

Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Udavi – An educational experiment in the village

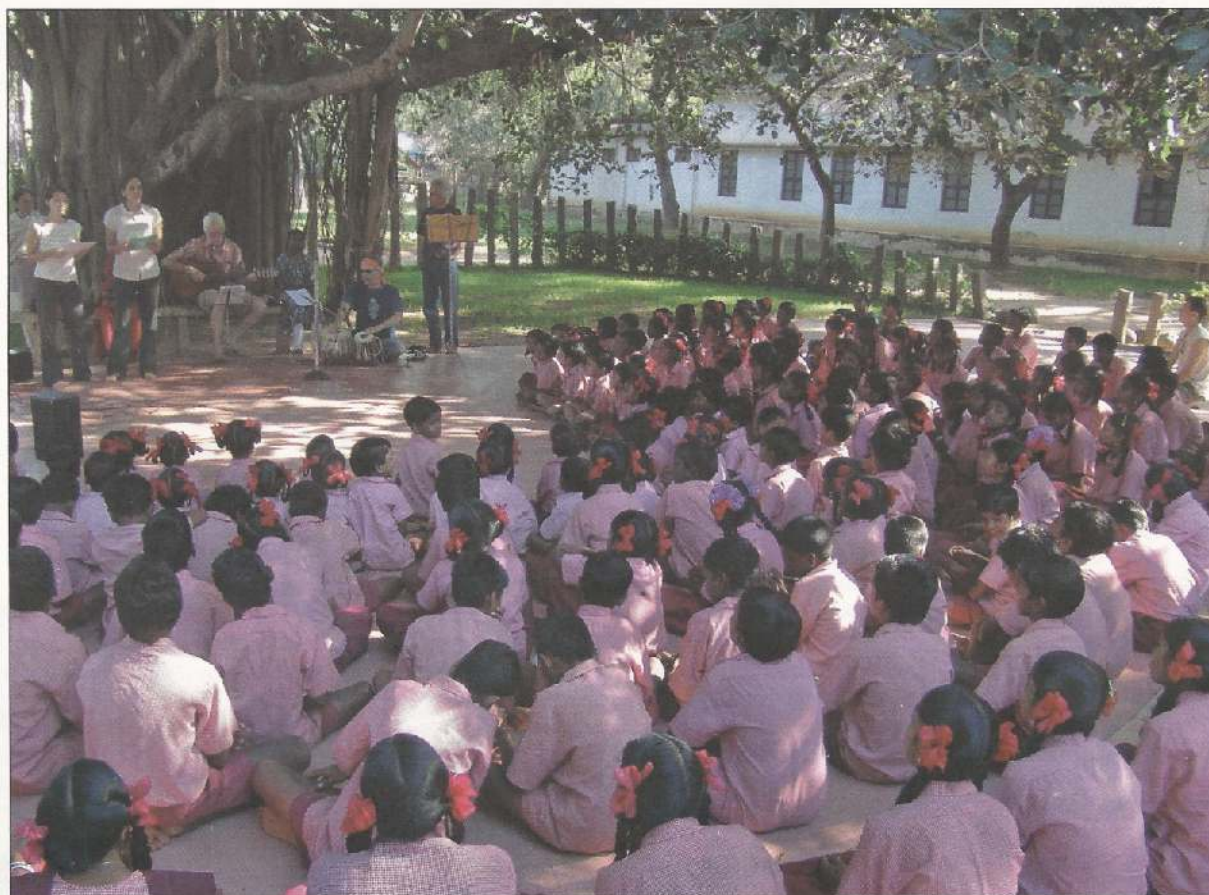
In 1999 the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIER) took over the management of Udavi school from the Auroshikha Agarbatti unit of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Sanjeev, who became Udavi's co-director, describes his experience of the last eight years.

Udavi Gentilesse School was one of the first schools started in the Auroville area, on the outskirts of Edaiyanchavadi village. Presently it has two hundred and seventy students from the age of three to matriculation (10th standard). Studies are conducted in the English medium. Students also study Tamil and some opt for French as a second language in the sixth grade. There is an almost equal mix of boys and girls and most of them belong to Edaiyanchavadi village.

When SAIER got involved, the school was like most other Indian schools, the only difference being that once a week there were creative activities. There was a daily sports programme and a morning assembly dedicated to prayer. The stress was on rote learning. The redeeming factor was the kindergarten section where teachers prepared innovative learning games and used them in the class.

The challenges we faced were to create a beautiful environment and change the expectations of the parents and the underlying assumptions of the teachers about what they are supposed to be doing and their expectations of the children's role as students.

The physical environment of a school plays an important role in the education of children. Udavi is blessed with a very big school campus with a large number of beautiful trees. But the boundaries of the school were poorly fenced: goats, cattle and thieves easily intruded. This changed when we created a compound wall around the entire campus protecting the area. After we trimmed and cut a few trees, a clean and beautiful environment was created which stimulates the aesthetic sensibilities and nurtures the psychic being of the children.



The morning assembly at Udavi School

A major challenge was to change the system of education. When SAIER took over, exams were held every month to check on how well children had studied. Children were always walking around with books memorising their lesson for the pending exam. We considered this contrary to all that Sri Aurobindo and The Mother stand for.

The first thing we did was to stop all the exams. This brought a furious response from the parents who could not understand why this was being done. After some meetings with the parents and their representatives and by way of compromise it was agreed that a mid-

term and a final exam would be held and that report cards would be issued to the parents so that they could see how their children were doing in their studies.

The next change we introduced related to the curriculum. It was a school tradition to follow certain text books in every subject starting from second standard. The teachers would cover the course by simply going through the books with the students; this was their whole work.

Fortunately the situation changed. Many teachers trained in the traditional methods secured government jobs and left. We replaced them with teachers

who had been trained differently. A number of teachers from Mirambika joined, a school dedicated to free progress education which has an extensive teacher training component and is part of the Delhi Branch of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. They use the 'project method' at all levels of schooling except for the ninth and tenth grades, at which time the focus progressively shifts to preparing for the State Board exams. Through the 'project method' children start taking responsibility for, and finding interest in their learning. In this way we did away with the traditional textbooks.

Once again there were objections from the parents. They could not understand how learning could take place without these books. Many parents offered to pay for the books, thinking that we were trying to save money by not buying them for the students. Some even complained they would go to the School Board authorities to complain, as what we were doing 'was not permissible'. Fortunately the matriculation system gives a lot of freedom to the school to teach the subjects in the way the school wants until the 10th grade level when there is a prescribed curriculum to follow. We did not compromise and explained to the parents the reasons for what we were doing.

The next difficulty came in relation to crafts. As part of the integrated learning programme, we introduced many crafts like carpentry, clay work, tailoring, and electrical work. Once again, there was a lot of resistance from the parents. They said that they had not sent their children to the school to learn things like that. Also the children felt that they had not come to school to learn manual skills. Other schools do not do it, so why should they have to?

We had also invited the children to take responsibility for the maintenance of the school and participate in the cleaning of the school compound and watering of the plants and here too there was a great resistance. Once again we did not compromise. We discussed the issues with the parents explaining why we did this and the positive benefit of this education for their children. Slowly the resistance lessened.

About three years ago we identified certain students who were academically weak. We felt they would not have the capacity to prepare for the matriculation exam and that we would be forcing them to learn subjects in which they were not really interested.

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Outreach schools

"How can we prepare the children, children taken from anywhere, who have no way of learning at home, whose parents are ignorant, who have no possibility of having any means to learn, nothing, nothing, nothing but the raw material, like that – how can we teach them to live? That will be an interesting problem."

The Mother, November 11, 1967

In this issue we report on the successes and difficulties of three of Auroville's seven Outreach Schools – schools created for the benefit of the children from the surrounding villages. They are the Udavi Gentilesse School in the village of Edaiyanchavadi; Auroville's one-year old New Era Secondary School in Aspiration known earlier as After School; and the New Creation Bilingual School nearby the village of Kuyilapalayam.

New Era Secondary School – a review

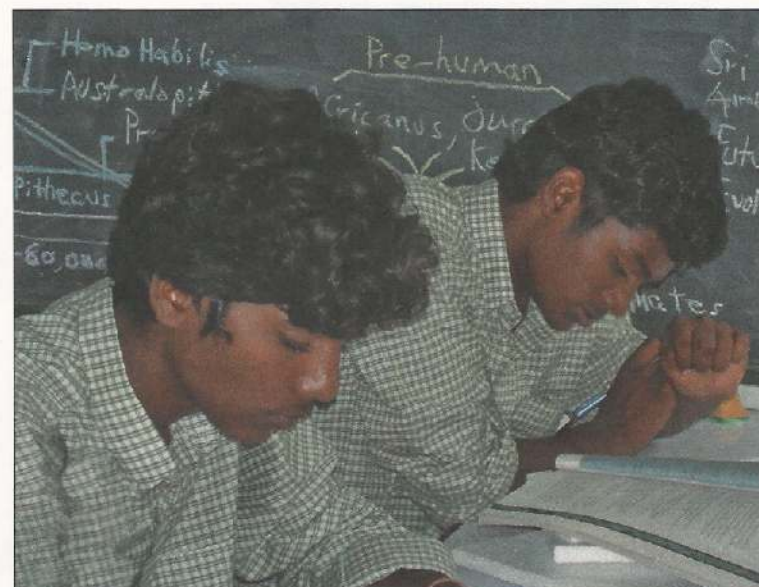
Taking fledgling steps towards activity-based learning, an Auroville high school finds the going in the first year rough but encouraging.

In June 2007, after the annual summer break, After School, one of Auroville's earliest high schools, reincarnated as New Era Secondary School, NESS for short. NESS embraced a revolutionary educational reform recently introduced by India's national education board, the National Council for Education Research and Training (NCERT) called the 'National Curriculum Framework 2005' or NCF. NCF aimed at replacing the age-old model of rote memorization of textbooks with learning initiated and directed by the learner (where the teacher only plays the role of facilitator).

"The fact that India is adopting this new educational strategy not only at the national level but also at the state level is good for us," says Rod Hemsell who runs NESS along with Selvaraj. "It is perfectly in line with the Mother's approach, where students construct their own knowledge, and use the teachers as well as the world around them as their resource." Fifty students enrolled in the New Era Secondary School last June.

And the assessment at the end of its first year? "We have accomplished our two main goals," says Rod. "The first was to set up the basic infrastructure for the school – the computers, the labs, the teachers, and the programme. And the second was that our efforts at affiliation have been rewarded."

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Students of NESS studying the evolution of man

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Seal 25/5

Dr. Karan Singh visits Auroville

The Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation visited Auroville on March 29th and 30th.

"I am tired!" said Dr. Karan Singh on the evening of March 30th, finishing a packed two-day schedule. He had inaugurated a statue, opened four buildings, met with five working groups and quite a few individuals, and had visited Future School, the Matrimandir, the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the Irumbai temple. His address to the community at the Solar Kitchen was the last item on his agenda.

Dr. Karan Singh had decided on this visit as he had had to cancel both the meeting of the Governing Board planned for February 27th and his attendance at Auroville's 40th anniversary celebrations. This visit was an opportunity for a quiet interaction with Aurovilians and for spending more time here than would otherwise have been possible. It served also to prepare him for the meeting of the Governing Board called for April 9th in New Delhi.

The first ribbon was cut on March 29th, when he opened the new Swagatham Guesthouse complex situated between Bharat Nivas and Atithi Griha guesthouse. He had laid the foundation stone for this complex in September last year. The speed with which the work had proceeded was remarkable. "The work would have been completed but for the sudden rains," apologized builder Dhanapal. "We could only complete one of the rooms; the others will be finished after 2 months." Praising the work, Dr. Karan Singh handed him a memorial plaque.

Swagatham Guesthouse has six cottages, each with a living room, bedroom and attached bathroom. A reception building and guesthouse kitchen complete the complex, built with a government grant. "Swagatham is part of the Pavilion of India. Each room will be furnished in the style of one of the states of India," explained



A moment of concentration before Sri Aurobindo's statue

Aster Patel. The rooms will host members of the Governing Board and International Advisory Council when they hold meetings in Auroville, and accommodate visiting scholars and important guests.

The morning of March 30th saw the inauguration of the Sri Aurobindo statue at Savitri Bhavan which, said Dr. Karan Singh, "is the gift of the Auroville Foundation to Auroville for its 40th anniversary." He also opened the beautiful new wing of the Savitri Bhavan which houses offices and the art gallery for the permanent display of replicas of the paintings of Huta's 'Meditations on Savitri'. "The originals," said Shradhdhavan, "will be stored in a specially prepared room in the Bhavan."

Next came the inauguration of the renovated Sri Aurobindo Auditorium at Bharat Nivas. While reclining in the comfortable push-back seats, Dr. Karan Singh gave some suggestions for the improvement of the stage facilities. The issue of completing the Bharat Nivas complex was then discussed with the Bharat Nivas group.

The final opening was the Auroville Foundation Bhavan, the Auroville Foundation's new office next to the Town Hall. "After all these years, the Auroville Foundation has at last moved into its own building," said Dr. Karan Singh.

Inaugurations over, business was discussed with members of the Working Committee and other working groups, after which he visited Future School and lunched with about 50 Aurovilians at the Integral Learning Centre at Vêrité.

In the afternoon he visited the Matrimandir. He did not go up to the Chamber, and commented on the lack of access for handicapped people. "At present, the only provision for them is to be carried up in a litter by four people. Many people consider this humiliating and have no other option than to meditate outside the building," he said and expressed disappointment that Auroville has not been in the frontline of creating access for the handicapped. One of the Matrimandir executives explained that they are open to any idea

which doesn't spoil the architecture of the place, but that so far none had been presented.

After visiting the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the Irumbai temple, he addressed the community at the Solar Kitchen. He congratulated the Aurovilians on the completion of the Matrimandir, which, he said, "is Auroville's gift to the world." He called to mind the donors, the workers, and all others who have been involved with this structure, and particularly Roger Anger, for whom this was his life's work. "I have seen the Matrimandir coming up, literally, from the ground. This magnificent structure has been built entirely by the Aurovilians, by your work, dedication and idealism. All the money has been raised by the Aurovilians, not a single rupee has come from the government. It is a great achievement." He warned, however, that a structure like this will draw an increasing number of visitors. "You can expect a 100,000 people a month to visit the Matrimandir," he said.

Now that Matrimandir has been completed, the focus, he said, has to shift to the building of the city. In this connection he stressed the importance of land acquisition and proposed that the community expedite the exchange of outlying areas for city lands. "There are several communities located outside the city area - maybe the residents can be encouraged to come back



Lunch at Vêrité

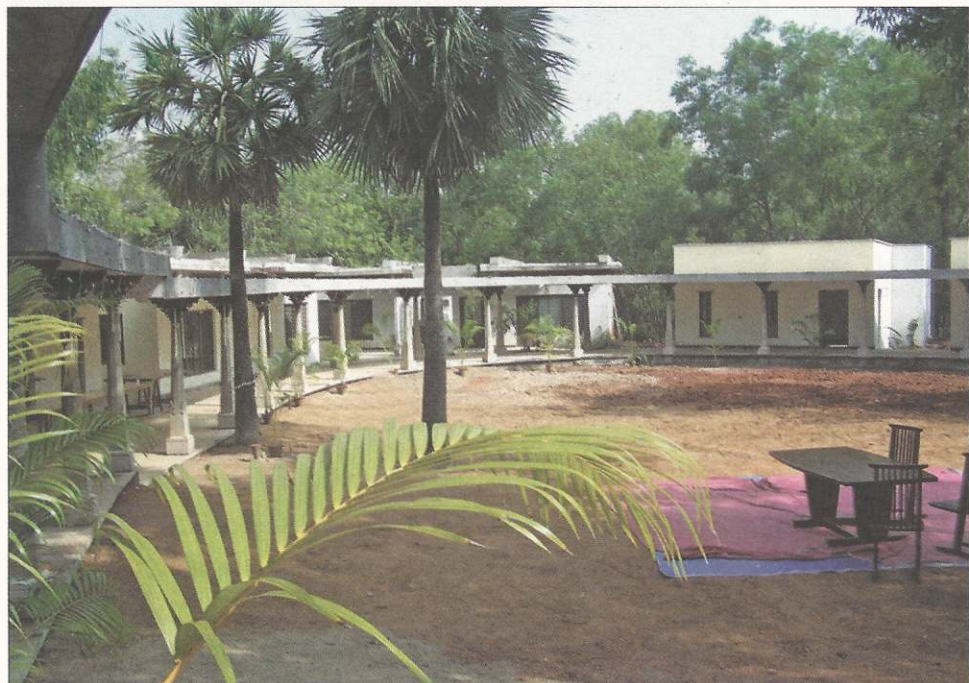
into the city by some exchange of land and some incentive; that is up to the community to decide. But it is in the interest of the community that the land is acquired as soon as possible." And he warned that the Auroville area will soon come under great pressure and it will become increasingly difficult to acquire the lands for Auroville.

Dr. Karan Singh left, he said, happy with days well-spent. So was the experience of many Aurovilians who were glad that the Chairman of the Board had spent time in Auroville itself instead of in meeting rooms. This, they said, should be repeated soon, for there is much more to be seen and experienced.

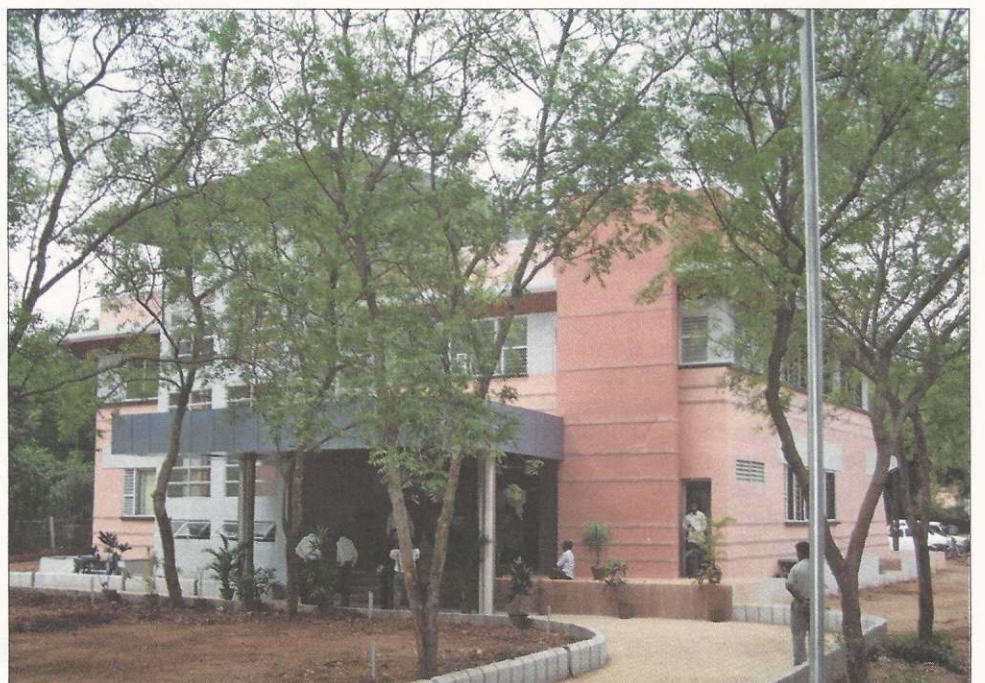
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Savitri Bhavan's art gallery with Huta's paintings



A view of Swagatham Guesthouse at Bharat Nivas



The new Auroville Foundation Bhavan

Completing Bharat Nivas

With the completion of the Matrimandir the stage is set for the completion of Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India

On March 1st, the Auroville Foundation staff moved into the Auroville Foundation Bhavan, its new office nearby the Town Hall. The old administrative offices at Bharat Nivas, from where Auroville was administered for more than 25 years, are now empty, awaiting a new future.

Bharat Nivas, the Pavilion of India, has harboured almost 40 Auroville units ever since, in 1984, its unfinished structures came into the possession of Auroville. It was the time of the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act. "Auroville received a grant of Rs 1 lakh from the Human Resource Development Ministry to set up a Centre for Research in Indian Culture," recalls Aster. "It was a large sum for the Auroville of '84, and we discussed how best to handle it as many units and working groups in Auroville were in urgent need of offices."

Aurofuture, the Development Group, the Entry Group, the Residents' Service, the Archives, the Library and SAIER were all in need of space. The library books, stored in cardboard boxes under the Amphitheatre, were disintegrating due to inflowing rain water. "We decided that Bharat Nivas should be opened up to all Auroville," says Aster. The money was not only used to start the Centre for Research in Indian Culture, but also for makeshift arrangements for many other units. And so the unfinished structures of Bharat Nivas became the administrative hub of Auroville's community life.

With the departure of the Auroville Foundation offices, most of Bharat Nivas has now become available to fulfil its true purpose: to be the Pavilion of India in the International Zone. To assess its importance, we have to go back to February 1971, when The Mother initiated the work on two construction sites: the Matrimandir and Bharat Nivas. "She said that she wanted the Pavilion to be finished by Sri Aurobindo's centenary, in 1972. This calls for a deep reflection," says Aster.

In 1970, The Mother explained to Prem Malik the main purpose of the International Zone: to demonstrate, at the physical level, the essential unity that exists behind the diversity which manifests itself in the world in the form of different cultures. But, she said, this unity manifests itself only at the spiritual level. For that reason she stressed the importance of revealing the spiritual heritage of each country. In the record of his meeting with The Mother, Prem wrote that "The Mother made a statement that this was the reason why she wanted the Indian Pavilion to be the first to be built, as India was the one country which had an unbroken spiritual heritage and one which could act as an example for the other pavilions to follow."

The original design of Bharat Nivas was for an auditorium, a restaurant, a school of linguistics, a guest house and pavilions for the different states of



Studying the plans for Bharat Nivas. From left to right: Dhruv, Dr. Karan Singh, Prashant, Meenakshi, Aster and Divya

India. The Mother wanted the Government of India to provide the funds for building the Pavilion. A grant of Rs 90 lakhs was received. Unfortunately, this money was not used for the purpose for which it was granted and the buildings that had begun – the auditorium, the restaurant and three circular state pavilions – remained unfinished.

"Over the years, various teams of architects studied how to finish the buildings," says Aster. "The original plans of architect Chakrapani had been badly modified. But as there were no funds and the spaces were not free, little could be done."

The situation changed in 1994. With a small government grant the auditorium was somewhat renovated. Subsequent grants helped to modify the restaurant building into an art centre, called Kala Kendra; to build Atithi Griha, a students' guest house; and construct the ground floor of the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity. This year it became possible to do a first-class renovation of the Sri Aurobindo auditorium and to build Swagatham, a new guest-house with facilities for visiting scholars and other senior people.

Plans are now in progress to make a Master Plan for the Bharat Nivas campus in order to integrate all buildings and create a true campus 'feel'. Two new buildings are planned. One is the Tamil Heritage Centre designed by Auroville architect Poppo. Its construction will start soon on the site allocated to it years ago, as funds have meanwhile been allocated. The second new building is the Centre of Indian Studies, to be designed by renowned Indian architect Balkrishna Doshi. Here, preparatory work has started but the plans are yet to be made. The three unin-

ished circular pavilions will be demolished when the present occupants have found another location. They will be replaced by a small open-air amphitheatre. The former offices of the Auroville Foundation will be turned into an exhibition space to host a permanent exhibition on India titled 'The Sense of the Infinite'. An implementation programme for the next 5 years is being worked out under the guidance of B.V. Doshi. "Dr. Karan Singh, on his visit to Auroville on March 30, 2008, discussed the plans with the Bharat Nivas team," says Aster. "He said that this was the first time he sensed the identity of Bharat Nivas!"

Meanwhile, the purpose of the Pavilion to reveal the spiritual heritage of India continues to be pursued by all the activities that are based there. "The Centre for Indian Studies will continue its frontline comparative research in areas such as philosophy, psychology, new dimensions of spirituality and their correlation with the traditional knowledge of India and the work of Sri Aurobindo," says Aster. "The seeds of this work were sown as early as 1984 when we started programmes in all these areas and organised exhibitions, lectures and conferences."

With the financial support of the Government of India, Aster is confident that Bharat Nivas will soon manifest more fully. "The Government has decided to fulfil its commitment made to The Mother in 1971 to provide the funds for Bharat Nivas," she says. "But also the support of the Auroville community is of the essence. We should all feel the importance of finishing Bharat Nivas, for it holds the key to the flowering of the entire International Zone."

Carel

In brief

Railway project cleared

The Union Ministry has cleared a railway project along the East Coast linking Chennai and Cuddalore via Mamallapuram and Puducherry. It is proposed that the Rs.523-crore railway line will pass through the east side of Auroville, between Kulapalayam and New Creation Corner, with a station at Kulapalayam. If all goes well (especially with land acquisition) it will be in operation in another 10 years.

New cashew lease policy

Land & Resources Management have decided that around 106 acres of cashew and mango topes in the city area owned by Auroville will no longer be leased out and allowed to be sprayed with chemical pesticides. The harvest will be leased to an Aurovillian and used within Auroville.

Housing crisis update

The Housing Service reported that the Auroville housing situation is worse than expected. There is a great need for new houses, in particular for newcomers – an estimated 100 units a year need to be built to meet demand, while quite a few Newcomers do not have the resources to make a financial contribution to their housing needs. Moreover, many Aurovillians are currently living in houses that are below acceptable standards. Lastly, many existing houses, built in the past without advice from architects and engineers, are ageing fast and need repairs that cannot be met from the present repair budget. A comprehensive housing database is in preparation and a seminar will be called to study the issues.

The 13th Harmony Arts Show

Eleven artists – potters, painters and sculptors – represented Auroville at the prestigious Harmony Arts exhibition at Mumbai's Nehru Centre Gallery. Works of Adil, Agnus, Anamika, Ange, Chinmayi, Henk, Julietta, Kratu, Krishnamurthi, Michel and Pierre Legrand were on display amidst works of more than 150 other artists.

Herbal medicine classes at Pitchandikulam

The Pitchandikulam Bio Resource Centre offers classes on making herbal remedies for common ailments from locally available medicinal plants and common kitchen ingredients. A herbal dispensary is also functioning at the Bio-Resource Centre.

Payment by credit card

The Financial Service now accepts credit and debit cards from everybody holding an account. It also has a debit card for Aurovillians who like to pay bills via the internet.

Auroville team wins Kabaddi championship

The Auroville Kabbadi Club has won the first place in the Puducherry State Kabbadi tournament held in April at Madugarai. Thirty-four teams participated from the State.



AUROVILLE FOUNDATION

Is the Auroville Foundation an autonomous body?

A correction and clarification.

In the article "Is the Auroville Foundation an autonomous body?" which appeared in the March 2008 issue of *Auroville Today*, a mistake was made. The opening quotation "The Auroville Foundation is, like any government department, subject to all the norms and regulations applicable to Government departments and particularly in relation to the handling of finances," was not made by advocate M. Bharathi, as was stated. It was made by senior advocate Soli Sorabjee, who summarized the legal opinion of Mr. Bharathi.

The article lacked quotations from Mr. Bharathi which we give here. Mr. Bharathi had opined that "the Government's rights over the Assets / Properties / Funds of Auroville are clearly established," and that "the funds of the Auroville are Govt. Funds and all the financial norms that are applicable to Govt. funds are applicable to Auroville Funds also." Mr. Bharathi opined further that "Since the Secretary is the only appointed Govt. official by Central Govt., AG [Accountant General] will rely more on his version of accounts than from the

Unity Fund executives. The responsibilities cannot be fixed on the Executives of the Auroville Unity Fund since they are only residents of Auroville and sometimes they are foreigners. The Governing Board cannot fix responsibilities on them for the lapses that may occur in their transactions. Thus the Governing Board cannot pass a resolution in nominating two executives of Auroville Unity Fund, as the co-signatories to manage the funds of Auroville." Stating that the Secretary has to be a compulsory co-signatory, Mr. Bharathi concluded that "it is the duty of the two Govt. nominated Governing Board members [the ex-officio members from the HRD ministry in the Governing Board, eds.] to raise this issue before the Governing Board meeting and see that the Govt. interest are protected and the basic tenants of the Govt. financial prudence & procedures are implemented strictly."

As stated in the article in the March 2008 issue, Mr. Bharathi's views were not shared by Shri Soli Sorabjee, who concluded that the provisions of the Act guarantee complete autonomy to the Foundation.

AUROVILLE IN INDIA

Art show in Mumbai

Inited by art patron Ram Piparaiya, Auroville's five-artist collective of Henk van Puten, Agnus Gastmans, Anna Maria, Nele and Hufreesh, presented about fifty paintings and sculptures at the Indusvista Art Gallery in Mumbai in April. Dr. Karan Singh, who inaugurated the exhibition, congratulated the group. As he wrote in the visitors' book, "I am most impressed by the talent and creativity of these five Auroville artists. In very different styles and idiom, they express in an effective manner the inherent creativity in Auroville."



From left to right: Nele, Hufreesh, Dr. Karan Singh, Agnus and Henk. Not in picture: Anna Maria.

PHOTO COURTESY HENK AND AGNUS

Udavi – An educational experiment

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We invited these students to follow a different scheme of education where they could learn things that they really wanted to learn and also master some manual skills so that they could prepare themselves for their future working life. Six students joined reluctantly. The parents opposed the scheme vehemently but accepted only when faced with the alternative that their children would have to leave the school as they had been regularly failing to secure pass-marks in the examinations. However, these six students found themselves stigmatised in the school and the other students considered them dull. They also started to think of themselves as inferior. This programme had to be dropped under the cumulative pressure of these attitudes.

It became clear to us that we had to deal with the attitudes of students who believed that education is all about passing examinations and ultimately getting a certificate, which will allow them to take the next examination, the next certificate, which will enable you to secure a good job. It has taken us a long time – and we cannot say that we are fully successful in our endeavour to change this belief. We introduced the idea that there is a value in many things apart from doing well in examinations. The idea that different students are good at different

things like games, athletics, gymnastics, clay, tailoring, or carpentry or that there are students who have a spirit of adventure or are good in music, dance, painting or theatre has been fostered in our school by giving a good amount of time to these activities and properly honouring the achievements in all these areas. Slowly the children are experiencing another meaning of learning and going to school. They experience learning as joyful and as making some progress in themselves. They learn the art of concentration and the need to make an effort and persevere if they want to progress. They begin to have a relationship of trust and friendship with their teachers.

The students understand now that the school is meant for them and that it is not possible to live and work here without a basic collective discipline. What follows from this is that the students now discipline themselves and there is almost no necessity for teachers' supervision. This has come as a great relief as the school campus is very large and to supervise every corner of it is next to impossible.

One of the handicaps the village children face is their lack of exposure to a lot that is going on in the world. The introduction of DVDs and cable T.V. has made some difference, yet what they see on the screen is not part of their life in a living way. Their

attitudes tend to be narrow, their concerns very limited and their aspirations, if any, are determined by the films – wanting to be a doctor and help the poor – which wear off quite soon. We have used the morning assembly to introduce many new types of ideas and people into their lives. Interesting personalities from the Ashram, Auroville and Pondicherry have addressed the students. People from different cultures have presented special features of their culture. Serialized versions of the Mahabharata, Ramayana, the Bible and Krishna's stories. We have discussed issues as they come up either in the village, the



PHOTO GIORGIO

A student responds joyously to the music-inspired painting session

country or the world. And students have presented their work to other students and answered their questions. We have practiced making their minds quiet for a progressively longer time. In this way the morning assembly of about twenty minutes has been used to enhance their sensibilities.

We also observed that the children were not eating properly. The lunch they brought was, in most cases, very meagre and their diet was not balanced. For the last year and a half we have provided lunch to the school children. They also receive a morning snack and an evening snack. We find this a basic necessity in the context of a poor village like Edaiyanchavadi.

The effort to bring the educational principles enunciated by Sri Aurobindo and Mother to the village children has been rewarding and fruitful at one level but frustrating at others. During the first ten years in school the children begin to flower and with proper observation and guidance are nurtured in the direction of their *swabhava* (their unique path). But this changes as soon as learning starts for the State Board exams. Then the students are pressured to learn only a few subjects by rote, to be literally reproduced at the examination. This precludes the possibility of experiencing and understanding

this knowledge. It is unfortunate that we have to subject our students to this.

But our hands are tied as any effort to de-link ourselves from the State Board examination will make the school and its programme quite useless in the minds of the parents and they will remove their children from the school and put them in some other school offering certificates of the recognized boards. The gains of the first ten years still justify the problem of the 'exam years' at the school. It has been observed by many who visit the school that the children exhibit openness, have a capacity to think for themselves, are able to express themselves in English quite well, and are capable of taking up responsibilities. All these achievements are quite unusual for village schoolchildren.

We can only hope that the possibilities of a free progress system of education will be available to students in India in the near future, and that a united plea is made to the government to do away with standardized tests and make the syllabus flexible to suit the needs of different students.

Sanjeev Aggarwal

This article first appeared in SAIER's quarterly magazine 'Ritam'

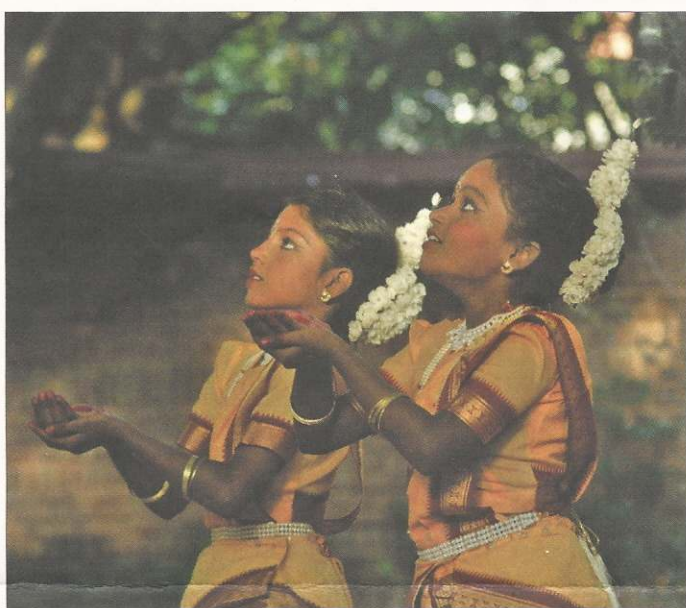


PHOTO GIORGIO

Young Odissi dancers performing on Annual day

New Era Secondary School – a review

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In early April, a team of school inspectors visited NESS to assess the programme, and they left "highly impressed".

The move to reinvent itself as NESS was a bold step for After School. In recent years it had come to be seen more and more as an outreach school, with few Aurovilians sending their children to attend it. Now all its students come from the local population in the surrounding villages.

Caught between its aspirations to offer an integral education as The Mother wanted, and the ground reality which demands the security that certificates offer, the school has been through much introspection particularly since the year 2000.

"It has not been easy," admits Selvaraj who was responsible for starting the school and managing it. In the beginning, the school offered the National Open School programme (NOS), a progressive self-learning curriculum (promoted by the Ministry of Human Resource Development of the Government of India) primarily meant for students in remote areas with little or no access to schools and or teachers. Its text books were detailed and self-explanatory offering scope for deep learning. However a subject often had as many as four to six text books each, which overwhelmed not only the students, but the teachers too.

The situation became complex with students wanting a quick and fail-safe way to reach their final goal – a ticket to college. The NOS programme had one major strike against it – the programme was new and relatively unknown in Tamil Nadu. "Not all universities recognized it automatically, so we had to check with the local colleges if they would accept the NOS certificate, and when they did not, we had to initiate the relevant paper work," explains Selvaraj. "There was also resistance from some of our core teachers who wanted to shift to the Tamil Nadu State curriculum, which is followed by a majority of schools in Tamil Nadu, as it was seen as being easier to teach."

In the spirit of experimentation, After school switched over to the State board curriculum. With its detailed and condensed text books, a sizable material to learn within a limited time frame, and

an examination system that does not encourage critical thinking, the programme demanded 'cramming' and memorization. The downside was that now very little learning happened. Selvaraj explains, "The students were satisfied if they just managed to pass with a 35%. Of course I was not happy, but by myself, I could do nothing."



PHOTO COURTESY NEW ERA SECONDARY SCHOOL

A clay-modeling session in progress at the Pyramids Arts Centre

It was at this point that Rod Hemsell showed up. Rod, an early Aurovillian, returned back from the United States armed with an extensive experience in education that included starting a K-12 school (kindergarten through high school) in Colorado with public funding. His first two years back in Auroville were spent in getting acquainted with the then educational scenario in the schools. "I sat in the School Board and SAIER meetings, and visited various Auroville schools trying to understand what was going on," says Rod. He finally decided to join After School which welcomed him with open arms, and it was Rod who set the ball of change rolling.

Along with Selvaraj and a team of ten supporting local Aurovilians (many of them After

School alumni), a new vision and direction for the school was formulated, and the decision made to embark as the New Era Secondary School with a new curriculum.

"We also have the support of people like Heidi Watts and Françoise, both professionals in teacher training, plus the team at New Creation Bilingual

week, they've said no. And to set up a library is expensive and we don't have the budget for it.

Over the past year, both the Dutch foundation, Stichting de Zaaier, and the American Foundation for World Education (FWE) have supported the NESS experiment with modest grants. The school also receives a regular Central Fund budget of Rs.40,000 a month. "However we underestimated our running expenses so we are 68,000 rupees short," says Rod. "This year, we have plans to set up a science lab and a library, and that will mean looking for funds again!"

"In Auroville, we don't seem to understand the economy of scale. We are supporting four high schools now – an Udavi School, a New Era School, a Future School, and a Last School, and spending a lot more money on supplies and teachers than needed. All of us compete for the same resources and have to duplicate libraries and science labs! Can we not do one good quality high school programme?"

"The response from SAIER to our new programme has been 'we are interested in following your example, but we are waiting to see what the outcome is'. But now is the right moment!"

In the meantime, the inspectors who came this year to assess NESS and NCBS – the two schools in Auroville that have introduced the new national curriculum – have left with an excellent impression of the schools. "Those inspectors are principals of schools in Tamil Nadu who have had to implement the educational reforms in their own schools," says Rod. "After seeing our programmes, they immediately recognized the possibility of sending their teachers here for training, and suggested that we join a coalition of regional schools so as to have a significant impact on educational practices in the area!"

"The advantages we have in Auroville are that we are already applying activity-based learning principles, and because we aren't habituated to the traditional methods and bound by conventional norms, we are freer to experiment. Of course people like Subash and Heidi have been doing teacher training with activity-based learning at the primary level. Now it appears we can help teachers at the upper levels too."

Priya Sundaravalli

Redefining itself: New Creation Bilingual School

More than 200 children ranging in age from 3 to 13, receive academic and vocational education from crèche through 8th grade in Tamil and English.

André Tardeil had a vision and passion to create a bridge between Auroville and the impoverished population of neighbouring Kuilyapalayam and other local villages, by providing opportunities for informal education, training and earning a living. In the early eighties UFO-shaped buildings designed by architect André Hababou came up. They served as a rural training centre, housing small carpentry and tailoring shops, as well as the beginnings of school facilities, often all mixed together. As there was no other school in the neighbourhood, apart from a Panchayat primary school up to 5th standard, children eagerly came to the new school. Gradually the 'UFOs' were joined by other workshops and classroom buildings to create the well organised lively school campus that it is now.

Beginnings

In the early years several other Aurovilians joined André Tardeil to provide the basics of an education for the village children, but it was only in 1990 that the classrooms and curriculum began to be consolidated. Invited by André and encouraged by Auroville's Sri Aurobindo International Institute for Educational Research (SAIIER), Roy Wicks, a retired British police officer, arrived, established some order, and added the bilingual dimension with English classes and some teaching in English. He promoted a more interactive and diversified curriculum than the standard Indian listen-and-repeat approach, or the alternative, 'total freedom without responsibility'.

The mainly untrained Tamil staff worked hard to assimilate this new philosophy and the strategies which accompanied it. The new approaches were introduced at first by educationist Greta Jackson, also from Britain, who offered a variety of play-way methods, and then by Heidi Watts, a professor from Antioch University in the United States. Heidi began



Lunch time at Priyannam, the newly built kitchen and dining room

Suryagandhi accepted the challenge and was much later joined by Dianna, Françoise, and Franca.

None of these individuals had a clear notion of what lay ahead, but all consented to give the management of the school a try, in addition to their regular commitments in Auroville. Fort-nightly meetings soon became weekly gatherings. What became immediately apparent was that the school needed a principal. Up to this point there had only been 'directors' responsible for the overall running of the school but never a 'principal' responsible for the children, teachers, and curriculum.

Fortunately, Shankar, who was then teaching at

fronts, from teacher competence and accountability, to the enthusiasm and cheer evident in the faces of the children. After the first year, positive feedback started coming in from grateful parents who saw that things were changing through the behaviour of their children, meetings with teachers in the school, and a new venture, an active Parent-Teacher Association. They also appreciated the vocational classes held weekly in computer use, tailoring and woodwork, singing, dancing and art, and an everyday sports programme. M.J. Kumar, a local entrepreneur and father of three daughters who study in the school feels that since Shankar joined as principal, the school has become more strict, something he is very happy about. "We can be proud of it," he says. "I can see in the way my daughters now prepare for the school day, and want to do their homework that it has become real for them. Before, school was about eating and playing, now it is also about learning." He says that his youngest daughter, now in upper Kindergarten, is doing much better than her elder sibling. "She's 100% Kindergarten. But the older one who is now in 4th standard, missed this serious basic training in Kindergarten and I can see that she lacks something."

Another parent, Mercy, wife of a labourer and mother of three children, expresses her satisfaction with the current education the school offers, the child care, and the nutrition provided for the children. "I'm somewhat educated myself," she says, "but can't express myself in English while my children can. They correct my pronunciation, and this is very good as English is the common language all over the world. My son tells me everything he learned at school that day!"

"Also in our homes, we beat our children when they do something wrong, but at the school the teachers talk with them and find a solution. This I like very much." Mercy also appreciates the special tutoring sessions that the school offers which her second child benefits from, as well as the field trips organized within and outside Auroville. "I'm grateful for all this."

A major challenge for the school continues to be finances. NCBS has no regular income and opens its doors to children of the lowest income groups without charging any fees. "We function separately from the French-oriented Free Progress Child Development Centre elsewhere in the New Creation settlement," says Support Group member Janet. "A common misconception is that we are the same as André's crèche, and are therefore benefiting from the donations it receives."

While basic expenses, such as most teacher and staff salaries, maintenances, nutrition expenses, and some essential equipment and repairs come out of Auroville's Central Fund via SAIIER, the Support Groups says that it is "insufficient to run the school properly". And contrary to the general assumption, the school also does not receive any money from New Creation's taxi service or its restaurants. "Quite naturally people think that some of this income is channelled into the school. But this is not and has never been the case."

To overcome its financial handicap, NCBS has for past three years, been regularly publishing a quarterly newsletter reaching out to potential donors in Auroville, India and abroad. In it, appeals for funds to support specific projects are made. Response has been forthcoming, as in the case of Priyannam, the newly inaugurated school kitchen that doubles as a dining hall funded by a well-wisher. The same donor has also offered seed money for the construction of climate-appropriate school buildings over the next five years (to replace the not-so-ideal 'UFO' classrooms).

A unique experiment

Encouraged from various sides and in collaboration with SAIIER, last year, the school has started the process towards accreditation by India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE). In early April, the first official school inspections have been fulfilled satisfactorily.

Slowly the uniqueness of the NCBS experiment in integral education for village children, based on the principles of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, is beginning to be noticed. Because here is an environment where the concept of 'human unity' is a direct and natural experience lived through the mix of Eastern-Western team of teachers, volunteers and trainers. The open curiosity and freshness of the students themselves is another of the school's precious assets.

Says Shankar, the principal, "These last three years have been a true challenge for us all, but we are moving ahead and the evidence of this is all around us especially in the children's smiling faces. The encouragement and trust expressed by the parents, and the fact that they don't transfer their children to other schools any more, speaks for itself. We now have a caring, qualified and a committed team of 17 Aurovilians, 7 Newcomers and 16 employees, of whom six have degrees in education and five have teaching diplomas. The fact that western Aurovilians and Newcomers are now joining the school's staff, and that forty of our children will participate in Auroville's Nature Camp this summer are also promising indicators."

"Our 200 children benefit immensely from the increased self-esteem and enthusiasm of the teachers. With malnutrition, disease, domestic violence and general neglect still occurring in our area, some of the children suffer from traumas that are not being addressed, and that translates to a fairly large percentage of our students having some learning disability."

"But through their work with trainers, all our teachers have now discovered that 'slow learners' or 'dull' kids may not be 'slow' or 'dull' at all - they may just need another approach to open up. In the last six months, the school was able to get the services of a 'special needs' team that works therapeutically with these children. There is no greater joy in the school than when a small



A typical classroom scene (with two teachers) at the New Creation Bilingual School

coming regularly for a few months each winter to work with schools and teachers in Auroville, and was a frequent visitor to the New Creation Bi-lingual School (NCBS).

During the early nineties, the first turn towards a more formal education at NCBS emerged. While André did not entirely agree with a more structured approach to schooling, it was generally appreciated and seen as effective, and fund-raising efforts were rewarded. Among these were substantial grants from the European Commission to build vocational training centres and a computer lab.

"When Roy came the school only went up," says Pugazhendhi, one of the school's earliest teachers who continues to be involved. When Roy left for the U.K. in 2001 for medical reasons, the supervision was taken over by a British couple, Mike and Sue, both educators, who introduced assessment techniques and began insisting on prior preparations for classes and adherence to a curriculum. Their good work is still apparent in the school. When they left three years later, there was a leadership vacuum.

The new team

Early in 2005, Heidi and Martin Littlewood of AVI UK felt that something had to be done about this lack of effective leadership in NCBS. The general discontent among village youth was high and it seemed that the best help Auroville could offer to the younger generation of the bioregion was good and solid education, both academic and vocational. Martin and Heidi consulted with Sanjeev of SAIIER and asked some long-term Aurovilians if they were willing to form a management team or 'support group' for the school. Janet, Mauna, Shankar and

Last School, agreed to take up the position. As a Kuilyapalam native well known in the villages and in Auroville, and an experienced teacher with a Masters Degree in Tamil and second language teacher training, he seemed tailor-made for the job.

Challenges

And so the real work began. There was considerable resistance to change from the teachers who had been used to Western leadership and could not accept that a Tamil principal could do the job. Old misunderstandings and frictions that had built up between New Creation's original initiators and the past leaders of the school also had to be resolved. The Support Group had to move slowly. It had conversations with the teachers where expectations were firmly defined, regular attendance supervision was introduced, as was the school uniform, the latter done to avoid visual differences in the students' economic status.

As principal, Shankar initiated thrice-weekly meetings with the teachers, and was present at the school every day from 8:00 am until 6:00 pm. Gradually, the Support Group inched forward, bonding as a team. Health professional Suryagandhi, one of the members of the Support Group says: "In the beginning I was afraid to join a group with all these different nationalities! But Heidi and Sanjeev encouraged me. 'Do it for the children', they said. Now I can say that I am very happy with the way we work. Sometimes we don't agree but we always come out of it. It naturally happened that each of us has a specific function in the team. It works!"

That it works is clear from the smooth functioning of the school and the visible progress on all



Members of the Support Group: Françoise, Suryagandhi, Franca, Shankar, Mauna, and Janet Not in photo: Dianna.

child in Kindergarten, who never spoke or laughed, suddenly opens up and communicates!"

During a recent group interaction amongst the NCBS team, the members of the Support Group were deeply touched when a teacher spoke of her experience. "In the beginning we did not like it when you asked us to prepare the classes better, work on ourselves a bit, and so on. But now I understand that you have been stimulating us in the same way that we now stimulate our children!"

Shankar responds, "And this seems a good enough beginning of integral education to me."

The NCBS Support Group

Auroville Today May 2008 5

Managing the media

On Auroville's 40th birthday more than a hundred photographers and twelve TV and film crews attended the bonfire. Facilitating the incoming numbers of media-persons visiting Auroville is the challenge for the Auroville OutreachMedia team.

Mauna has been with the team from the beginning: "OutreachMedia (then still simply called 'Outreach') was formed more than ten years ago at the request of many residents to regulate the 'nuisance' of the Press," she says. "At that time filmcrews just wandered around. They would enter communities and put their cameras and microphones under the nose of everyone. Many people did not like this. The journalists were curious about Auroville, but did not know where to start."

The OutreachMedia team is composed of Aurovilians who are multi-lingual and multi-cultural; some have a media-background in journalism or public relations, like Ann, Cecilia, Tapas, Tim and Robert, but there is also a lawyer in the team, Vinodhini. At the moment OutreachMedia is answerable to Auroville's Working Committee.

"OutreachMedia provide factual information on all aspects of Auroville. We try to ensure that the ideals of Auroville are respected by the visiting media, as The Mother has clearly expressed that there should be no publicity," says coordinator Fabienne. "We receive many requests from national TV channels wanting to promote Auroville for tourism. It is not always easy to convince them that the township is not a holiday spot or for day trippers!"

For print media journalists, the first step is to contact OutreachMedia. Nowadays this mostly happens through email. The team provides information to the journalist on the steps to be taken and connects them with the key people in the fields of the journalist's interest. For television or film crew the situation is more complex. While the Indian crew only need filming permission from the Auroville Foundation (which goes through OutreachMedia), foreign filmmakers, in addition, need to follow the procedures required by the Government

of India to film in India. In addition they need to provide a full synopsis of their film, obtain a recommendation from the Indian Embassy in their country, with full details of the filming crew, and submit this to the Indian Government, through the Auroville Foundation.

OutreachMedia not only facilitates the logistics of the arrival and stay of the journalists and film makers, but also assists in shaping the film's scenario and introducing the crew to relevant parties. Because of financial constraints, crews rarely come beforehand to prepare the ground. OutreachMedia's logistical support helps the team to start shooting from day one, accompanied by a member of the team who shows them around. Aurovilians, OutreachMedia notices, feel more confident to talk about their work or personal experience knowing OutreachMedia has done some pre-screening.

But the services from OutreachMedia do not come for free. "We must keep the service unit rolling," says co-coordinator Cecilia. "We have expenses, that's why we ask a contribution from the journalists. Of course we try not to charge poor film



PHOTO GIORGIO

On the day before Auroville's birthday, an early press team arrives to document preparations at the Amphitheatre

students for example, who may have no production company or television-stations behind them."

A contribution is also being asked when magazines ask for photographs in high resolution. With Auroville's professional photographers, the team wants to set up a databank of images. "It is only fair that they also are being

paid for their work."

Another question that constantly comes up is how to protect Auroville's integrity while being open to media. Cecilia says: "We think there need to be some guidelines that would regulate the service we are offering. The question is how we can do that without being perceived as 'censors' by the outside media."

Sometimes OutreachMedia has to manage the chaos from over-zealous press attention. Fabienne gives the example of the bonfire on Auroville's 40th birthday that was such an occasion. "To meet the demand for filming and photographing the event, and to prevent disturbance to the thousands of visitors attending the ceremony, we arranged a high, partitioned section in the amphitheatre. And this was much appreciated by the press though, it was perceived to be restrictive by Auroville's professional photographers."

Recently the team held their first meeting for the Tamil Press. A PowerPoint presentation by govern-

ing board member Ameeta Mehra was shown and the journalists were informed about the 'why' of Auroville. A panel of Aurovilians was available, each member a specialist on topics such as village relations, governance, education, economics, town planning and land purchase. Fabienne says: "It was quite successful and for days after the meeting there was a stream of positive reporting about Auroville in the local papers."

Mauna says that after all these years she still enjoys showing the press-people around. "You work for five or seven days very closely together with visiting journalists and filmmakers and this creates a bond. Sometimes years later you still receive emails, interesting articles or a photo."

"But the work is not always easy. For instance when a journalist, seeing all this gold on the Matrimandir, or the many photos of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo all over Auroville, asks how he can explain to his readers that Auroville is not a sect. Answering such a question needs some insight and definitely sharpens the mind."

Robert



The OutreachMediateam. From left to right: Tim, Cecilia, Robert, Ann, and Mauna. (Not in photo: Fabienne, Tapas Bhatt and Vinodhini)

THEATRE

ERIC: A review

It was strange to enter a cold, medieval Nordic world on a hot Indian night at Bharat Nivas on March 28th.

Sri Aurobindo had set his play, 'Eric', in Norway. Eric, the king, is trying to unify Norway. His last obstacle to achieving this is Swegn Olafsson, who claims the throne. Swegn's sister, Aslaug, and Hertha, his wife, come to the court of Eric disguised as dancing-girls. Their intention is to kill him.

However, Aslaug and Eric fall in love and Aslaug has to decide between her duty to her brother and her feelings for Eric. Eric suspects the women are more than they seem.

Eventually, Hertha reveals the plot to Eric, who forgives her and Aslaug and promises to preserve the life of Swegn. Swegn is forgiven, and finally Eric sets Aslaug upon the throne as Queen of Norway.

Sri Aurobindo's play is loosely based on a Norwegian epic, but he gave his own profound interpretation to the original story. Freya, the Nordic goddess of love, is obviously a reference to the Mother, and through her force King Eric turns from base behaviour to a higher consciousness.



PHOTO IRENO

Swegn (played by Chris) planning his attack with his followers

This was the second of Sri Aurobindo's plays that the director, Aryamani, has produced. She decided to stage the play with the audience on the stage. It was a wise decision. It gave an intimate and tight atmosphere to a play that depended on characterization rather than high drama.

Martin as King Eric brought strength and colour to the character, and he looked the part of a noble king with his long flowing curls. This was his first performance and he must have worked extremely hard. His Austrian accent was not obtrusive and his movements were strong and precise.

Anandamayi as Aslaug, the sister of Swegn, had the most difficult role. She handled her complex character extremely well. Srimoyi, who played Hertha, provided the cold calculation to her sister's emotional reactions as their plot to murder the king progressed. His enemy, the warrior king Swegn, representing the dark forces of pride and violence, was strongly played by Chris.

The set was simple and uncluttered and created a wintry Norwegian setting with a constantly burning camp fire. A hanging map of Norway and big burning candles created a regal

atmosphere against which the drama of love and the evolution of consciousness was acted out. The tension in the atmosphere was wonderfully retained throughout – there didn't appear to be a weak link in this thoughtful production which introduced many people to this rarely-performed play.

Aryamani remarked that it had been a remarkably rich experience for all the actors, and especially for herself, to have been immersed in the profound lines and thoughts of Sri Aurobindo for weeks on end. We look forward to her next production.

Dianna



PHOTO LORETTA

Eric (played by Martin) wooing Aslaug (Anandamayi)

A Sri Aurobindo reader

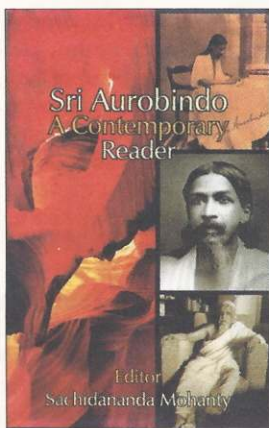
Sri Aurobindo: A Contemporary Reader is the title of a new compilation of Sri Aurobindo's writings. The editor, Sachidananda Mohanty, explains that his intention is to draw attention to Sri Aurobindo's neglected social and international vision. Why neglected? Mohanty points out that the most common approach among Sri Aurobindo's adherents is hagiographic and this puts off many secularists and intellectuals who would otherwise have much to gain from studying Sri Aurobindo's ideas on society, the individual and the larger world order.

Mohanty's approach, therefore, is to create a bridge to a new readership through concentrating upon those writings that bear upon contemporary issues while minimising any reference to Sri Aurobindo's inner, 'occult' work.

How well does he succeed in this?

In one sense, he does a very good job. Mohanty identifies some of the key contemporary issues as the tyranny of the State, religion versus secular modernity, the problem of self-determination and identity politics in a multicultural society. On each of these topics, and on many more besides, Sri Aurobindo is revealed to be extremely pertinent. For example, he describes the organized State as "a collective egoism much inferior to the best of which the community is capable", and "The State always tends to uniformity, because uniformity is easy to it and natural variation is impossible to its essentially mechanical nature."

As to self-determination, "The principle of self-determination really means that within every living human creature, man, woman and child, and equally within every distinct human collectivity, growing or grown, half-developed or



Philistine is in fact the modern civilized barbarian." "Evolution moves through diversity from a simple to a more complex oneness."

Another surprise for many readers will be to discover that Sri Aurobindo is very approachable. For while Sri Aurobindo's conclusions often seem to be definitive, he is always 'open source', giving the reader full access to the roots of his argument, and he never tries to impose himself. Twice I even found myself taking issue with him. Once over what I felt to be his unfair dismissal of the contribution to learning of Christian monasticism, the other time over his assertion, in *The Ideal of Human Unity*, that the United States was and might continue to be "a province of England" because it had not evolved its own distinct form of expression.

Having said this, I read most of this collection nodding vigorously and marvelling at the plasticity, depth and, yes, contemporary relevance of Sri Aurobindo's insights on topics as diverse as the United Nations, the necessity of linguistic and cultural diversity and the inherent limitations of reason.

But a question remains. Is this an adequate way to present Sri Aurobindo? Because while the decision to omit references to Sri Aurobindo's inner work may be understandable in terms of introducing

adult, there is a self, a being, which has the right to grow in its own way, to find itself, to make its life a full and a satisfied instrument and image of its being."

This, of course, is classic Sri Aurobindo – the measured thought magisterially revealed through a cascade of clauses and sub-clauses. But Mohanty's selection also shows how pithy Sri Aurobindo can be. "The

him to a non-devotee readership, there's a cost. And that is that it not only excludes a – actually, – the most crucial part of his work but it also leads to a profound misunderstanding of his working methods. For his approach as shown in this book is not, as Mohanty states, based on "his wide reading, his considerable travel prior to his arrival at Pondicherry, his participation in mass political movements and association with a wide cross-section of public figures and personalities." Rather, as Sri Aurobindo himself explained, his insights arose from direct inner experience.

In fact, by excluding all references to what Mohanty terms the 'occult' dimension of Sri Aurobindo's work, his vision and importance cannot be fully understood and is ultimately impoverished.

To take but one example: in an extract from *The Human Cycle* quoted here Sri Aurobindo states that it is a "spiritual, an inner freedom that alone can create a perfect human order."

An inner change in human nature? How can that happen? On the basis of this compilation no answer is given. But if this passage is read in conjunction with Sri Aurobindo's *The Record of Yoga*, a minutely documented account of his yogic practice between 1909 – 1927, or with *The Synthesis of Yoga*, or with his letters where he talks about his efforts to bring down a new consciousness for the earth, then one understands the very real basis of what otherwise appears to be cloud-cuckooism.

This aside, *Sri Aurobindo, A Contemporary Reader* is both readable and contemporary, as well as handsomely produced. Hopefully, readers will follow the beginnings of Ariadne's Thread provided by Mohanty to the very centre of Sri Aurobindo's thought and experience.

Alan

Sri Aurobindo, A Contemporary Reader, ed. Sachidananda Mohanty. Routledge, 2008

Between Seasons

Between Seasons is the title of Lloyd Hofman's new collection of poems. By turns whimsical, lyrical, melancholic, amused and quietly passionate, these are intimate poems which draw the reader quietly into Lloyd's world. He's a close and sensitive observer of nature – a mantis is extinguished in his candle flame, a young bamboo "strokes autumn skies", a tree frog leaps into his hair – but there are also poems of love lost and love regained. Above all, these are the poems of a man who has cut the cables of the past and is shaping a new self out of solitude and the simple contacts of daily life.

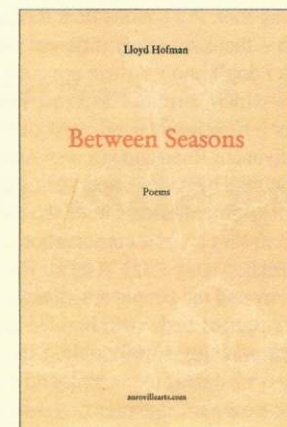
*life seasons by
as bird song dips
the forest without
into the soul
unstudied, bare*

The force of this poetry lies in its simplicity and integrity. As he puts it in *Clay Poems*:

*My aim was a few words
to deal with knowing but
light in coming across.*

*A small body of speech
to be true to itself
and fit for any use.*

Sometimes a poem fails to sustain a certain tone or feeling. The wrong word, an



awkward rhythm or an abrupt shift of register breaks the spell he has beautifully created. But this is a minor quibble. Overall, I felt privileged to have been allowed a glimpse of a sensitive being in the act of exploring itself, as well as learning when to let go:

*Sometimes I go beyond
the fringes of my
thoughts
and artificial space*

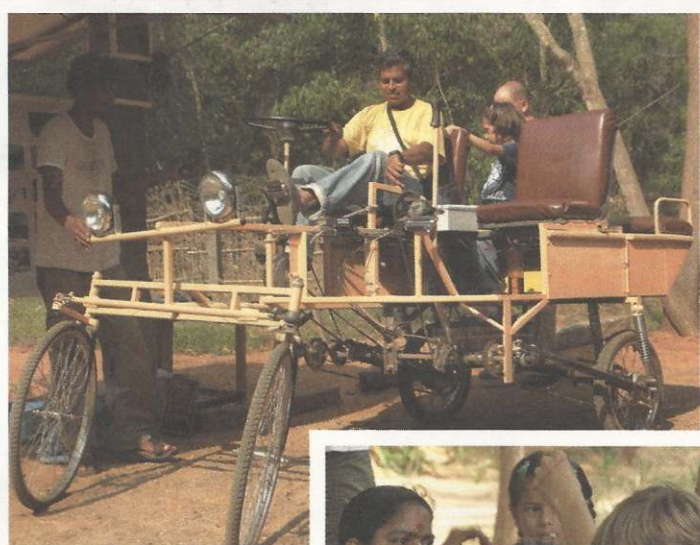
*at ease in not knowing,
not seeing myself, and
at one with the outcome*

Alan

Between Seasons
by Lloyd Hofman.
Published by
aurovillearts.com
For information contact:
avipro@auroville.org.in

CELEBRATION

Earth Day 2008



Clockwise from top left: A 21st century pedal-powered electric carriage; Youth from Mohanam Cultural Centre leading a drumming circle; Solar Kitchen's new charging station (solar street lamp at back); A mobile solar water heater by AUORE; Environmental displays at the Visitors' Centre; Beading and crafting with papier-mâché.



ALL PHOTOS GIORGIO

A birdsong wakes me up. It's not yet dawn, the moon is still full. There are no walls in the hut where I'm sleeping. It's a frame of granite pillars and logs with a steeply raked canvas roof. All sounds float through. Besides the birds – there are many different songs whose creators I don't know – there are cockcrows from villages which surround Sadhana Forest. The forest covers 70 acres of land west of the Puducherry-Tindivanam Road and is a new Auroville project. It was started by Aviram and Yorit who, together with their daughter Osher, settled the land in December 2003 to start a water conservation and tree planting project.

Around me people are asleep on wooden charpoys, framed beds with braided rope base. These are surprisingly comfortable. I lie under my mosquito net listening to the birds and watching the mist in the trees a few metres away. My world right now is both beautiful and peaceful. It's still dark when the first sounds of a tabla come drifting into the sleeping hut. It's our wake-up call. The instrument varies but the time is always the same. A quarter to six in the morning and Aviram is about to start his morning chant and meditation session.

Those joining, hurry off to the hut we call the living room, others roll over for a bit more sleep. The first working session will start at 6.30, after the meditators finish. Then we'll all go to the tool shed, gather what we need, and make our way into the forest. It's only just light and dew still lies heavily on the ground. Those who didn't cover their clothes the night before find the damp has penetrated our wall-less hut when they reach for them in the morning.

In the forest, right now, we are making bunds. To be more exact we're digging ponds and making bunds. The earth that comes out of one goes into the making of the other. We are quickly learning that reforestation is also about increasing water supply and preventing erosion. Planting new trees is only part of it.

At the work area those with rakes and bags collect old leaves and other plant debris from the ground for spreading around newly planted trees. Those with crowbars use gravity to chip away at the sides of the holes that will become the new ponds.

Make them beautiful shapes, urges Aviram, people will walk past here and they must see beautiful shapes.

The volunteers scratch their heads. What is a

A Day in Sadhana Forest



A volunteer transports soil for building bunds in the early morning

beautiful shape? A coiled circle, like a snail's shell? A loose figure eight? A freeform heart?

Different ponds start to take shape. Inside the hole a volunteer breaks the heavy clay with a pickaxe. The loosened dirt is scooped up by mumpstys into chettys and baskets and passed by a human chain to where the bund is being created. There it is tipped out, spread evenly and then tamped down by many feet shuffling sideways along the top.

After two hours of work we go back to the compound. Another group has spent the past hours peeling and chopping fruit and making *ragi*, or maybe a rice porridge. Whatever, it will be hot and have bananas and peanuts in it. The rest of the fruit – pineapples, oranges, papaya, pomegranates, *mosambi*, tangerines – becomes a fresh fruit salad, bowls of which will be consumed by hungry volunteers.

Everyone here, other than Aviram and Yorit, is a volunteer. There are over 60 people from around

the world, all of them staying for at least two weeks. Many stay longer, some for many months. Whatever length of time a person stays, though, he or she is warmly welcomed into this forest community. Accommodation is provided in a series of huts and dormitories. Everyone contributes Rs100 a day to cover the cost of three generous meals and each newcomer is issued with environmentally friendly soap, shampoo and toothpaste.

The environment is a constant presence. Everything is set up to minimise harmful effects in ways both large and small. All the food is vegan, there are very few waste products that can't be composted or recycled, efficient wood-burning 'rocket' stoves are used for cooking, and solar panels provide energy to run lights and computers and to allow the recharging of the numerous gadgets the volunteers bring with them. For laundry we use soap nuts from the *Sapindus trifoliatus* tree. After 24 hours of soaking the nuts they release a soap-like

substance which cleans even the dirtiest of stains.

Breakfast over, it's time for another couple of hours of work. Second work is often in or around the compound. It might be maintaining the showers, toilets, laundry areas and kitchen, tending the vegetable gardens, cutting the grass, or clearing runoff drains. Any of the hundred and one things that need care and attention for the project to succeed. By now the sun is high in the sky and water bottles are kept within easy reach. We filter groundwater for drinking, it's very soft and sweet.

Somewhere between 11.30 and mid-day most people have finished their rostered work for the day. There are still individual tasks to be done and calls for volunteers go out as incidental jobs crop up. For the bulk of us, though it's time to relax. Maybe a shower before lunch, or a swing in one of the hammocks. There's always someone on the computer, catching up on mail or doing a bit of research. Plans are made for the afternoon – maybe the beach, or the mud pool which is said to be very good for the skin. Or a jaunt into Puducherry or around Auroville.

But first there's lunch. It's the main meal of the day and we're lucky to have Nadav in charge of the kitchen, he's a wizard at creating tasty meals with a variety of flavours, day after day. There's always a big crowd. All the volunteers, newcomers who have arrived that morning, any other visitors who are around. Lots of chat – there's no hurry to go anywhere – who won't be here for dinner? Andrew is giving a tai chi lesson at two, there's yoga at four, a workshop tomorrow. Will the people in charge of filling the water filters make sure it's done?

So the day winds on. Time to read, time to exercise, time to snooze. Mopeds and motor scooters are hired. Bikes are available for those with the energy to pedal. Although we're away from the centre of Auroville it's not hard to get in and out, we're not far from the main road to Puducherry or the beach, so there's no shortage of places to go for those who want to explore the area.

Dinner is usually a smaller affair. A number of us will be out. It's eaten in the dining room, another open-walled, thatched-roofed structure, where we sit on mats on the tamped earth. Afterwards it's a short stroll to the living room, where there's conversation and laughter until, eyes drooping, I wish people goodnight and go to my bed for another deep, dreamless sleep until the pre-dawn chorus of bird-song again starts a new day.

Elle Rasink

LETTERS

On visitors and guests

Dear Editors,

I have just read the article entitled 'Auroville's visitors and guests' from the April 2008 issue of *Auroville Today*. What an insight into the running of Auroville and its treatment of guests! At one point, the article mentions the possibility that "complaining about the behaviour of guests can be an excuse for keeping Auroville small and cosy, insulated from the outside world." Certainly the article revealed how insulated Auroville truly is in some ways. In particular, I noted the comments regarding how the Guest Service prioritises which guests get first choice of accommodation during their visits (namely Aurovilians first, Auroville International Centres second and so on until we get to the lowly individuals whose names are not recognised as previous visitors). In the absence of a database of previous visitors, the reliance upon the memory of whoever happens to be manning the Guest Service at a particular time seems a fairly arbitrary manner of dealing with people. I, for example, visited Auroville a few years ago (I loved it and will definitely visit again). I never met the lady who made the above comments but it seems that despite my devotion to Sri Aurobindo and Mother, I am not sufficiently in the 'in' club to be allocated accommodation in times of a squeeze because she may not remember that I have visited before.

I was also bemused at the comment "I first send people to Centre Guest house when they have vacancies because this guest house makes the biggest contribution to Auroville." Wow! It would appear to an outsider that money buys influence in Auroville. What a great deal it must be to be regarded as, certainly on one perspective, the official Auroville Guest House because you can afford to give the biggest wedge of cash. In the UK, as in many countries, donations to the governing party have to be declared by law so that people know who has a potential influence on those who make decisions. So, how much money does Centre Guest House and the other guest houses give to Auroville (as an amount rather than a percentage)? How much actual profit, after donations, remains with the guest houses? It could be argued that as Centre Guest house is always guaranteed guests by this policy, it will likely always generate the most profit and therefore always be able to give a higher percentage to Auroville. This hardly seems fair to other guest houses that may not initially be able to afford a large donation percentage and are never given an equal chance at increasing their clientele. By encouraging first time visitors to stay at Centre Guest house, Auroville is automatically giving it the official seal of approval as the ideal place to visit Auroville to experience and understand its ethics and philosophy. Will it always be the first port of call for guests as long as Centre Guest house pays up, even if the quality of service should ever decline?

I would just like to add that as Auroville is the Mother's creation, I feel that it is incumbent upon all of us, Aurovilians or not, to prevent it from becoming too "insulated from the outside world". Auroville is just too important to let that happen.

Yours Sincerely,

Balvinder Banga, London, U.K.

On going colour

Hello AV Today!

I have been subscribing to your paper for several years and have even contributed some articles. I always enjoy it and read it cover to cover almost immediately.

I am a bit worried about your suggestion in the latest issue that, because of the introduction of color printing, the subscription price will go up. I do not think that this is a good time to do this because of the pinch we are feeling due to the economic recession, at least in the US and in the UK. I am paying about 25 GBP a year for a subscription, and in my budget, it already counts as a luxury item. Many of us are now trying to find ways to cut back on spending.

Also, I would like to express interest and encouragement for the feature you often have on focusing on individual families and/or persons in Auroville and telling their story.

All best wishes

Christine Rhone, U.K.

AUROVILLE SERVICES

The Farewell project

What does it mean to die a conscious death? The writings of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo suggest that, as one's consciousness increases, it takes progressively longer for the body's consciousness to leave after death. Based upon this a room has been



PHOTO GIORGIO

set aside in the Health Centre where, after death, a body can be kept for up to 7 days to give the body's consciousness time to depart in a quiet atmosphere. The space has been left neutral to enable friends and family to personalise it. Visitors may also be received there.

The room is available to all who have expressed the desire that their body be kept there after death. To facilitate the carrying out of this wish the Farewell Project group has developed a questionnaire that Aurovilians can complete and which will be kept on file at the Health Centre. Although not legally binding it will have strong persuasive power as to the clearly expressed wishes of the person concerned. The document will include information useful in cases of accident or serious illness as well as dealing with preferences after death such as organ donation. "We also want to emphasise the benefits of making a will," says Suzie, a member of the Farewell Project Group. "If you have personal property outside of Auroville, it's important to make your intentions with regard to Auroville clear in a document that is legally valid."

Another aspect of the Farewell Group's work is the preparation of the site of burial or cremation. This work is carried out by a team of young Aurovilians, who offer it as a service to the community.

The work of the Farewell Group is deeply appreciated. It is a help for family and friends in difficult times to make the passing of the deceased a harmonious movement towards the Light.

Elle Rasink

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