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Protecting Matrimandir's integrity

Thousands of visitors come to see the Matrimandir. That number will increase in the years to come. How does one preserve the inviolability of the Matrimandir and its gardens?

PHOTO: SHIRAZ



Visitors gather at the amphitheatre to view the Matrimandir.

"She never gave a free right to enter the Matrimandir. She said that there will be a time in the week or a time in the day when visitors will be allowed to come; a fixed time or a fixed day to show people around, and that for the rest of the time, the Matrimandir will be for those who are serious – serious, sincere – who really want to learn to concentrate. She said to Roger Anger, the architect, that the Matrimandir is reserved for Aurovillians; but that not everyone will be admitted. The first condition for those who want to go there is to ask. On this basis we have formulated our the Matrimandir access policy." The members of the Matrimandir Access Team, Srimoyi, Arayamani, Lala, and Shiva, nod in unison when fellow-member Gilles explains what The Mother had said about access to the Matrimandir. They have been in charge of receiving visitors and regulating admission for the last few years. "Our main concern," says Gilles, "has been that the Matrimandir and its gardens not become a 'free for all' and that the atmosphere doesn't decline. Those who have visited the Baha'i Lotus Temple in New Delhi will know what we try to prevent: thousands of tourists walking and chatting all over the place, with scant concern for the sanctity of the place."

The Soul of Auroville

"The reasons why people want to visit the Matrimandir vary," says Gilles. "Some are attracted by what the Matrimandir truly represents; others are day-trippers curious to see 'the golden globe'." With India's fast development, many people now own motorbikes and cars and outings have become fashionable. Others come by tour buses. On special holidays, the number of visitors runs into thousands.

"One of the first things we noticed is that most visitors do not understand the relationship between the Matrimandir and Auroville. For them, the

Matrimandir is just another temple in South India," says Lala. "You can't blame them, for Auroville can nowhere be seen. The communities, the schools, the workshops are all hidden and closed to visitors. That's why we have made it mandatory for all visitors to see the video on Auroville before visiting the Matrimandir. In that way they come to know about Auroville's aims and ideals and that the Matrimandir is an integral part of Auroville and would never have been built if it was not as Auroville's Soul. The video also communicates something of the inner meaning of the Matrimandir; that it is an instrument for a change of consciousness, an extraordinary tool for Sri Aurobindo and The Mother to communicate their message." After having seen the video and the exhibition on the Matrimandir at the Visitors Centre, visitors can get a pass for the amphitheatre from where they can see the Matrimandir from a distance. These visits can be made at any time throughout the week, with the exception of Sunday afternoons, the time when staff who deal with the visitors everyday have their free afternoon. We also noticed that the crowds on Sundays afternoons in particular, were rather undisciplined. Some caused us quite a bit of trouble. We are open Sunday mornings for those who cannot come during the week to see the Matrimandir. As we do not want to promote the Matrimandir as a tourist attraction, we find the Sunday afternoon closure quite appropriate," says Srimoyi.

Visiting the chamber

Those who are interested

to meditate in the Matrimandir have to express their interest and are then told how to get a special pass. "Access to the Matrimandir," says Arayamani, "is very much an individual affair. The Matrimandir is not a building to see, but to experience. Meditating in the Chamber has an effect on people, but not all people are ready for that. It is for this reason we do not allow groups inside. The Mother made it clear that the Matrimandir is for individuals to concentrate. We have created an individual booking service, where those interested can make a reservation."

For first-time visitors, a special introduction programme has been organised. After having seen the video on Auroville, one of the team members gives a short talk on the Matrimandir. Says Srimoyi, "We deal with groups of 30 to 50 people, each afternoon from 4-5 p.m.. We always get many questions. People want to know the reasons for the golden discs, the why of the rose inner skin, the

January and February is the high season in Auroville for visitors and guests. 5000 visitors a day pass through the Visitors Centre and all the guest houses and spaces are full. How does Auroville cope with this influx, particularly in respect to the main attraction, the Matrimandir?

What are the kinds of things visitors want to know? How well does Auroville receive them? Can we, should we, do more?

meaning of the crystal, and why there are twelve gardens and petals. Some ask about the ideals of Auroville and the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother." After the introductory talk, the visitors are brought to a meditation chamber in one of the petals for 10 minutes and then to the Inner Chamber for a concentration of another 10 minutes. "We give them time to get a sense of the place. There is usually a lot of looking around. As this time is specially set aside for first-time visitors, they do not disturb those who come to do a serious concentration," says Srimoyi. This experience, it appears, has been very successful.

The team is more relaxed about repeat visitors. "Once a person has been in the Chamber, he or she is entitled to a pass for the 5-6 pm meditation," says Srimoyi. But advance booking is necessary as the room can only hold a limited number of people at a time.

Official visitors

Matrimandir attracts people from all levels of society. Visits from VVIPs are usually announced well in advance so that special arrangements can be made. Some of them come with a police escort – but firearms are strictly banned from the Matrimandir. VIP visits are often announced on the day itself. "We are not always certain who comes," says Shiva. "Sometimes it is the VIP; but sometimes it happens to be a distant relative or friend who uses the VIP's name to get special reception. It is difficult to fit them in, particularly if they turn up with a large entourage. Also they often do not care to come at the stipulated time. But we cannot mix them with first-time visitors or with the 5-6 meditation groups. Ideally, they should visit when there are no other people in the Chamber. We'll have to make a special time for them."

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Vice-President of India visits Matrimandir

PHOTO: ALAN



The Vice-President of India (left) in conversation with Dhanapal and other members of the Working Committee

The Vice-President of India, Shri Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, accompanied by the Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry, Shri Mukut Mithi, visited the Matrimandir on the 31st of December. The Vice-President did not go up to the Chamber but spent some time in the meditation room in the 'Progress' petal. Later, under the Banyan tree, while listening to an explanation that Mother intended the chamber for concentration, he asked "But how do you concentrate?" He was told that it was about finding one's centre, one's inner being, and then following its guidance in all of life's activities.

He wrote in the Matrimandir visitors' book, "It is a great feeling to be in this temple of peace and harmony. It inspires us with noble values of life and to imbibe within us the virtuous, secular and humane conduct in life."

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Serving on the front line at the Visitors Centre

What are the challenges and satisfactions of working at the Visitors Centre?

Ramachandra has worked since 2000 at the Visitors Centre, where he is a key part of the Information Service.

AUROVILLE TODAY: What does your work involve?

Ramachandra: I look after the accounts, sales, book purchases, parking fees, etc. Along with other members of the Information Service team, I also have to answer a lot of questions from visitors and guests. We get 5000 visitors a day at present!

What kind of questions do they ask?

The most common questions are about Matrimandir. Many visitors have heard about it but don't know more. Generally I send them to the video hall and then to the Matrimandir exhibition upstairs. If they have further questions and I have the time, I'll tell them more. I adjust what I say according to what I sense is the interest and understanding of the individual. Some visitors want help in finding a guest house. This can be very time-consuming as I have to find a place according to their budget and requirements. Then there are the people who



A throng of visitors at the Visitors Centre

want to know how to join Auroville.

Are there many of these?

After seeing the Auroville video, many people want to join! I explain the process but I tell them to think a hundred times before committing themselves as once you jump there's no easy way back. I also tell them they should have a good understanding of the The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and of what Auroville stands for.

When you talk about Auroville do you speak only about the positive aspects?

Yes, I always want to give people a good impression. I don't talk about the problems because people wouldn't understand them: you have to be living here to understand. If someone asks how successful we have been in achieving human unity, I tell them we are trying, that we are on the way. Generally I don't talk much about philosophy but about practical things. But if they ask about The Mother, I tell them how, at the age of seven, she was sitting on a chair and her mother said it looked as if she was bearing the whole world on her shoulders. 'Yes,' said The Mother, 'I am.' This always touches people.

How satisfied are visitors with their visit to Auroville?

Most people are positive about their visit. However, many visitors are frustrated that they cannot visit the chamber of the Matrimandir, even though I explain it is not a temple but it is meant for individual concentration. Day visitors are also disappointed that they cannot see more of Auroville. We should do more for them.

How?

I think people should also be able to go to the amphitheatre and see the Matrimandir from there on Sunday afternoons, which is the only time some people can visit. Then, for those who really want to see more of Auroville, we could organize a daily tour and take them to places like Savitri Bhavan, Bharat Nivas, CSR and Shradhanjali in a non-polluting battery vehicle. Those interested in greenwork could also be taken to an organic farm or the Botanical Gardens.

What about visiting an Auroville community?

Many visitors want to see how Aurovilians live. The problem is that

most Aurovilians don't want to be seen! They don't want to answer endless questions.

Could you also do more in the Visitors Centre to give a fuller picture of Auroville?

Definitely. The new exhibition on Auroville in the new hall is not yet complete, but it misses out many things. If I was redesigning the exhibition I'd put in the history of Auroville, how it evolved from a desert until today, and I'd make it clear what we are here for. The present exhibition is too 'high', too symbolic, for the ordinary visitor, it doesn't give enough practical information. I also think we could do more to create a special atmosphere by, for example, having beautiful flowers on both sides of the entrance to the Visitors Centre. This would give a feeling of peace and harmony as soon as people enter here. It's also important that the people giving information are experienced, long-term Aurovilians; we have a good team but we don't have enough such people who are regularly present. Sometimes I'm here on my own.

How do you manage?

It can be difficult. Occasionally we get

groups who have been drinking, and last month rowdies from a local village smashed a window here: that was quite scary. Also, when many people are clamouring for my attention at the same time, it's not always easy to control myself. But, in seven years, I only lost my temper once! The other thing is that when you give and give to visitors you can become totally empty and exhausted. So I keep myself a little bit detached because I need to keep an overview of what is happening.

What are the satisfactions of working here?

The Information Service team is a very nice team. Then sometimes you meet special people, visitors who inspire you because they are inspired by Auroville. It's like when a candle is burning. The light shines out on all sides, but if you are below the candle you don't see it. In the same way, visitors often feel things - like the peace here - which we Aurovilians don't notice. Then some questions push me deeper into myself. To answer such questions I have to read a lot, and when I read The Mother and Sri Aurobindo I'm reminded of why I came here.

We also get many thanks from visitors for helping them. I'm always a little dissatisfied with myself when I answer a difficult question because I feel I miss out so many things, but generally visitors seem to value what we offer them. You only have to look at the many positive comments in the Visitors Book.

From an interview by Alan

What is available at the Visitors Centre?

Auroville exhibition hall, information help desk (where books of Sri Aurobindo, The Mother and brochures/books about Auroville are also available), video room (where an introduction to Auroville video is shown in English and Tamil versions), Matrimandir exhibition rooms, reading room, three boutiques selling Auroville products, cafeteria, bookshop, tea kiosk, STD booth, toilets.

A portrait of Ramachandra

Ramachandra was educated at a small school in his native Orissa. "It was a school based on the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother offering integral education, and we grew up like one family there, all brothers and sisters. It had a special atmosphere which I haven't found anywhere else since."

When Ramachandra was 16 years old, he visited the Pondicherry Ashram for the first time on a school trip. "The Ashram was like heaven. I decided that one day I would come back and live there." On the same visit he came to Auroville, which he also liked very much as the natural surroundings reminded him of home.

In 1987 he visited the Ashram again. He enquired about joining, but was told he was still too young and needed to study more. He decided to study science as his first ambition was to be a doctor. "I went to a big college which was a shock. There were hundreds of students and everybody was speaking English rather than Oriya. Then one day, while reading Sri Aurobindo, I came across a passage where he said that doctors would not be needed in the future. I thought, 'What am I doing here, wasting my time?' Around the same time I read Sri Aurobindo's The Mother in which he wrote that 'Your life is given to help in The Mother's work'. That really struck me. So when, in 1991, I came to the Ashram for my birthday I was determined to stay there."

"Initially I was allowed to stay for three months, helping in the kitchen. But something had changed. When I had come before, I was young and had just accepted everything. Now I began to question what

I saw. I saw that some of the people were like stones, they had no capacity for change. And the path was laid out very straight. If you didn't follow the path exactly, there was no place for you. I felt like I was in jail. Then, at one point, I became fully



Ramachandra attending to a visitor

blank, like a zero. I no longer knew who I was. I thought 'I'm going mad'. I was very lonely, and, at a certain moment I felt, 'Why live as a blank? Why don't I just go to the sea and keep on walking?'

"At that very critical moment, I had a dream. I was on The Mother's lap, and She was telling me, 'This is not the end, there is something more you can do'. It was the turning point. And it was then that Auroville came into my mind."

Ramachandra came to live in Auroville in the summer of 1992. He found a place in New Creation where he looked after the kitchen. After

two years he went to Delhi to do a teacher training course at the Mirambika School. He returned to teach maths and English at New Creation School for the next five years.

"When I first came, New Creation was Auroville to me because I was so occupied with my work there that I never went anywhere else. But, slowly, as I learned about the larger Auroville I felt the need to do something else." At the same time, he realized he had to do something to support himself financially. "At the end of my first month in New Creation, André wanted to give me some money but I told him, 'I have a place to stay, something to eat, I don't need anything else'. But by the fifth month I realized that money is needed to live in Auroville, although I still regret that we can't create a space here where people can just work and live for the Mother. Anyway, Mother obviously wanted me to go through the experience so I opened a gift shop in Kuilapalayam."

Ramachandra had absolutely no experience of business - he didn't even know how to calculate percentages - and he began by making many mistakes. But today this shop, under the management of his wife whom he married in 1999, is doing well. However, the shop was never more than a sideline for Ramachandra: "I just wanted to find a means of staying in Auroville." So, after stopping work at New Creation he spent a year looking for a suitable job. "One day, Nico and Jaya came to the shop and asked me if I would like to work at the Visitors Centre. I said, 'Sure.'" Ramachandra spent one month observing everything and being taught the basics by Alain Grandcolas. Then he was thrown in at the deep-end.

Alan

Extracts from the Visitors Book (over the last 7 months)

A ray of light for the Earth.

I am interested in saving society if you can give me direction. Waiting for your kind direction.

Everything is fantastic and unique.

It is very frustrating to know that the Matrimandir (area) remains closed on Sunday afternoons. We came from a long distance with a hope to see Matrimandir and all my dreams were shattered...

This place is truly inspiring and beautiful.

Why can't I buy a copy of the Matrimandir video?

A novel, futuristic, ideal, holistic, universal ideal of humanity imagined and practised by Great Aurobindo and Mother.

Your new hall has very little information. The pictures in the earlier exhibition were much more interesting and informative.

It seems to be the dream country.

Very peaceful. Wonderful display of unity in humanity.

The most frustrating experience at the Matrimandir is no proper guidance.

The service is marvellous.

Very inspiring. I hope to return and learn more about your remarkable philosophy.

The work of the Guest Service

Casual day visitors head for the Visitors Centre. The Guest Service deals with people who want to stay for a time in Auroville.

Auroville's Guest Service is rather inconveniently tucked away on the Solar Kitchen's first floor, neighbouring the Solar Café and the Internet Service. The one-room office has comfortable wicker chairs so that guests can leisurely peruse the enormous amount of literature on where to stay, what to do, how to find work and generally how to make the most of their stay in Auroville.

The first necessity is finding suitable accommodation for those who have not already booked. Binders

with glossy photos of the various guesthouses and their levels of comfort and price are available, together with remarks like, for New Creation, "joyful and lively", Aspiration, "friendly and family orientated" and the Youth Camp, "near to lively local Tamil village", which means blaring music at 4 a.m. Quiet community at the beach "offers also Watsu and shiatsu and a variety of yogas and dances and other therapies". Peculiarities like greenbelt houses not having electricity and probably not a desk for the visitor's computer are explained to save a lot of frustration later. The inconveniences of living in a tree house are pointed out, as is the hazardous drive up the road from the beach communities. Prices vary from one Rs 100 a night in the Youth Camp to Rs 2,800 for a cottage per night at Afsanah guest house, so there is accommodation to suit every pocket. With about one hundred and fifty rooms in various communities and maybe a hundred rooms in private houses; the choice is extremely varied and the staff has ample choice to send guests to a suitable location. But between December and March, everything is "full, full, full."

The walls of the Guest Service are plastered with so many posters of events (updated weekly), happenings, therapies, courses, places to visit, that guests often look at these offerings in amazement. The fact that there is such a variety and high standard of opportunities for work and play available is frequently



Josetta (left) and Lella (right) show a guest the binder of the Auroville guesthouses

remarked upon.

When Lella took over the Guest Service seven years ago there was only one computer, the office was only open in the afternoons and it was a nice quiet job. Now five people are employed part-time and are kept very busy. Lella gives great importance to welcoming the guests and trying to find out what each one wants, even though they may not be sure themselves. Once their needs are clarified the staff try to point them in the right direction. After all, many Aurovilians came here originally as guests and it is very important to

guide them through the confusing maze that Auroville can seem at first. The staff speak English, German, French, Italian and Spanish and many of the leaflets are in these languages. Apart from Lella the team consists of Auralee, who is responsible for e-mail correspondence; Josetta, the administrator par excellence; Florence who has been known to sit with confused guests for hours; and Marje as the welcoming receptionist. Lella prefers that people who work at the Guest Service work for free and not for a maintenance, as she has found from experience they such

people are much more motivated and enthusiastic, which is definitely a necessity here.

The Guest Service does not have its own budget, but has to apply to the Economy Group for money. The Auroville Guest House Trust is responsible for each guesthouse and guest room keeping high standards and transparent accounts.

This is the only service run exclusively for guests in Auroville and provides a very caring and efficient atmosphere, which is a credit to the often hassled and overworked staff.

Dianna

Volunteering opportunities offered at the Guest Service

Farm and green work – 18 choices including farm work (heavy duties), vegetable gardening, tree planting.

Food production – 7 choices including work at the Bakery, food preparation and serving.

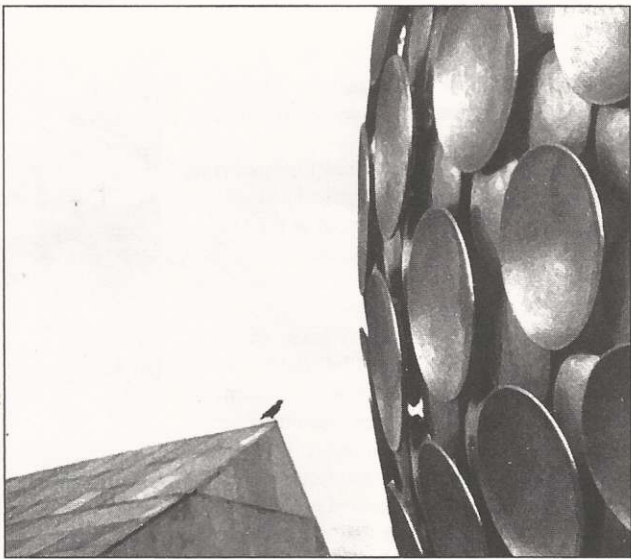
Technology – 4 choices including online platform for yogins, updating websites, Auroville radio (experienced only).

Education – 11 choices including teaching tailoring, maths, computer science, arts and crafts.

Others – 18 choices including arranging flowers, walking dogs, teaching swimming or writing for *Auroville Today* (experience required and commitment for four months minimum).

MATRIMANDIR

A walk at dusk



A solitary bird perched on top of a petal

In the distance misty jets of water arc, spraying the earth and preparing it to receive life. Like miniature paddy fields, rows and rows of drought-resistant grass appear to thrive. All is quiet at the Matrimandir. Only the occasional sound of traffic from the road beyond the trees or the caw of a lone crow resting peacefully up on a petal.

The workers have left for the day. Their chattis lie askew; earthen pots turned over. Exuding warmth, the landscaped red earth rises ahead, up and down like waves. All undergrowth removed, the trees seem majestic, tall, and unreal; as if their true sizes are revealed for the very first time.

To the right, an old *nagalinga* tree with its snaking stalks, heavy with blossom offers its fleshy yellow-pink flowers – *Prosperity*, The Mother called them. The ground below is littered with thousands of buds, blackened and dry like bird droppings.

The red-tiled pond is an echo of the amphitheatre, studded with tiny lotus leaves floating small. Multitudes of black snails cling to the mossy sides, feeding off the slimy greens.

The disks burnished and gleaming catch the last light of the fading day. The orange and black portholes stand etched against an exposed white strip of the outer skin. A red light blinks on and off on the top in a steady rhythm.

Now passing the excavation for the lake, it looks parched and empty bearing a scatter of wild saplings of neem and work tree. A solitary rain drop falls. The heart swells. Above, a solitary wispy purple cloud streaks the sky.

A cuckoo coos from far, and a flock of birds rouse and twitter in response. The crickets begin their high-pitch hum as the blanket of darkness wraps all around.

Priya Sundaravalli

Protecting Matrimandir's integrity

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And as they often bypass the Visitors Centre, we'll also have to find another location to show them the videos on Auroville."

Aurovilian requirements

The team has observed that there is no big rush from Aurovilians to meditate in the Chamber. So far, they've had free access each morning and evening from 6-8. But not many have come.

"It's not an act of indifference," says Aryamani. "Don't forget that the Matrimandir is a presence and an action. Quite a few Aurovilians are aware of that. They may sometimes feel that they can't go into the Chamber for inner reasons. Many Aurovilians meditate at home, or just come to the banyan tree and sit there for some time in silence. With the growth of Auroville this will all change. Can you imagine how many people will come to the Matrimandir when the city has 50,000 inhabitants?"

Once Matrimandir is completed

"Once the Matrimandir is finished," says Srimoyi, "the situation may change." Is there any intention to then give more access to day-visitors, for example by allowing them into the Matrimandir to have a look at the crystal as was done many years ago? The answer is a definite 'no'. "According to what we understand, after studying all that She has said on the Matrimandir, She did not want the Matrimandir to be open to the public in this fashion," says Srimoyi, and she adds, "and moreover, it is not manageable. It's impossible to regulate thousands of people in and around the Matrimandir. It's all marble and white carpet inside. So many people cannot put on socks, walk up to the room, then walk down and out again into the gardens or into the other meditation rooms. The atmosphere would be destroyed. Moreover, we do not have the required manpower to supervise all these people. Already now we need a minimum of 10 people to supervise access to the Inner Chamber and one for every one or two petal meditation rooms. If you calculate the number of guards that would be required if all the petal meditation rooms and the gardens were open to the public, you would easily

reach a number of 50-80 people! The organisation would be massive."

An equally impressive organisation will be required to regulate access for those who want to meditate in the Inner Chamber or in one of the 12 petal chambers. "Over the last years we've allowed on average 30 new people each day to access the Chamber," says Gilles. "This means that we are effectively entitling an additional 11,000 people each year to meditate in the Chamber! We intend to computerize our visitors' system so that we can check if someone has indeed been visiting the Matrimandir before, but that will not affect the numbers very much. Advance booking will become a requirement. In due time, it may even be necessary for Aurovilians to book in advance if they want to come to concentrate."

The most important change the team foresees is shifting the visiting times to the mornings, early morning for first-time visitors and later for repeat visitors' meditation. This would leave the afternoons, and particularly the hours after work, free for Aurovilians. The area around the Banyan tree will be available for people to sit and gather themselves inwardly before they enter the Matrimandir. But the team is still in the process of reflecting on its experience, in order to propose access regulations for the future.

Understanding and goodwill

Though the basics of the Matrimandir access policy seems to have been worked out, the team expects the pressure to grow. "Whatever we do, it won't be enough," predicts Gilles. "The pressure to take more people will only increase. And even if we take more people than we wish to, we still will be under pressure to take more." The situation is comparable to that of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Ten years ago it was easy to get permission to visit Sri Aurobindo's room. These days, with crowds of people visiting the Ashram, permission is only granted to those who have their birthdays. "I asked Manoj Das Gupta, one of the Ashram trustees, for advice about how to deal with the problem," says Gilles. "His answer was interesting: 'Change consciousnesses'. It will be difficult."

Carel

Sri Aurobindo said...

On January 30th 1971, while reading to the Mother a chapter from his book "On the way to Superhumanity", Satprem quoted the following passage from one of Sri Aurobindo's letters:

"... I don't believe in advertisement except for books, etc., and in propaganda except for politics and patent medicines. But for serious work it is a poison. It means either a stunt or a boom – and stunts and booms exhaust the thing they carry on their crest and leave it lifeless and broken high and dry on the shores of nowhere – or it means a movement. A movement in the case of a work like mine means the founding of a school or a sect or some other damned nonsense. It means that hundreds of thousands of useless people join in and corrupt the work or reduce it to a pompous farce from which the Truth that was coming down recedes into secrecy and silence. It is what has happened to the 'religions' and it is the reason of their failure."

02.10.34

Sri Aurobindo: *On Himself*

Mother commented:

"That passage should be typed and put up in Auroville. It is indispensable. They all have a false idea about propaganda and publicity. It should be typed in big letters; at the top, 'Sri Aurobindo said,' then put the quotation and send it to Auroville. Say I am the one who's sending it."

America's evolutionary destiny

This article is an edited version of a talk by Robert McDermott given at the Town Hall.

It seems to me that if we are ever to answer the question of the meaning of America it must be within the broad context of the evolution of consciousness. Sri Aurobindo talks about the evolutionary advance towards a spiritual age and particularly towards a supramental age. He is clear that humanity is not yet in the spiritual age, although there are signs of its coming. Sri Aurobindo said that the characteristics of a spiritual age are God, freedom and unity. So let's look at America in terms of those ideals.

When we look at America this way, I think we see that whichever of these three themes we take up we find thrilling examples of the realization of these ideals, but also, invariably, we find their shadow manifestation and, generally, the brighter the light, the longer and darker the shadow.

America is a project, an experiment, somewhat like Auroville. The sense that it has a manifest destiny is a deep idea. John Winthrop wrote in 1630, "We shall keep the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace. The Lord shall be our God and delight to dwell among us as his own people....We will be as a city on a hill. The eyes of all people will be upon us."

At certain periods in American history there is an amazing convergence of genius, courage

and insight in a few individuals. Take the time of Washington, Adams, Jefferson, Hamilton and Franklin. This group fought with each other, but whenever necessary they rose above their differences. They wrote the Constitution, a Bill of Rights, and they kept the 13 states together, which was a great, implausible achievement at that time and under those conditions.

These individuals represented something like a strong, karmic intervention. In the evolution of humanity there are precious moments of transition, jumps, and these individuals hastened the nation's evolution towards freedom and liberty. They didn't succeed fully – "all men are created equal with certain inalienable rights" is still obviously not the case, but it's an ideal with a certain power which keeps working.

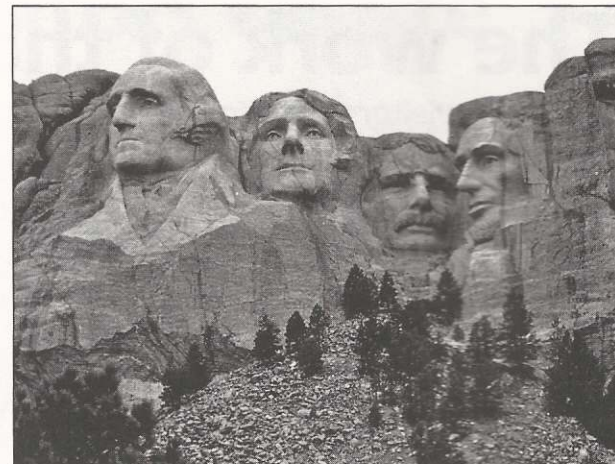
The next great moment was in the mid 19th century when, within a period of five years, Emerson, Whitman, Thoreau, Hawthorne were writing their best work. In the middle of all that comes this astonishing, implausible figure, who was educated for only about a month yet grew up with an eloquence to rival Shakespeare's and with a deep insight into the practicalities of power. While Lincoln's ideal was that of individual freedom, his religion was the undivided union.

The next great figure, a hundred years later, also spoke of freedom and dignity. "God grant

that we will change our world and our civilisation and will be able to move from the bleak and desolate midnight of man's inhumanity to man to the bright and glittering daybreak of freedom and justice." Martin Luther King was the conscience of his generation who, like Gandhi, saw the possibility of a new order.

If we look at America today in the light of God, freedom and unity, the three characteristics of the spiritual age, we see both light and darkness mixed. This present administration is certainly about God – even their meetings begin with prayers. This is positive as a counterbalance to the secular takeover of the Western world that denies spirit and transcendence. However, this administration uses God as an instrument of their political schemes, and this the Bible defines as idolatry.

As to freedom – America is still a beacon of light and hope to many people. At the same time, civil liberties are being curtailed and the media has fallen asleep: it has not been speaking out against such abuses. Finally, unity. This, again, remains a powerful ideal and America remains a great melting-pot of the races: in some school



Mount Rushmore in Dakota, USA, with the heads of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt and Abraham Lincoln

districts in New York a hundred different languages are spoken. Yet, America remains spectacularly ignorant of the larger world.

America today is so imperfect, so inadequate to its high mission. While we are still a work in progress, a transitional nation, I don't know that America's high mission will be realized because I think we might be going rapidly in two directions at the same time. On the one hand, towards enlightenment, tolerance and universality, a trend which is particularly alive among the young, and, on the other hand, a hardening and resistance to tolerance and universality.

Edited by Alan

Zen and the soul of Japanese painting

The exhibition 'Yamato-e: The journey of Japanese painting', at Kala Kendra featured over two hundred Japanese art prints dating from the 11th century AD. On the eve of the inauguration, art historian Debashish Banerjee from the University of California - Los Angeles, gave a talk exploring the nation soul of Japan through its paintings.

One way to understand the 'Nation-soul' is to look at culture, and examine it from a historical perspective and reality. Just as the human soul picks events and circumstances to manifest itself and to create the slant of the individual personality, so too the nation-soul picks 'accidents' to create a nucleus around which that particular culture builds its discourse, and in this way builds its identity. How this identity or self-identification is built, an internal thing. So when we try to look at other cultures from the point of nation soul, from the outside, it is very important not to project but try to reach out for the inner understanding of that particular self-identification.

This exhibition attempts to capture the expression of Japanese painting and the history of Japanese painting firstly by looking at the periods where the changes take place and the contextual culture existing at that time, and secondly looking at the developing vocabulary of the internal terms or what is called the art historical discourse. How do the Japanese think about expressing themselves? What lexicon do they create? It is by examining these questions that one can get a sense of what is important to them.

Zen is a historical accident in Japanese culture. It comes at a certain point in time when it was important for the Japanese people to create an expression for themselves that they could call 'Japanese'. For something like this to happen, one needs the 'other', and for Japan this 'other' at that time was China.

The value of art

In the realm of art, music or poetry, art is fixed and still. It expresses only a given moment in space and time, and it cannot move freely through either domain. However, it is precisely this stillness and fixity which gives it its particular value.

Art stills the emotion and teaches the delight of a restrained and limited satisfaction. This Sri Aurobindo says is the essence of art, or the soul of painting. This specificity of space-time that Sri Aurobindo refers to is an approach or a perspective on the infinite or the Divine. It is a specificity of time and space against a backdrop of infinity and eternity.

This approach to the Divine through the specificity of time and space in relation to eternity and infinity, is what is characteristic of Japan and Japanese art.

Shinto is the earliest religion of Japan pre-dating Buddhism which came to Japan around the 8th century AD. Shintoism is the awareness and worship of specific locations and objects thought to have spiritual power and inhabited by God's spirits called *Kami*. Essentially it is the development of a certain kind of inner ability to tap into something unique in locations and objects which make them stand out as sacred. The best example of this is perhaps Mount Fuji. This attitude already predisposes the Japanese to the specificity of time and space of an object in relation to something divine.

The coming of Yamato-e: Japanese painting

The notion of Japanese style painting arrived around the 10th century and is related to the disintegration of the tremendous *Tang* dynasty of China. This was the dynasty that universalized the Ajanta and Gupta Buddhist form, and was

The Mother's Message to Japan, 1962

*Let the Supreme Beauty be manifest
in this land of beauty so close to my heart.*

Blessings
The Mother

responsible for the great dispersion of the classical Indian Buddha across Asia. With chaos in China and law and order breaking down, resulting in robbers on land and pirates on sea, it becomes difficult for the Japanese people to cross the ocean safely and enter the mainland.

At this moment in history, the Japanese Emperor imposes a ban on all visits to and from Japan to the rest of the world. This 500-year ban would be the first of several that will be imposed upon Japan over time. As a result, perhaps fortuitously determined by the nation soul, there is a turning within. There begins a new attempt, perhaps the first attempt, to define something that might be called 'Japanese', and the term *Yamato-e* comes about. ('*Yamato*' refers to the name of ancient Japan from the 4th century to the 7th century and 'e' means painting.)

The Japanese turn to subjects which are uniquely 'Japanese' – aspects of *Shinto*, locations in Japan, and themes of seasonal change and seasonal activity. This is the beginning and essence of Japanese landscape art.

Influence of the Song dynasty

The soul of Japan like the soul of the human being, makes its impact felt at certain specific points in time when it precipitates certain 'accidents'. This happens in the 13th century when Japan opens contact with the Southern *Song* court of China, the next great Chinese dynasty, and Japanese monks begin to cross the ocean and assimilate two things – the new Buddhism of Southern China, and the new ink landscape paintings.

The *Song* dynasty famous with respect to its culture and particularly the development of landscape painting, gives this genre of painting loaded with metaphysical, spiritual and philosophical ideas.

The landscape painting of China incorporated into itself a blend of Confucianism and the varieties of Buddhism. What emerged from this was a unique style of composition called 'one-corner painting'. The essence of 'one-corner painting' was the presence of large white space on the canvas with the actual painting occupying only a small corner. The theme was usually a landscape scene – a mountain, monastery, river or waterfall. This one-corner composition was essentially an abstraction of space, space viewed as an aesthetic quality but weighted by the world of phenomenon. Visually this was presented as the vastness of the void against which the world of phenomena is a very small occurrence.

Mono no Aware

Another quality that Japanese art absorbed from the last period of the *Song* dynasty was the aesthetics of transience.

As the *Song* dynasty faced the threat of destruction and disintegration by the Jurchens and the Mongols, there was a pervading sense of living on the edge. The awareness of death as an everyday companion made more acute a very Buddhist emotion, transience and the value of passing things.

And in art, this found expression as a quality of sadness which began to be depicted as the movement of time against the stillness of eternity. The Japanese even coined a term, *mono no aware*, to represent this sentiment of rarefied compassion which continues to have its lasting influence on Japanese art. It flourishes in Japanese monasteries, and it is this aesthetics of transience upon which Japanese culture is based.

Interestingly the Chinese later began to view this quality of transience as an unfavourable trait – effeminate, lacking in power, and non-virile. Very soon the expression of the aesthetics of transience disappeared from Chinese art.

Zen Buddhism

The third and the most important contribution of the Southern *Song* culture to Japan was *Zen* Buddhism. With its notion of spontaneous enlightenment and belief in extreme practices, *Zen* Buddhism was embraced by the emerging *Shogunate* and consequently the *Samurai* of Japan.

As the earlier Japanese court becomes effete, deeply involved in luxury pastimes, the military gained power. At a certain point in Japanese history, a major feud between the two great clans of military leaders, the Taira and the Minamoto, resulted in the battle where the former was eliminated. With this, the Minamoto *Shogunate* got established.

The first *shogun* or supreme commander of Japan, Minamoto Yoritomo, desiring that his rulership be identified not just for its military power but also recognized for culture, set up an independent cultural capital in Kamakura separated from the court of power in Kyoto. This established a new identification of the *Samurai* with Buddhism.

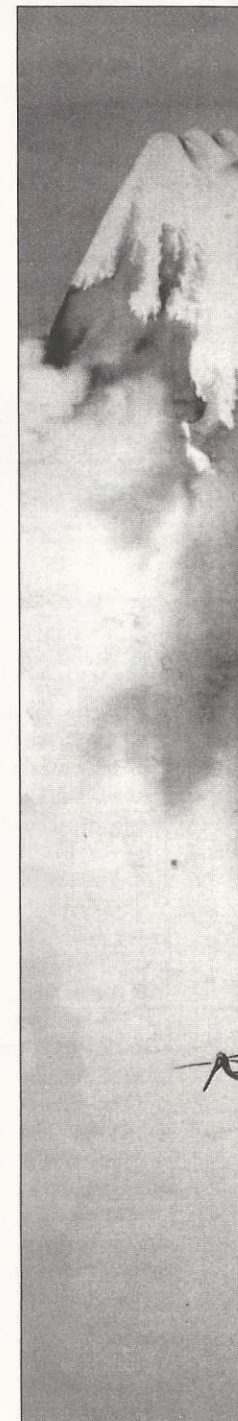
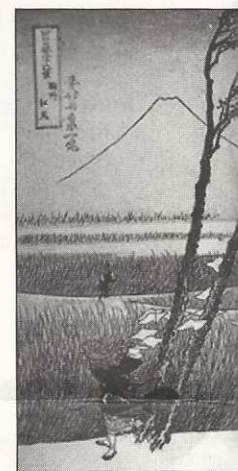
Thus while other Buddhisms elsewhere remained solely monastic, *Zen* Buddhism in Japan manifested itself in two ways: a monastic manifestation through the monks; and as a power in active life through the warriors. *Zen* philosophy with its austere and extreme practices, was seen by the *Samurai* as the spiritual practice in war.

Poetry and its relation to Japanese painting

Simultaneously, with the development of art, Japanese poetry also developed with *Zen* monks writing interpretations of poems. Two major poetic forms, the *Koan* and the *Haiku*, emerged and became closely identified with Japanese painting. Common themes were explored in both expressions: the relationship between spacelessness and space, eternity and time, and infinity and specificity. It manifested in the works as a crisp accuracy of detail balanced against the mists of the indefinable. The Japanese soul of poetry that evolved around this time was more derived from painting than poetic in its own right.

Poetic expression was closely related to the art of painting and the art of *Zen*. It is in this convergence of painting, nation soul and *Zen* that the soul of Japan comes to the world.

Edited by Priya Sundaravalli



The physics of Sachchindananda

In mid January, a three day seminar was held in Auroville on the theme of 'The Collective Yoga of Man: A world in process'. Among the speakers was Ulrich Mohrhoff, a teacher of maths, physics and quantum philosophy in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram school, who gave a fascinating talk on The Physics of Sachchindananda. Here it is in a slightly shortened version.

Quantum mechanics is the general theoretical framework of contemporary physics. When properly interrogated, it tells us that a twenty-five century old paradigm has passed its expiry date. It is no longer appropriate to ask: what are the ultimate building blocks of matter and how do they interact and combine? The notorious difficulty of making sense of the quantum world is not that we don't understand Nature's answers. It is due to the fact that Nature fails to make sense of our questions.

The right questions to ask proceed from the assumption that what ultimately exists is a single, intrinsically ineffable Being. How does this manifest itself? How does it come to constitute an apparent multitude of objects? How does it realize their properties? If you turn to quantum mechanics with questions of this sort, you will be surprised at the simplicity and straightness of the answers you get.

Among them is the most economical creation story ever told: by entering into spatial relations with itself, that intrinsically ineffable Being gives rise to both matter and space, for space is nothing but the totality of existing spatial relations, while

matter is simply the corresponding apparent multitude of relations – apparent because the relations are self-relations.

Why self-relations? If you consider the so-called "ultimate constituents of matter" by themselves, out of relation to each other, they lack properties. The reason this is so is that all physical properties are defined in terms of relations. This includes the shapes of things. The form of a composite object is the totality of its internal spatial relations. Objects lacking internal relations, such as quarks and electrons, are formless. In addition to that, quantum mechanics rules out the existence of intrinsically distinct substances. So if you contemplate any two of the so-called "ultimate constituents" of matter by themselves, you are contemplating one and the same thing twice. The true number of "ultimate constituents" is one.

So the right questions to ask proceed from the assumption that what ultimately exists is a single, intrinsically ineffable Being. Why intrinsically ineffable? Well, if properties resolve themselves into relations between Being and Being, there is no property that can be attributed to Being itself.

Of all the weird features of the quantum world, none is more baffling than the superven-

nience of the microworld on the macroworld. Supervenience is a philosophical term for a relation between two types of properties. Properties of type B are said to supervene on properties of type A if objects cannot differ in their B-properties without differing in their A-properties.

The microworld supervenes on the macroworld in the sense that molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles have the properties that they do because of what happens or is the case in the macroworld of tables, chairs, and lab equipment. The properties of the microworld depend on the properties of the macroworld rather than the other way round as we are wont to think. In the quantum world, to be is to be measured. A property exists only if, only when, and only to the extent that its possession is indicated by a macroscopic event or state of affairs.

If quantum theory tells us how the world is manifested, rather than how it is put together, then this dependence of the small on the large is not so very hard to understand. Quantum mechanics affords us a glimpse "behind" the manifested world – the macroworld – at formless particles, nonvisualizable atoms, and partly visualizable molecules, which, instead of being the world's constituent parts or structures, are instrumental in its manifestation. But we cannot describe what lies "behind" the manifested world except in terms of the finished product – the manifested world.

Involution (chit)

If the quantum world is mysterious, so is consciousness. How can a material thing be conscious? How can there be consciousness of material things? The answer – at any rate, the short version of it – is that there is no such thing as a material thing. There is a single, intrinsically ineffable Being. This manifests itself, and quantum mechanics tells us how. But it does not only manifest itself. It manifests itself to itself. It is not only that by which the world exists but also the self for which the world exists. It is not only the substance that constitutes but also the consciousness that contains. It is both the sat and the chit of the Vedantic trinity *sachchidananda* (*sat-chit-ananda*).

We have seen, however fleetingly, how the one ineffable Being becomes – without ceasing to be the one ineffable Being – an apparent multitude of property-less particles. How does the one Self become an apparent multitude of individual selves? We all know first-hand what it means to imagine things. So we can conceive of a consciousness that creates its own content. With a little effort we can also conceive of this consciousness as simultaneously adopting a multitude of viewpoints within its content. We also know first-hand the phenomenon of exclusive concentration, when awareness is focused on a single object or task while other goings-on are registered or attended to subconsciously, if at all. As Sri Aurobindo explains, it is by such a multiple exclusive concentration that the one Self assumes the aspect of a multitude of individual selves and loses sight, in each self, of its identity with the other selves and with the Self of all selves.

Once we have a multiple concentration of consciousness, the action by which the one Self creates its content differentiates into a subjective action on the part of each individual qua self and an objective action on the part of each individual qua substance. And once we have an exclusive concentration of consciousness – which means ignorance, the Vedantic *avidya* – these actions further differentiate, the subjective one into a conscious and a subconscious part, the objective one into a voluntary and an involuntary part.

Ignorance, as we all know, has its degrees. *Sachchidananda* can deepen its multiple exclusive concentration to the point that its individualized subjective action – which is one of Sri Aurobindo's definitions of mind – ceases. It can further deepen its multiple exclusive concentration to the point that even its individualized objective action – which is one of Sri Aurobindo's definitions of life – ceases. What then exists is a multitude of formless individuals, for it is life (in this particular sense) that is responsible for the existence of individual forms.

Thus it is one and the same process – namely, a multiple exclusive concentration – that produces the multitude of selves and, when carried to its farthest extreme, the multitude of formless particles.



Ulrich Mohrhoff

The adventure of evolution (ananda)

What ultimately exists relates to its manifestation in a threefold manner: it is the substance that constitutes, it is the consciousness that contains, and it is (subjectively speaking) an infinite bliss-ananda – and (objectively speaking) an infinite quality infinitely expressing and experiencing itself.

Then why does it hide in formless particles? Why does it subject their relations to apparently self-effective laws? In this world, *sachchidananda* is playing Houdini, imprisoning and enchainning itself as rigorously as it can, challenging itself to escape, to re-discover and re-affirm its powers in what seems to be a universe of mechanical forces and random events. Its multiple exclusive concentration allows it to enter various states of ignorance and incapacity so as to experience growth in knowledge and power, the excitement of conquest and discovery, the surprise of the unknown, the challenge of opposition, the triumph of victory.

Closing the circle

Back to physics. Since the word "fundamental" does not have a comparative, a theory is either fundamental or it is not. If a physical theory is fundamental and complete, then it is capable of explaining everything else and therefore incapable of being explained by anything else – except teleologically, by pointing out the reasons why it has the particular form that it does.

One of the reasons why the general theoretical framework of contemporary physics has the particular form that it does, is that without it stable objects could not exist, specifically, objects that have spatial extent (they "occupy space"), are composed of a large but finite number of objects without spatial extent (particles that do not "occupy space"), and are stable (they neither explode nor collapse as soon as they are created).

The existence of such objects requires the fundamental theoretical framework of contemporary physics to be exactly what it is, namely quantum mechanics.

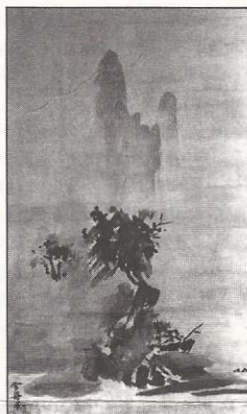
Quantum mechanics is a probability calculus. Given the outcomes of measurements that have been made, it allows us to calculate the probabilities of the possible outcomes of measurements that may be made. And that's it. Because quantum mechanics presupposes measurements, its consistency requires the existence of measurements. And it is eminently plausible that the existence of measurements in turn requires the validity of all empirically tested physical theories – namely, the so-called "standard model" and Einstein's theory of gravity – at least as effective theories. (An effective theory is a theory that is valid over some but not all scales of length.)

This is a humbling conclusion, for it means that all empirically tested physical theories are essentially tautological. If you want spatially extended objects that neither explode nor collapse the moment they are formed, the validity of these theories is a must. To be precise, their validity is guaranteed if spatially extended objects are composed of objects that lack spatial extent. This is the sole nontrivial input and the only real mystery. Why are things that "occupy space" made of finite numbers of things that don't?

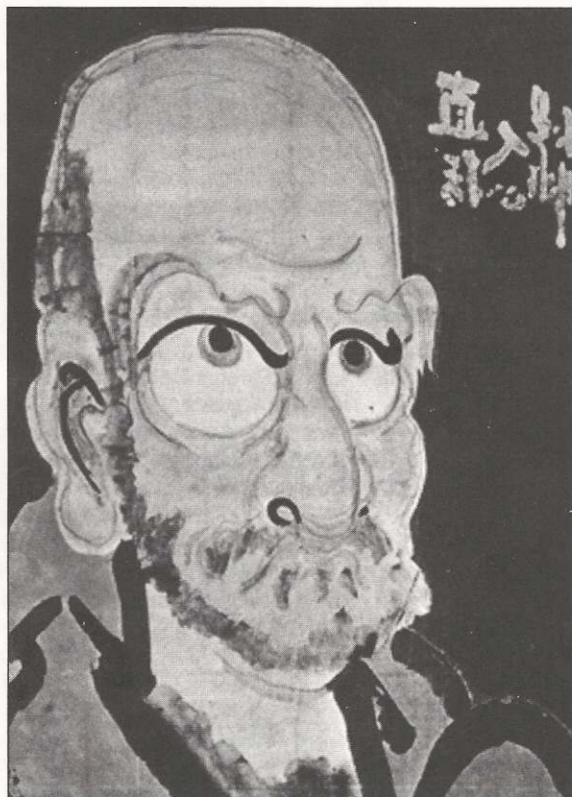
We have seen why. The creation of a world of formless particles is the final stage of an involution that has set the stage for the adventure of evolution.

Ulrich Mohrhoff

This paper was first published by Philica.com. Papers which explore these issues in more detail are available for download from Ulrich's website, thisquantumworld.com



Clockwise from top left: Katsushika Hokusai (1760-1849). *A Sudden Gust of Wind at Ejiri*. From a series of *Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, nishiki-e polychrome woodblock print, 1831, Edo period, private collection. Katsushika Hokusai is celebrated as a great ukiyo-e print designer, book illustrator, and painter. His works had a deep and lasting effect not only on Japanese art but also on modern Western art. Sesshu Toyo (1420-1506). *Landscape scroll*, section of the handscroll, ink and slight colour on paper, late 15th C., Muromachi period, Mori Art Museum, Yamaguchi, Japan. Sengai Gibon (1750-1832). *Frog in Zen Meditation*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, and below *Circle, Triangle, Square*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, both Idemitsu Museum, Tokyo, Japan. Hakuin Ekaku (1685-1768). *Daruma*, hanging scroll, ink on paper, Edo period, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, USA. Daruma. In this image of Bodhidharma, the Indian founder of Zen Buddhism, the legend that he pulled off his eyelids after becoming sleepy during meditation is represented, expressing the concept of 'open-eyed' meditation. Nagasawa Rosetsu (1754-1799) *Mount Fuji and cranes* hanging scroll, ink on silk Edo period, private collection, Okayama, Japan.



A central water organisation for the Auroville area: luxury or necessity?

With the completion of the Matrimandir and the resumption of land purchase, Auroville is on the verge of a leap forward. But what is the solution for Auroville's and the region's water problems?

The contamination and depletion of the ground water resources of Auroville and the surrounding region have been of concern for many years. In 2002, Auroville's *Water Harvest* in collaboration with several French scientists studied the reasons for the groundwater contamination in the Kaluvelly watershed. In 2003, German engineer Harold Kraft presented a proposal for an integrated water management for Auroville. As Kraft's report had not taken into account the needs of the surrounding villages, several other reports followed. In September 2004, a self-appointed 'Auroville Water Group' organised a seminar on 'Sustainable water resources management for Auroville and its Bioregion' in the Tibetan Pavilion. The seminar was followed by a visit of the President of India to Auroville in November 2004. The President expressed his confidence "that Auroville, in cooperation with other organisations, will be able to find a lasting solution to the water problems of the region."

Since then, the Water Group has been focussing on two lines of action. One is to order a pre-feasibility study on available water resources for Auroville and its bioregion. This report is being made by Dutch engineer Jeen Kootstra. A second focus is to study how a water organisation for Auroville in conjunction with surrounding villages could take shape. This work has been undertaken by another Dutch national, Eri Salomé. Both projects are funded by Vitens, a Dutch water supply company. Vitens is also funding a pilot project for an integrated water supply system for the nearby village of Kottakarai.

In mid January 2007, Eri Salomé presented the report on his work. His main conclusions are that water sustainability for the area is still a far-fetched concept and that a central water organisation that deals with all aspects of water management in Auroville and the surrounding villages is required. Groundwater in the Auroville region is being over-exploited; while Auroville's regional reforestation and rainwater harvesting work have made an impact, groundwater depletion still exceeds recharge. Awareness of the need for water conservation is minimal and no regulations exist to minimize over-consumption. A central water organisation for the region should ensure an improved and continuous water supply, proper rainwater harvesting, demand management for households, industry and agriculture, and waste water and solid waste management. The initiative for such an organisation, writes Salomé, should come from Auroville.

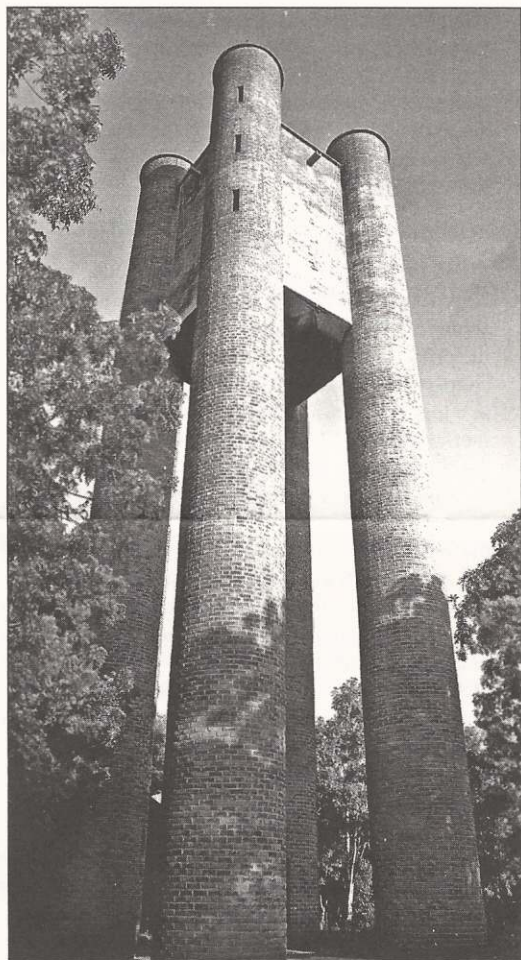
The situation in Auroville

Even though Aurovilians wherever possible recycle their waste water and most houses have some sort of rainwater harvesting system, most Aurovilians tend to use too much water. Consumption patterns are excessive [see box]. "Auroville, recognized by the Government of India as 'one of India's spiritual gifts to the world,' should do better," says Salomé. "There is a particular laziness in not adopting water saving practices in households, and many Aurovilians do not sufficiently realise that they

should function as an example to the surrounding villages."

Individual initiatives

The absence of a central water organisation in Auroville is perhaps a major reason why high water consumption has never been checked. Auroville's growth has been organic and has only to a very limited extent been guided by the Master Plan. Almost every community has developed its own water supply consisting of a well and a pump, powered by a windmill or electricity connection, and in some cases, by a standby generator. In the course of time the astonishing number of 186 wells have been dug, most of which draw groundwater from the same aquifer. As each community carries the complete costs of water supply, a sense of 'ownership' has developed. Currently, each community



'The elephant', the first truly collective water tower

decides how to share water and pay for the expenses of the water supply – most often only electricity charges, occasionally including a small operation and maintenance budget. Whenever a system breaks down, the community residents have to pool resources to install a new one. There is no central support.

Collective approaches

Some communities have now opted for a more collective water supply. A major development was the building of the collective water system nicknamed 'the elephant'. The system, fed by four wells, has underground and overhead

Water usage in Auroville

Based on figures from the years 2004 and 2005, an average consumption of 180 litres per capita per day (lcd) has been calculated. This figure, however, is estimated and not based on meter readings – many communities do not have a water meter installed and those that have complain that the water meters fail after a few months to provide reliable readings, due to turbidity in the rainy season and sludge deposits.

Detailed water use figure from water meters in Auromodèle community show a much higher average usage of 300 lcd. The Invocation water system, calculated for a usage of 150-200 lcd, also supplies an average of 300-350 lcd. Both cite water usage by domestic staff and for gardening as reasons for these figures.

The Kraft study used the figure of 150 lcd; the Auroville 2004 Master Plan assumed 200 lcd: 130 lcd for domestic requirements and 70 lcd for gardening, construction etc. Indian city standards are 135 lcd, European city standards 125 lcd or less.

water tanks and now supplies water to 6 communities. Other collective approaches have been initiated by the Auroville Planning and Development Council (APDC) and its predecessor, the Interim Development Council. They banned the drilling of new wells without permission and pre-financed new wells in the Residential Zone so that more houses could be built. The APDC also suggested studying whether it is feasible that water from the groundwater-rich Auromodèle area be used to supply the city, which is groundwater-scarce. The APDC's 'Water Awareness Team' (WAT) has started an awareness campaign to make Aurovilians conscious about their water usage.

All these collective initiatives have naturally led to the question should Auroville not have its own central water organisation to regulate supply. Though the need for it is increasingly being acknowledged, the idea has also evoked negative responses. Quite a few Aurovilians are reluctant to lose control of 'their' water supply and be dependent on an organisation outside the boundaries of their community.

The situation around Auroville

From the discussions of Salomé with presidents of the panchayats (village councils) of the villages around Auroville, it appeared that Auroville's water situation is heaven compared to that in the villages. Village distribution systems are all in poor shape, are often abused and fail frequently. House connections hardly exist; instead the villagers rely on public taps that provide water for a few hours each day. Ammas and children carry water home in plastic kijas. At the tap they have to wait their turn. Many villagers fear lack of water. The water quality is poor due to poor distribution systems: effluents from leaking sanitary facilities or contamination from solid waste and chemicals used in agriculture find their way into the water. In most villages, water quality is also bad due to saltwater intrusion into the groundwater.

Ideally, say the panchayat leaders, people should have house connections; in practice, they would already be happy with more public taps. All panchayats welcome intervention from Auroville and believe that Auroville should help, not only by installing proper water distribution systems to meet increasing demand, but also in creating more awareness of the need to protect the water sources and open ponds of the villages from pollution. Salomé warns that as the situation in the villages is so much different from Auroville – a water consumption of 40 lcd (litres per capita per day) against the Auroville average of 250-300 lcd – social unrest may occur if the differences remain too large for too long.

'More water' is also a focal point for the authorities from Puducherry and Tamil Nadu. They are not only aware of the depletion of the water resources, but also have to meet an ever-increasing demand. Their focus is on implementing groundwater recharge programmes by making rain water harvesting mandatory, promoting the renovation of ancient water tanks and promoting the recycling of grey water. To a limited extent they are involved in demand management, particularly by promoting alternative irrigation methods and growing less water-demanding crops. "Regional authorities are generally very limited in their possibilities due to the political impact of nearly every action and limited budgets," writes Salomé. They are well aware that the main cause of groundwater depletion is the free electricity provided to farms and the lack of incentives to save water or electricity. But no politician is willing to face riots because of imposing charges on electricity consumption

in agriculture, however minimal.

When talking about the position of Auroville in regional water management, village panchayats and regional authorities alike emphasise that Auroville could and should set an example. As a first step, the pilot project in Kottakarai [see box], if proven successful, should be duplicated in other villages. At a later stage, a full involvement of Auroville in the water supply of the villages would be welcomed.

A central water supply organisation

"The giant challenge of managing water resources in a sustainable way in Auroville and its surrounding villages," writes Salomé, "can only be met by a strong water organisation that is respected not only in Auroville but also by the villages and regional authorities." Increasingly, water is the guiding principle in the development of regions. Administrative boundaries are not relevant. Shortages and pollution of ground water are collective problems. Moreover, the wider region around Auroville will develop at a fast pace. Large projects such as the extension of Puducherry airport, the extension of the Buckingham Canal and the new railway line connecting Puducherry to Mahabalipuram and Chennai will have a tremendous impact on the urbanisation of the region. "Auroville," writes Salomé, "cannot be permitted to fail developing an organisation that can defend its interest." Such a central water organisation should ultimately take responsibility for all aspects of water management, not only in Auroville, but also its surroundings.

The organisation could start small to prove its viability. External funds can be raised to kick-start a diversely qualified six-member team. Within Auroville, it could start where the water supply is under threat and where new developments are planned. Gradually, it should take over and link community water supply schemes and plan the development of water resources and a water supply network for the future city. It would be responsible for water savings campaigns, set standards for water budget per capita, and develop an all-Auroville financial strategy including setting proper water fees.

Auroville Foundation initiatives

The Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. Ramaswamy, has announced that he intends to propose and get funding for the implementation of a water organisation that would be in charge of the water sourcing, storage and supply of an Auroville population of 5000 people, the coastal villages of Chinnamudaliarchavadi, Periyamudaliarchavadi and Bommaiarpalayam, and the inland villages of Kulalpalayam, Edaiyanchavadi, Kottakarai, Irumbai, sanjeevinagar, Alankuppam and Rayapettai.

Ultimately, the organisation should also be responsible for proper rain water harvesting, waste water management and groundwater recharge.

Around Auroville, the organisation should first be involved in the Kottakarai integrated water supply project to develop expertise in dealing with the surrounding villages. Afterwards, it can expand. From the outset, however, it should be authorised to represent Auroville – at a later stage the surrounding villages – to regional and national authorities.

It may be a long haul. But, says Salomé, chaos is the only alternative and delay is a luxury Auroville can no longer afford. The organisation should be part of Auroville's structure soon – preferably well within two years.

Carel

The Kottakarai integrated water supply project

The neighbouring village of Kottakarai supplies water twice a day for about half an hour. The water quality is poor. The water infrastructure is bad and there is pollution as effluents from bad sanitation, poor solid waste management and chemicals used in agriculture leak into the damaged distribution network.

The project covers all water aspects: water distribution, sanitation, water harvesting, irrigation, reuse of water, and solid waste management. Awareness and involvement of the villagers is a main component. Not included is how to use less water for agriculture.

The Kottakarai integrated water supply project, funded by Vitens, will take about one year. After that, it may be extended to include two other villages. This will require the interlinking of village ponds, developing rainwater harvesting systems on a regional scale, and constructing collective waste water and solid waste treatment systems. In this phase, farmers will also be assisted to develop interest and find funding for sophisticated water reduction systems and growing special crops that require less water. In this way, the first overall water management organisation in rural Tamil Nadu will be created.

Auroville's own nature camp at Kavunji

"It rained at night. We cleaned the camp in the early morning and then made a trek to the nearest waterfall. The landscape was full of green trees and multi-coloured flowers. On the slopes of the hills we found yellow and violet raspberries." (from a student's diary)



Forest, rocks and stream – the natural borders of the Auroville camp

Almost all Auroville children have visited Berijam Lake in the summers. "Over the last twenty three years, we estimate that about 3,500 children have spent part of their summer holidays in Summer Camps," says Frederick, one of the organizers. The camp locations have varied, but have always been near Kodaikanal in the Eastern Ghats Mountains. In the last few years, the location has moved to Berijam Lake, known as the most beautiful high-altitude lake in all of South India. As forest laws protect the lake and forests, special permission is required, but has always been given by the Forest Department.

"On our way up through the dense pine and acacia forests we saw tracks of wild pigs' activity, and found dung. Boris, the Auroville biologist who came with us, explained that it was dung of deers, gaurs and even elephants!" says a student's diary. "But we did not see gaurs and deer on this trip."

In the summer of 2006 it was no longer possible to conduct the camp at Berijam. Another site was required and after some scouting around it was found near Kavunji, a village about 9 kilometres from Berijam. The site, bordering a small stream, was rented for the Summer Camp 2006. It proved to be a success, not only as an ideal starting point for treks, but also for sports and regattas on the stream.

The organizing team then decided to see if a small piece of land couldn't be purchased, so that Auroville could have its own permanent base-camp. A donation was received; soon afterwards, the team managed to purchase half an acre plot in the name of the Auroville Foundation. Bordered by two small streams and a forest, the plot is only accessible by foot. Nearby there is a piece of public land, which can be used for sports and recreational activities. A public road with regular buses to Kodaikanal, Manovanur and Kavunji is only half a mile away.

"The Auroville site is in an 'ecotone,' a zone between two or more different ecosystems," says Boris excitedly. "The Auroville summer camp is situated in an ecotone between forests, pastures and terraces with cultural plants. There is a rich bio-diversity. In the morning we heard the voices of the red-wattled lapwing (*Venellus indicus*) from the wet pasture, a dove from the forest, and a myna from the agricultural land."

The team is now in the process of raising funds for creating basic infrastructure – dormitories, bathrooms, kitchens, and a multi-purpose hall – for 60 participants. Energy needs will be met from solar and wind sources. The team intends to beautify the plot by planting flower and fruit trees and medicinal plants.

Once the basic facilities have been installed, the plot will be used for more than just summer camps. Frederick envisages that the camp may be used during autumn and spring holidays, as well as for camps with special programmes such as botanical studies. Also other youth, for exam-

ple from the surrounding villages, will have the opportunity to make use of the facilities. Trekking, rock-climbing, orientation and survival training, living off the land, identifying flora and fauna and caring for the ecological and environmental health will all be part of the various camps. When it is not occupied by school-programmes, Auroville units and services and Auroville-related groups may utilize the camp. "Ultimately," says Frederick, "the camp could be used as a site to help conflict resolution, for example by inviting Palestinian and Israeli youth."

"They were 12 cool and magnificent days," writes Boris at the end of his nature camp experience. "The ancient geological complex called shola of the Palani Hills is among the few places on our planet where man didn't commit an ecological crime. Let's hope that many children may enjoy it."

Carel

To support contact naturecamp@auroville.org.in

NEW BOOKS

Deliberations on The Life Divine – Volume I

Those who have tried to read Sri Aurobindo's *The Life Divine* will agree that the book is not easily accessible. As David Hutchinson wrote

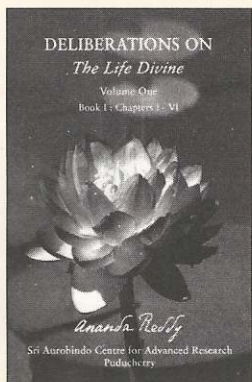
in his introduction to his *The Life Divine Study Guide*, published in the magazine *Collaboration*, "One of the joys and challenges of reading Sri Aurobindo is the sweep and depth of his thought, which, despite its exactitude, covers large ranges in a single paragraph or sentence. Because of this, it is a common experience for readers to finish a section of text in a state of expansive befuddlement." Another reason for befuddlement is Sri Aurobindo's references to eastern philosophies, which are often unknown to Westerners.

Ananda Reddy's *Deliberations on The Life Divine – Volume I, chapters I-VI* are a help to better understand the first chapters of this magnum opus.

The book is based on the talks Ananda gave on the topic in Auroville, at the Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research in Pondicherry and elsewhere in the world. The style of the book is informal and closely follows the tenor of his talks. What makes the book particularly valuable is the extensive reference to other books given at the end of each chapter, which are a help for a better understanding of the relevant chapter of *The Life Divine*.

Carel

Costs Rs 160. Available from SACAR Trust, 39 Vanniar Street, Vaithikuppam, Puducherry 605012, email sacar@auromail.net.



PASSING

Wim Aspeslagh

*May we meet again in the silence
May we meet again in the fire
May we trust that our love won't die,
And we know when it's time to fly...*

Song composition by Wim, summer 2006

On the 22nd November 2006 Wim Aspeslagh celebrated his 50th birthday in the Ecodaya Sanctuary in Hampi. He was nearing completion of a new "rock shelter dwelling" at the tip of the island – a beautiful new creation he poured himself into during the months of October and November. This birthday also marked the completion of a year long "sabbatical" where he gave time to himself to create, to heal his body and to dive into spiritual thought and practice. Throughout this year he wrote poetry and songs to Life and The Beloved and he began to write his life story. It is somehow clear reading through his words and listening to his music that Wim was at peace with himself, his world and everyone he had ever loved. He was preparing to begin a new chapter in his life story that he believed would wind up during his 84th solar return.

On the morning of 30th December, 2006, 5 weeks after this birthday, Wim succumbed to an infection. The official diagnosis that came a week before he died in the Apollo Hospital, New Delhi, was "Hairy Cell Leukemia". With an almost non-existent immune system, it was not a fair battle.

I joined Wim and Thulsi, who had been with him since his birthday in Hampi, a few days before he

was transferred from a hospital in Goa to Delhi. 10 days later and a week before he died, his sister Jo joined us – his only sister whose beloved husband died a year earlier in an instant while they were out cycling together. When it happened, Wim unhesitatingly flew straight back to Belgium, guiding and supporting her over a few months into deepening her trust in the process of coming to peace with death.

There were four grace-filled days after Jo's arrival, when Wim was very clear and communicative. He was more or less comfortably stabilised with the ventilator and medication and he lay in bed plugged in to beeping machines with these incredible shining eyes and aura of calm around him. During these days, we maintained an almost constant presence at his bedside, holding his hand, looking into his oceanic eyes and sometimes sharing what was in our hearts or softly singing. In spite of being on full life support, around Christmas time he wrote that he wanted all three of us to break the rules of "only one at a time" and be in the room with him together to "celebrate!". Another time he wrote in response to the arising of fear in my heart, "I am here with God". When I asked him if he was afraid, he wrote "Of what?" It was 3 days before his death when he



PHOTO COURTESY KATHY

finally wrote, "Will I make it?". It was the last written communication he made and first really clear indication that he had an inkling that he was actually going to leave his body.

It is still very hard to accept, yet it starts to make perfect sense. Wim was complete, there wasn't "unfinished business" – he didn't have to do anything else. There was often a sense though that he was spread too thin. Wim had too many friends – if that is possible – who all loved to be in his presence. He had to travel a lot to sustain relationships with all his "soul brothers and sisters", woven around the entire planet. I guess sometimes it felt like he just wasn't around quite long enough before he had to dash off for another appointment somewhere on the planet.

Friederike wrote to me after learning of Wim's passing: "I think everybody who has to shed our form of existence so early leaves a special call – to feel out what he or

she stood for and take over the baton. It seems that Wim left a strong call!"

I've thought a lot about those words in the past weeks and I think Friederike is right. Wim loved to celebrate and I feel Wim's message to those of us left to carry on Her Work in Auroville is to keep finding ways to consciously celebrate.

Events like The Kosmos Festival, Earth Day, Earth Dance Celebration and UN Peace Day Programmes were all deliberately designed by Wim as catalysts to get Aurovilians to awaken and celebrate the beauty, mystery and miracle of our lives. These events had a golden thread woven in... a subtle yet constant reminder of the basic fact of Unity. He knew that our lives and actions are what bring forth a world we dream of and he wanted to share that knowing with others. This, I believe, was Wim's passion and his call.

Kathy

"For me, artistic creation is personal evolution"

What lies behind the success of a small Auroville film unit?

PHOTO CORIOLAN

Before coming to Auroville in 2000, Basile had worked for 20 years in film production, making films for French TV and large corporations. Claudine, his partner, has expertise in 3-D animation and worked on computer games. Today, they are much in demand, both in Auroville and outside, as artistic and innovative film-makers.

I first saw Basile's work at an international video evening in Auroville a few years ago.

His short film about a special puja in a local village stood out from the rest of the offerings, not only because of its technical inventiveness but also because of its deep humanity. Clearly, here was a film-maker who was genuinely interested in people and their customs; he was not 'using' them to satisfy his personal ambitions as a film-maker. Since then I've seen more of his work and all of it, whether commissioned or deeply personal, has the impress of a particular 'eye', a particular way of seeing and celebrating the world. Recently I visited him and his collaborators, Claudine and Coriolan, in their workplace in a small, thatched house in Dana community to find out more.

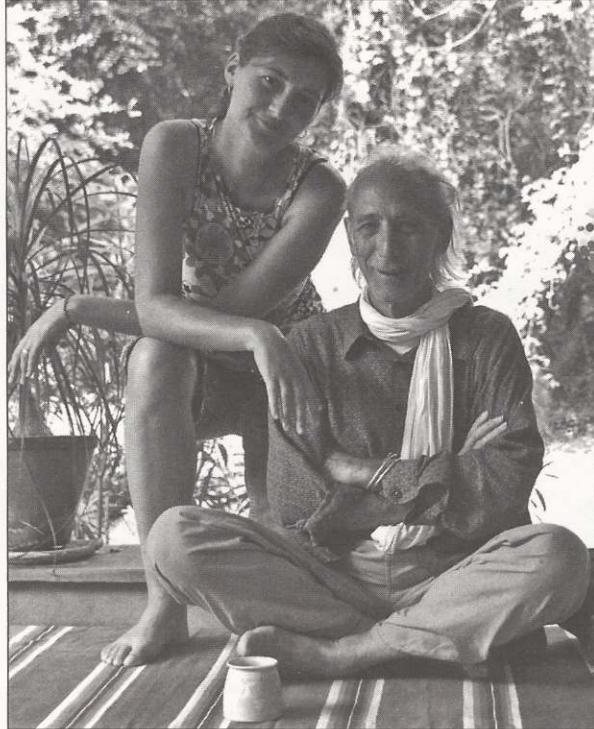
AUROVILLE TODAY: When you came to Auroville had you planned to keep on making films?

Basile: Yes and no. I wanted to recover my artistic creativity, to liberate

myself, because for many years in France I felt I had not been able to do what I wanted and I had stagnated. When I came here I wasn't sure I would continue making films. But then I realized that, with the new technology, I could do something more personal, more artistic, than I had been able to do in France where much of my work was commissioned by television companies or the corporate world.

Claudine: When I came here I was tired of computers, of business and money, and for one year I just remained quiet. After that, with my background in video animation, it was natural I should come to help Basile with his film work.

Basile: Our first project in Auroville was making a film on Auroville's environmental achievements for the Indian Space Research Organization. Originally they wanted 15 minutes but after rough editing we still had 90 minutes. It was difficult to know what to cut, so we ended up making a 52 minute film. For us it was very interesting because we had wanted to make a video on Auroville but didn't know how. While making it, we discovered so much about Auroville's history of afforestation etc. And what's remarkable is that many other Aurovilians also



Claudine and Basile

learned about this for the first time when they saw the film!

Then we made some short films for the Pondicherry municipality in collaboration with INTACH, the architectural heritage organization. After that, everybody wanted us to make films for them! We have a project with Tency and Gilles to make a big movie on the water situation, the Handicrafts Council of India wants us to help them communicate what they are doing, and the Auroville Tsunami team wants a film made on their work.

Do you feel trapped again?

Claudine: No. We are not going to let what happened in France happen again. And the interesting thing is that many of the films we are asked to make now are about the environment and ecology which, along with the human aspect, is what interests us most.

Basile: I feel we have a balance now between work which is commissioned and the more personal work which the commissions help finance. The last movie we did was on the silk weavers of Varanasi. This was commissioned by a Danish company which wanted to give all their workers a silk scarf as a New Year gift. The scarf

would come in a box along with our video, which would explain the situation of the weavers. The company wanted a 15 minute film – which we made – but we found the subject so interesting we ended up shooting 20 hours of film, which we're now turning into a 52 minute film.

Claudine: It's important for the weavers that their story is told. They produce such beautiful work but many of them are starving as they can only make one metre of woven silk a day on the hand-loom and this means it is very expensive. Most people prefer to buy imported products from China instead.

To whom do you want to show this film?

Basile: This is the problem. Unfortunately, it's very difficult to sell something that's already finished to the television companies: they prefer to specify what you should work on. Also, there's a problem when you want to make a more personal film.

Has living in India changed the way you make films?

Basile: Yes. Not technically, it's more to do with the inner rhythm which is slower here than the frenetic pace of films in France.

What is your main motivation in making films?

Basile: For me, artistic creation is always to do with personal evolution, with yoga. Before making films I was a painter for twenty years, but it was the same process. In order to express something you have to confront something in yourself: it's a need. I don't make something to get praise from the world but to confront something in myself. At the same time, I think it's important that we record the history of Auroville, how the people came here, the extraordinary personal stories etc., otherwise all this will all be lost. It's the human aspect that interests me most.

Do you also feel a sense of social responsibility?

Claudine: Of course. I would never make a movie about, for example, nuclear power. The reason we're making the longer film about the weavers is that these people touched us deeply. We went to one of their villages. They are so poor – one third of the hand-weavers in Varanasi have no work – but everybody welcomed us. It was an incredible experience.

Basile: What interests me most is not journalistic reporting but making films with a personal vision. I don't like rummaging in the garbage. I would never do a documentary on the slums, for example, even though I know such places exist. I prefer to show what is positive, higher, more refined, like the fascinating culture of India. That is my philosophy.

From an interview by Alan

La Compagnie des Films de L'Inde

Films Basile and Claudine have made since coming to India

Documentary 52 minutes :

– Towards a sustainable future:
Auroville 35 years of research

Journal d'un Velakara

– Retour à Pondy
– Sur les traces d'Hanuman
– Made in India
– Benares saree factory

Musical clips :

Nadaka et les Basavaraj brothers
– live in Paris
– living colors

Environmental :

– DEWATS at Aravind Eye Hospital
– Tsunami relief Auroville
– ADEME : Un pas vers un futur durable
– Impression of India
– Tranquebar
– Sanitation
– ITPI : The world in your hands

For more information contact:
claudine@auroville.org.in



A silk weaver at work: a still from the film on the Varanasi weavers

INTERNATIONAL ZONE

The yurt from Kazakhstan

Central Asia plants its nomadic presence in Auroville by opening a yurt marking the first phase of the Kazakhstan and Central Asian Pavilion.

Lined with white felt and detailed with Kazhak scroll-type ornamentation, the yurt was an instant hit with the visitors to the Unity Pavilion on the evening of January 13th. The traditional shelter of the free-spirited people of Eurasia and Mongolia, with its warm cocooning circular space replete with cushions, and Kazhak craftwork and clothing on display, it found immediate resonance with the Aurovilians.

Ruslan, who is organizing the Auroville International gathering in May 2007 at Almaty, Kazakhstan, explains: "The yurt is designed so that it can be easily taken apart to be carried on horseback, and later put back together. It has three main elements. An extensible trellis base, the *kerege*, a dome made of poles, the *uyk*, and a rounded top, the *shanyrak*. But these days the use of yurts is limited since people have a more settled

lifestyle."

Travelling all the way from Kazakhstan to Auroville, this first Auroville yurt will be on the site of the Unity Pavilion until the development of the next phase of the Central Asian pavilion on its designated site in the International Zone. "The yurt will be open to Aurovilians for various gatherings not necessarily related to the International Zone," adds Ruslan.

The yurt was bought for Auroville by the Moscow-based foundation *Dialogue of Cultures – United World*, which co-sponsored the event together with the Auroville International Liaison in Kazakhstan.

Priya Sundaravalli

For more information on the Auroville International meeting at Almaty Kazakhstan in May 2007, please contact ruslan@auroville.org.in



PHOTO PRIYA SUNDARAVALLI

At the opening of the yurt: relaxing with tea and snacks.

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