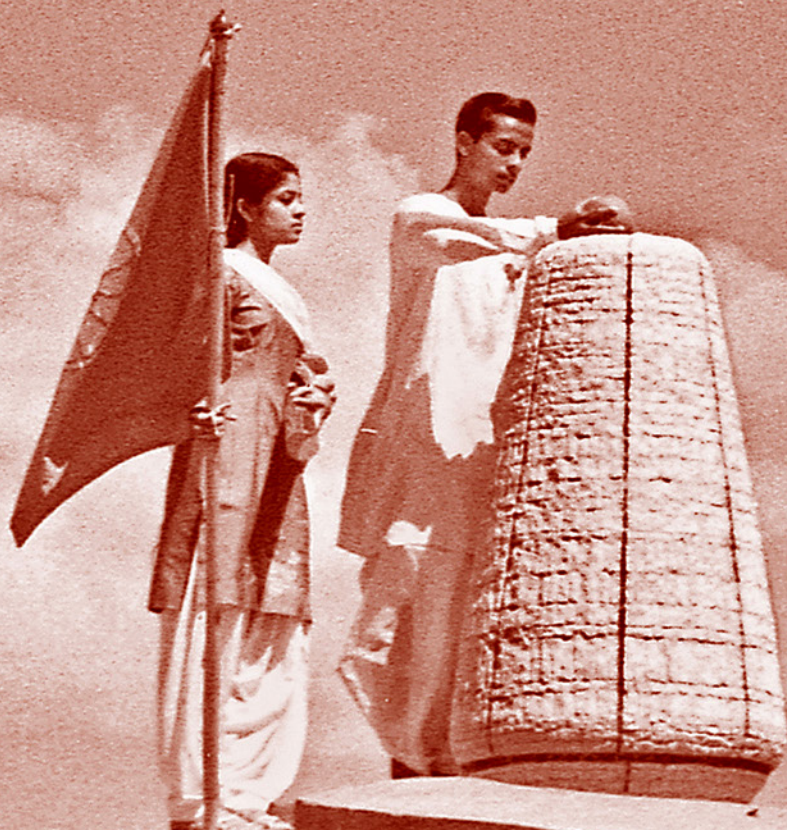


The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education



Auroville – the birth of a Dream

Mother said many times: "Whoever gets my touch, whoever has a second of true aspiration, true love for me, he is finished for life, for all lives — he is bound to me. I have put a golden chain round his neck, his heart is bound eternally to me."

It is a thing nobody can see, you yourselves don't see; but it is a fact, it is there. The golden chain is there within your heart. Wherever you go, you drag that chain, it is a lengthening chain. However far you may go, it is an elastic chain, it goes on lengthening, but never snaps. In hours of difficulty, in hours of doubt and confusion in your life, you have that within you to support you. If you are conscious of it, so much the better; if you are not conscious, believe that it is there. The Mother's love, Her Presence is there always.

Sri Nolini Kanta Gupta (to the final-year students of the Higher Course on October 26, 1976)

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The Golden Chain

Alumni Journal of S.A.I.C.E.
Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, INDIA.



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Frequency of Appearance: Quarterly.

Mode of Donation: Donations can be made
by MO/DD/Cheque in favour of:
"The Golden Chain Fraternity".

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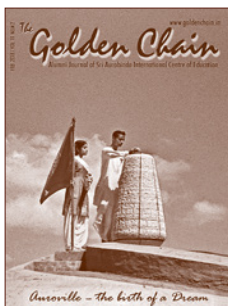
URL: www.goldenchain.in

Publisher:

Ramraj Sehgal
for THE GOLDEN CHAIN FRATERNITY,
2 Rangapillai St., Pondicherry.

Printer:

Swadhin Chatterjee,
SRI AUROBINDO ASHRAM PRESS,
38 Goubert Avenue, Pondicherry.



On the Cover:

Vijay and Kiran Poddar represent the Ashram during Auroville's
Inauguration Ceremony on 28.2.1968. Vijay pouring sand from
Sri Aurobindo's Samadhi into the Urn.

THE EDITORS' PAGE

by Sunayana Panda '79

Auroville is celebrating its half century! Only those who were present on 28th February in 1968 will fully understand how this fact is in itself a miracle. The resources were so few. There was almost nothing to start with. The idea of building a city which would be a living example of Human Unity was laughed at by many. It looked like an impossible dream. But here we are today celebrating its 50th anniversary. What is strange is that the whole question of Human Unity is crying out to be answered even more today than ever before. If Auroville had not been founded 50 years ago we would have to start building it today.

The foundation ceremony in '68 was something spectacular. But the preparation for that day was a race against time and it was in itself an adventure story. There was no road at that time which led to the place which is now the amphitheatre. That road was built by the young men of the Ashram, mostly D-group boys. The logistics of getting 5000 people to a place in the middle of nowhere was a daunting task in 1968 but it was taken up with enthusiasm by everyone.

That extraordinary month of February in 1968 was a historic moment in the life of SAICE. The School was fully involved in the inauguration ceremony of Auroville and one part of the school was humming with activity throughout the month. There was nothing else that mattered at that time. There was something surreal about it – a school caught up in the excitement of the foundation of a city for the future where people of all the countries of the world would live in peace and harmony. On the other hand, if not the teenagers and the young then who else can work for the creation of an ideal world?

On the morning of the 28th, at the beginning of the ceremony, the Mother read out a message which was heard by everyone at the amphitheatre.

Her voice was relayed through telephone lines which were connected from Pondicherry to Auroville. In today's connected world it is difficult to imagine that in 1968 even phones connected by landline wires were something rare. Everyone felt the Mother's presence that day so concretely. A newspaper carried a photo the next day which showed a cloud formation over the banyan tree which looked exactly like the Mother's face. She was indeed present there during the ceremony. She had told Kiran-di who represented the Ashram, when she went to see her to get her instructions for the 28th, that indeed she would be there.

Today as we celebrate the 50th anniversary, the world is talking about it, and it is making people find out who the Mother was. In 1968 the Mother was 90 years old. Who in this world has ever laid the foundation of a new city, dreaming of Human Unity, at the age of 90? Who she was and what she has done for humanity will be known a little better now. Till now we have thought that only those who were interested in spirituality would be interested in knowing about her but today the opportunity has come when we can talk about her to those who would like to bring about a unity among all the people of the world. This is easy for most people to understand even if they cannot understand high philosophy. Her message, written in her own hand says "Auroville – a city the world needs". Fifty years after the foundation ceremony this message still rings so true.

Let us hope that this milestone in the life of Auroville brings a new awareness in the Ashram about all that the Aurovilians have achieved in every sphere. We have so much to learn from them – attending a few sessions of "Sourcing our Oneness" cannot be enough. Their youthful enthusiasm and creativity, their openness to the wide world and new ideas are elements we could certainly add to our life in the Ashram. ❧

A RARE PRIVILEGE

Sachidananda Mohanty '75

Currently Vice Chancellor, Central University of Orissa, Prof. Sachidananda Mohanty talks to Sunayana Panda about his nomination to the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, his understanding of internationalism and human unity, and the best ways we could contribute to the future of Auroville.

How did the nomination to the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation come about?

Honestly I have no idea as to how I was selected. I understand that the nomination is made through the Ministry of Human Resources Development [MHRD] of the Government of India which administers the Auroville Foundation. Under the AF Act, members nominated to the Board of Governors are expected to be eminent personalities in different fields of life who have made notable contributions to the vision of the Mother as enshrined in Auroville: They are expected to promote the goals of the planetary city.

You were here in 1968 during the inauguration ceremony of Auroville. What memories do you have?

First a little bit about the background: I joined the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education [SAICE] as a young boy from a middle class background from Bhubaneswar, Odisha in Dec 1966. It took me nearly a year to get adjusted to the international ambience of what is generally known as the Ashram School that attracts students from varied educational, linguistic, ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds.

Given the above circumstances, I was predictably reticent and shy during 1968, the year that saw the inauguration of Auroville. Unlike some of my classmates, I did not, alas, have the privilege of actively participating in the opening ceremony in 1968 in the formal sense of the term. I do have glimpses of the event though. Bus ride on

a dusty makeshift road, a huge balloon floating in the clear sunny sky, crowds of people and on-lookers within and outside the tents, white-clad volunteers in their smart attire maintaining discipline, the Mother's prophetic voice announcing the inauguration of this unique international experiment, the presence of the ancient banyan tree, and above all, the amphitheatre with the urn-shaped lotus to which the sacred earth from different lands were brought by flag bearers: a boy and a girl from different nations of the world.

It was truly a memorable and momentous event; the real significance of the historic inauguration may not have fully dawned on me then though. After all, the Auroville Charter, then and now, appears to be somewhat utopian given the nature of the world we live in. As the Mother aptly tells us: 'Auroville wants to be a bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realizations.' [Charter of Auroville]

During your last visit to Auroville what were your impression about the township?

My visits to Auroville, over the years, have been few and far between: sporadic in nature. This time around, thanks largely to the support and hospitality of the Auroville Foundation and the Working Committee members, I had a much better opportunity to come closer to Auroville. However, due to insufficient time at our disposal, field visits were not possible to the centres of

activities. Nevertheless, I did have a ring side view thanks to an interactive session I had at Bharat Niwas and the exciting presentations by the different Auroville groups in the Board Meetings for two days. We were deeply touched by the warmth and hospitality wherever we went, the sense of professionalism and dedication to the Cause we witnessed.

What was particularly extraordinary was the hard work, sensitivity and care with which the Aurovillians were preparing themselves to welcome the 50th Anniversary celebration.

How do you plan to contribute to the future development of Auroville?

Management of Auroville would necessarily go beyond the conventional approach to administering a national or international township howsoever progressive and radical it may be in thought and vision. In creating the Auroville Charter based on a vision that seems to defy human comprehension and received wisdom, the Mother was clearly taking us into unknown and uncharted territories and goals worthy of the best of mankind.

I have no illusions of possessing special intuitive or spiritual qualities that may be appropriate in catering to the needs of a spiritual community. However, I am aware that the enlightened mind and heart, to begin with, can approach issues of problem-solving and conflict resolution in an 'objective' manner, based on goodwill for all and the welfare of the largest sections of the community. Indeed, it is important to base our individual



Vice Chancellor's office, Central University of Orissa, Koraput

and collective behaviour on harmony and mutual understanding.

There are clearly issues that are at the forefront of the attention of the township: the question of the pavilion model, Indian and international, the problem of acquiring land for growth and expansion, the building of the 'city' for 50,000 inhabitants, the goal the Mother had set at the inception of the project, the need to better integrate the local communities with the international township, and so on. For this to happen, we must all work together closely, in a spirit of amity, understanding and togetherness. We need to go beyond our comfort zones and the beaten paths to find lasting solutions. Naturally, my effort will be in sync with the overall effort of the Governing Board.

The city of Auroville has achieved a lot in the past 50 years. We need to consolidate these achievements and take the Mission forward as envisaged by the Mother. From being a sustainable eco-community with myriads of achievements, Auroville could ideally move in the direction of a vibrant international township, indeed a city. I shall feel privileged to be part of this process.

In what way can you take the Mother's views of human unity to the world?

As an academic and a scholar, I have attempted, over the years, to project Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's views of human unity and international living through my class room teaching, public lectures and peer-reviewed publications at the national and the international level. Some recent titles are: *Sri Aurobindo : A Contemporary Reader*, New Delhi : Routledge, 2008, 2009 and 2010; *Cosmopolitan Modernity in Early 20th Century India*, New Delhi: Routledge, 2005 [revised South Asia and international editions forthcoming in May 2018]. We will do well not to believe self-righteously and arrogantly that we have a monopoly over Truth for the world. It would be much better to try and realise the principle of human unity, first of all, in ourselves, in our family and community and in our day to day life.

Indeed, as the Mother says, an ounce of

practice is far more important than an ocean of precepts. Examples, in the long run, will have far better results in achieving human unity than mere intellectual discourses. Such a view may appear somewhat naive in today's context of cynicism and pessimism, but we need to hold on to this faith and move ahead.

Is there anything else you would like to add?

Thanks to the Grace of the Mother, I had the privilege of joining the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE) at Pondicherry early in life. It has given me a sense of direction. To be liberated from the narrowness and angularities of a small town culture, and participate in a unique international educational experiment at Pondicherry, was indeed a dream come true, a rare privilege given to few. To be given an opportunity now to serve Auroville is truly a miracle, an act of grace! ❧

A SPARK IN THE DARK

Devika Murthy '81

Every evening, when the sun sets,
and the night is about to come,

God walks across the darkling sky
and lights his lanterns one by one,

That shed their diamond glow on high,
brightening the pathways of heaven.

Likewise, when man in despair slips
and feels that nothing can be done,

A call to God and lo, He comes,
to kindle hope where there was none,

And light our inner lamps of strength,
then shadows fail and all is won!

COMING HOME

Anirban Ganguly '97

Recently appointed to the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Anirban Ganguly is a former student of SAICE, and currently director of the Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation in New Delhi. He is a member of the Central Advisory Board of Education and also a member of the Policy Research Department and co-convenor of the Library and Documentation Department of the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). He has done his doctorate on Sri Aurobindo and the national education movement in India. Here he speaks about his connection with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and his work for India.

My family's connection to Sri Aurobindo goes back more than a century. My great-great-grandfather, Upendra Nath Banerjee, was a revolutionary in the group that Sri Aurobindo led. He was one of the principal members, along with Sri Aurobindo's younger brother, Barindra Kumar Ghosh.

Upendra was arrested at the Maniktala garden house, along with the entire group of revolutionaries, including Sri Aurobindo. They were all put on trial for 'Waging war against the Emperor'. This was the famous Alipore bomb trial. But unlike Sri Aurobindo, Upendra was convicted and deported for life to the Cellular Jail in Port Blair in the Andaman Islands.

After 10 years, there was a general amnesty and he was released. Once again he became active in political work and became a journalist. He also visited Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry. That was the time of the evening talks, as recorded by Purani, and he attended some sessions. But soon he was re-arrested. After his release he joined C.R. Das's Swarajya Party, later took charge as editor of a leading Bengali daily

Dainik Basumati and was also a prolific columnist and also authored books. His most famous book is *Nirbasiter Atmakatha (Autobiography of an Exile, 1921)* – a classic in Bengali literature – which like Sri Aurobindo's *Tales of Prison Life* contains a vivid picture of the life lived by the revolutionaries in the Cellular Jail in Port Blair. Rabindranath Tagore had high praise for the book and made it mandatory reading in his Visvabharati at Santiniketan.

Upendra was the mentor of Nolini Kanta Gupta during the revolutionary period. When I was just a little over two years old, Nolini-da insisted that I be sent to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for my education. That was in 1979. I joined the Centre of Education a year after. So I never had the benefit of meeting the

Mother personally, but growing up in the Ashram I lived and interacted with those who had been very close to Her, in particular Nolini-da, Jugal Kishore Mukherjee, my teacher in Knowledge, and of course, Pranab Kumar Bhattacharya, who really nurtured my life. It was Pranab-da who gave me insights into the life and ways of the Mother, it is from him that I imbibed my urge



to work for a larger cause in life. I didn't meet Kireet-bhai at the time, as he had already left the Ashram to become Special Secretary of the Ministry of Education.

So I grew up during the phase of disturbances between the Sri Aurobindo Society and the Aurovilians but I was too young to register all that. Only later did we become conscious of what had happened. Pranab-da, though very close, did not influence my thoughts about Auroville. Throughout his life kept a strong stand against Auroville. But though he was an imposing figure, he never imposed his views on those around him. He was a formidable leader in his own right and his doors were always open to Aurovilians who wished to meet him in their individual capacity.

JOINING POLITICS

Right from the beginning, it was clear to me that if I would not take up the Ashram life, I had to do something different. For me, that was doing some national service, being in public life, working for India. That ideal, which I had imbibed from being in the Ashram, was actively supported by my mentors. Added to that was, of course, the sense of dedication, of selflessness, of sacrifice as explained by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and at the same time the tenacity to hold on and dedicate yourself to what you have chosen to be your part in life. Those were the points that Jugal-da stressed over and over, and all this contributed to my larger understanding of what the Mother wanted. Pranab-da always encouraged my eagerness to be in public life, he supported my intellectual quest and my dream to work for the country.

I have sometimes been criticised for 'going into politics', as the Mother so often said that the Ashramites should not be involved in politics. But I believe that injunction holds for those who have decided to take up the Ashram life. Mother herself was always very concerned about India and about the need to have contacts with political personalities of that period. She invited Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, for example, to preside over the Sri Aurobindo Memorial Convention in 1950 and maintained contacts on the political level with people such as Prime Ministers Jawaharlal Nehru,

Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Gandhi. Also Sri Aurobindo had devotees who were involved with politics, such as Surendra Mohan Ghosh, who he said was 'his man in Delhi' and to whom he gave, exceptionally, private darshans and political and yogic advice. And there were others, like K.M. Munshi, who were deeply influenced by Sri Aurobindo from his days in Baroda and had darshan of the Sage as late as July 1950.

I look at it this way. I was not suitable for the Indian Administrative Service. I chose to go into politics as a means to do that service which I always wanted to do, which is to help India regain her rightful place in the comity of nations on which Sri Aurobindo himself has so extensively written.

I aspire to be an instrument for that purpose.

Now, when one is in political life, one has to choose a platform from which to act. For me, that platform is the BJP, for I feel it to be the political formation which in terms of political articulation and understanding has a deeper understanding of Sri Aurobindo than any other. There may be individuals in other parties who are also deeply knowledgeable about Sri Aurobindo, but as a collective, this is the platform with which I feel most affinity and comfort, where I can carry out my functioning in consonance with the deeper ideals I have imbibed from the Ashram.

I am convinced that Shri Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India, is definitely working towards manifesting Sri Aurobindo's views on India. He not only wants to see India positioning herself in the comity of nations as a great and self-reliant power, but is also concerned about India's spiritual mission and her deeper cultural and civilisational identity and dimension. Sri Aurobindo, in his last public message to the Andhra University, (December 1948) wrote about India becoming a powerful nation but at the danger of forfeiting her Swadharma, losing her soul. This, I believe, is what the Prime Minister is trying to prevent: he is searching to manifest a deeper coalition, a deeper harmonisation of these two dimensions – outer prosperity and preservation of Swadharma. His twitter message on the occasion of August 15th, India's Independence Day and

the birthday of Sri Aurobindo, shows this twofold mission: "I pay my tributes to Sri Aurobindo on his Jayanti. His rich thoughts and grand vision for India continue to be a great source of inspiration."

The Mother spoke about the need for people 'to go beyond politics'. Over the last decades, we haven't seen that. The politics of division have intensified and the fault lines between divided communities have widened. But I think that we are now seeing the emergence of the politics of aspiration, where there is no longer a differentiation on the basis of religion, caste or creed, a new India which has resolved to fight against divisive tendencies, against social challenges and generate a new narrative. As director of the Syama Prasad Mookerjee Foundation, which is often referred to as 'the think tank of the BJP', I work with the party on a large number of issues but it is precisely in these areas where I strive to develop the party and India further.

TALKING ABOUT AUROVILLE

I have heard complaints in Auroville about the lack of sufficient support from the Government of India. On the one hand, I consider it a blessing, though on the other I agree that it delays Auroville's development.

I am reminded of a speech Dr. Mookerjee gave in parliament when debating the Visva Bharati University bill. Mookerjee said that institutions like Tagore's Visva Bharati University and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram (Auroville did not exist at that time) should be given a great degree of autonomy and that the Indian government should only facilitate the experiment. His words were not heeded, and the government take-over of Tagore's university initially caused a lot of distress: it went totally under the control of the government, and gradually its soul and the original vision were subdued.

But there is a change today. The present government has given Indian institutions of higher learning more autonomy than they ever had before. I think it is a very wise move, because these institutions have unique characteristics that have evolved over time following the inspiration of their specific philosophies.

So for Auroville, it is good that the Government keeps its distance and allows Auroville the freedom to grow organically; but there definitely should be more support. The government should recognize that Auroville is a unique experiment, conceived by among the most extraordinary visionaries of our era and the soil of India was chosen to manifest it. This soil was thought fit for such an experiment – and consequently, there should be an attempt to recognize Auroville as an Institution of National Importance so that it can be given some kind of special protection. We should also actively try to find solutions to some of the long pending problems of Auroville, in terms of land, visas, green belt, town planning etc. But all this will take time; we cannot expect the entire government machinery to immediately appreciate the importance of Auroville. There are people of goodwill in all stations and I am sure incremental progress will be made.

I am grateful to have been appointed member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, which allows me once again to be in close contact with Auroville and help manifest its ideals. I visited Auroville when I was in the Ashram kindergarten, and I often visited Auroville in my student days. Then, for a long time, I could not come; until two months ago, when I accompanied Mr. Amit Shah, national president of the BJP, on his visit to the Matrimandir.

This time, it was a longer visit.

It felt like coming home. ❧

This article first appeared in Auroville Today

India of the ages is not dead nor has she spoken her last creative word; she lives and has still something to do for herself and the human peoples.

Sri Aurobindo (SABCL, 14: 380-381)

AUROVILLE

THE BIRTH OF A DREAM

The idea to start an international township was thought of around 1965 and it slowly took shape, details were added and the ideas became more elaborate. The date 28th February was chosen because 1968 being a leap year, the anniversary of the Golden Day commemorating the Supramental descent was being celebrated on 29th February and many visitors were expected.

The whole idea was discussed in the school and the students who were then in the Free Progress section worked for the event. The foundation of Auroville coincided with the opening of the Corner House and when the young delegates representing their countries started coming they ate there with the students. For many years the Auroville Information office was where the School Registrar's office is now and when we were walking past it we would just drop in and look at the model of the town with the little golden globe representing the Matrimandir. The idea of Auroville was very much in the air in the late 1960s in the Ashram.

As February neared the whole school was caught in the excitement of this extraordinary event. The representatives of 124 countries as well as all the different states of India were invited and a boy and a girl from each country or state came with a handful of earth from their land so that it could all be symbolically united in a marble urn. At the last minute it was seen that many countries had not been able to send representatives so the School decided to replace them with a boy and a girl from among the students. And as they did not have the earth of that country the Mother asked them to take a handful of salt to add to the mingled earth within the marble urn.

The Inauguration Day



We contacted some of those who had participated in that ceremony in 1968 and got their stories so that we could see that day come alive before us once again. We start with Kiran Poddar's memories, recorded below (in the third person) from an interview with her. They are of special interest because of her personal contact with the Mother, and the special role that Mother asked her to play in the inauguration ceremony.

THE INAUGURATION CEREMONY

Reminiscences of Kiran Poddar '67

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Planning for Auroville's inauguration started in 1967. At that time Kiran (then aged 19) was a student at SAICE. Their family house was the hub, the centre of planning and coordination for everything related to the inauguration. However, it was only after Kiran completed her studies on Oct 31st that she became involved herself, when Mother told her quite specifically that she wanted her "to work for Auroville; to help your father (Sri Navajata) with Auroville work." This work then became quite naturally like an extension of her life in the Ashram.

People like Roger Anger and Gilbert Gauche, a PR man from France who had experience of planning major events elsewhere in the world, were coming to Navajata with their ideas and requests for the inauguration, such as to have a big balloon

flying high above the banyan tree on that day.

Meanwhile, as usual, everything was automatically being shared with and conveyed to Mother, who was interested in all the details of plans for the day, and was keen to know where matters stood on everything.

LAND FOR THE INAUGURATION

As late as 1967, not all the land needed for the inauguration had been acquired. Every day Navajata was reporting on the situation (and other such matters) to the Mother, because she had placed special emphasis on the importance of getting the land, saying strongly and clearly, "I want it (the land) to be bought..." All Navajata could do was reassure her that it would be bought – if her grace was there!

Meanwhile, the pressure to buy the land in





time was leading to some difficult negotiations with the village owners by the various individuals working with Navajata on this crucial matter, because the owners were already aware that something big was being planned for the plateau site and naturally saw an opportunity to make some good money in the process.

Independent of the negotiations, Navajata conveyed to all the village headmen that they and their people were invited to attend the inaugural event.

TRANSPORT

One of the Ashram departments inevitably involved in preparations for the event was the Transport Dept, which had to work out how best to make use of the department's vehicles for the occasion. Other transport details such as the logistics of the route from Pondy to the Auroville site; who would go at what time with what vehicle(s); and the pick-up points etc. to get Ashram members and other people from Pondy to the site, were mainly taken care of by young Ashram volunteers.

However, more vehicles were needed than the Ashram had available, specially buses, so Navajata used a personal contact – an industrialist friend who was a devotee of Mother, and who ran with Mother's blessings an organization called

"Progress Transport" – to arrange for a large fleet of buses to be available on that day. There were at least 20-30 of them, maybe as many as 50, that eventually formed a huge convoy from Pondy to the site, together with many private cars, whose owners had also offered to help with transport.

PONDICHERRY STATE'S COOPERATION

The Pondy State Government was fully supportive of the whole event. The Police closed off all side roads from Pondy to the site to ensure the smooth flow of the many buses, VIP cars (quite a few countries' dignitaries had also come) and other vehicles taking everyone to the site.

The Ashram recording section was handling the live relay of Mother's voice from her room in Pondicherry to the inauguration site in Auroville. The relay was not through the city's main telephone exchange but through the Pondicherry All India Radio telephone line and they had blocked all other lines so that there would not be any interference or disturbance.

These and other gestures showed how widespread and deeply felt was the support for the event within Pondicherry's administration. The feelings in regard to the importance of the event went far beyond just the Ashram and also embraced the town of Pondicherry.

AN ELECTRIC SHOCK

On the evening of 28th February Hema Arora '69 sent the following letter to the Mother

Douce Mère,

The inauguration ceremony of Auroville this morning was an unforgettable experience. Out of chaos and disorder everything worked towards harmony and beauty.

I had been selected to represent Iraq during the inauguration ceremony but people from that country arrived so I was shifted to represent Yugoslavia. Unluckily for me people from that country also reached Auroville at the last moment. Then I was made a Turk, but to my utter dismay people from Turkey also panted in at the last second. Finally I was given the banner of China, and that too communist China. You can very well imagine my feelings at that moment! Well, I can at least boast of being the only person to have changed her nationality four times in a single hour.

Douce Mère, as the ceremony started all the

muddle and confusion were forgotten. I could feel your presence among us so powerfully, so very concretely that nothing else mattered. An ardent aspiration mounted upwards for the realization of this beautiful dream of yours; of Auroville – city of Harmony. It was a moment when “earth grew unexpectedly divine.”

It was no longer of any importance which country I represented or which countries others stood for, what counted most at that time was that we were present at this very solemn and historic hour in our march towards perfection.

As I walked into the arena with China's flag in my hands an electric shock seemed to have passed through my being, emptying it of all thoughts and feelings and “touching the moment with eternity”.

Nearly everyone present must have felt something, for there was a trance-like quality in their gait when they entered the arena.

Douce Mère, today was really a very beautiful and memorable day.

Thank you and good night.

ASHRAM AND THE INAUGURATION

The inauguration was a big, BIG event in the life of the Ashram at that time. In fact one can say that the whole Ashram became involved in one way or another following its announcement. The actual programme for the event, with transport details, timings etc. was announced by way of a beautiful hand painted poster – signed and “Blessed” by Mother – during the week leading up to 28th Feb.

In announcing the event, mention was made of the plan to bring two young people representing every nation and state of India for the day, and the need to take care of them by way of providing accommodation and generally looking after them. It was stated that it would be preferable for the accommodation to be in Ashram buildings and with Ashram families, and not to have them stay in local hotels, of which – anyway – there were not so many in those days. SAICE took up this responsibility, and via its teachers

and students found the needed beds and rooms for all the expected attendees. In fact they took full responsibility for looking after them, making them feel welcome, and showing them around. This was especially important, as some were expected well ahead of the 28th and therefore needed this sort of help and hospitality in the lead up to the actual day.

As the day of the inauguration drew closer, everyone in the Ashram became increasingly focused on it, and began to work together in a wonderful spirit of mutual harmony and goodwill, seeing it as something of great importance to Mother's work. It was something that had to happen – the first beginnings of making Mother's “Dream” a reality.

ASHRAM STUDENTS AS REPRESENTIVES

Although some countries sent both a boy and a girl to be representatives for the inauguration ceremony as requested (usually connected



Ashram boys and girls working on an Auroville road

with their Embassy in Delhi), some sent only one, and some sent none. So it was decided that the Ashram students will stand in for unrepresented countries and perform other associated roles.

MOTHER'S INVOLVEMENT & PRESENCE

As far back as the autumn of 1967, Mother had chosen Kiran and her brother Vijay to be the first to go to the Urn carrying soil from the Samadhi with the Auroville Charter, the latter handwritten by Mother and contained in a sealed stainless steel cylinder.

On learning about this, Kiran tried to persuade Mother to be physically present at the event herself, but she replied that that was not possible. However she implied that SHE WOULD BE THERE, making this assurance when she told Kiran and Vijay to come to her room early at 8 am on the morning of the 28th, with the words ... "You will come here to my room on the morning of the inauguration, and then (touching Kiran's heart) take me with you to the inauguration."

On arrival at her room on the actual morning they found quite a number of others also there connected with the event, Mother then gave Kiran and Vijay the ceramic bowl containing the Samadhi soil, handing it to her as though she was handing over the most precious and valuable

thing on the planet, together with the hand-written Charter which was then placed in a stainless steel cylinder (approximately 60-70 cms long) presumably made by Harpagon Workshop. She then wanted to know exactly how they would place the cylinder in the Urn. Others present gave their ideas, one of which was to tie a sky blue ribbon around the cylinder to lower it vertically into the Urn. Mother agreed to this, and then asked about the flag: "How are you going to hold it?" Then Mother spontaneously took the flag in her own hands, and – with great strength and force – proceeded to show Kiran exactly how it was to be held. (For Mother, every single detail was important – even how to place the Charter cylinder and the soil sample into the Urn.)

THE SOIL OF EACH NATION

An important detail to be organized was arranging the soil to be put in the Urn by representatives of each nation. It was simply asked of each nation that they should bring "some soil" from their country, but quite a number of national representatives brought special soil from places sacred or precious to that country.

FEEDING THE THOUSANDS

It was agreed that a rice-based lunch packet would be provided to everyone present after the



Preparation of the mound in the Amphitheatre; behind are the shaded stands

inaugural ceremony. Dyuman-bhai – who was in charge of the Ashram Dining Hall at that time – took full responsibility and made arrangements to provide at least 10000 such lunches, maybe 15000, on the assumption that some 5000 would be needed for the Ashram / Pondy people and perhaps another 10000 for the many villagers expected to attend. The idea was that the lunch packet could be opened and eaten at the inauguration site without the need for formal seating arrangements.

This was a huge challenge, because the Dining Hall people had never done anything comparable to this before, specially to feed so many people so far away (transport alone was one of the logistical problems, plus handing out the food packets in an orderly manner), but it went off very well, to the satisfaction of everyone attending. Water was of course also provided, from a well approximately 1 km from the site.

PREPARING THE SITE

There were no roads on the plateau at that time, so the Ashram boys were going out in the evening and working at night for several weeks before the event to create the road from today's Certitude corner to the Banyan tree.

So many details had to be worked out. Meanwhile Nata was collaborating with Roger Anger on the actual construction of the Amphitheatre

and other features of the site (the Ashram Garden Section, for example, was working to provide lots of lotus flowers and potted plants for the day). Keet roofing was used around the rim of the Amphitheatre to provide shade, specially where chairs were set out for the VIPs (such as Mr. Tewfiq, Head of the UNESCO office in Delhi). But the space not being enough many just sat on the slopes in the sun with no untoward incident.

THE URN

The reinforced concrete Urn, designed by Roger was cast at Coco Garden under the direction of the Harpagon workshop (run by Udar). On completion it was covered in marble-chips by (Sicilian-born) French Aurovilian Vincenzo Maiolini.



The Urn brought to the site in a trailer

EXHIBITION AT BANYAN TREE

For the exhibition that was to be set up close to the banyan tree, Paolo had arranged for circular platforms to be built on which exhibition panels were mounted with Mother's messages on Auroville, its purpose and aims, the Charter etc. There were lots of lotuses and other flowers around, arranged, supplied by Jyotin-da of the Ashram gardens.

THE BALLOON

Following Gilbert Gauche's suggestion of a hydrogen balloon over the Banyan tree on that day, Navajata had used his contacts to get hold of one. And finally on the evening of February 27th it arrived. The balloon came from Bombay, the mechanic from Hyderabad and the gas cylinder from somewhere in the south. Sure enough, on the morning of the 28th it could be seen flying high in the sky above the banyan tree from as far away as Promesse.



COORDINATION OF THE PROGRAMME

Student volunteers from the Ashram Physical Education Department, coordinated by Mona-da, took responsibility for looking after the various sections of the crowd, guiding the VIPs, delegates, youth representatives, Ashramites, local village people etc. (the latter were mostly taken care of directly by the Ashram/Society people who had been involved in land negotiations with

them). The police was also there to help.

Udar was the key person acting as Master of Ceremonies during the event.

SEQUENCE OF THE EVENT

Mother had set 10:30 am as the time of the inauguration.

The programme started with Mother reading, from her room in the Ashram, the text "Greetings to all men of goodwill. Are invited to Auroville..." As soon as Her voice was heard live the whole place was electrified. (Kiran found it very moving that Mother was issuing this invitation to the whole world at that moment). It was followed by Her reading the Charter of Auroville in French.

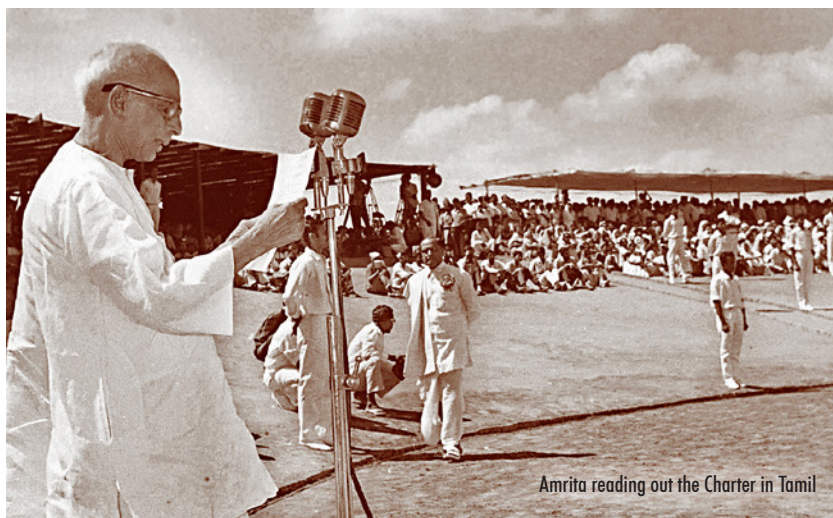
Kiran and Vijay, representing the Ashram and also carrying the Samadhi sand and the scroll of the Charter of Auroville in Mother's handwriting, then started the sequence of young people carrying the name placard and soil of their state or

country (the states first) in alphabetical order, while at the same time the Charter was being read out in many languages, 16 in total, each reading whenever possible coinciding with the youngsters from that country going to the Urn (the English reading was by Norman Dowsett; the Tamil by Amrita-da, who had been responsible for its translation into that language; the Sanskrit by Madhav Pandit; the German by Eckhardt's wife Theodora Karnasch). Last of all came Kalya and Fabienne

with the flag of Auroville and the earth of Auroville. Nolini-da then stepped forward to seal the Urn.

IMPRESSIONS AND REACTIONS

When Kiran had been in Mother's room just before leaving for the inauguration, she had had an overwhelming feeling of something immense and powerful being brought down by the Moth-



Amrita reading out the Charter in Tamil

MOTHER'S IMAGE IN THE BANYAN

The day after the inauguration the Indian Express newspaper had a big write-up on the event, covering the whole front page, with a large photo of Nolini-da sealing the Urn. It may have been in this photo that Mother's image appeared in the Banyan tree, as seen from the opposite side of the Amphitheatre (with the Urn in line with the tree). Looking at the photo, people felt that

er for humanity at the time. She felt that Mother was pouring her force into all involved, into Navajata, Roger, and others, as well as into her and Vijay and everyone else in the room and beyond. This feeling stayed with Kiran throughout the event, to the point that she didn't feel it was any longer just her normal limited self that was there at the event, but that a part of Mother was also there with her, and with everyone else up on the plateau. She felt that Mother's whole vision and force for the realisation of Auroville had been implanted in all those who had been present in her room; that they were now all part of a historically important moment during which Mother was bringing down something of great importance for the whole world i.e for Planet Earth and everyone on it. Commenting on the actual inaugural event, she said: "It all went so smoothly; it was as though Mother herself was directly overseeing and conducting everything. Everyone was so enthusiastic to be playing a part and involved in something so huge, to be actually participating in such an important event. I had the impression that this feeling was shared by everyone, by all the 10000 to 15000 people on the plateau at the time. It was as though Mother was bringing down something great and immense, truly giving something to the whole world, to all humanity – an opportunity."

No doubt many others also felt something similar because Kiran says that some of the letters written by the young participants and students after the inauguration were very moving and beautiful.

they could see Mother's head outlined just above the Urn in the tree, formed by the shape of the leaves and branches with the sky behind. Many people remarked on this as being an indication of "Mother's presence".

Later, after the event, when Kiran next saw Mother, Mother remarked, "I believe the whole



Nolini Kanta Gupta sealing the Urn



The Ashram delegates, Kiran and Vijay Poddar. Vijay holds the cylinder with the Auroville Charter in it. He lowered the cylinder into the Urn using a ribbon tied on it by the Mother.

event went beautifully. You saw that photo in the paper? Some people say that they could see an image of me in the tree.” It was at this point that Kiran remembered Mother telling her and Vijay to come to her room on the morning of the 28th and saying – tapping her chest in the area of the heart – “take me with you, here, to the inauguration. Those people who are sincere will feel me there.”

Kiran had the feeling that when Mother remarked on the apparent image of herself in the photo, she was quietly telling Kiran – “I promised you. I was there.”

MOTHER AND THE BANYAN

It seems that Mother had a close association with the Banyan tree, because in the early stages of preparing the inauguration site the spirit of the tree communicated to her that it was disturbed by all that was going on around it, and was not happy with how it was being treated. Following this subtle communication, Mother called Nata,

who was coordinating work at the site, and asked him to investigate what was happening to the tree. This led to the discovery that carpenters had hammered nails into the tree for hanging their tiffins. Mother sent a special message via Nata to ensure that this sort of disrespectful behavior towards the tree was immediately stopped.

After the inauguration, again the spirit of the tree came to Mother, this time to tell her how lonely it felt after all the activity around it over the past 2-3 months. Mother’s response was to encourage the creation of the first settlements in Auroville. This was made easier by the fact that Mother had already indicated at the time when land was being bought where a first borewell should be dug, by using a “needle” over a map to pinpoint its position. It had proved to be an excellent source of good water. Auroville’s first settlements began shortly after. ❧

*Based on the article in the book,
Inauguration of Auroville – Concept & Purpose.*

MEMORIES OF THE INAUGURATION

Some of those who had participated in the ceremony in 1968 answer our questions

How were you chosen to participate in the inaugural ceremony of the foundation of Auroville on 28th February 1968?

Arup Mitra '72: As a large number of countries had sent their earth but not delegates, the Mother decided that a pair, a boy and girl, from the Ashram school would represent such countries. In some cases, only one delegate came and so, a corresponding partner was chosen from the Ashram. The final pairing was done in the morning of the 28th itself after taking the last call of the arrival of the representatives and consequently none of us knew who our partner would be. Nor did we have any idea which country we would represent. We were simply asked to be present in the school courtyard at the beginning of the 2nd period, that is at around 8-30 a.m.

Rajan Sankpal '74: Delegates from all over the world were invited for the inaugural ceremony of the foundation of Auroville and students from SAICE were chosen to represent those countries who could not attend. A boy and a girl were chosen to represent each country. Savita Srivastava and I were chosen to represent Qatar. It was very exciting and I felt very honoured to be part of the Divine event.

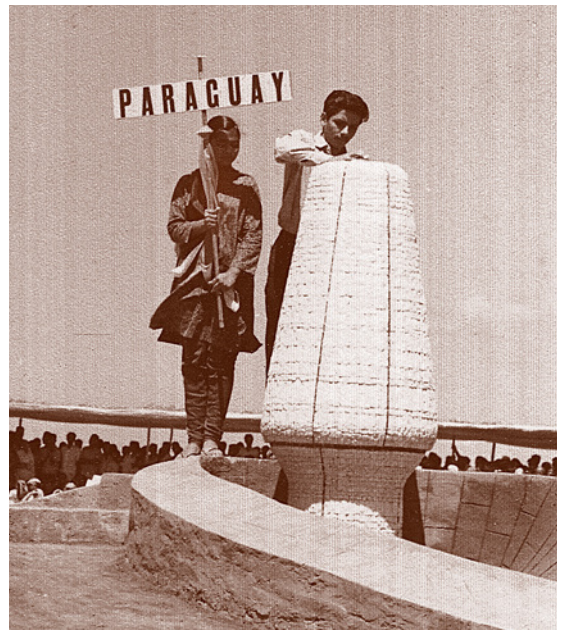
Subhash Thaker '72: I was selected as there were no representatives from Paraguay. My partner was Hemlata for the ceremony day, if I recall the name correctly. We were elated at the prospect of representing a foreign nation which we had never visited, and to be part of the ceremony to get the soil of 200 countries in one urn. We felt bigger than ourselves. Just the dream of one world outpaced everything else.

Sanjukta Lall '71: I do not remember exactly how the selection was done. I think the Mother had earlier asked the children (may be of a certain age group) to give a symbolic drawing as to what represented for them The World Unity. I think, those children's proposals which were sent to the Mother. Perhaps they were among those selected

to represent the countries from where children had not been sent.

Manju Jhunjunwala Bonke '72: On 27th February 1968 I received a note from Kireet Joshi informing me that I will be representing Rajasthan in the Auroville inaugural ceremony. I was thrilled to be part of the Mother's dream project.

Mahesh Patel '73: Our school chose a teenage boy and a teenage girl from among the students to represent countries which could not or did not



send representatives. I was then 15 years old. I was chosen to represent Russia. Since the idea of Auroville itself was like a dream, naturally I was fascinated and full of joy.

Maurice Shukla '75: How I was chosen? Serendipity, pure and simple, you might say! The delegates from Iceland could not make it in time, we were told, and so there we were: Vishakha and I! I was simply thrilled beyond words for having been bestowed this amazing privilege, almost by default! On hindsight, I am always amused by the Mother's sense of humour and irony. I who detest

the cold was chosen to represent Iceland! And that very year, just a few weeks later, on asking the Mother for a new name (I was exasperated by my friends mercilessly and endlessly distorting my original name) She called me Maurice! To me it rather suggested “More ice” to be a worthier representative of Ice-land!



Were you also involved in the preparations that led up to the event? If so, in what way?

Arup: The students of “Vers la Perfection” section of the SAICE led by Tanmaya-da, Padma and Guruprasad (Goupie) were involved in preparing the banners with the names of the countries on them. A colourful satin ribbon was also attached on each side of the placard. These would be carried by one of the delegates representing each country. The work was done in Room Number 14, on the ground floor of the school. But as the work was long and helpers few, we not only worked the whole evening after the sports activities, but the work extended well into the night. Understandably therefore, the activities became more and more hectic and prolonged as the day of the inauguration approached.

Funnily, Auroville office workers from the building next door, led by Oscar, would visit us at almost every hour. But they came to inspect the progress of our work only and vehemently

refused to help us in speeding things up. They said they were overburdened by ‘other’ responsibilities. This led us to believe that they were merely hopping from one place to the other without doing anything substantial.

Upendra Ratra, the artist among us, who was assigned the task of designing the earthen bowl and its earthen cover that would be used to carry the sacred earth from each country, reported to me an interesting incident that induced laughter. Upon finishing a sample piece when he took it to architect Roger Anger for approval, the latter somewhat rudely but customarily observed, “Tu trouves ça beau ? Moi je dis que c’est horrible!” But in spite of such unabashed expression of contempt, Roger did finally accept the model for preparing the required dozens of earthen bowls.

Subhash: I was involved in building the roads and other infrastructure. Also, as a student of architecture, because I had imagined that it would be very hot on that day, I had designed a special umbrella which was meant to be an experiment in the frugal use of material and technology. Unfortunately, when I took the prototype to the grounds of Auroville, it could not withstand the velocity and the swirl of the rising wind. Nowadays, there are computers to work this out. I had to abandon the experiment as there was not enough time to build another one due to the tight deadline.

Benimadhav Mohanty⁷⁴: Yes, was at it from November, when some of us from the School started making the road to the Centre by clearing bushes. Then from the end of January we used to cycle up to the centre for recording the registration numbers of the lorries that were taking loads of red soil out or bringing in material, as several double payments had been made. To avoid this we started noting down all the vehicle numbers. Then in the last week leading to the 28th we worked with Paolo Tomasi on the exhibition of more than a hundred photographs of the Auroville landscape of the time, taken and enlarged by Borun Tagore, and Norman Dowsett junior.

Mahesh: As students, we were all allowed to give our ideas and thoughts, as to how we would like to visualize Auroville. I think Mother had

DAYANAND-JI REMEMBERS

The most difficult work was to lay the roads to the amphitheatre. Bits and pieces of land had been bought but they were not contiguous. So first of all the land had to be bought to connect the Kuyilapalyam road to the land on which the amphitheatre was going to be made. Truckloads of red earth had to be sent to the site and work went on for a whole month. A system was devised to keep track of all the trucks which were taking the earth. I would send the truck driver with a chit and when it reached the site the person present would write on it that he had received the material and then the driver would come back to Pondy and take the payment for it in cash. This meant that I was called at all odd hours by the drivers who would come to take payment. In those days all payments for everything were made in cash.

The work of making the amphitheatre and the road was also given to the students of the Ashram School. The urn was made by Vincenzo. I saw the Mother almost every day to keep her informed about everything or to get her instructions.

My work during the ceremony was to manage the crowds. Many villagers and the pan-

chayat heads were invited. There was a huge crowd of people who had gathered that day and as I spoke Tamil and I knew all of them I had to manage them.

After buying the land at Alankuppam I went to give them sweets. I took them in a trailer behind a jeep. But they refused to take those sweets. They had never seen anyone else other than their own village people so when they saw foreigners they were very suspicious about our intentions. I had to come away with the sweets. The villagers were extremely hostile in the early years.

The Mother took all the decisions. She had asked me to plant 12 transformation trees around the amphitheatre. I did that but later someone chopped them off.

The banyan tree was in a very poor condition. The villagers used to tie their cows to the tree and it was just the village tree. We looked after it and it looked so beautiful afterwards.

The Mother was in a hurry and was always saying "This has to be done just now. There is no time." Something was descending and she needed a place for it to manifest.

The idea of having Matrimandir just there was not planned until much later.

suggested that. I do not remember what ideas I gave, but I remember a student suggesting fountains of "Sherbat"!

Sanjukta: Yes. Major activities were going on, in various fields. I remember, along with our teachers, namely Guruprasad (nicknamed Goupie), Kake, Krishna-bhai, Tamnay-da, we children were involved in making the banners for all the countries, in plywood - you know a vertical stick to hold up and then a horizontal plaque with the name of the country printed on both sides. This horizontal plaque was not just a sheet of ply. It had to have certain dimensions, so some carpentry expertise was required! Then writing the names out in capital letters, of a certain size, the task of cutting out the same, then pasting them onto these boards, was work which required

concentration and was also enjoyable. The first sample was sent to the Mother for her approval, then the rest were taken up on the same model, but to reach that standard it took us 5 trials. Then came the flags of various countries. What an interesting task, and how much we learnt at that time! The same colours could be involved but the placing of the colours, either horizontal or vertical, the order of the stripes, changed the country it represented. For us 13-14 year-old children, this was all quite fascinating. Remember we had neither TV nor radio and, of course, there were no computers, so this kind of exposure was a major source of learning, I remember having worked for 5 days and 5 nights continuously, just before 27th February 1968! Enthusiasm was at its height and I did not feel a wee bit tired.

WHAT AN HONOUR!

By Minoti Mohanty '75

I joined the Free Progress System of Tanmaya-da in December 1967, a year after my joining the Ashram School. My limited outlook was changing fast. Shedding the cocoon of my biological family of 6 members in Odisha, I was happy to be a part of a unit of 30 in the hostel. The Free Progress System had no definite gradations – we were one Big Unit – one big family. Gone were the days of alienation, hunting for friends, looking for amusements. Into each day were packed so many surprises, anyone I came across in any part of the Ashram was a known face, a smiling face, had a loving look – we were one family with the Divine Mother as the mother of us all.

It was around this period of elation, some secret words were buzzing around among my senior batch-mates. There was talk of a project of the Mother, 14 kms away from Pondicherry, to build a city based on the ideal of Human Unity, a city which will belong to no one in particular but to humanity as a whole.

Being young and fanciful, it got me dreaming, dreaming of a place of brotherhood, harmony, peace and love. With the Mother guiding us anything was possible.

I was too new to take part in any of the preparations for the inauguration of the 28th of February, but I was told that two persons – a boy and a girl of all the states of India and all the countries of the world would go to put the soil of their state or country in the urn at the Auroville Amphitheatre. Since the girl from a country called Indonesia could not come for the occasion, I was to replace her.



What an honour, what excitement! I was overwhelmed with indescribable joy in anticipation of this great event.

What followed is also very dream-like today. All I remember is that in the wee hours of 28th February 1968 we boarded a bus to Auroville and on reaching there found the place already teeming with hundreds of people.

The landscape was quite barren all around, except for the Banyan Tree around which some 'alpanas' were made tastefully. But the colourful banners of the various representing countries were aligned on one side and to me they were reminiscent of the Olympic flags in some auditorium. The ceremony began with Vijay-bhai and Kiran-di clad in white flowing dresses approaching the urn with the Mother's Flag. An intense moment indeed! In a solemn manner all the delegates followed on the spiral pathway, carrying the soil of their country and banners in hand. Everyone was conscious that an extraordinary event was happening though in a humble way. Fabienne and Kalya made a very smart and handsome pair when they reached the urn with the Auroville flag and soil from Auroville. At the end, our senior-most sadhak of the Ashram, Nolini-da, approached the Lotus urn and sealed it.

Then came the Divine Mother's voice broadcast from Her room in Pondicherry reading the Auroville charter – firm, powerful, irrefutable and crystal clear. "Auroville..."

What a great step in history! I was a small speck in the crowd that day but today I feel that I had the extraordinary privilege of witnessing such an epoch-making event!

Nalin Patel '73: Absolutely. Day and night. The Corner House (the students' canteen) became in some way the centre point of meetings

for the youth. Most of the time, we were helping around there to see that everything was in place when all the delegations came.

Manju: The week before the ceremony was a hectic one. There were a series of meetings held in the courtyard of the Ashram Library which is a neighbouring building from my house. I participated there in the brainstorming sessions to explain to the delegates the *raison d'être* of Auroville and the UNESCO link. Also three delegates, one from Mauritius and two others from Kenya, were lodged in my house. It was one of the most interesting weeks in my life.

Maurice: Well, I was barely thirteen, so my involvement in the preparations was purely at a personal level. I spent a lot of very happy time with the delegates who had arrived, chatting, finding out about our mutual life-styles and routine and experiences, eating with them at the Corner House. I still remember the fun and cheer sitting under the mango-tree in the Corner House in the evenings, chatting away endlessly and wanting this moment never to end!

Can you say something about the atmosphere in the Ashram in the month that led up to the final day?

Arup: The atmosphere was electric, pregnant with the euphoria of an approaching festivity. The mood was buoyed up by the thought that an international city so close to Pondicherry was coming up in its glory and we would actually see it take shape. Night and day, our topic of discussion centred round the City of Dawn and the latest things that the Mother had said about it.

Mahesh: There were lots of activities, especially in the Auroville office, the room where now the Registrar's Office is located. Most of the Ashramites felt involved in this idea of Mother's about an International City. I think people in the Ashram were fascinated not only with the concept but with the designs and models made by the French architect.

Benimadhav: The atmosphere must have been surcharged. I did not even notice as we were busy shuttling between the Centre and Pondicherry twice a day, carrying food to relieve our friends who were on duty, day and night, in 3 shifts. We volunteers had no school or sports.

Subhash: I don't remember the atmosphere

in the Ashram being very different outwardly. Perhaps, there was pressure and tension in those who had to meet the tight deadline to construct the arena like a coliseum.

Rajan: From 21st February until the inauguration day, 28th February, the atmosphere was simply electric, excitement filled the air and we all were caught up in a mood of great aspiration.

Nalin: There was so much excitement in the air. My brother Kamalesh and I, along with friends like Upendra Sharma, Niladri, Sunu were all the time interacting with the newcomers from far and wide trying to understand what was happening in their countries. This was early 1968, and it seemed that it was the climax of something new which was happening. So many young people were there, from all over the world and especially from Europe, and they were coming into India and Asia. There were VW buses parked and camped in the Government Park. For us, the Ashram teenagers, it was as if people from Mars were here and our curiosity had no end.

Maurice: It was simply, indescribably enthusiastic! As youngsters, we had been fed at school and at the Ashram on the power and joy of "dreaming", and in those days for all practical purposes, school and the Ashram felt like ONE world. The excitement of launching this project of 'human unity', the colourful happy presence of all these international delegates from outside Pondicherry and outside India, the uncontrollable euphoria of creating the 'New world' which we felt was just round the corner and around and above all this, the tremendously reassuring and inspiring Presence of the Mother emanating from her room above the Samadhi! We seemed to be living in heaven already and the gift of Auroville was that extra drop that spilled over on to an ocean of gladness!

Can you share with us your memories of the day itself? What were your impressions?

Arup: The day began amid suppressed excitement. I remember putting on a pair of trousers and a full-sleeve shirt for the occasion, a rare thing in the Ashram of those days. After finishing a quick breakfast at Corner House, I rushed to

RELAYING MOTHER'S VOICE

How was the Mother's voice relayed live from her room to the amphitheatre for the inauguration ceremony of Auroville?

In 1968 conditions were quite different from today's world where many things are within easy reach of even the common man. Arun-bhai of the Projector Room confirmed that the whole operation was done with telephone wires. The Mother sitting in her room read out the charter of Auroville and the wires connected to the microphone then went to a recording machine and also to a telephone in Pondicherry. That telephone was connected to a telephone in Auroville. In those days even landline telephones were rare in Pondicherry and there was probably only one in Auroville in February 1968. The Mother's voice was then amplified by the speakers connected to that phone.

Although the Director of the All India Radio Pondicherry helped set up this long distance connection there was no transmission by radio waves in this process of getting the Mother's voice to Auroville. It was Vishwanath-da who set up the recording equipment inside the Mother's room and Mahi was sitting outside the room in the covered part of the terrace with the recording machine when the Mother spoke into the microphone.

All those who were present at the inauguration ceremony say that hearing the Mother's voice live at the ceremony was something unforgettable.

the school. The courtyard was half full and, as is typical of the Ashram, everybody was waiting in silence for the registrar to come and start making the announcements. My turn came rather late as I was designated to represent Thailand, beginning with the twentieth letter of the Roman alphabet. I found that I was paired up with an unknown girl, whom, however, I had seen before. I soon learned that her name was Aruna Nandi but there was no way of guessing what tremendous impact she would later bear on my life.

While Aruna took the banner, I collected the earth of Thailand in a covered earthen bowl from, if I am not mistaken, the Typing Room beside the erstwhile Room Number 7 on the southern side of the ground floor of the school. This room was located under the erstwhile Hall of Harmony with its entrance under the exposed stairway.

I was quick to point out to Aruna that I was instrumental in manufacturing the banner she was carrying. However, on inspecting the content of the bowl, I was a bit disappointed to realise how closely the earth of Thailand resembled that of India!

Proceeding out of the school by the south-eastern gate, near Sisir-da's room which had been kept open for the occasion, we headed straight towards the Art House on the Rue Duplex.

Oh! What an amazing spectacle was waiting for our eyes! As we emerged on the present day Nehru Street at the level of the Rue Francois Martin, an unprecedented large convoy of 30 buses became visible. These buses were lined up on both sides of the road to take the participants, other Ashram members and visitors to Auroville. There was a tremendous rush because 1968 was a leap-year, and the 28th was ensconced between the all-important Darshan Day on the 21st and the anniversary of the Supramental Descent on the 29th. As a result, the huge turnout of visitors would not miss the firsthand view of the birth of an international city and those who could not muster a place to sit in the buses happily squeezed themselves between the seats to avail that free ride. But there was no fighting for place, no shouting or any kind of disharmony among the people.

Mahesh: The day naturally started with waking up very early in the morning. You can imagine, even on annual picnic days we hardly sleep the previous night, and this was a special, once in a lifetime picnic. All the pairs of teenagers from all countries along with students of our school were taken together to Auroville. We felt delighted to be part of the elite group. We were seated separately, which made us feel very important. But more important was the joy of taking part in the foundation laying ceremony of a City

visualized by the Mother. The place was totally barren in those days, with hardly any greenery. It was therefore very, very hot. But the joy of participation was so much that I don't think we felt the heat. At least I did not.

Nalin: It was a beautiful morning and the air was crisp. The convoy of buses and vehicles which left Pondy for Auroville was an impressive sight. Everything was running smoothly. There was no chaos, no hectic movements, no noise. What was most impressive how punctually the ceremony started in spite of hundreds of visitors.

I was hoping that Mother would come physically to attend... but then Her vibrant message over the speakers was electrifying and gave me goosebumps. Even today this powerful voice and message bring back the same feeling.

Manju: It was 50 years ago but it seems as if it was only yesterday. Early in the morning of 28th February 1968, dressed in my best skirt, I hurried to attend the ceremony.

Delegates from all over the world had gathered there. The Africans stood out in the crowd with their vibrant coloured dresses and proud statures. With a gathering of delegates from different nations, it was like witnessing the entire world in a concise form on the soil of Auroville. The ceremony was heralding a new era of world unity.

The Mother read out the charter of Auroville in French from Her room and it was broadcast live. Her words were directed to 5000 people gathered around the amphitheatre. Thereafter the charter was read in 16 languages. It was when Amrita-da read the charter in Tamil that I understood how sweet the Tamil language is!

When my turn came, I walked slowly around

the amphitheatre and moved towards the urn carrying the soil in my hands. But just as I was putting the soil in the urn I felt one of my sandals snapping. I walked barefoot back after placing the soil in the urn and leaving the broken sandal there.

The Banyan tree standing in an expanse of sun-baked earth was a quiet witness to this ceremony and all the happenings.

Rajan: On the inauguration day a boy and a girl from the participating countries or those of us from SAICE who represented a country, held

in our hands the placard bearing the name of the country and the soil from that country. I represented Qatar with Savita Srivastava. The Divine Mother's voice came through powerful and resonant from her room and hearing it was a divine experience. We all walked slowly around the amphitheatre and moved towards the urn which was at the center, carrying in our hands the soil or salt as the case may be. And one by one we placed the



soil in the urn. It was a feeling of tremendous excitement to be a part of this divine event, and a historic one.

Subhash: The day was bright with a golden light and it was hot. It felt like a new dawn, a new year's day, a festival day, something out of a fairy tale. We could distinctly see a gathering of clouds, a formation which took the shape of the Mother's profile looking at the opening ceremony. It felt quite extraordinary.

Benimadhav: There was a very mixed crowd and everyone was very disciplined. There were 40 buses that carried us all to the Centre at 8 am. It was the largest gathering that had ever assembled at the Ashram. Many had come also for the

29th which was the 4th anniversary of the Supramental Descent. I was too tired and excited to register much. I was in a kind of haze, as we had been working for more than a month continuously leading up to the ceremony. It was my time for taking the cue after T was announced, country after country was being lined up to go. Volunteers were led by Batti-da and Ajit-da (Namita's brother) who were the overall in-charge for most of the boys in uniform standing around the amphitheatre.

Sanjukta: 28th February 1968 - for us children it was THE DAY. It was for this day that we had put in so much effort. We were going to be part of History. A New Unity Space was going to be created. Mother's Dream was getting manifested. It was a very serene day. Yes, that is what I have retained.

Maurice: Unbelievable excitement was in the air, lots of movement and joy linking us all, unstoppable chatter amongst us kids, smiles that just would not leave our faces, our School where we were supposed to gather and be picked up from had a truly 'international' dimension to it. Auroville that day seemed but a natural culmination of this amazing coming together of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the East and the West were meeting after all in this celebration of our being ONE family! As the buses drove us towards Auroville, the way seemed endless, full of all kinds of vehicles heading for this momentous inauguration of the New City. I remember the bare, red treeless red terrain, the heat and the powdery Auroville dust in the air we could see from the bus, and the sea of visitors that had already gathered as we reached the Banyan Tree and the Urn area where the ceremony was to take place. Here all frontiers and barriers seemed to disappear as

this sea of humanity mingled in all its diverse colours and shapes. I remember how even the Tamil villagers who had come from all around felt so much part of what was happening in their dusty bowl that day.

What were the highlights of the day, from your point of view?

Maurice: First, obviously was the inaugural ceremony itself. The way it had been planned, organised, all very disciplined, systematic, the flags, the spiral pathway to the Urn, the neatly designated seating arrangement, the smartly dressed

Ashram volunteers in white... and then as the ceremony began, hearing the Mother LIVE from her room in the Ashram! That was one incredibly powerful moment for me: She was with us, amongst us through that LIVE broadcast! We felt the ceremony was taking place in Her womb! Wasn't it the 'birth' of a new world?!

Then as kids we were so excited about reading the name of the country that was being announced and to try and recognise the delegates! Suddenly I realised how many we were from the School! I



remember Kalya and Fabienne very clearly, representing Auroville, looking so inspiringly young and beautiful, and both were, besides, directly connected to the Mother as well! And then to see our dear Nolini-da sealing the Urn at the end! None more fitting could have been chosen for this highly symbolic charged act! The unity of the world had been established in the heart of the earth itself, eternally rooted!

Sanjukta: From the moment the journey started from Pondicherry till I marched up the ramp and finally offered the soil from the country I was representing into the white urn, I felt the

LA NAISSANCE D'AUROVILLE

Gita Lall '71

Janvier 1968

"Alors j'aimerais que vous imaginiez la forme que prendra la structure dans laquelle on mettra la terre du monde tout entier."

M. Roger Anger a appelé quelques élèves pour exécuter un dessin de cette structure qui représentera le symbole de l'unité mondiale. Nous nous sommes mis au travail en exécutant plusieurs esquisses de structure d'urnes et de la forme que prendrait la terre tout autour.

M. Roger Anger nous a dit qu'on allait choisir un de ces dessins pour le jour de l'inauguration d'Auroville. Bien sûr qu'on n'avait pas le droit de "guigner" le papier du voisin. Tanmaya nous a montré quelques-uns de ces croquis.

J'attendais et je brûlais d'impatience de voir comment ce serait le jour du 28 février 1968.

Février 1968

Mère a enoyé un petit mot pour représenter les drapeaux de tous les pays qui allaient participer à la naissance de cette ville nouvelle, de ce rêve de Mère, Auroville. Mère ne voulait pas qu'il y ait de vrais drapeaux. Elle a demandé que soient fabriquées de pancartes. Fixées sur les bâtons, chacune porterait le nom d'un pays et des rubans aux couleurs des drapeaux y seraient accrochés.

Les pancartes ont été fabriquées à Harpagon. L'imprimerie de l'Ashram a imprimé les noms sur du papier et les rubans, on les a achetés au marché. Nous avons effectué tout

l'assemblage. Je me rappelle que nous avions un grand plaisir à travailler même la nuit. Quelle joie de participer à la naissance de cette ville nouvelle, Auroville.

Arrive le 28 février. Tôt le matin je me suis préparée en pensant comment allait se dérouler toute la cérémonie.

Nous sommes partis dans les autobus de l'Ashram. Arrivée sur le terrain je suis restée "bouche bée". Je me suis dit, "Ouah! Quelle ouverture! Quelle beauté et harmonie règnent sur ce terrain!" J'ai été sidérée par la Présence qui dominait cet endroit. Les chaises pour les "VIPs" ont été installées. Chacun avait une place. Nous avons pris les nôtres. Il y avait beaucoup de monde mais un silence dominait l'endroit. La cérémonie a débuté. Chacun est allé faire le tour du terrain pour monter jusqu'à l'urne et y mettre la terre.

Je représentais le Vénézuéla. À mon tour je me suis levée et je marchais lentement. Je posais chaque pas avec cette pensée en moi: "Ô Mère, que ton rêve, que cette ville nouvelle existe et qu'elle grandisse et s'épanouisse pleinement, telle que tu l'as voulu." Je m'approchais de l'urne; arrivée au sommet je suis restée figée, je ne pouvais plus bouger, je me forçais à me déplacer. Impossible! Comme si quelque chose m'avait envahie, je sentais sur la tête un poids lourd, très lourd! Et puis hop! tout d'un coup ce sentiment a disparu. J'ai continué, je me suis éloignée de l'urne et suis descendue.

Plus tard entre le feuillage du banyan nous avons tous aperçu une forme qui ressemblait à celle du visage de Mère.

Le jour du 28 février reste inoubliable.

Mother's Eyes were watching the entire ceremony. It was vividly felt.

Nalin: The smooth way in which all the events were unfolding and in our minds, we youngsters from the Ashram were just saying, "Let us make it an Olympian event where the youth of the world is together."

Rajan: The highlight for me was, Savita Sri-vastava and myself walking and carrying a

placard for the nation of Qatar and placing the salt in the urn.

Subhash: The pouring of the soil of 200 countries into the urn, the smartly dressed colleagues, the welcome, the food, the dust blowing in all directions etc. - all that added to the charm of the day.

Benimadhav: Mother's voice was broadcast live from Her room. She read out the charter of

Auroville. It was followed by others reading it in other languages such as Sanskrit, Tamil, Russian, Arabic etc. I was impressed by the very organised way in which everything moved. It was impeccable.

Arup: By far, the highlight of the day was the live broadcast of the Mother's message in her own voice. This transmission was organised by the newly formed All India Radio, Pondicherry, headed by its dynamic director Mr. Dharmagani. (*Ed. Note: The Mother's voice was transmitted by telephone lines but the AIR was involved in the whole project to facilitate things.*) At the moment when the Mother began reciting her message, I remember getting goose-bumps all over my body. Oh! What a Presence was felt during that reading!

Another event, of personal importance that shines out relates to an event that took place on our return to Pondicherry. All the delegates, including the Ashram students who represented the countries, were given a sumptuous lunch at Montbrun House, now known as Society House. As Aruna and I were proceeding towards the food counter, someone from the Ashram called me unexpectedly. I was asked to help others to unload a big quantity of material that had been brought back from Auroville, post the inauguration ceremony. The work took inordinately long and I was cursing my luck for missing out on the special lunch because I was feeling terribly hungry. With a heavy heart, I reluctantly headed back to the serving counter knowing well that it had been dismantled by now. But lo! What a surprise was awaiting me. Aruna had taken an extra plate of food with hers and was patiently waiting for my return to share her lunch with me!

Mahesh: The highlight of the day was the buffet lunch in Montbrun House (Society house). I do not remember the items, but I do remember the feeling that we had a royal meal, with all the young boys and girls from different countries. I think, in those days, the lunch compensated for the loss of not being able to put the earth/salt in the urn, as a couple from Russia landed in Chennai sometime when it was the turn of countries starting with the letter M. And by the time it was

the turn of countries with the letter R, they had reached Auroville. On a more serious note, the highlight of the day was to listen to the message of the Mother. I felt then that the Mother was physically present there among us.

Did you feel that something "special" was happening? If so, can you say something about it?

Arup: The Mother's presence was concretely felt throughout the period of preparation as well as on the day of the inauguration.

Another interesting point was, the Mother received in her room one of my little cousins from Calcutta whose 3rd birthday fell on 28th February 1968. This was minutes before making her historic, long-distance, inaugural speech. The parents of the little girl reported seeing some technicians and a lot of instruments in Mother's room. This goes to show how relaxed she was, sticking to her daily schedule even on that apparently 'busy' day of Auroville's birth.

Rajan: With the foundation and inauguration of Auroville (City of Dawn), the vision and work of Sri Aurobindo was being realised. It was a collective experiment dedicated to human unity and international understanding. I consider myself extremely fortunate to have been chosen to be a part of this Divine event.

Subhash: Indeed, the Mother's presence was felt and this was confirmed by the Mother the next day. That touch, that love, that we were selected to be the representatives of the countries which stood for one world, meant that we needed to carry this work forward when we left Auroville for our home that evening. I still do this and the travel industry in which I work makes it a little easier.

Benimadhav: Mother's presence was palpable... It had never been so strong.

Mahesh: It certainly felt like something special was happening. The word "Auroville" itself was special, and is special even today.

Sanjukta: For sure, the conception itself was unique and special. The Mother had read out the Charter of Auroville, her voice reverberated all over. The wind, the sunlight, the shade, everything participated. It was tangible.

REPRESENTING AUROVILLE

Fabienne

I must say the most important memory is that we were all tremendously, intensely and quietly happy... and that happiness came from the deep feeling that somehow we were in the right place, at the right time, with the right persons, participating in a formidable and wonderful event that certainly would help bring more joy, beauty and friendliness to the world. Now that might seem a little “superlative” but that is because it WAS superlative. We were blessed with superlative happiness. It was as if Her dynamic and joyful Presence was everywhere... covering the whole event, in all its details, like an “atmosphere” englobing the Ashram, the whole town of Pondy and the whole area of Auroville. There was a tremendous enthusiasm, dynamism and joy... a joy of just being there.

In 1968, a few months, or days before the Inauguration, my Grand-Father, André-da, announced to me that Mother wished that I, along with Kalya, my cousin, represent Auroville for the Inauguration. I jumped for joy of course.

The day before the Inauguration, Kalya and I went to Mother and we received from Her the box, lined with silver paper, that contained the soil of Auroville to be poured last, in the urn,



on top of the soil from all other countries. I was carrying the beautiful flag of Auroville. There was a lot of wind, and a lot of strength was needed that day to hold the flag steadily, but someone from the Physical Education Department had shown me exactly how to hold it – may he be remembered gratefully right here – and everything went well. I can only say I am so glad and grateful I was there and would gladly live that experience all over again and again and again.

Something really wonderful is there even now in Auroville... hopefully not only “in spite of us”, but because of our love, aspiration and trust, and the growing awareness that, if nothing else, we are endowed with a deeper and more valid way of looking at Life, Ourselves and Others.

Nalin: Yes – this was going to be the dawn of a new era. When one looks back on that event in February 1968, one can see, historically, the other significant and perhaps connected events that unfolded around that time and that year. Just a few which changed our world: the student revolutions in France and Germany; the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy; the rising protests against the Vietnam War; the *Prague Spring* of 1968 in Czechoslovakia, etc...

Maurice: Absolutely! We were creating the “New” world, we were “the sun-eyed children of a marvellous Dawn”, “the flaming pioneers”, the

barrier-breakers, the architects of this incredible world of oneness that we lived and breathed that day and in the days preceding it. I felt the Ashram was expanding its horizons, it was embracing the whole world. Another very strange feeling I had was this: though Auroville was officially coming into existence on 28th February 1968, I had the unmistakable impression that it had ALWAYS been there, waiting for us to come and discover it! It did not feel like some individual’s or an organisation’s project but a project of the entire earth, something that the planet had been yearning for, for all these centuries! And the Day had at last dawned! ☸

CELEBRATING AUROVILLE'S 50TH ANNIVERSARY

Srimoyi '78 tells us about some of the major events that were held to mark the occasion

Auroville celebrated the 50th anniversary of its inauguration this year. On 28th February, the customary Bonfire and meditation was followed by the Water Ceremony which was reminiscent of the inaugural soil ceremony 50 years ago. Can you tell us something about it?

The idea to have a water ceremony came over a year and a half ago. Jyoti and I were brainstorming and we thought we could have something reminiscent of the Inauguration ceremony but with a different element – water. And slowly it dawned on us that in fact this is the element that is most relevant today, the element that is the topic of the moment all over the planet. It's beauty is that it transcends national boundaries thereby taking this ceremony one step farther from that of the original inauguration ceremony. An element which truly belongs to all and must be shared by all.

Our Matrimandir Events Team took it up. We spread the word regarding our plan and people brought samples of water from all over the world. From Iceland to Antarctica, from Peru to Sudan, from Tibet to Hawaii, they came from all over – there were 321 samples in all (*see map here: <https://www.auroville.org/contents/4257>*). There were so many sacred sources: there was water from Lourdes, from the Chalice Well at Glastonbury, from a sufi mazaar from Pakistan, from Gangotri and Mansarovar and from many many other sacred places, springs and rivers in India and abroad. People put in a lot of effort. For

instance Vilas, who had represented Cuba in the original inauguration, went especially to Cuba and got water from four different sacred sources there and she brought them with so much care in bottles that had been used by the Mother. Many in India brought water from their tirthasthanam. I was really touched by the dedication and devotion with which so many brought the water.

As we got closer to Feb 28th there was like a deluge of water samples that started coming in.

We had to receive each one of them from the collaborators who brought them, listen to their particular story, put them in order, label them, enter them into the chart and finally forward them to the calligraphers who would then copy them out onto the beautiful blue paper placards. The placards in the shape of drops were



The Water Ceremony

cut and spray painted by two Auroville units. An Auroville potter made the beautiful pots to carry the water. It was really a collaborative effort.

On 28th February, after the meditation, shortly before 6 am just as it started to get light, the Auroville children came down batch by batch into the Green Room of the Amphitheatre where a team of volunteers handed over to them one by one the water samples and the placards, with which they walked quietly out into the Amphitheatre, then up to the Urn and down on the other side, walked along the water symbol as given by the Mother and finally poured the water into the golden disk placed at the centre of the Auroville symbol made of flowers and candles. The disc already

had water from the Lotus Pond that is below the Matrimandir and water from the Samadhi that had been kept in Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's rooms. This water received all the other waters.

The whole ceremony was accompanied by live music from Auroville musicians and the Auroville Choir. The theme of the music was the "Earth's Aspiration Chant" as given by the Mother. It was a special moment in the history of Auroville. We, the organisers were very touched by how beautifully it all went. We really felt that the Mother presided over the whole event.

All the water that was part of the ceremony is now in these 3 large sealed containers. We hope that all this water will go into the future lake that will surround the Matrimandir. The waters of the world will flow in the Matrimandir lake and keep receiving the Mother's force. And we believe that when the water comes here and receives the Mother's force it has an effect on the source from where it comes.

Volunteers from the Ashram helped with the crowd management on 28th Feb. Also in an exceptional arrangement you helped arrange for the Ashram students to be present for the early morning meditation, Bonfire and Water Ceremony. Can you tell us something about this?

Usually, I along with some volunteers are left to take care of crowd management. This year I said "I can't do it. I have to concentrate on the water ceremony." Besides, we were expecting some 6000 or more people and it had to be organized in a different way with at least a hundred volunteers. It was wonderful that Ashram volunteers came forward to help us. A special bond has been forged between Auroville and Ashram through this endeavour. The Golden Chain started it some years ago by issuing passes for the Bonfires on our behalf and now your office has become an important link between Auroville and Ashram.

And yes, 160 odd students of the Ashram School with their teachers attended. I remember how I handed over the passes to Manoj-da who handed them over to Uttama. It was like a ceremony in itself. The students' coming was a very symbolic and a beautiful moment. It was really wonderful to collaborate with people from the

Ashram to make this possible. Srijita of Auroville Security was also involved. She organized the routes the buses had to take etc. I think finally it all worked out really well. The children also must have made the effort to wake up really early to be able reach here on time. It is something they will always remember.

I am left with a very happy feeling when I remember the 28th Bonfire and Water Ceremony. Yes, we had our share of difficulties in Auroville with the limited passes etc., but I feel when you persevere and try to go beyond the difficulties asking for Her help the final outcome is powerful and beautiful.

In the buildup to the celebrations, Auroville hosted the Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi. What were the highlights of his visit? How will it benefit Auroville?

I believe that nothing happens at the Matrimandir that is not the Mother's will. Prime Minister Modi's visit must have had Her sanction. I believe he spent around 15 minutes in the Matrimandir. What happened there is between him and the Mother. Then, we were asked if he could inaugurate the water ceremony and so we provided water samples of Ganga, Narmada and Kaveri to pour into the lotus pond below the Matrimandir. He did it very well, very ceremoniously, while five children from Auroville chanted Sri Aurobindo's Gayatri Mantra. His speech at Bharat Nivas was also very nice. I was particularly touched that he referred to the Mother as the Divine Mother and that he paid tribute to Kireet-bhai.

I am not in a position to say how we are benefited by his visit. Yes, the Prime Minister of India visiting Auroville has a certain significance on deeper levels, but that is beyond us and I cannot comment on that.

The main cultural event of the celebrations that some of us attended was the programme Seas 'Soul Encounters for the Auroville Soul' which was staged in the amphitheatre on 17th Feb. Can you tell us something about the concept of the programme and what it was like to be a part of it?

SEAS narrated the Soul's evolutionary journey through passages taken from Sri Aurobindo's



Srimoyi during the programme *Seas*

Savitri. There were about a hundred participants in all. The performers from various disciplines of the body came together and created this unique event along with video projections as backdrop.

The vision and concept of this programme came from Grace, an Aurovilian and a dancer. Production, direction, choreography, choice of costume etc were also hers along with some professional collaborators. She was the driving force behind its creation. The music was by Patrick, who used to work with Sunil-da.

Grace must have begun working on it a year and a half ago. She had a very clear idea about what she wanted to do. Then of course it evolved from there. Grace, Patrick and Savitri (another Aurovilian) selected the lines from *Savitri* and from April or May we started going to Patrick (in Sunil-da's music room actually) and would listen to the music that he was composing and give our feedback. This went on for a few months. Then six of us were chosen to read the lines. We practised the reading and recorded the lines. Finally, I must say I loved the music.

A programme of this scale has not happened before in Auroville. As you saw there were performers of all kinds. These are all activities in Auroville: the fire dancers, the Odissi and Bharatnatyam dancers, children doing acrobatics and gymnastics. It brought together the community in a way. It was a very beautiful experience for all of us. To work with *Savitri* with such beautiful music in a space like the Amphitheatre in the vicinity of the Matrimandir is a tremendous privilege. You have to have the tremendous Grace of the Mother to experience this. Not that we didn't have difficulties between ourselves – you know the human factor always comes up – but if you

sincerely ask to be able to go beyond these petty egoisms, the help is always there.

You have been in Auroville for a number of years. Have the celebrations, this working together created a greater bonding, a greater focus? Has it yielded something?

Yes, it surely has yielded something. I believe something has gone into the very fabric of the community. I cannot say it is "this" or "that". I don't have the vision or the insight to be able to say it, but something has definitely happened. The programme *Seas* and the Water Ceremony were both an offering to the Universal Mother. In return, I believe She gave us a gift by making it all so beautiful. Something was in the air, and who made it so? It cannot be us, it was Her, Her presence which made the difference.

And now it is like a lot of doors have been opened for us. We have to now go through these doors. I can only say that there are moments in Auroville, when you feel, that after being stuck for many years, things/projects start moving. It is a moment like that now. We have to use this moment that Mother is giving us.

New generations of SAICE alumni continue to join Auroville. Do you feel there is any special contribution they can make to the development of Auroville in the coming years?

Yes, definitely, SAICE alumni have a special role to play. They receive something in the Ashram which is essential for the growth of Auroville – this full commitment to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo. We need people here who say "this is what They have said; this is what They have seen; so, let's do it." I think this is easier for Ashram students. I am not saying it is true for all, but the Ashram education is really very special. The speciality lies in just the fact that the environment and the teachers who teach there have this inner connection to the Mother and Sri Aurobindo which they communicate to the students. We were bathed in that. It is in the very pores of our being. Nothing can change that. I hope that things are still like that today. Yes conditions may have changed. We have to do the best we can. And I believe the Divine is still in charge; She is still taking care. ❧

ENACTING *ERIC*

Sunayana speaks to Anshul '17 and Shibani 'K1 who played the main roles of Eric and Aslaug in the 1st December Programme, 2017.

Sunayana: Tell us how Sri Aurobindo's play *Eric* came to be chosen for the 1st December programme.

Anshul: Initially we wanted to do something different. Priyanka, Vinay and I took up the initiative. We first thought of Vikramorvasie. Then we decided to weave a play around Sri Aurobindo's lyrical poems where a group of seekers strive for the Truth, in a symbolic spiritual journey. We wanted to show the seekers' journey from a physical one to a psychological one with the help of lights and projections. There were two main poems, "The Rishi" and "Ahana" around which we created the journey. But it was more of a mental construction rather than a creative vision which is the substance of any play.

Su: So at what point did you decide to abandon the idea?

Shibani: The script was changing every two weeks and the participants were discouraged. We had started off with a rather big batch which gradually became just the few of us. On 5th November we did our first reading of *Eric*.

Su: So was *Eric* chosen because there were only a few characters in it?

A: No. One day Cristof said, "Why don't we take up *Eric*?" He had suggested it earlier but this time it caught fire.

Sh: The funny thing is that Anshul and I were

the most against taking it.

A: We were still persevering with our initial plan when I fell ill, then Priyanka fell ill, then Vinay subsequently.... That's when we bailed and decided to do *Eric*. Sanchari and Tanay were very happy because they were persevering in another way!



Su: Who helped with the back stage work?

Sh: Auroposée, Priyanka, Pushan, Arjav, Akash....

Su: The sets were quite minimalist.

A: Yes. The sets were actually made for our initial plan. When we decided to abandon that idea the elements of that same set were used for *Eric*. There was a mountain in that set so we used it for showing the landscape of Norway.

Su: Anshul's costume looked fine. It was the women's costumes that looked more 'contemporary' than Norwegian but they were beautiful. When I saw Shibani I thought, "In that sleeveless dress, the poor girl will freeze."

A: At first we had thought of very dark colours but we realised that they are not very suitable for stage lighting as they don't reflect as much as the lighter colours. That's why there were some bright colours in the costumes.

Su: Did you have to research a lot into Norwegian culture?

A: Yes, I read up quite a bit. I would listen to Norse music on YouTube; it's very enchanting. I

used to also watch the TV series *Vikings* while we were rehearsing. It's a series largely based on true historic events. This helped me further understand the culture.

Su: Did you read up about Nordic mythology?

Sh: Yes, we did that also.

Su: Eric, the hero of the play, is not a real person from history. Sri Aurobindo has been quite free with names and events. There was a king who tried to unite Norway but he wasn't called Eric. When you play a real or well-known mythological character then you read up about him or her and prepare yourself and try to be as close to him as possible. How did you prepare yourself for this role of Eric who is not based on any real person?

A: I based myself on the character of Eric created by Sri Aurobindo!

Su: What background information did you get about the play, about how it was written?

A: Interestingly Sri Aurobindo wrote this play after he came to Pondicherry in 1910.

Sh: It was a play that he corrected repeatedly during the course of some years. He took a special interest in it. Cristof was not particularly fond of this play. His favourites were the more classical ones, such as *Vasavadutta* and *Perseus*. But when he began working on *Eric* he said, "My God! I never realised how poetic this is!"

A: He said he thought *Eric* was one of the most poetic plays of Sri Aurobindo. I think it's amongst his favourites now.

Su: This play was last performed in 1975, "starring" Chhote and Leslie.

A: This play has been performed only three times for the 1st December programme, including this performance. I think in the 1950s it was performed with Mona-da playing Eric.

Su: The 1st December programme has a deadline. No matter what happens it has to be performed on the 1st of December. How did you manage with just 3 weeks in hand?

Sh: With the 1st December programme you can't say "I'll get up on the stage on the 1st without any preparation and outshine everyone, (*stagey méré débo!*)" When Mahi-da's team came to fix the lights we were ready with two thirds of the play. In one week we had learnt by heart the



major part of the play.

Su: Did you take the whole play or did you cut some portions because you were short of time?

Sh: It was mostly complete. We took out some lines from the second half of the play but Act 1 and 2 were intact.

Su: Until about two thirds of the play there are only three characters and there are monologues after monologues. So how did you work? How did you manage to learn such long monologues by heart?

Sh: We never thought that we had so much to learn. It just came. I related very well to my character. I felt I was Aslaug. I am a lot like her in real life — passionate, impulsive. I felt as if I was myself speaking, I didn't feel that I was learning someone else's words. If it had been some other character maybe I would have found it difficult.

Su: What kind of rehearsal schedules did you have?

Sh: As it was mostly just the two of us we spent the whole month working from morning till night. You can ask us about what was the schedule when we were not rehearsing for *Eric*.

A: After a while, we would even say our lines while just hanging out.

Sh: I started calling him "Eric" in real life.

A: And I saved her number as "Aslaug"!

Su: I am really curious to know how you managed to learn your long monologues by heart.

Sh: I find it more difficult when you have short lines and then someone else gives you an answer, because sometimes they are so similar. It can be confusing. If it's a monologue then there is a thought and you follow it. With short replies, sometimes it is the same thing with little

differences. That is so much harder to remember.

Su: Yes, sometimes you can get the wrong cue. You could make a mistake and start off on another piece of dialogue.

Sh: There was a particular place in the play where Anshul would always forget his line. It was a scene where I am really sad and he would just go blank. So I would silently mouth the words to prompt him. I was trying to remain in character and still silently prompt him.

Su: What were your main difficulties during the period of preparation?

A: There are some emotionally intimate scenes with intense dialogues in this play. Getting them right was difficult because we didn't know each other at all when we started. Secondly, the relationship of conflict with Swegn, the antagonism between Eric and Swegn still needed a lot of work. And the third difficulty was to get Hertha's character right. Hertha is an extremely complicated and nuanced character. It takes a lot of time to identify with so many layers at once.

Sh: Aslaug has just two layers. One layer is where she knows that something has to be done and the other layer is where she wants to follow her heart. But Hertha has so many thin layers in her character that it is very difficult to portray.

Su: I think Sanchari did a good job of it. What were the most memorable moments of this preparation?

A: Everyday was memorable. Every day we felt something new and the next day was even bet-

ter. We lived a different life.

Sh: It was surreal! It was a surreal month we lived.

Su: Is there anything I have not asked but you

would like to talk about?

Sh: I would like to add that this play has been one of the most revelatory experiences.

A: I concur. I have acted in plays before but there is something special about the 1st December. This was the first time that I was doing a 1st December programme and also the first time that I was doing a play written by Sri Aurobindo. Now I don't know whether it was because it was my first time but I tangibly felt something else at work. You know there are moments, like at the beginning of the competition season, when Mother says that she is there and you can access her guidance and power and she will help you. There are these moments of the year when there is a concentrated focus and a presence. I think that the 1st December programme is one such moment too, when everyone feels it. It is very concretely there.

Su: The fact that everyone is there together....

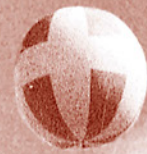
A: There is a collective aspiration that helps the individual aspiration.

Sh: I think there is an intensity. Usually, in our everyday life, our concentration is spread out. But, during this play, we were steeped in that, in the play, and we were trying to put it into action. The thing about acting is that you try to live it and you try to become it, by becoming what you are saying as sincerely as possible and so intensely, for so many days, for such long periods.

When anyone asked me, 'So, how's the 1st December preparation going?' my standard reply was, 'I have never been so concentrated in my entire life, so intensely and for so long a duration and every day. This intensity I have never felt before.'

A: I would also like to add that we had a strong feeling of Fate. There is a line at the end of the play about Fate, and we could feel the truth of those words. ❧





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Greetings from Auroville
to all men of good will

Are invited to Auroville all
those who thirst for progress
and aspire to a higher
and truer life.

