

Auroville Outreach

A newsletter from Auroville international township

April 2001

Visit of European Union Ambassador

Towards the end of March, Auroville was happy to receive the European Union Ambassador – Head of Delegation, Mr. Caillouët, together with his wife and 1st Secretary Mr. Francois Massoulie, for a visit to Auroville, coinciding with the vernal equinox and first World Day of Planetary Consciousness.

After a dawn gathering at the Amphitheatre marking the World Day of Planetary Consciousness, the working day started with a foundation stone ceremony for the coming Town Hall Annex - the first building in the future administrative area of the township - near Bliss community, close to the Matrimandir. First Mr. Caillouët and

then everyone else present placed a stone in the waiting concrete mixer, after short speeches by Aurovilian Asia Urbs coordinator Luigi Zanzi, Mr. Caillouët and Dr. Kireet Joshi, Chairman of the Governing Board, AV Foundation.

From there Mr. Caillouët went on to Auroville's Development Group office, where - seated at a central table displaying the EU flag surmounted by a bowl of lotus flowers, symbolising Europe and India - he heard a series of short presentations summarising existing involvements with the EU plus future hopes.

Mr. Sauro Mezzetti, Italian Aurovilian, spoke on 'Auroville Innovative Urban Management' and Auroville's plans to develop networking with cities in the EU, India and South Asia.



(from left to right) Luigi Zanzi, Auroville Asia Urbs Coordinator, with Mr. Caillouët and Mr. Massoulie of the EU Delegation

Auroville is an international township in Tamil Nadu, South India, founded in 1968.

Inspired by the vision of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, over 1,500 people from India and some 30 other nations are building a township dedicated to an experiment in human unity, with the eventual hope of contributing to international understanding and the evolution of human consciousness. Nearly 5,000 of the 40,000-plus local people living in the dozen-or-more villages that comprise the Auroville bio-region are also involved in the project, providing their skills and labour.

The township, projected for 50,000 people, will radiate out from the central Matrimandir and its surrounding gardens in 4 zones, the International, Cultural, Residential and Industrial. A large forested area, the Green Belt, will eventually surround the entire township area.

Present activities in Auroville include wasteland reclamation and reforestation, organic farming, village development, education, health care, renewable energy, appropriate building technology, arts and culture, handicrafts and small-scale industries, architecture and town planning.

As described by its founder, Auroville aspires to be "a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities."

For more general information visit the website: www.auroville.org

Mr. Joss Brooks, British Aurovilian, talked about an environmental project to be financed by the EU - to restore the tropical dry evergreen forest over a large area surrounding Auroville, in a shared project involving the Tamil Nadu Forestry Department and Pondicherry Public Works Dept (PWD), the latter in the context of 3 local 'tanks' (reservoirs) surrounded by remaining stands of the forest and a variety of medicinal plants.

Mr. Tency Baetens, Belgian Aurovilian (after pointing out that he was the only person present actually born in and hailing from Brussels, the EU capital!), summarised the work since 1995 of Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research in low maintenance wastewater treatment systems using plants, both in India and China, in collaboration with BORDA, a German NGO, funded by the EU.

Mrs. Meenakshi Van Megen, Tamil Aurovilian, and Mr. Don Kelman, American Aurovilian, spoke about their work in the fields of education and training for local youth, stemming from Auroville International-UK's contact with the European Union, which had resulted in 3 sub-projects: vocational training in New Creation School, construction of an educational facility for young employed workers in the Ilaigarkal School, and the introduction of innovative teaching methods by Auroville's Village Action Group in their Isaiambalam School.

Mr. Pieter Raaimakers, Dutch specialist in water conservation technology working with the Govt of Pondicherry, explained how he is interacting with Auroville's Harvest Water Service plus Pondicherry's Dept of Agriculture and PWD to coordinate the ecological, engineering and social needs involved in rehabilitating a number of 'tanks' in the Union Territory of Pondicherry, with funds from the EU.

Dr. Krishnamurti and Dr. Narayanan, both of Pondicherry University, talked about the highly acclaimed P.U. Management School, where they are conducting courses in human rights. They expressed their hopes for a Centre for European Studies in the university. They also talked about the existing collaboration with Auroville in water conservation, recharging of the aquifers and environmental issues in general, and the hope that the University could interact with Europe on such matters via Auroville.

Mr. Helmut Schmid (German), Ms. Jill Navarre (American), Mrs. Aster Patel (Indian) and Ms. Jaya Berggreen-Clausen (Swedish) - all Aurovilians - gave a series of short presentations summarising the work

being done in, and hopes for, Auroville's International Zone, in course of which they expressed a desire for improved international exchange and opportunities for research in Auroville and Europe in subjects like human unity and environmental issues. They also mentioned the plan for a 'Unity Pavilion' in the International Zone, which will be a 'living' centre for cultural exchanges, educational projects, etc, affecting the 12-or-more countries of the EU.

Speaking briefly after this series of presentations, Mr. Caillouët jokingly referred to Auroville as a "city of knowledge; specially in knowledge of how to make friends with the EU!" He also said how happy he was to see the way Auroville was using funding from

The Planetary Vision Festival 2001

This event - or rather series of events - initiated and sponsored by The Club of Budapest in partnership with a number of Founding Alliance Members as 'The Planetary Vision Festival 2001', has been launched as the first in an annual series of events and programmes designed to promote a new planetary consciousness, with related ethics and actions.

The 2001 Festival started on January 1st, seen as the first day of the third millennium, with groups in 25 countries/locations - from Alaska to Antarctica and Australia to Samoa - joining together in two grassroots initiatives, a 'Walk for the Future' and a 'First Global Singalong'. The Festival's next major programme, involving the Matrimandir in Auroville and the Lotus Temple in Delhi together with another 15 sites worldwide, was the World Day of Planetary Consciousness on March 20th. Auroville celebrated this with a dawn bonfire



March 20th dawn bonfire in Auroville

followed by chanting of Sri Aurobindo's Gayatri mantra and reading of the Charter in a silent concentrated floral atmosphere, in the presence of the European Union VIP visitors (see main article) and Governing Board members of the Auroville Foundation. The event was filmed for inclusion in a 'Planetary Vision Special Event' programme to be shown that evening in Budapest, Hungary, involving many world-renowned figures. Two other events are planned before the end of the year.

To quote Edgar Mitchell, Apollo astronaut: "For a sustainable civilization to be achieved in this century, it will require the concerted efforts of citizens in every nation. Awareness of global issues, dedication of personal effort, movement of global political agendas toward a sustainable future is the responsibility of each of us. The Planetary Vision Festival is a vitally important link in this endeavour."

the EU to make improvements in the wider bio-region, and remarked on the continually improving relations between the EU and India.

Final item on Mr.Caillouët's morning-long agenda was an interaction with the wider community of Auroville at the Sri Aurobindo World Centre for Human Unity building, where he initiated a discussion on the subject of 'India, Europe and Human Unity'.

Overall there was a mutual feeling that the visit had been a valuable one, in the sense that Mr.Caillouët was able to see something first-hand of Auroville and learn about its existing and hoped-for future interaction with the EU, while at the same time explaining EU policies; how they see their relationship with India; and how they hope to increase the interaction between India and the EU.

Auroville Energy Products

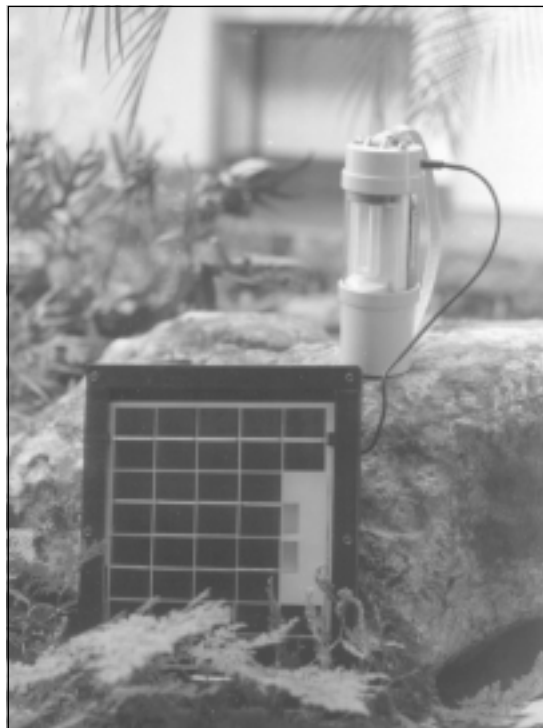
We referred in the January and July 2000 issues to Auroville's use of solar energy, but what hasn't been highlighted to date is the production of solar powered equipment within Auroville itself.

Auroville Energy Products (AEP), headed by German electronic engineer Carsten, is a commercial unit which was started some 5 years ago with the aim of assembling and supplying high quality solar lanterns for the Indian market. Key components for the lamps - which come in two models, a 2.5 Watt 80 lumen Solux I (giving light equivalent to 3 kerosene lamps or a 15 W bulb) and a 3.3 Watt 120 lumen Solux II (equivalent to 4 kerosene lamps or 20-25 W bulb) - are imported from Germany, and then assembled in Auroville. Each comes with a small 4.5 W solar panel of 30x15 cms; gives uninterrupted light for up to 4 hours; and holds its charge for as long as 3 or 4 weeks. Apart from a bulk

purchase by Tata BP, the market to date for these lamps has been mostly confined to Aurovilians and tourists/visitors for lack of a concerted sales drive elsewhere.

Following production of the lantern, the unit decided to expand into wind generators and water turbines. The former, with imported core equipment and towers made by Auroville's Aureka workshop, have been installed in hybrid grid systems incorporating diesel generators on Sagar Island near Calcutta, at a research institute in Gujarat, and in Auroville itself. The latter - micro hydro systems, designed and developed in Auroville - have been supplied so far to locations in Ootacamund and Kodaikanal in Tamil Nadu, and to a site in Orissa.

The Orissa installation is particularly interesting, as it has radically transformed life in the remote tribal village of Putsil, near where it was sited, enabling people for the first time to study or do practical work in their homes after dark, as well as enjoy entertainment in the form of a community television set and make use of a community computer. The plant is designed for 13.5 kW power generation and can function even when water levels in the perennial local stream are low. Two trained villagers operate the power house, supplying 60 W to each house. Main beneficiaries are the women, who previously had to spend a whole day getting kerosene from the nearest supplier, and also had to do all grinding by hand. Neighbouring villages have also benefitted, as they can now make use of the flour mill operating in Putsil, and get battery-operated appliances recharged there.



AEP solar lamp with charging panel

Another innovative product under development since several years by AEP is their solar powered bicycle, with removable battery, which so far has been constructed in 2 models. With full charge the cycle will run approx. 12-14 kms using battery power alone, but in combination with pedal power on the easy stretches will typically cover more than double that distance. Although relatively expensive, they have a good potential application in places like Auroville, where tourist-visitors and guests often need to cycle long distances under the full sun to see everything.

Immediate future plans for Auroville Energy Products include the development and sale of solar energy related products such as charge regulators and inverters, and the carrying out of local solar installations. In the longer term, sustainable energy systems in general and fuel cell technology are likely areas of investigation.

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Janaka Studios - source of sacred art

Going back several hundred years to the time of the renaissance in Europe, art was at that time often produced through collective effort. There was always a master painter, but he rarely did all the work himself, relying on apprentices to prepare canvases and complete some of the more mundane details of his works.

Today in Auroville we have a similar approach to art being taken in Janaka Art Studio, a creative enterprise located in Ravena, where a master in Thanjavur painting is turning out artistic works of exceptional quality in collaboration with a small team of supporting artists, students and helpers, some Aurovilian and some from the surrounding villages.

Heading this team is long-time Aurovilian Jocelyn, who some 4 years ago was persuaded by 35 year old master painter Ganesan – who hails from Thanjavur and was supervising a studio, art school and training centre in Pondicherry partly funded by UNESCO – to open a studio in Auroville, with the aim of producing Thanjavur-style paintings using traditional techniques. Together they started Janaka Studios, and began turning out pictures depicting mostly classic scenes of sacred art re-interpreted from archive material of the great temple wall in Thanjavur, but also other sacred subjects such as Sri Aurobindo & The Mother, Buddha, and even themes of a Cabalistic nature.

In contrast with most painting techniques, Thanjavur-style works of art can take months to complete. The board is first covered with canvas cloth, then coated with layer after layer of a special gesso-type all-organic paste, containing zinc oxide



Master painter Ganesan (right) with assistants at work in Janaka Studios

or iron oxide mixed with tamarind bark in a tree gum medium. This is left to dry each time for a day or more before being sanded down in readiness for the next layer, until a perfectly smooth fine surface is produced. This process takes sometimes weeks, after which the outline picture or design is drawn. Next, real or mock gems or semi-precious stones are mounted with glue on the picture surface where outstanding highlights are required, and 'set' in raised surroundings of zinc oxide and tree gum mix. This same mix is also used to create a slightly 3-dimensional relief effect to various parts of the picture/design and outer border, on which is mounted a layer of 18-carat gold leaf. Only at this point, usually after a month or two of painstaking work, does the actual "painting" begin, using hand ground pure organic colours. As it can take 3 hours to produce just 5 teaspoons of colour pigment, it can be imagined how time-consuming and labour intensive this stage of the work is, but the final benefit is that the resulting colours don't fade, and remain vibrantly 'alive' for decades - even centuries - to come.

Janaka Studios is now turning out around 15-20 paintings a year, some of which could perhaps be considered near-masterpieces. Quite a number have been given away in Auroville, where they adorn the walls of both private residences and public buildings, but others are being sought out and bought by Indian and overseas collectors. Exhibitions have so far been held in Auroville (at the Visitors Centre and Pitanga Hall), in Bangalore and in America. A calendar was also produced in Auroville for the year 2000 featuring over a dozen paintings, and sold out completely.

Asked about her future plans, Jocelyn says: "I am hoping our students will go on to become teachers in the Auroville and local schools, thereby spreading awareness of the Thanjavur style of art and knowledge of the processes involved. One student has in fact already started teaching in Isaiambalam School. Meanwhile I also have plans for a children's colouring book of sacred art, and hope to produce another calendar next year."

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Enquiries or feedback relating to this newsletter and its contents are always welcome, and can be communicated to:
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