was no excuse any more to go away. I decided to take the plunge, and see if could overcome my own shortcomings."

"Then Mother left us, and frankly speaking I have never been reconciled

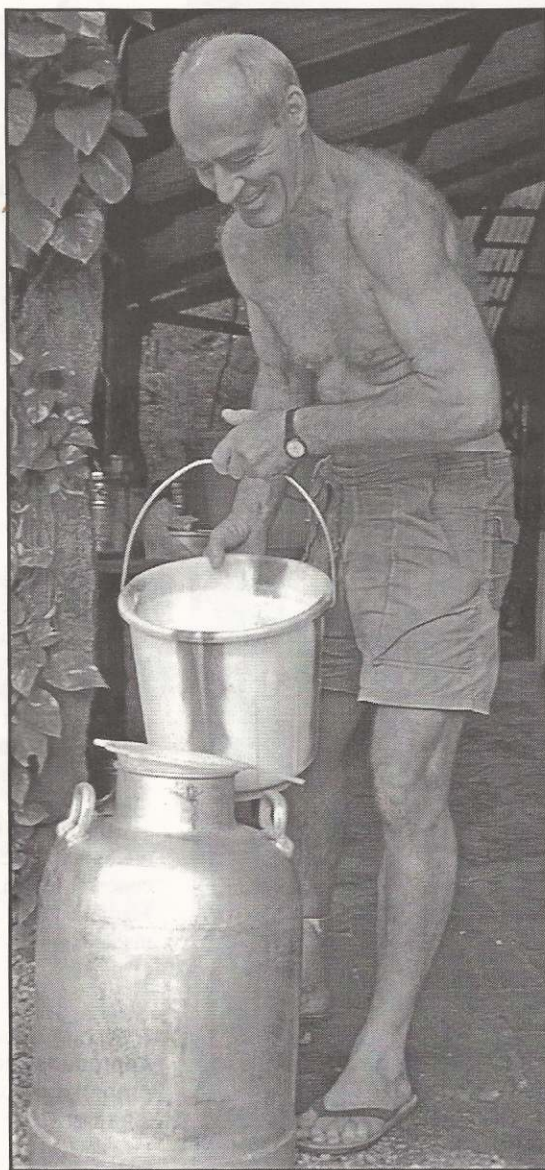
with it, though I naturally have accepted it. I came to Auroville for Her, not for Auroville's sake. And there was the disappointment of that 'failed transformation' as I was one of those who firmly believed in the transformation of the body, and I had put all my faith and trust in that physical possibility. You know, that was just after the upheavals in the sixties, and everybody was hoping and aspiring for 'the new world' that was going to happen."

For Dietra too, Mother's passing changed her world. Together with her children she had settled in 1970 in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Her oldest daughter, Dawn, received Mother's permission to live in Auroville, a project which Dietra "did not like one bit. I thought to myself that I had been a caveman in the past and there was no need to repeat the experience. But after Mother's passing I wanted to contribute through physical work. The Ashram seemed more or less 'completed' and I could help Auroville to grow." She got permission to build "Gratitude", close to "Certitude" where she has been living ever since.

Both Thomas and Dietra were severely affected by the quarrels which arose after Mother's passing, as they

chose to belong to a group called 'the Neutrals'. [the group which did not want to associate with either party in the conflict over Auroville after The Mother's passing, eds.] Looking back at those turbulent times, Thomas says that to this day he has never solved the problem whether it was right to join the struggle as a third party. "It is clear that we would not have survived in

Auroville if we had not done what we did, for we would have been forced out of India. But like all the others, I used my ego to fight. The fight taught us, among other things, a lot of detachment – from our own opinions, from Matrimandir – which was difficult – and in a certain sense also from Auroville. What remains is The Mother."



"This is not to say that we do not love Auroville," says Dietra "and that we do not have our hopes for the city to succeed, for it is after all a plan of the Mother. But if you regard Auroville as a yoga kshetra, a place where you can work out your inner life problems with beings who also have reached a certain point of development, the question whether the city is built or not loses its importance. For it becomes more important that people find their inner selves." Adds Thomas: "We certainly did not lose interest in Auroville's exterior manifestation and its attempts at economic and political organization. Looking back, I often feel that we missed good opportunities. For example, at the time of the fights with the Sri Aurobindo Society there was no political will to solve the problems, only the will to possess Auroville. That brought us instead the

involvement of the Government of India through the Auroville Foundation. I am not saying that the Foundation has not helped, but I believe things would have gone better without any Government interference. Somehow, the presence of the Government in Mother's project is for me a dichotomy. Maybe I cannot see the true purpose behind it, and in any case I have to accept it as one of the workings of the Divine, but it remains incomprehensible."

Dietra: "The Foundation has been an attempt to bring some structure into Auroville's organization. But so far it hasn't really worked, and neither have our own attempts at an internal organization. And I believe that it is a Grace that they have not worked. We see from week to week how Auroville attempts to try to govern itself. Rules are being made, working groups are constituted, then fail again, attempts are being made to make people adhere to rules. But does Mother, who only made a few rules for Auroville, want this?" Thomas: "It is often argued that rules have become necessary to control people. But why does someone come to Auroville? To obey another set of rules? Is it truly necessary? Auroville is home to a great many beautiful people, perhaps more on one small spot together than anywhere else. Looking at the physical manifestation there has been a lot of material progress, something which would not have been possible without an inner dedication."

Today, Dietra is 69 while Thomas is 61. "Aging does change perspectives," says Dietra. "There are of course the small problems of the body. But the true change is that one finds oneself more concerned with the true things of life. There is a shift of focus from the outer to the inner. And with that a sense of gratitude that one is allowed to experience that here."

Carel

Mother's Mountain in America

The Matagiri story

Matagiri, or 'Mother's Mountain', was the name Mother gave to one of the first centres of the Integral Yoga to be established in the U.S.. Founded by Sam Spanier and Eric Hughes, both of whom continue to live there, it covers 42 acres of a mountainside in upstate New York. For some time a residential community, it now functions as a retreat centre and a source of books and information about the Yoga. Here Sam talks about its unique beginnings and later development.

Sam first visited the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1962. "Mother told me then, 'You can be a bridge between East and West'." At the time Sam had no idea what this meant. But later, while sitting in the small courtyard of Maggi Lidchi's house near the Ashram, images started appearing in front of his inner eye, "just like a slide presentation, picture after picture. I was being shown what I had to do. And this was to found a community in America."

Sam returned to work in the U.S. "But one day in 1965 Mother told me inwardly, 'Now is the time to purchase the land. Go to this area and find the place'. I had absolutely no money. So I told Her - we were used to talking together like this - 'I'll find the land, but You'd better help me find the money!'"

Sam managed to get three months leave from his job. He travelled to the area which Mother had indicated - Woodstock in upstate New York - and began looking for a suitable property. He told the real estate agents that there had to be a lot of land but it shouldn't be too expensive, not more than \$10,000 - presumably so Mother would not be put under too much financial pressure...

One day Sam was sitting in a real estate agent's car when another car ran into the back of them. Sam was thrown forward and hit his hand on the steering wheel. "It wasn't much, but

the estate agent insisted on taking me to a doctor for a check-up. The doctor told me there was probably nothing to worry about. A week later there was a knock on my door. It was a man from the insurance company which represented the man who had crashed into us. The insurance man asked me to sign a waiver that I wouldn't prosecute his client and offered me, on behalf of his company, \$75 for the inconvenience. Immediately I heard Mother's voice: "Ask him for \$400." I did. The man looked at me in astonishment. "Oh Mr. Spanier, that's impossible. We only pay that when someone has lost a finger. You're not hurt at all."

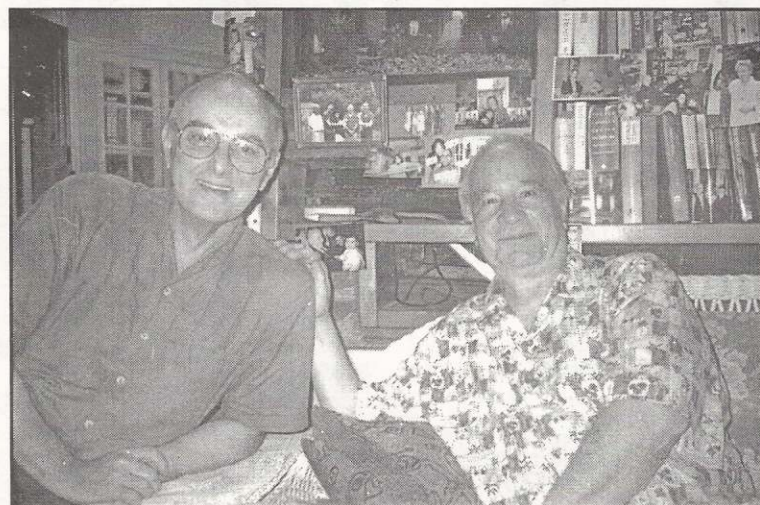


Then Mother told me, 'Tell him to ask his people for \$400, and tell him that they will give it to him'. I told him this and he went away shaking his head. 'I'll do what you say, but I know what the answer will be.' One week later the man returned, looking rather shaken.

'Mr. Spanier, I'm astonished. When I told my bosses what you asked for, they actually agreed to pay the \$400.' Sam put the cheque in his pocket and thought no more about it.

After many weeks of looking at properties, Sam was about to give up: nothing he had seen was appropriate. Then he met an estate agent who offered to show him a place which had only come on the market that morning - the agent hadn't even seen it himself. "Just as we turned off the main road into the property - there was nothing to be seen yet, only trees - Mother told me, 'This is it. Tell him you'll take it.' I told him. He stopped the car and looked at me oddly. 'But Mr. Spanier, you haven't seen it yet!' I realised he must think me a kook, so I quickly told him. 'Yes, yes, let's have a closer look'. So we went up to the house, and the minute I stepped in I was delighted: there was such a purity there."

Sam managed to raise the money to make the down-payment. However, at the signing of the purchase agreement it was mentioned that some extra charges had to be paid. "I was a complete novice at this. I hadn't realised there would be legal bills etc. So I asked how much the extra charge was. They told me \$400. I was about to tell them I just didn't have it, but then I remembered that cheque which had been sitting in my pocket for



Eric Hughes (left) and Sam Spanier

months. As I signed it over, I began laughing. Mother got me into an accident just to arrange that extra \$400!!"

Matagiri functioned as a community for about 15 years. Over that time, about fifty people experienced a community life which was modeled on the Sri Aurobindo Ashram's code of conduct - no smoking, no drinking, no politics, no sex. "For many years we had been a celibate community, but in the late 1970s we allowed, after some debate, a couple to join us. Soon afterwards I went for an extended holiday in Paris. When I returned the whole vibratory situation at Matagiri had changed: everybody seemed to have paired off! It made me realise that, while celibacy is a wonderful thing, you can't enforce it.

"Matagiri provided a fertile ground: many people who subsequently went to live in Auroville or are active in the yoga in the U.S. lived here, and many important initiatives - like Collaboration magazine - began in this place."

Sam and Eric now live there alone, although they continue to host darshan gatherings, talks and weekly meditations. However, at this year's All-USA Meeting the Matagiri Working Committee unveiled a scheme to expand facilities by building a new community hall, additional guest accommodation, and a meditation room to house Sri Aurobindo's relics. Obviously, Mother still has plans for her mountain...

Alan

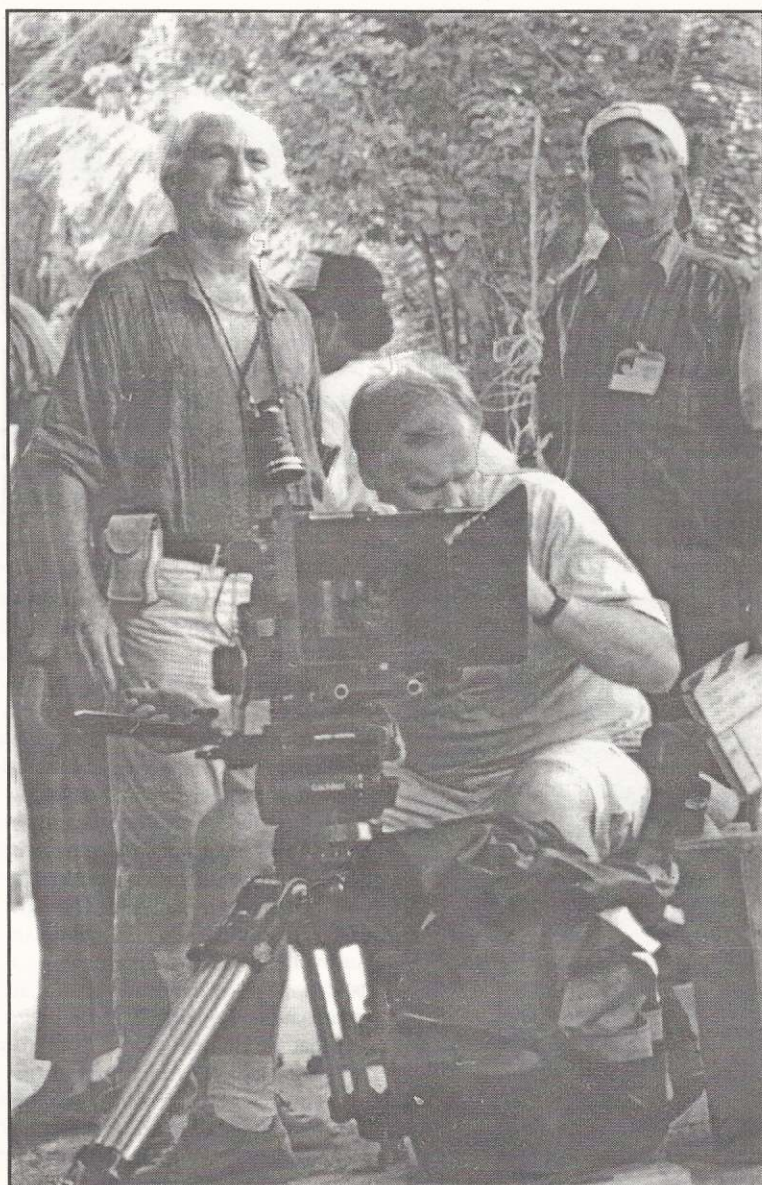
CULTURE

Wanted: Aurovilians for film and TV

Aurovilians like films. Not only as something to look at, but also as something to participate in.

There are an increasing number of film and TV projects seeking Aurovillian actors, 'extras' and staff and nearby locations as settings. This could point to an emerging trend for the City of Dawn. In the first two months of this year alone, three film crews filmed Aurovilians and Auroville for use in film and television. In August *Passeurs d'Enfants* (loosely translated as Child Smuggler), co-written by long-time Aurovilians Yanne and Croquette, saw an 120-strong French-Indian television crew shoot the story in nearby Pondicherry and villages around Auroville. The telemovie, starring Frenchman Pierre Arditi and scheduled for screening on French TV station TV1 in February 2001, was made with a crew which included Aurovilians in major and minor roles, 26 as one-day 'extras,' 2 for one-day stunts and others helping in location finding, liaison and management roles. Everyone was happy: the film and TV companies because they got cheap locations and actors, and the Aurovilians involved because they earned more in one day than they would normally earn in 10.

But it hasn't always been so easy. Aurovillian Kripa, who starred in the 1992 Indian film *Nadoodi Thendral*, recalls her "time-consuming and painful" auditioning experiences, and the insecurities concerning whether she had been accepted or not. "We didn't even know which movie it was for. The final shooting took much longer than they had promised and I



had to fight to get paid. In the end I only got half of what they'd agreed to."

Indian Film Union rates specify a minimum of Rs 500 a day for non-speaking 'extras' who appear in the background, and Rs 2,500 and up for small characters. When compared to the average Rs 3000 per month paid by the Auroville Maintenance Fund, it becomes clear why screen work attracts Aurovilians. Moreover, if Indian Union rates seem high, they're just a local minimum. The month after *Passeurs*, the small-budget film *Being Light*, starring Jean-Marc Barr of *Big Blue*, was shot around Auroville and also employed Aurovilians on its team. Although *Being Light* was "small budget", it chose to pay its crew in French francs and follow French film union rates - substantially higher than Indian rates. "Film makers are business people," says Croquette. "They know they should pay you at least Rs 500 per day, but if they can get you for one paisa, they will. Aurovilians should be aware of this."

But it's not just the pay scales that are in need of careful scrutiny. Other concerns include the question of taste. Madras casting agent Kumar, who has made Auroville café New Creation Corner his second home and office,

French film-maker Franck Apprederis and cameraman preparing a shot in Matthur village for *Passeurs d'enfants*.

PHOTO: CECILIA

has lately sought "white men and women 25-30" for a new movie project. Further investigation revealed a script without story, and characters mostly without clothes. "Auroville should be concerned about the images we portray, especially images of women. For example, white women in India are still portrayed as 'being always available and anybody's,' a kind of James Bond hangover," says Kripa.

Yanne considers the increasing appearance of Aurovilians and Auroville locations in films a good development. "But," she says "Auroville must organize a central point of contact for the steadily-increasing numbers of film and telemovie makers asking for Aurovillian actors, locations and support staff. The service would assess and select scripts, discarding nude films and other sub-standards, with an aim to improve Aurovilians' interactions."

Many of the scenes of *Passeurs d'Enfants* were shot in two villages around Auroville - Chinakottakuppam and Matthur. "The crew spent a week in Matthur, an event of no small importance for the villages," said project location assistant and independent Auroville filmmaker, Raman: "The large crew, the vehicles and the catering create an impact for the village. But it's important these events leave behind a good impression. They should leave happiness and harmony behind them, for goodwill and also for future films."

Jesse

Renowned Malayali director visits Auroville

An Adoor Gopalakrishnan film festival

Aurofilm recently hosted a film festival featuring Adoor Gopalakrishnan's work. At the invitation of Aurofilm, the internationally renowned director from Kerala himself came to Auroville for a couple of days to present his work.

Adoor Gopalakrishnan is arguably one of India's finest film-makers. Often compared to legendary filmmaker Satyajit Ray, Gopalakrishnan is realistic in his style. But perhaps even more so than Ray, Gopalakrishnan imbues his films with a deep symbolism. He has scripted and directed eight feature films in all and more than two dozen shorts and documentaries. Seven of his eight feature films have bagged prestigious national and international awards, including the highly coveted British Film Institute Award. In 1983 the Government of India conferred on him the Padmashri, one of India's highest honours, for his outstanding contribution to Indian cinema.

His work

After the success of his first film "Swayamvaram" in 1972, Gopalakrishnan along with other film-makers launched an alternative movement through a network of film societies and theatre owners to promote art or non-commercial films in Kerala. Today, Kerala has established a benchmark in India for producing meaningful and realistic cinema as opposed to the standard "Bollywood" fare and non-realistic song-and-dance routines churned out by commercial film-makers.

At a sprightly 59 years, Gopalakrishnan is soft-spoken and unassuming by nature, but uncompromising in his work. In an earlier interview about his films he said, "I like to challenge

my audience, provoke them into thought and give them an experience to remember. Every time I make a film, I ask myself why anyone should want to see it. But I don't make compromises, concessions. I want the viewers to see my work on my terms. I don't want them leaving the theatre saying 'I've seen it before, I knew what he was going to say.' For them as for me, the film has to be a constant process of exciting discovery and enquiry." Gopalakrishnan does not like his works to be called "experimental", claiming that he makes films for the lay public and not for critics. Nevertheless his treatment of themes is unusual and perhaps sometimes too complex to be grasped by the audience.

The film festival

"Mukhamukam" (Face to face), one of the films screened at the festival, is an example of where the director's intentions are not always clearly communicated to the audience. Mirroring the fortunes and debacles of the Communist Party of Kerala, the film depicts Sridharan, a small town revolutionary, who successfully unites industrial labourers to fight for their rights. Eventually, in Sridharan's absence, some of the leaders of this labour union form the ruling political party. In the second-half of the film, one sees Sridharan, who had gone into hiding for ten years return to his town. However, he is no longer the torchbearer for society who had once been a source of inspiration to many. He returns as drunkard and a wastrel. Says Gopalakrishnan, "Sridharan is in fact a projection of the people's own selves and thus an inconvenient and embarrassing revelation. Unable to face the reality and the human weaknesses of

their hero, someone eventually kills Sridharan, and the film ends with the whole society resurrecting an untarnished image of the man.

One of the themes that Gopalakrishnan explores in this film is how, over time, people mould reality to suit their perceptions. What is interesting but is often missed by film-goers, is that in the first half of the film one does not get to see Sridharan as he actually is. One sees Sridharan through the selective memories of other characters. Also in his desire to show "a society in crisis," Gopalakrishnan eschews a narrative plot and the individual nuances of a character. But many in the Auroville audience bemoaned the loss of details in the story and the flatness of the characters.

The other two feature films in the festival, "Elippathayam" (The Rat-trap) and "Kathapurushan" (The Man of the Story) were better received in Auroville. "Kathapurushan" too depicts the fate of an individual, Kunjunni, caught in meshes of Kerala society, but unlike many of Gopalakrishnan's protagonists, Kunjunni has the moral courage to face the reality of his life and to transcend it through his creative urge as a writer.

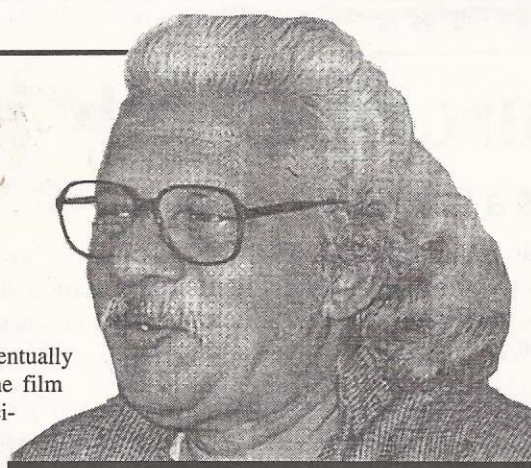
"Elippathayam," made in 1981, is Gopalakrishnan's first colour film, and almost the entire film is a sequence of beautifully framed shots of rural life in Kerala. Colour is used sparingly and mainly as a symbol to depict the nature of a character. On the whole, the film is highly imaginative and, one must add, relentless in its portrayal of the protagonist, the last heir of a disintegrating feudal order, as a rat caught in a trap. Gopalakrishnan explained

that change always occurs, whether one consciously makes a choice or is a victim of others' choices. The Auroville audience found the pace of the movie inexorably slow, but the director held that the subject, the imperturbability of a rural setting, and in this case the lazy lifestyle of a landlord, did not lend itself to fast cuts.

In response to a question from the audience as to why he does not choose his themes from modern lifestyles, Gopalakrishnan, borrowing a metaphor from photography, answered that he does not yet "have the focal distance" to be able to view contemporary life in proper perspective. He added that the emotions he depicted in his films were universally experienced, even though his stories were set in a Kerala of forty years ago. When asked about the relevance of screening his films in a forward-looking society like that of Auroville, Gopalakrishnan answered with a smile that while ideals were good and necessary for a society, it was important that people had the sincerity to face and accept the reality of their lives and not live in a comforting illusion buffered by their ideals.

The film festival also screened several of Gopalakrishnan's documentaries which gave the Western section of the Auroville audience a chance to taste the culture of South India—the rich and highly stylized theatre and dance forms of Kerala and the awesome temples built by the Chola dynasty.

Bindu



Sho
new

● Savitri Bhavan presented its annual report October 1999-2000. The first building is now fully equipped and extensively used for exhibitions, lectures, courses and other events, including recorded readings by The Mother of Savitri. The second phase of construction, a building to host visiting scholars and students, is at the design stage. A five year development plan has been prepared for the completion of the complex, part of which has been included in a proposal for higher education which has been presented to the Government of India for funding. The gardens around the Bhavan are a special point of attention; the objective is to grow there all the plants mentioned in Savitri. To receive the newsletter 'Invocation' and further details contact Savitri Bhavan, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India or email savitribhavan@auroville.org.in.

● Dr. Kireet Joshi, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, has expressed his wish to meet with all the residents individually or in groups during his visits in Auroville. The Interim Working Committee has been organizing the meetings.

● The foundation ceremony for Creativity, a collective housing project, was held on Diwali (October 26th). The core group of 15 interested residents has been joined by a new wave of interested people so that now the project is virtually 'full'. If all goes well and the funds come in, it is hoped the community will be ready for habitation within one year.

● Rainfall patterns are changing. In the period January to August 2000, Auroville received double the average amount (620 mm rainfall against the average of 311 mm), even though the rainfall recorded in June, July and August was less than average for those months. Rainfall in September and October, however, was again above average, even before the arrival of the north-east monsoon which is normally due on October 15.

● Auroville International Canada has chosen a new Board. It plans to open an Auroville boutique in Montreal and/or Toronto, promote a Canadian pavilion in the International Zone of Auroville and, in a few years, host the annual AVI meeting in Canada.

● The Supreme Court of India has passed an order against the use of loudspeakers and drums for religious purposes. The Supreme Court held that a pollution-free environment is a natural right for everyone. The order has provided the authorities, who have been largely unable to take action against religious groups, with a tool to take effective action against noise pollution. This ruling may also help Auroville. (Source: Down to Earth, September 30, 2000, p. 16)

● Gilles Cormac, a long-term French Aurovilian living in Sve-Dame, passed away on October 14th due to a cerebrovascular accident. Gilles was 47.

PROFILE

A town crier for Savitri

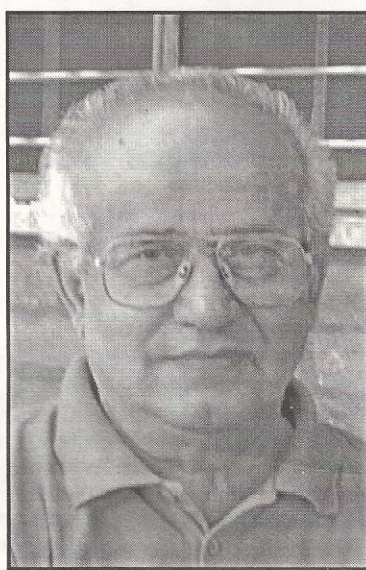
The work of Dr. Nadkarni

Dr. Nadkarni taught linguistics for many years in the U.S. and in Singapore. When he returned to India he began studying and offering classes on Sri Aurobindo's works. In 1989 he began his popular Savitri 'camps' in Pondicherry during which he reads and explains the poem line by line: to date, he has reached Book Three of Canto Ten.

The concluding session of the two most recent camps took place in 'Savitri Bhavan'. Auroville Today spoke to him in September, during his first extended stay in Auroville.

"In 1989, after repeated requests from my friend Dr. Manmohan Reddy, I began the Savitri study camps in Pondicherry. Fortunately Nirodbaran gave me his seal of approval, which I think I needed because I'm a total upstart in this business - I've no Ashram background, I'm no yogi and I have no literary training. I just enjoy reading the poetry and sharing what I find in it with others. For me, it's a celebration: I'm like a town crier who goes round the world saying, 'Here's a wonderful thing. Read it.'

"Savitri appeals on so many different levels. For some it is the magic of the poetry, for others the dramatic intensity, for others it is the mantric



quality, and, of course, Mother has said that Savitri is the complete handbook of the yoga. I also believe that Sri Aurobindo, through the writing of this poem, was impregnating the occult level with vibrations of love, hope and joy at a time when Europe, in particular, was experiencing great pessimism and darkness, and that these vibrations can be experienced even if one doesn't understand the words.

"I myself have not grasped all the dimensions of the poem. I tell my audience I am not in any way an

authorized interpreter of the text. The most I can do is be a doorway: the reader himself must discover the innermost essence, the sanctum sanctorum.

Savitri is not without its detractors. These include those Indian literary scholars who find in it nothing but echoes of Tennyson and the Romantic poets, and those who believe that Indians shouldn't write in English but only in their own language. Then there are those - a sizeable proportion of the Indian intelligentsia - whose response to Sri Aurobindo's works is conditioned by a belief that he abandoned political action to immerse himself in some kind of nirvana: Nehru himself expressed disappointment that Sri Aurobindo did not heed the call to participate in Gandhi's civil disobedience movement. The magnitude of this misunderstanding is difficult to grasp - if Sri Aurobindo had not completed what he set out to do, humanity would not have had a future - but Nehru's view is so widespread in some circles that I use Savitri as an opportunity to present what Sri Aurobindo was really doing.

"Then there are some people who criticise me for bringing Savitri down to earth. It's true that I don't mystify, I demystify. I talk about the poem in terms of contemporary life because

I'm a product of this century, and because I'm enthralled by life, not disgusted by it, even while I'm aware that a greater power is needed to perfect it. There is a great deal of religiosity in India, and there's a danger that Savitri will become some kind of holy writ. More than this, there's a danger that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother themselves will be made into some kind of religion. That this hasn't, in my view, happened yet is not because we haven't tried hard enough, but because of the foresight of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother - who didn't specify any ritual or rigid organization, and who refused to start a school based on their work - and because of tremendous Grace.

"I expect to finish the Savitri readings in about two years. People have already asked me to take up other works of Sri Aurobindo then. Some years ago I began some classes on Sri Aurobindo's Essays on the Gita: I'd like to take up this work again because the Gita still tends to be read exclusively through the lens of Indian tradition, and Sri Aurobindo's interpretation deserves to be better known. But I'm also considering returning to the first three books of Savitri because I don't think that the sections dealing with Aswapathi's yoga have ever been explicated satisfactorily."

Alan

Making Auroville truly international

Are money and politics a bar?

Auroville is an international township with people from over thirty countries. Thus not all the world's countries or cultures are represented; in fact, some of them are conspicuously absent. Some people believe that the explanation lies on the occult level, with each part of the planet following its own destiny in its own time. Nevertheless, many reasons can be found right here on the material plane, foremost among them political and economic circumstances. Shanti, who lives in Ecuador, explains.

Most of the countries that are not represented in Auroville are the so-called developing countries of Africa, Latin America and some parts of Asia. The simple argument that people from these areas do not come here due to their economic inability to do so is a difficult one to swallow for many European and American Aurovilians, who valiantly came to Auroville and built lives for themselves with scant resources. For them, with the noteworthy exception of those coming from Eastern Europe, a life without the possibility of travel is hard to imagine; which is not to say that it is easily affordable. For when you don't have money, even "budget" travel is expensive. It is, nonetheless, within the realm of possibility. In western countries one can still manage to earn, scrimp, and save enough money to come to a place like, for example, South India. Once the ticket is in hand, obtaining a passport is a matter of due process. The Indian visa, particularly an entry visa, can be trickier, but generally speaking, when all is said and done, most Europeans and Americans are granted such visas without significant hassle.

None of these steps might be within reach if you happen to be a citizen from some other region of the world, for instance, if you are a citizen of the South American country Ecuador. This small, peaceful "banana republic", like

so many Latin American nations, has always been dominated by the United States, which from an early period has ensured that this country remained a cheap source of agricultural produce and an open market for American goods. Maintaining this comfortable arrangement has involved assistance, in the form of electoral contributions, training, etc. to politicians who don't upset the boat and who don't meddle with the powerful oligarchy that makes economic and political exploitation possible. The system basically appeared to be "working", not because Ecuador was truly democratic or working its way towards greater equity, but because it got lucky and discovered oil. As a result, the Amazon jungle was plundered and some rich people became richer. Some of the goodies trickled down to a not-so-educated middle class, made to feel content enough to be able to sit on chairs upholstered with American cloth and watch American television shows on American TV sets.

Such good things do come to an end, and they did so some years ago when Ecuador's fragile economy and political stability collapsed. From one day to the next, the financial situation, provoked by absurdly greedy politicians and bankers, spiralled down. The price of the dollar skyrocketed and inflation went through the roof. In an incomprehensible effort to stabilize

things, the government froze every citizen's private bank account. Whole life savings, so painstakingly accrued for a child's education, a house, or perhaps travel to some distant place like India, were gone and most probably will never be recovered. The final blow came when Ecuador, bowing to the unmerciful experimentations of the International Monetary Fund, "dollarized" its economy. Today the national currency, the sucre, no longer exists and everything has a price in dollars. This does not mean, however, that people are earning even at the level of the pittance that illegal migrant farm workers earn in the United States. Ecuadorians have to make do somehow, earning like third-world citizens and paying like first-world ones even for life-saving medicines. It goes without saying that there isn't too much money around for travelling, let alone relocating elsewhere.

Then, of course, there is the matter of a passport and visa. There were some days in the turmoil that ensued in Ecuador last year when there would have been no office to which to apply for a passport, as there was no identifiable central government in operation. Even most of the time, however, when the waters are not so rocky, it is not an easy process. As in many developing countries, in Ecuador a passport is not really regarded as a citizen's entitlement; in other words, there is no assur-

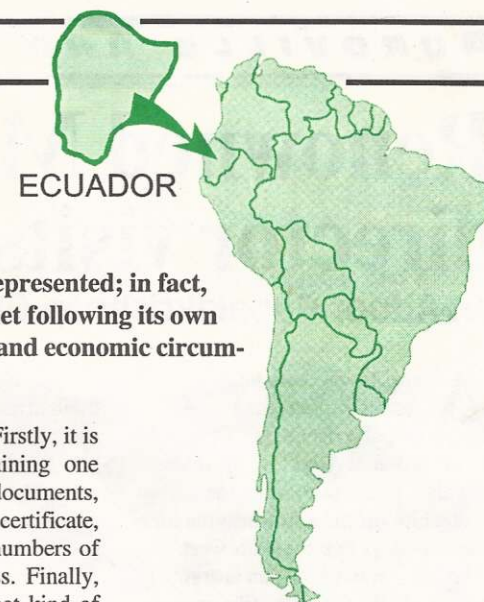
ance that you can get one. Firstly, it is expensive. Secondly, obtaining one requires a series of other documents, which in turn require a birth certificate, a paper which significant numbers of Ecuadorians do not possess. Finally, there is the question of what kind of weight such a passport carries in the international arena. An Ecuadorian I know was once stopped while coming through Indian customs not only because the customs officials had never heard of his country, but also because they could not fathom that such a handwritten (only in Spanish), homemade-looking document was actually legitimate.

And this particular Ecuadorian citizen was actually lucky to have come as far as the customs queue, for the obtaining of an Indian visa is no small feat. The hassle begins with the fact that India has no embassy in Ecuador: if you want even a tourist visa, you must send your application to Colombia. This adds to the expense. Once your passport reaches the embassy, there is a good chance that Indian officials will think twice before granting any kind of extended stay. The Ecuadorian citizen has earned the sorrowful distinction of possessing a nationality that even other developing countries are sometimes reluctant to provide with visas.

Suffice it to say that even the most committed and impassioned

Ecuadorian would find it very, very difficult, if not impossible, to get to Auroville. And such Ecuadorians are hardly alone. There are whole populations in the world whose political-economic lot is far worse: people who have no nationality; people who live virtually imprisoned by their governments without the possibility to leave; people living amidst warfare, and people whose currencies mean absolutely nothing in dollars or even rupees.

Everyone makes deep sacrifices to come to Auroville. Sometimes it is important, however, to realize that the capacity to make such sacrifices is actually a tremendous privilege based on economic status and nationality, and not only a function of one's spiritual growth. This kind of awareness can be very humbling, and can also be very powerful on a collective level. Ultimately, understanding the material conditions which facilitate one's choice to participate in the Auroville experiment, and limit another's possibilities to do so, can be an important step towards recognizing, and eventually overcoming, some of the concrete obstacles to achieving human unity.



ENVIRONMENT

"Kings among tumultuous armies"

Understanding the monsoon

The monsoons, which help balance global temperatures and sustain life on earth, affect a vast area of the globe – from Africa across Asia to the Pacific; northern China and the Himalayas to north Australia; and even Mexico and parts of Central America – directly influencing the lives of over half the world's population. In India alone, 50% of the arable land is irrigated solely by monsoon rains.

There are two Indian monsoon seasons. The summer or south-west monsoon comes in from the direction of Africa and brings heavy rain to the west coast and large areas of northern India between June and August. This is when Asia breathes in. The winter, or north-east monsoon, sweeps down from the plateaus of Asia and the Himalayas, bringing rain and cooler weather to south-east India between October and December. This is when Asia breathes out. For a thousand years or more Arab dhows have relied on this phenomenon – and the 'trade winds' – to sail across the Arabian Sea to India ahead of the main force of the south-west monsoon, returning with fresh cargo on the winds of the north-east monsoon. So it's not surprising that the word 'monsoon' derives from the Arabic word

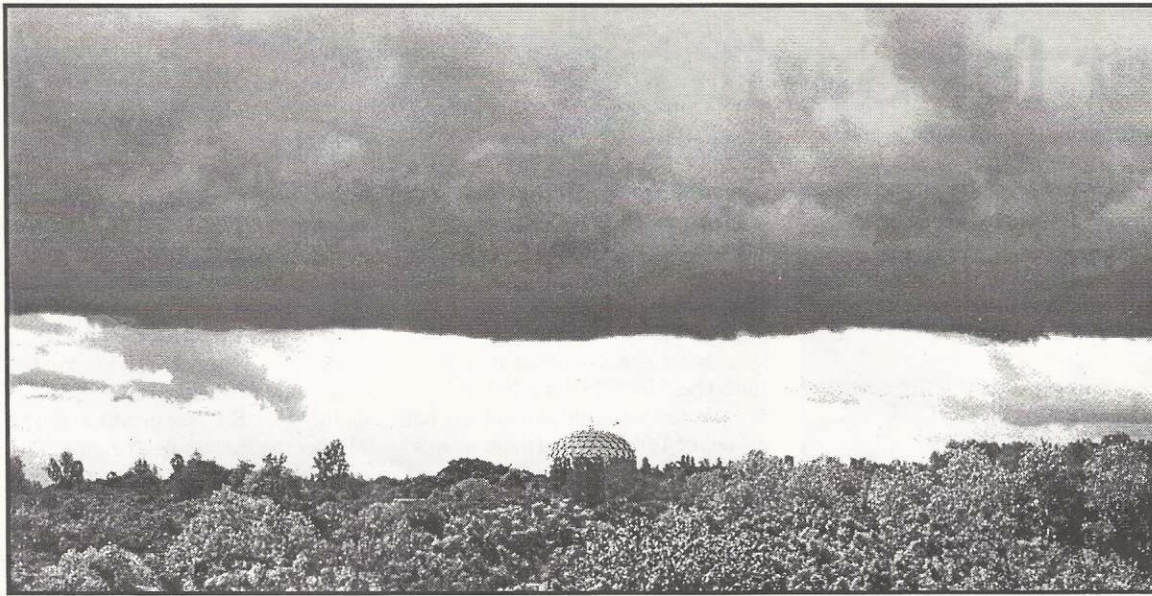


PHOTO: JESS

'mausim', meaning 'season'.

The key to understanding the basic monsoon mechanism lies in the fact that land heats up and cools more quickly than the sea, the latter holding its temperature more or less steady. As the sun moves north bringing our summer heat, the land steadily gets hotter and hotter, while the temperature of the ocean lags far behind. The effect on a

huge land mass like Asia, as the hot air rises over the land, leaving below a vast area of low pressure, is to draw in massive amounts of air from over the ocean. This is the south-west monsoon pattern (it is the wind, and not the resulting rain, which is defined as the monsoon).

Around September, with the sun fast retreating south, the northern land

mass begins to cool rapidly. As it cools, air pressure builds up over the land. Meanwhile the oceans are still holding their warmer summer temperatures. The cooler high pressure air over inland Asia then starts to move down towards the lower pressure areas over the ocean, and our north-east monsoon is born. Asia breathes out, and we enjoy our October-December period of rains.

Meanwhile the air moving out from inland Asia is replaced and balanced by warmer air moving in northwards from the oceans at around 40,000 feet.

For most of India, the main monsoon is the south-west monsoon. Only in Tamil Nadu does one see a major difference, because this area fails to pick up anything but the remnants of the summer monsoon. It's the north-east monsoon which saves us, picking up moisture over the Bay of Bengal and bringing us approximately two thirds of our annual rainfall.

For politicians, farmers, shopkeepers, fishermen, bankers, gardeners and weathermen the monsoon means many different things. On it hangs national prosperity, crops, price levels, fish catches, loans, nitrogen-laden rain, megawatts and reputations, to name but a few things. All are relevant and all have their importance, but somehow I prefer 5th century poet Kalidasa's view of things, when he says of the monsoon:

"The clouds advance like rutting elephants, enormous and full of rain. They come forward as kings among tumultuous armies; their flags are lightning, the thunder is their drum."

Tim

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