

AUROVILLE

SUN-WORD RISING



a trust for the earth

savitra

A Documentary Journey through the Pioneering
Labour of Auroville's Emergence as a Community
(originally published by the Community of Auroville in 1980)

Auroville: Sun-Word Rising

A Trust for the Earth

savitra

The Community of Auroville
1980

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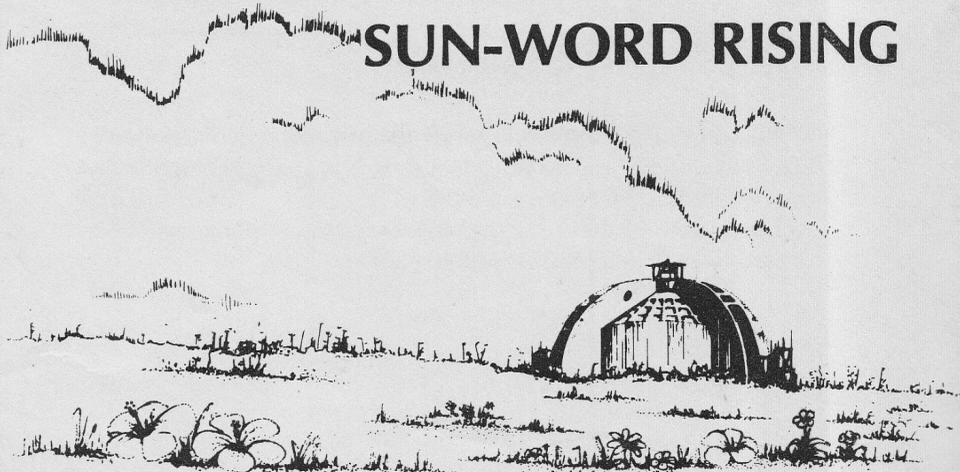
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aum namo bhagavate aum namo bhagavate

AUROVILLE:

SUN-WORD RISING



A TRUST FOR THE EARTH

savitra

THE COMMUNITY OF AUROVILLE 1980

aum namo bhagavate aum namo bhagavate

Author's Note

All of the documents, correspondence, transcripts of meetings and conversations that appear either verbatim, in excerpts, or paraphrased through the text that follows, are drawn from authentic material and records. None of these original references have in any way been revised to alter their explicit meaning and intent.

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To Her, the fire that calls forever in the heart,
And to Him, the One that it calls,
The One that it is...

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PREFACE (2020)

In the summer of 2019, Auro-eBooks asked my permission to republish *Auroville: Sun-Word Rising* (originally published by Auroville in 1980). Over the years, several AV residents encouraged me to republish it in order to preserve a history of the Community's pioneering experience. But I refused, feeling uncomfortable to revive the ghosts of our past. However, with the whole world presently in a full-blown evolutionary crisis, this time felt different. So I agreed. For if we don't know our own past, how can we understand our present, heal past wounds, cocreate a truer future?

Trained by Margaret Mead in the importance of keeping archival records, I crafted *Sun-Word* from extensive notes, letters, documents and direct experience. The narrative tracks my personal journey to meet the Mother, Her accepting me into the Ashram, then into Auroville where I learned to risk my life in order to truly live it in those first decades of AV's emergence and development.

Though written in a 2-month flash – from December 19th, 1978 to February 28th, 1979 – *Sun-Word* never reached a conclusion... left us hanging in suspense, leaving it for another moment to resolve. But what its narrative did provide was an uncut version of events in the years that followed the Mother's passing, filling in an incredible missing piece of AV's history, bravery and sacrifice which many today know little or nothing about. In this light, 40 years later, isn't it time to recover these missing links, freeing them from the shadows?...

For they represent a critical passage in Auroville's history following the passing of the Mother – a painfully shocking event that suddenly left us orphaned, vulnerable, facing a collective childhood on our own. But we pulled ourselves together and, despite impossible odds, began the adventure to bring new life to a barren plateau: establishing settlements, schools, farms, reforesting a

wasteland, organizing a collective process to keep Her Dream alive. Yet even as we persevered, we found ourselves facing another tragic loss of innocence, betrayed by the very group meant to protect and support us: the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), which chose to assume control of Auroville rather than collaborate with its residents in the spirit of the Mother's Charter.

This unfortunately led to a protracted conflict that prompted an intervention by the Government of India in 1980 – the year after I completed the original *Sun-Word* manuscript. This Government Act in turn led to a Constitutional Case brought before India's Supreme Court. In their lawsuit, the SAS argued that Auroville was a part of their "religion", and was therefore exempt from Governmental interference.¹ Auroville's victory in the Case cleared the way for the eventual Auroville Foundation Act passed in 1988 by Parliament².

For those unfamiliar with this challenging period in Auroville's history, this typo-corrected version of *Sun-Word Rising*³ attempts to shed an honest light on events that some might prefer to forget, others might consider bad for publicity. But the Mother never asked us to compromise or cover up the Truth to protect our spiritual image. And isn't the Hero's Journey a quest to bring light into the darkness? – to heal and transform our shadows rather than merely deny and transcend them? In fact, the Mother even encouraged us to sign our letters with "At the service of Truth". In that light...

At the service of Truth,
Savitra (October, 2019)

¹I spent a year in New Delhi working with our legal team then, drafting the affidavit (on file in Auroville's archives) which our lawyer – the eminent jurist Fali Nariman – actually used to win our case in 1982.

²While this Act rescued us from the SAS, it created other challenges, altering AV's own internal governing structure.

³Although I write in "American" English, I retained the British spelling in which I originally wrote *Sun-Word*. I also kept the gender-biased default reference of "Man" for Human – a bad habit which I finally broke in the mid-1980s.

a passage between two stories

This is not an easy story. Love stones never are. They are a birth in themselves.

This is a story about the intersection of a personal life with a collective experience: a Community called Auroville. But at a certain point in this story, these words 'personal' and 'collective' – myself and others – which we think we know so well, begin to blur, begin to become something else, begin to merge and re-emerge as something completely other. That is why I call it a love story. An evolutionary love story which lies at the heart of each relationship, which repeats its pattern in all of the languages of this universe: molecular, cellular, ecological and psychological, in the stars and in the eyes of another. And all of the characters in this story begin to become interchangeably you and I – to act out in their lives, their gestures, their habits and their fears, their hopes, their dreams and their struggles, the process of this love story imprinted in the heart of the earth... this most fundamental of genetic codes.

It is the simple story of self-giving, of the incomplete forever giving itself up to become the whole that it is. But the simplest of stories, the most simple of stories, are never easy. For all the scenarios of this story till now have worn the mask of the ego, the Great Complicator. The spoiler, the one who resists a larger and greater becoming for fear of losing himself: the one who clings to the small and petty frame he calls his own whether singular or plural, refusing to let go like the vulture glued to its carcass. An ultimately simple story, confounded, lost, hidden, but always there. Always there like a sudden twinkling of sunlight on an endless sea even amidst the long, laborious prologue of struggle which till now has been the dominant theme of our earthly journey.

A story of the earth. A long-forgotten, ever-present love story concealed, deformed, obscured, censored by the ego, edited into his

melodrama of resistance and conflict, division and death in chapters that only repeat the same futile episodes, the same futile fears. The autobiography of a consciousness which seeks in every scene to possess, to control, to own, to have – and if it cannot have, to destroy – as if thereby to give a semblance that it exists, as if vicariously to enjoy that which it is afraid to be. The microbe and the man, the group, the state, the globe, all he seeks to annex, to rule and to defend, even to the death. And none, not even the saint, perhaps least of all the saint, is immune.

Two stories. One, Real, which we have known forever; the other, its mask. A story of Love and a story of Resistance. A Resistance as old as time – of all in us that refuses to change, to expand, to acknowledge our inseparable oneness which *is* our sole and true identity. A oneness so painful to that petty sack of habits we have grown accustomed to call ourselves. So painful that we have preferred to die in our shells, in our self-imposed exile, rather than to change; preferred to carve out our little kingdoms and erect our tombs to protect ourselves from one another and from ourselves rather than to change... So hypnotic the trance of the ego.

This small story is a passage between the two. A passage and a quest through which the earth itself is passing. A difficult and agonizing transition from the grip of the ego and the fear of becoming to a Community of the Earth which has recovered the simple story, the Real Story, the only story. A quest which has carried me across the hemispheres to a place somewhere on the southern coast of India called Auroville – a Community whose roots go deeper than a simple common sharing, deeper than a mutual sense of ideals and goals to heal a strife-torn world, deeper than a resonance of sympathy, down down deeply to that deepest resonance of unity which alone, beneath this global hallucination of men and countries obsessed with their own destruction, remains the single and true Fact. This is a story of a meeting with Auroville: A personal love affair with a Community of men and women whose

lives have intersected, exposing all of humanity's contradictions. A Community of men and women who have chosen, despite the resistances they harbour and the larger resistances around them of a world addicted to doubt and denial, to leave their shells, their masks, to find that sole Fact of their lives: to *live* that Story which alone is Real, to catch that sudden twinkling of sunlight and call it through the breach of their lives and of the world's, through the heavy and painful lines of a story that never was or could be, burning the pages that never were, the forgeries and the Imposter, until a new man emerges and this earth becomes the sun that it is.

This is the story of an encounter with Auroville, a Community whose simple Charter begins: "*Auroville belongs to nobody in particular, Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole...*" The first lines of a Trust for the Earth.

9 September, 1979

PART ONE: KINDLING

*A solitary flame illumines the darkness:
I place myself before it
as kindling wood.*

(Journal note - 1968)

1. the traveller in the mists

This story of mine, of ours, began long before I knew, long before beginnings. But the stories of men demand beginnings so we shall satisfy them and make one. But between ourselves we know it is only a myth. That is why all true stories begin simply once upon a time, once upon eternity...

... Somewhere in the early mid-1960's, there was a man not quite a man who lived in a place called Florida at the very south-eastern shore of the United States. He was not a happy man, though he did not know why. Not quite a man at all. He was who I thought I was.

He was a student in a university, lost like the rest of us, trying to make the best of finding himself in a world that made no sense. He had long ago forgotten the Real Story, long ago forgotten that secret sun forever there, vibrating in the atom, the star and the human heart – that single power whose glance can utterly change this world and ourselves. It was so long ago, this self buried so deeply, that he no longer even remembered the ache, so numbed had he become. Like the rest of us spun in our deep spell, lost in our primordial amnesia, he had grown accustomed to the habit of his impotence. Only a tiny grain of something else struggled still, insensibly, far far within him... a muffled cry of something or someone suffocating, a last trace of some slumbering discontent, of a remembrance not fully effaced. The vestige of who he was.

*We are chased by a self we cannot now recall
And moved by a Spirit we must still become.*⁴

But one day, god knows why, something stirred his somnambulism, pierced his crust. Even amidst our stumblings, some infallible

⁴Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, p. 225.

design...

It began with poetry, gently at first with Blake and Wordsworth, Keats and Shelley; like the fragrance of a memory moving through a mist, the first dim rememberings rolled in from another shore, swept through him, invaded him, calling to someone asleep, arousing a first *feeling* poignant but unseeing – a touch at once of delight and despair, ravishing and anguishing, a first sense of something deeply missing. And the long-forgotten ache slowly began to unveil.

And the waves gathered force, passing through that first sweet taste of innocence into the growing swells of Eliot and Cummings, the implosions of Dylan Thomas, the fervour and clash of waves beating against an insensate world. *Wake up, wake up.* And the sea grew darker, pounding, pounding itself furiously, raging against the rocks on the shore like someone madly trying to awaken before he drowns. *Wake up, wake up.* And the seething sea writhed like a serpent within that one who I thought I was, sang in the exquisite violence, the impassioned midnight choruses of Rimbaud and Baudelaire, of Genet and Miller, surged in the raw, rebellious cries of the outlaw who spits in the face of his own death, *L'Homme Revolté* of Camus, of Ginsburg and Ferlinghetti and Lenny Bruce. *Wake up, wake up.*

And so the ache was bared, the ache so painful, so nude, the Great Need of his life hidden even from himself for how long? how many ages? How many lives had he walked alone on the earth, in the sea, in the body of a man lost in his oblivion, anaesthetized, unable to even feel that something was missing, that *he* was missing?

And so by the nakedness of his own need, he was condemned to search for that which was missing, to burn in his urge called forth by an unfillable ache whose void no other could fill.

And so the quest, the journey, began for the traveller in the mists:

the return, the recovery which lies not behind but before us, not in retreat but in becoming. For him it had begun with poetry, for another, it could have been a strain of Bach or a stroke of Van Gogh, a spark of Einstein or a scent of jasmine. The door one enters doesn't matter, it is the act of entering alone which matters: of piercing the crust and touching that need which is the same Need in all, which is where all the journeys begin, which is where you and I begin.

Outside him, the earth too seemed suddenly ajar, adrift in its orbit; suddenly not quite so sure of who or what she was as she bore the first convulsions of a long-forgotten labour. The first ripples rising from a fire-seed planted long ago in the heart of the earth in another story, the first ripples troubling the world's blank visage. A black man one day suddenly seized by his own life refuses to be set apart at a lunch counter in Alabama or Georgia or Mississippi. A man oppressed suddenly refuses his oppression. Why had he chosen that moment to explode? What unforeseen urgency overtook him that day, pressed him past the compelling gravity of his own fears? What sudden chemistry broke the bond, ignited the spark that sent a hundred thousand men and women to Washington that spring in the name of freedom?

A man oppressed suddenly refuses his oppression, revolts from the paralysis of his own fear. And in his eyes one sees the cry of all men in all time – of One Man, that same Man caught by that uncalculating instant which remembers that he must *be*... that instant flashing like a sword in the sun, liberating him from the fear of his own freedom: the sole Oppressor behind all oppressions.

Something or someone suspended within the deep womb of earth stirred, quickened by a single golden ray which threaded layer by layer the growing density of night, self drawn irresistibly to self, awakening that which it is, calling to it through the ever-descending spiral into Matter where it lies asleep: A consciousness locked in itself, lost to itself, dreaming that it is poor and powerless and

dispossessed. An Eternal Story buried in Time. A Princess white with snow cast under a deep spell until He comes from the Country of the Sun and kisses her on the brow, a touch warm and golden that unlocks the same warm gold hidden in her heart, whispering *wake up, wake up*.

A man oppressed suddenly refuses his oppression. The first vague rumblings of a Great Evolutionary Discontent dislodged from its torpor began to filter through the body of the earth sending forth a thousand hairline cracks in the mask. An Urge which cannot rest until it has carried humanity beyond itself to its fullness cleaves the crust. An Urge which can only deliver itself in the discovery of its true being, its missing whole heaving in her heavy heart. And the once-complacent campuses suddenly begin to erupt under the banners of civil rights and freedom of speech.

The first assault of waves sweep ashore, timidly at first, tempered by innocence. And throughout the South, men and women take to the streets, leave the refuge of their well-reasoned fears. A conflagration of sit-ins and marches, boycotts and protests plague the placid, moss-covered towns, sweep defiantly across the drawling country-sides under the measured and restrained cadence of Non-Violence. The choruses of "We Shall Overcome" reverberate and swell and merge into one mighty voice as men and women, black and white, faces grim and determined, link arms, weave together beyond the borders of their little lives. It is the early sixties and a sophomore at the University of Florida, a traveller in the mists unaware that he has embarked on his journey, is drawn into the vortex. He does not know why, what attracts him despite the raised eyebrows of prudence – the counsels that tell him he has nothing to gain and everything to lose. Only that something inside him corresponds, feels alive, senses a value in the act itself, the *act itself*, which refuses to calculate consequences, to bargain with gain and loss. A sophomore begins to shed his skins, begins to risk his life to live.

And so it was that he moved into his first experience, waded through his first march down the sultry streets of Gainesville Florida in that small procession armed only with a handful of homemade placards and signs: that small procession which turned the corner onto Main Street, exposing him suddenly to those first indelible looks where he saw in the eyes of strangers – men whom he had never met – the red coals of the beast; heard the snarl of wolves, teeth bared, in the sidewalk chants of ‘nigger lover’. And those looks, those words, struck deep, shattering something in him, pressing him further upon a course from which he could not turn back, quickening in him the rhythm of the rebel, carrying him farther out to sea in the dark and pounding surf.

And from the Sleepy South, the reaction stiffened, slammed back swift and shocking: The arrests and the beatings, the fire hoses turned against the men and women in the streets, the glares of hatred and the beer-bellied laughter of contempt; and in the dark alleys and moonless woods, the burnings and the lynchings. “Oxford Town, Oxford Town, everybody there has their head hung down,” whined the thick-twanged elegy of Bob Dylan.

And the innocence was torn and shredded like the clothes ripped off the backs of black men by police dogs. And with it, the muzzles of Non-Violence began to give way – the polite and well-behaved protestors who somehow still knew their place began to burst through their facades as the raw volcano of outrage and indignation that lay suppressed for more than a century erupted.

But behind, always behind, the returning refrains of “We Shall Overcome”.

Two stories intertwined: A movement widening, embracing, uniting, becoming, tearing aside the mask; and its recoil, contracting, shrinking, denying, calcifying the mask to conceal the cowardice of men afraid to be. A story of Love and a story of Resistance.

2. the fundamental revolution

That fall of '63, Kennedy is killed in Dallas. We watch again and again the grainy eight-millimetre replay as his head shatters like a Chinese vase in the open limousine. The nation is traumatized, the wedge of events cutting deeper into the crust, cracking the brittle mirage of our civilized immunity. We watch the spectacle live in disbelief as the black horse-drawn caisson carries his body through the grey November streets of Washington; we watch the spectacle live in the days to come as Jack Ruby casually steps into the TV screen through the cordon of police and fires a revolver point-blank into the stomach of Lee Harvey Oswald, the accused assassin who is being transferred from his jail cell.

Seemingly irrational circumstances conspire toward some inscrutable end, beating upon the thick hide of the earth as if to rouse someone locked within her. Powerfully charged circumstances unleash themselves in currents like some terrestrial shock treatment jolting a comatose world, breaking it down, wearing away at its defences, unravelling the smug illusion that assumes this well-worn reasonably-reliable pattern of existence to be the only one: the smug illusion that keeps us glued to our comfortable carcasses, finding change inconvenient and troublesome, preferring the security of our dead and uninspired ideologies to the radical and unprecedented emergence of a New Man with a New Consciousness in a New World.

A snow-balling collage of events thunders through the tableau of the sixties: From that first black man suddenly, unpredictably, revolting one day at a lunch counter – a mutant gene triggering off some unforeseen and irreversible metamorphosis – the sea rushed in pulsing through the campuses, flooding through the dry and dusty corridors and out into the streets and neighbourhoods... flooding through the doors marked “private” and “prohibited” and

“whites only”, and eventually through the doors marked “men only” and all the doors marked “only”. And the first errant streams of the Movement began to blend, the Civil Rights and Black Liberation struggles merging into the later anti-war protests and the plethora of self-determined expressions and experiences that poured out from a generation of youth broken open: Youth who needed to *feel*, needed to *know*, and were prepared to try anything to find their way to that which was missing... willing to look in all the rooms, even the ones where you risk losing yourself to find that missing something which you so desperately need. *Wake up, wake up!*

Drugs suddenly appear – the luminous and the deadly – pouring into the converging streams, bringing another dimension to the process, pushing the revolution off the streets and into the chemistry of human consciousness. The kaleidoscope jars and the khaki-clad image of Che Guevara transposes into the figures of Timothy Leary, Aldous Huxley and Alan Watts, the credo turning from Marxist dialectics to the wanderings of Carlos Castaneda. A decade looking everywhere, opening all the doors, trying everything, all the keys, the shiny ones and the rusty... all the experiments and all the exaggerations of the experiment, in that first initial surge, swinging madly to the extremes in order to resist the formidable undertow – the counter-pull of the past that would level everything, drag everything under the gravity of the Trance. And in this breakaway, hair lengthens, overflows or goes ascetic and bare; clothing eccentricifies, cross-breeds or dissolves; and mass music becomes an instrument of change, a ballad of the birth and struggle, a mantra of the moment, provocative and energizing, vital and violent, breaking the old records of His Master’s Voice, the same monotonous melody dipped in syrup or mud, sticky and stuck.

And slipping in somehow amidst the turbulence of that inrushing Western tide, a faint essence of the East: The infiltration of incense (perhaps at first not so much for atmosphere as to cover up the

smell of marijuana); the sounds of the sitar through the hybrid compositions of Bud Shank and Paul Horn, the Beatles and Yehudi Menuhin; and the gradual influx of a new jargon trickling into our linear language: a terse vocabulary snatched from Sanskrit, Tibetan and Japanese that seemed more at home, more fluent and familiar with the states and transitions through which we were passing: experiences for which our cultural dialect, derived from a unilateral rationalism, had no equivalent terms, no corresponding nomenclature.

Incense, ragas and a handful of migrant, mystic syllable. The innocuous symbols of a Revolution far more radical and dangerous, far more potent than all its surface renderings... than all the revolutions of the earth and the stars and the flickering insurrections of men. A Revolution fundamentally subversive which finally none can resist: A takeover from Within. A Revolution of Consciousness.

But who among us then – submerged in that era of ferment, over our heads in that swift infusion of feelings, experiences and spontaneity flooding our civilizational norms – could decipher the signs? Who among us then – so absorbed as we were in our repetitive patterns of matter and mind – could crack the code? For we were too close to see; and our idioms could only describe, repeat what they already knew. Something was happening but our eyes had not yet adjusted to the sunlight, the pattern was still too dazzling or too premature for our sluggish deductive processes which needed to digest and digest before a morsel could enter.

And with the past as our only vantage point, our analyses and commentaries could only cast the events into more traditional perspectives, interpret the apparent aberration as a social, political or, at most, psychological phenomenon... of historical but certainly not evolutionary significance... as if to reassure ourselves, that it would pass and all would be somehow as it was before, thank god.

But in an obscure journal called the *Arya* published in Calcutta before the twenties, long before the first hippie was conceived, someone sees through to the Other Story.

“The changes we see in the world today are intellectual, moral, physical in their ideal and intention: the spiritual revolution waits for its hour and throws up meanwhile its waves here and there. Until it comes, the sense of the other cannot be understood; and till then, all interpretations of present happenings and forecast of man’s failure are vain things. For its nature, power, event are that which will determine the next cycle of our humanity.”⁵

⁵Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. 30.

3. the ultimate subversion

...And for a young traveller in the mists already exposed to his first initiations, leaving behind a tattered sophomore cloak, another door on the left opens before him. And passing through it into an incense-filled room, he is offered his first joint of marijuana: another in the endless rites of passage in an eternal and ever-deepening Journey; another voyage opening upon another sea more perilous than poetry, carrying him further in, farther from the fading shoreline of the world he knew and the one he took himself to be.

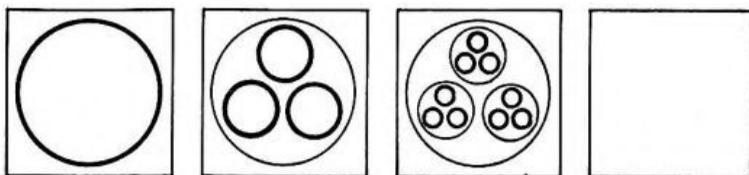
He draws those first acrid puffs of resin into his lungs ... a pause... and then a sudden rush of waves overtakes him. The room alters like an Escher print, pulsates to the music that is no longer outside him. Time takes on another frame, warps Dali-esque, losing track of itself, and Simon and Garfunkel get up and walk off their album cover. A fertile fantasy? An amusing hallucinatory diversion more entertaining than beer? Or a secret stumbled upon? A dangerous secret not to be played with, stripping our senses of their singular sovereignty, eating away at our exclusive notions of existence?... An unexpected voyage which begins to pry behind not only the relativity of man's institutions and systems – a recognition which subconsciously inspires all of the social liberation struggles – but behind the very relativity of man's perception itself: A perception which formulates and codifies those institutions and systems, but never questions itself – its own impoverished perception rooted in *this* vision of reality and not another. This congenital Habit that convinces us of our limits and ultimately of our death. For perhaps in this new recognition lay the lever of a more fundamental Liberation: The liberation of a Free Being, self-mastered, one, in full possession of his consciousness and will.

And through this unforeseen access to an awareness at once heightened and cut loose from its customary moorings, freed from

the arbitrary absolutes that subliminally define our rules of what is possible and impossible, sinful and sacred, psychotic and sane – our repetitive one-track reaction to reality passed on religiously through the back-door genetics of our humanity – he began his inner exploration: His Experiment in Consciousness, a self-styled Sorcerer's Apprentice propelled by a child-like fascination and curiosity.

His university repertoire had already introduced him to the heavyweights of the West, the thick Germanic thought of Heidegger, Kant and Nietzsche, the existentialism of Sartre: An imposing edifice of occidental minds whose voluminous bibliographies curiously drew reference to the *Upanishads* and other cryptic texts of another Tradition. And it was amidst this abstract milieu that he began his 'extracurricular activities'.

Heidegger among them had particularly provoked him, troubling his own arrogant Western logic, his inherited mental reflex which needed to dissect in order to know, which needed to *think* in order to feel that it knew, but which could never simply *be*. It was Heidegger who, on that smoke-filled evening, slipped him the morsel that he couldn't digest as he poured through a thick treatise on *Sein* and *Dasein*, Being and Nothingness. For he found that as soon as his mind attempted to grasp the sense of Nothingness, it was immediately faced with its own contradiction. Because the very act of *trying* to conceive it simultaneously plastered a 'something' over the Nothingness, turned Nothing into Something. Nothing which was by its own definition – or by its absence of definition – No Thing. And so he entered an unforeseen door: an experience undermining the whole scaffolding of the rational mental intelligence, disastrously deflating for the mental ego. And for our inquisitive seeker, nothing less than mind-blowing. For he would only later learn that the mind could *become* empty but could not contain the concept of Emptiness.



I.

II.

III.

IV.

But that startling recognition had somehow caught his innate Scorpio nosiness, setting off the Sherlock Holmes in him. And he spontaneously invented a naive exercise to visually verify the relationship of Something-ness and No-thing-ness, as if it were a problem he could not work out in his head but possibly on paper. So he began by drawing a circle on a blank page, confidently labelling it 'something' (drawing I). It would be a diagram of something substantial, anything, a basic element of existence, a molecule or an atom: Something. Now the point of the exercise was to find Nothing. Where was No Thing? Then as he looked more closely at the Something on the paper before him, he realized that if this were a molecular structure, it was actually a complex of other particles – atoms – and that its appearance of absolute integrity, its solid something-ness, was only an illusion of form. So he scratched out the border-line demarcating the Original Something and reduced it to three theoretical sub-Somethings contained within it. At last a background of Nothing appeared upon which the three revised somethings stood (drawing II). But then the problem suddenly inverted. For by applying the same principle of reduction to the three hypothetical atoms, he was forced to acknowledge that they too were only compounds of sub-atomic units – protons, neutrons and electrons – exploding once again the semblance of static mass (drawing III). And by following the abstraction to its pure mathematical conclusions whereby any integer – any something – can be infinitely reduced (or expanded if you reverse the process), broken down into simpler and simpler sub-units to the vanishing point, the fourth drawing was left hanging in the void

with a new dilemma: Where was Something? Where was that Ultimate Something?

Our sleuth once again had stumbled across something quite other than what he was looking for, gotten more – or less – than he bargained for in his inner dabbling. For some fundamental rug had just been pulled out from under him, leaving him astounded and utterly undone before a universe that he once – like the rest of us – thought he knew. A palatable, predictable universe blown out in an instant. A world that suddenly disappears right before our very eyes.

It was as if a physicist, sane and sober, setting off to graph the precise relationship between Matter and Energy, suddenly discovers that he has lost Matter. That it has inexplicably slid off the charts in the process of observing it. That even the most apparently stable, defined and definite forms of matter – even the most seemingly inert stone – deceive us, concealing a whirling mass of charged particles... electrons madly racing around their nuclei, whole micro-universes vibrating and pulsating. In other words, Matter – at least as we know and understand it – doesn't exist: is simply a Form of Energy. Or, to use another language, a Construct of Consciousness.

I.e., the borderlines that divide and give the sense of ultimately separate particles and identities are in fact nothing more than a powerful utilitarian Illusion: a Mask, an Ego – the Ego of Matter. Or the mirrored blindness of our own Ego which hides the true *Something*, true *Someone* – the true Individual behind the mask – because we cannot truly see... cannot rightly see through to that Other Story, that secret sun always there, informing all.

But that young explorer staring at his Map of Matter his predictable universe was suddenly blown out in an instant... A world suddenly disappearing, becoming quite other before our very eyes: Another world, or the same but differently seen, transformed by another

look. The Power of Seeing. The vast, Creative Power of Consciousness that sees, and what it sees, becomes. And with that Power comes the Responsibility – the Responsibility of Seeing clearly, seeing rightly. For this creature, man, still travelling in the mists of his ignorance, oblivious of who he is and the Trust that he holds, is a blind steward whose distorted sight misuses, misguides, misdirects the Power to project; and, hence, *creates* a distorted world. A world seen in division rather than oneness, strife and competition rather than harmony and love, death rather than the joy of a conscious and ever-progressive life. Hence, the imperative relationship of *seeing* truly, of *being* truly.

But for a novice explorer with his consciousness abruptly displaced, absorbed in the implications of that circle which dissolved, taking with it the rigid outlines and fixed maps of the old world, there remained simply an unexplained and unsought-for sense of freedom: of letting go, of unburdening, of starting again fresh in another beginning. A beginning he had begun how many times before, breathing that same effortless breath. And with that utterly subversive, utterly liberating thought, he leaned back in his empty chair which was and wasn't there, with only a blank piece of paper and Heidegger's Nothingness pressing against him, offering no resistance.

And the following day, still within the aura of the experience, under the influence, an impetuous and animated whirling mass of ionized atoms resembling someone who appeared to be me clutching an invisible document that presumed to amend the theory of the universe, entered the office of his radical, young philosophy professor. And with that page full of arcane erasures, that apparent me proceeded to share his revelation with someone he hoped would understand, would recognize the impact of the discovery, would be equally wonderstruck. Or at least would not have him committed. And as his blue eyes grew bluer in the telling of his tale, his remarkably-poised professor, refusing to even look at the rather

vacant piece of paper on his desk, reached behind himself for a thick maroon volume stacked on top of his bookshelf. Only a slight slit of smile betrayed for an instant the professor's impassive expression, a faint hint acknowledging some distant fellowship as he handed over, in that gesture repeated how many times before, the text to his red-haired, flush-faced visitor. On the cover in fading gilt it read: *Philosophies of India*.

Another unnoticed initiation, another indigestible morsel that would take him farther on the Journey.

And beginning with that compendium of Hindu and Buddhist thought that spanned the thousands of years from poorly-translated Vedic verse to the contemporaries of Ramakrishna and Sri Aurobindo, a former sophomore – a former someone in a former world, both in full transition, both tumbling into an unfathomed identity crisis whose only resolution lay in the recovery of their oneness – passed a turning point: A Point of No Return which he would face again and again. A choice at each moment as his life became more conscious, as Time accelerated to meet itself in Being, as someone who he thought he was became Someone who he *was* in the passage between Two Stories.

4. a breach in the blind

It was the meridian of the sixties and the sun was nearing midheaven. A war in the unpronounceable provinces of Viet Nam suddenly invades the homes of Americans who watch the daily gore through a sterile screen: villages desecrated under a rain of napalm, their straw huts turned to torches in the footage that edits out the screams of the occupants and the smell of burning flesh; dazed refugees fleeing down a desperate road amidst the muted crackling of machine-gun fire; Buddhist monks setting themselves ablaze to feed the drama of television audiences in another world; GI's with missing limbs, cigarettes dangling from their lips, helicoptered out of the battle zone; and the weekly toll of dead and wounded tallied out like an absurd scorecard in an absurd barbarian arena equipped with civilization's most advanced technologies of destruction.

And America is drawn deeper into the jungle cross-fire, committing hundreds of thousands of her young men to kill or be killed in the clash of equally bankrupt hypocrisies. But while Wall Street revels in a stock market bullish on a profitable war, Berkeley, California bristles, a street-fighter challenging the Machine. And the Movement becomes more dense, the confrontations harden and entrench, the protests intensifying in proportion to an insatiable draft as the nation polarizes.

And pressed on in his quest, an expatriate from a world growing more and more insane, a student-turned-seeker retreats further into his inner refuge, probing uncharted countries with unforeseen senses pursuing another Sense. And the taste grew sweeter, the foretaste of coming home.

A purpose had spontaneously begun to infiltrate and illumine his life, a self-evident meaning too uncomplicated to explain, corrupting him from within: Something he could give himself to,

something he could become in the giving, a joy which one could be but never have. A twinkling of sunlight through a breach in the blind, a clearing in the blurred double-image he had been.

He was beginning to remember that moment he had been waiting all his life to meet, to feel the warm joy of remembering, the unreasonable joy that recalls the sole reason of existence. And despite the unbearable boredom of his classes stuffed with their memorized meaninglessness, despite the shadow of a deadly military draft checked only by the fragile bubble of his university status, suddenly, despite everything, even himself, the world became beautiful, for no reason, just because it *was*, despite itself... the light behind leaking out through the mask suddenly-turned transparent, healing the Contradiction in a smile... life freed in that instant untroubled by time, free-flowing in a simple harmony, in a warm and golden stream.

And protected by the grace of his own innocence-in-earnest, he passed unscathed and unaware through those first perilous straits, an infant alchemist sailing on a psychedelic sea navigating with a handful of mystic scriptures and a compass that pointed in all directions to a same simultaneous oneness. And by the fall of '66, he wrote his first uncontrived verse, a simple poem penned by someone discovering the beginnings of his true first person. It was called '*a dialogue of one*'.

*a small boy springs
from deep within
silently
like a poem.
we wrestle in lost tongues
pulling each other
into love.*

Someone else was beginning to awaken, to emerge, to merge.

And gradually he began to rebuild his base, to protect and fortify his fragile find... Foraging instinctively like some forest dweller preparing for his hibernation, he gathered a first store of reading matter to feed the faith of his newly-kindled experience – provisions to carry him through the coming winter, to withstand the great, all-engulfing Doubt that poisons the world in each breath we breathe, cherishing its prophecy of doom and self-undoing.

And so he passed through those early exhilarating months in his one-man cocoon, devouring books that spoke in another tongue yet strangely familiar, experimenting with various body movements and breathing exercises rummaged from a hatha yoga manual, considering the turn to vegetarianism in an era before the coming advent of organic foods, considering himself as he had never considered himself before. But even in that pastel period, his séances still amplified by marijuana, a certain vague uneasiness would sometimes trouble his idyll... a certain disconcerting sense of commitment that hung behind, an intimation that this was not just a casual choice but a cross-roads. A path not merely taken for pleasure.

And it was not long before he felt that this was more than just a harmless, abstract exercise peripheral to his life, but rather something that deeply touched him: A power. And he began to feel realities reversing... For the phenomenon was tangible: a sudden electric current that would tumble him out of his reveries, an unbargained-for force that would sometimes violently invade him, coursing in waves through his spine, released through some occult chemistry that was somehow connected with his concentrated breathing... which seemed to arouse strange sensations in him, like fires suddenly ignited in different points of his body.

This new discipline, it seemed, was not designed to communicate through the accustomed Western intermediary of ideas, but through the dangerously direct medium of experience. And the techniques he was apprenticing were not just a palliative to make life bearable – the same but bearable – but a path of fire which if pursued would lead inevitably to another life lived by another inhabitant. For it was not just a sterile residue of calm and repose that sifted through the strainer, but the intermittent flickering of a hidden force that burned. A paradox of Peace and Power that the earth as well would one day have to face and resolve without the expedient of suppressing one for the other.

And the tranquil sea began to churn, the surf grew darker, heaving in foaming crests against the sky. *Turn back, turn back*, the habit called. For it was still not too late to turn back. But on he went despite himself. On he went, half-choosing, half-chosen by some inexpressible urge, or perhaps by someone else: someone he would meet when he *arrived*.

But the heady mix of psychedelics and amateur alchemy would prove too treacherous, too volatile an equation... Eventually leaving him, like much of his generation, burned out, disillusioned, exiled from the bubble – the sweet and luminous bubble – abandoned in the cold and skeptical night. For all of our ego-spheres, all of the bubbles no matter how brilliant and bright, are one day bound to petrify into a prison or pop.

*There is no more benumbing error than to mistake a stage for the goal or to linger too long in a resting place.*⁶

And one desperate and indiscreet day, attempting to retrieve the inspiration that was slipping away, he turned back for the answer, repeating a rite that could no longer save: A pill whose sacrament

⁶Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Glimpses*, p. 25.

had expired, whose borrowed light had been exhausted, leaving him, like the Sorcerer's Apprentice, at the mercy of a volatile chemistry... evoking a Power out of proportion to his capacity to contain it... condemning him, in the lingo of that day, to "a really bad trip". A disastrous altered state experience mimicking that same disequilibrium, misuse of Force, in the hands of the ego-blind infra-humanity we were then.

And the night overtook him, and he found himself that next forgotten morning in a field in the countryside beyond the consolation of men: An outcaste calling to a God that no longer answered, lying there alone, abandoned, while the sun rose, warming his body on the dew-glistened grass. It was yesterday in an old story that remembered what it was like to forget. And he was once again an unwilling character suddenly recalled into that old story – an alien transplanted back into the trance, resuming the personage of a former student about to graduate into a former world. He lay there in that limbo-field with the sun rising, seeing with eyes no longer transparent, eyes that eclipsed what they saw, with only the mocking sound of a cricket sawing beside him in the grass.

He managed somehow to survive the despair of those next barren weeks until his graduation that winter. A graduation that would peel away his last protective bubble, leaving him exposed to being drafted into the war in Viet Nam, the commercial pressures of his society, the expectations of his family – all the atavisms of his culture pulling at him, pulling him back, leaving him no chance to choose... or only a fixed set of options: how many children? two cars or three? blue suit or grey? him or me?... in a system that prided itself on free will and individual initiative.

He didn't bother to attend his University graduation ceremony, so they mailed him his diploma. A degree in literature and philosophy, a paper key to a paper world, offering the ransom of a secure

retirement in exchange for the responsibility of freedom. But even with his faith flattened and his innocence deceived, something in him struggled still, determined at least to resist the sirens of security, determined to see if something else could still be salvaged... Or at least, not to bow to his own cowardice, even if life could finally yield no meaning.

And in the sobering gesture of packing – packing up his past in Gainesville, Florida with nothing before him but a crowd of investors waiting to pounce, competing to help him into his existential straitjacket – he bolted for the woods. He had just turned twenty-one as he drove out of the flatlands of Florida heading towards the Colorado Rockies where he hoped to reconcile the contents of his life and the context of his future. Another inquiry, somewhat like his diagram of Something, only this time the hypothesis started from Nothing. But at least he was moving again without a map. His foot instinctively floored the accelerator and the country rushed forth to meet him.

He arrived in Denver after a week on the road, exhausted but relieved by the travel. He wandered for a moment in another scene, through wintry streets invigorated by the cold that bit his face and numbed his fingers. But it was not here in the frosted windows of a city that he would find what he was looking for. He had come to be alone, far from the influences of men, still harboring a simple pride and confidence in himself characteristic of his civilization – a fundamental belief that even if all else failed, he could still rely on himself and his own resources. And with that naive thought, he grabbed his bag and hopped a sightseeing bus heading up into the snow-covered ranges that rose in the distance. He had no idea where he was going; he only knew by the road that began its arrowed ascent towards white peaks and blue sky that the direction was true.

Time rarefied with the altitude as the little bus wound round the

massive girth of upraised granite; and as the road turned a steep mountain curve, opening suddenly onto a tiny village mirrored in a glacier lake, he suddenly asked the driver to stop. Then, slinging his bag over his shoulder, he spontaneously made his unscheduled exit in Evergreen, Colorado.

He spent those first crystal-clear days in an Inn he had all to himself, taking hot baths in an over-sized tub and carving a walking stick etched with totems of some undiscovered tribe... preparing for a rendezvous with himself. A rendezvous which came soon enough early one morning as he set forth across the frozen earth, circling an ice-covered lake as he trekked towards a ridge of rose-colored peaks. And by mid-day, a single pair of footprints trailed up the powdery slopes, tracking a solitary figure who had emerged soaked in sweat and snow on an unhorizoned summit.

Far beneath him lay the dotted dwellings of men beside a sapphire lake set in emerald woods. And farther still, the world of men from which they came: the spinning world of Wall Street and Viet Nam. He sighed, breathing a limitless breath that rolled out to eternity as he lay spread-eagle upon a boulder, alone before an unbound sun. And slowly the riddles he had brought with him began to slip from their sack: the draft? a job? a plan? a purpose? a God? And as they drifted past a second time, he realized that his response to the first ones depended on the unknitting of the last one. And with that thought, a cloud of doubts cast a sudden shadow above the peak where he sought refuge.

Had he come all this way to a last point dotting his i only to confirm his impotence? – to find that even with his agile mind he could not pick the lock whose key lay irretrievably with the last of the riddles? Because if there was something else – a Truth, a God with or without a name – then he had to know that or else the rest made no sense and any choice was equally void. Because if there was a Truth to life, it could not be something peripheral, something one

acknowledged on Sundays in a church or in a coffin, but the very centre and substance of one's being which one lived and lived for, the imperative knowledge he needed to know. But in the framing of the question, he had reached the limits of his rational intellect, exhausted the power of his personal resources. The answer, if it were answerable, lay beyond his scope.

He looked out from that precipice upon a merciless immensity in which he suddenly felt so utterly small, vulnerable – a speck of human consciousness defrocked of its elaborate myth, a man damned forever to his mortality, unable to even pray... to what? to whom? And in that painful recognition of his own emptiness, when all his straining energies finally subsided, relinquished, let go, a cry spontaneously welled up from a cavern deep inside: A silent call from the very core of his being. A call that was all that remained of him, that he had become. Then he heard a sudden stirring sound beating through the air above him, and he opened his eyes as three white doves passed just above his head. He had found his answer despite himself.

It was another man who retraced his steps down the shoulder of the mountain... The same man but different, who had carried his rational Western heritage with him to its last threshold and watched it expire, humbled in an experience whose surrender allowed something else to enter, another power to act. The breach in the passage between two stories.

*A vast surrender was his only strength.*⁷

He left the high country of Evergreen, Colorado... down through the plains into Utah, heading west for San Francisco with a curiously-carved walking stick, resuming a quest which had never ceased.

⁷Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, p. 357.

5. found in a face

He took a room in the Haight-Asbury district on the verge of its infamy, spending the next season absorbed in a chiaroscuro of texts and scriptures: passages from the Vedanta and the Passions of Christian mystics, erudite commentaries on Mahayana Buddhism and terse Zen tales, the parables of Ramakrishna and the Bhagavad Gita... It was still nearly two summers before Woodstock but the Age of Aquarius had already descended on a San Francisco bursting at the seams. And the first trickle of Gurus had begun to cross the Great Waters, passing through the Golden Gate.

With childlike enthusiasm, he diligently took to heart everything he read, adopting and memorizing a whole new terminology and symbolism, filling the loopholes of his time attending lectures and discourses from the swamis and monks who had begun to import their mysticism and mantras... marveling wonder-eyed, swallowing it all, even the mouthfuls that didn't quite fit... submerging himself in intense meditations that gradually grew more severe, submitting religiously to the ancient prescriptions, doing everything one was supposed to do – which gradually left less and less.

["I never had very much the experience of renunciation – for there to be renunciation, one had to cling to things, but always there was this thirst, this NEED to go farther, to go higher, to do better, to have something better. And instead of having this feeling of self-denial, one rather has the feeling of good riddance."]⁸

But as the process coagulated, a curious scenario began to repeat itself, a pattern shadowing him since his interlude with Heidegger. For the initial affirmation that had lifted the torment of his soul –

⁸Mother, extract from conversation, *Divine Materialism* (Satprem), p. 244.

that God, that Truth that had undeniably broken through on a lone mountaintop in Colorado – was once again ironically revealing itself as something more and more negative: a Truth of Life denying the very life it was meant to save. Stabbing it in the back. “The Eternal is true; the world is a lie,”⁹ declared the sage Shankaracharya in his quintessential comment on reality. “Regard the world as void,”¹⁰ ... “like a mirage in the air ... like a barren woman’s child in a dream,”¹¹ warned the more nihilistic derivatives of Buddhism, mocking the paper they were written on.

*“For fear of erring in our actions, we don’t do anything anymore; for fear of erring in our words, we don’t say anything anymore; for fear of... Virtue has always spent its time eliminating things in life, and if one puts together all of the virtues of the different countries of the world, very few things would remain in existence. It’s a very widespread tendency that probably comes from a poverty, an incapacity – reduce, reduce, reduce ... and all that becomes so cramped. In the aspiration no longer to err, one eliminates the occasion to err. It is not a cure. Quite simply it reduces the manifestation to its minimum, and the natural outcome is Nirvana. But if the Lord wanted only Nirvana, there would be only Nirvana! It is obvious that He imagines the co-existence of all opposites, and that for Him, this must be the beginning of a totality.”*¹²

He found himself backing vertiginously into a metaphysical corner. His Ultimate Sense was expressing itself in varying degrees of the world’s Nonsense: whether in the Buddhistic doctrine of *Shunyata* – Emptiness – which turns from an illusory existence – the revolving

⁹*Vivekachudamani* v. 20.

¹⁰*Suttanipata*. v. 119.

¹¹*Lankavatara Sutras*, v. 96.

¹²Mother, extract from conversation, *Divine Materialism* (Satprem), p. 222.

Wheel of Karma in which we suffer endless births – to a final release in some Nirvanic cessation of being; or the Vedantic Monism which eventually voids the universe as *Maya*, merging individual back into a Transcendent Absolute One; or in the more impassioned mysticism of the West which extinguishes itself in the ‘flight of the alone to the Alone’... our earnest seeker discovering once again that the more refined the teachings got, the more removed they became from life despite the initial promises of a new life; the more he pursued the One, the more he reinforced the contradiction of an irreconcilable Division – God and World, Spirit and Matter – or an inexplicable Absurdity.

["The opposition between spiritual and material life, the division between the two has no meaning for me..."¹³ "I believe that one of the greatest difficulties in understanding things comes from an arbitrary simplification that puts Spirit on one side and Matter on the other. It's because of this stupidity that one understands nothing. There is spirit and matter, it's very convenient. So if one doesn't belong to spirit, one belongs to matter, if one doesn't belong to matter, one belongs to spirit. But what do you call spirit and what do you call matter? ... where does your matter leave off, where does your spirit begin?... So they tell you: liberate spirit from matter – die and you liberate your spirit from matter. It's because of these stupidities that one understands nothing at all! But this does not correspond to the world as it is."]¹⁴

But despite the lump in his throat, the lump in his being that instinctively could not lend its assent to the Conclusions, he continued to walk the plank, reassuring himself that all of the Ancient Wisdoms had given their blessings. And so his meditations grew more morbid and reckless, tapping an unpredictable Power that thundered through him riderless, leaving him more and more

¹³Mother, conversation on Auroville, (19.4.68).

¹⁴Mother, Conversation, (7.3.56).

reclusive until he became convinced that Life was just a distractive and destructive prelude to Death. Death, the Great Liberator, the final Friend to whom we can turn.

[“... That is why the religions are always wrong, always! Because they wanted to standardize the expression of ONE experience and impose it on everyone as an irrefutable truth. The experience was true, complete in itself, convincing for he who had it. The formula he made with it was excellent – for him. But to want to impose it on others is a fundamental error which has absolutely disastrous consequences...”¹⁵ “... Each individual is a special manifestation in the universe, so consequently his true path must be an absolutely unique Path.”]¹⁶

Yet with all this spiritual rhetoric supporting the experience of his own nullity, his life became more and more unbearable. For no matter how hard he tried with all of his fervent good will to affirm the Negative, he couldn't deny his own experience, his own being.

Was there a someone there? here? Someone obscured behind an ego that still contaminated and subtly manipulated the experience? – even the religious experience? – preferring a final pyrrhic victory – prepared to destroy everything, obliterate the individual and his world – rather than lose its control?

And yet the Gurus were all smiles, beaming with their inner glow. For they had obviously confirmed the same negative Conclusions – saw the vanity of this earthly existence, this “tenement of flesh”; and from that certitude, accepted to renounce the world for God, pointing us elsewhere, beyond, to the sanctity of the cave or the grave.

[“We want to change life – we do not want to run away from it... Until

¹⁵Mother, Conversation, (24.9.58).

¹⁶Mother, Conversation, (16.11.55).

*now all those who have tried to know what they call God, to enter into relation with God, have abandoned life and declared: 'Life is an obstacle for That, we therefore abandon it.' Well, in India it was the sannyasins who renounced everything; in Europe it was the monks and ascetics... And life remains as it is."*¹⁷

But where had he gone wrong? Where had he committed the error? And where was the joy? The rainbow realizations? For he had followed all the formulas, endured all the austerities he could bear; but still the initial ecstasies soured, the revelations deflated and left him holding the bag. An empty cosmic bag. And yet they were smiling. Was this *It*?

["They imagine that the sign of the spiritual life is the capacity to sit in a corner and meditate..."¹⁸ They take off their outer being as if they were taking off a coat and they put it in a corner: 'Go away now, don't bother me, be quiet, you annoy me!' And then they enter into a contemplation (their 'meditation', their 'profound' experience), and then they come back; they put on their coat again, which has not been changed, which is perhaps even filthier than before, and they remain exactly what they were without their meditation ..."¹⁹ "And the more immobile it is, the happier they are. They could meditate like that for eternities, it would never change anything in the universe, nor in themselves."²⁰]

He seemed to have only two escapes left before him: Forget it all, lose yourself back in the material world. Or annihilate yourself in the Spirit. Both reduced to the same self-loss, one pragmatically, the other ecstatically.

¹⁷Mother, conversation on Auroville, (26.5.70).

¹⁸Mother, Conversation, (12.2.51).

¹⁹Mother, Conversation, (15.12.54).

²⁰Mother, Conversation, (14.3.56).

["As for me, I call it the 'Supreme Consciousness, because I don't want to speak of 'God'. It's full . . .the word itself is so full of falsehood. It's not that, it is: we ARE – we ARE the Divine who has forgotten Himself. And our work, THE work, is to re-establish the connection – call it anything, it doesn't matter. It is the Perfection we must become, that's all... call it what you like, it's all the same to me. But it is the aspiration one must have. One must get out of this mud-hole, this imbecility, this unconsciousness, this disgusting defeatism that crushes us because we allow ourselves to be crushed."]²¹

But still something was fuzzy, something was missing, glossed over, as if a step had been skipped by the Wise in their rush for the exit. And in his long walks through Golden Gate Park, a fog followed him, shrouding the scenes: Wildflowers peeking through grove of red woods – *"a mirage in the air"*? Children sailing a boat on a pool of swans – *"like a barren woman's child in a dream"*?

If he could have liberated then the lump in his being which still was not satisfied, which could never be satisfied with anything less than the Whole, it would have told him that the patented Conclusions were not logical – had blindfolded themselves, covering their tracks at the end in a sleight of mind.

["It doesn't matter at all how one speaks of it; what matters is to follow the path, YOUR path, any path – Yes, to go there!"]²²

... For if everything was an illusion – a void within a Void – then one was forced to deduce that some vague Nihil somehow becomes conscious of its own non-existence only to evaporate in the awakening. Or if some Transcendent Reality was conceded beyond the myth of this world-play, where was the relation? – the link between this exiled existence, its inhabitants and that

²¹Mother, Extract from conversation, *Divine Materialism*, (Satprem) p. 353.

²²Mother, Conversation, (17.2.54).

Transcendence? Or was it only to discover that this was all a hoax, and in that discovery, to retreat back into some heaven of original whiteness, bleaching out into the bliss of an Eternal Absolute? But if so, why did It abdicate Its unruffled poise for this aberration to begin with?

But so long as he could not consciously formulate his hesitation, see his own blindspot, no alternative explanation could emerge. Leaving him to assume that it was simply his nature's refusal of its glorious extinction: a "revolt of the flesh". Which in fact it was.

["...An immense spiritual revolution that rehabilitates matter and creation ... Thus, one can say that it is really when the circle will be completed and the two extremities joined, when the highest will be manifested in the most material, that the experience will be truly conclusive ... It seems that one can never really understand except when one understands with the body." ²³]

But as the tension and stress within him became more acute, as if he were suppressing the very urge and power of his being – which in fact he was – he turned to the guidance and counsels of the orange-robed swamis that wandered through San Francisco with growing frequency. And they initiated him with their mantras or recited soothing tales of the Saints and their ordeals, advising him to be patient or just smiling knowingly... then withdrew, it seemed, into their untouchable Peace: Into a witness consciousness that calmly, passively watched the charade and one more deluded soul – me – still ensnared in the Illusion, while they rose above, detached, free, content in their impotence. But where was the Power? The conscious Power to *change* this miserable existence, transforming it into something else? The Power to awaken the Princess asleep in Matter? Or was that Supreme Consciousness ultimately impotent, condemned to its own passivity, subject to the limitations of an

²³Mother, Conversation, (14.5.58)

unfulfilled universe?

["On the contrary, the Power that creates must be the force of an omnipotent and omniscient consciousness; the creations of the absolutely Real should be real and not illusions. And since it is the One Existence, they must be self-creations, forms of a manifestation of the Eternal, not forms of Nothing erected out of the original Void – whether a void being or a void consciousness – by Maya..."

"If the Reality alone exists and all is the Reality, the world also cannot be excluded from that Reality; the universe is real. If it does not reveal to us in its forms and powers the Reality that it is, if it seems only a persistent yet changing movement in Space and Time, this must be not because it is unreal or because it is not at all That, but because it is a progressive self-expression, a manifestation, an evolving self development of That in Time which our consciousness cannot yet see in its total or its essential significance."²⁴]

For where was the sense? Where? And so he wandered, caught between two impossibilities with no way out.

["There is no place to get out! Get out where? There is only THAT."²⁵]

He had left the old world – the nightmare that men lived – but instead of finding a new world, he was finding none. And there were no more mountains left to climb.

But he didn't want the mountains any more, he didn't want the heights that grew more sterile with their solitary climb towards some mystic vanishing point. He wanted the earth. Finally the

²⁴Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 410, 416,

²⁵Mother, Extract from conversation, *Divine Materialism*, (Satprem) p. 221.

earth... the fullness of the rich, green earth. For he was as much her son as the Fire's. And he could no longer relinquish one for the other. He wanted a new life here on a new earth kindled into a sun.

O Fire, thou art the son of heaven by the body of the earth.

(Rig Veda, III 25.1)

And as the tension mounted within him, converged in the clash of the last contraries – the two great world-poles of Spirit and Matter, the Cultures of Peace and Power, East and West – a spark ignited, popping a primordial bubble, an anachronistic spiritual bubble...

[“The age of religions is over. It's old, it's over, now it's an extra- and super-religious perception that is asserting itself as indispensable.”²⁶]

... It was the last turbulent years of the sixties with the seeds of another story beginning to dream on a barren windswept plateau on the southern coast of India when everything fell away: the profound and the petty, the stock brokers banking on this world and the swamis on the other, the holy illusion and the profane... Everything falling away, burning, leaving only this call: This call that was the only thing that remained of him when everything else had been stripped away. This simple need that would never let him loiter, that pressed on like a pulse beating forever the unbroken call of some hidden heart.

[“Truly a thirst, a need, a need. All the rest has no importance, it is THAT one needs. No more ties – free, free, free, free. Always ready to change everything, except one thing: to aspire, to have this thirst... The ‘something’ that one needs, the Perfection that one needs, the Light that one needs, the Love that one needs, the Truth that one needs – and

²⁶*Ibid.*, p. 243.

that's all. As for the formulas... the fewer there are, the better. But that: a need, a need, a need which only THE thing can satisfy – nothing else; no half-measures, only that. And then, go on! Go on! Your path will be your path, it makes no difference – no matter what path, no matter, even the excesses of the American youth can be a path, it makes no difference!”²⁷]

And on that day that moved him, he strayed into a modest brownstone building on the corner of Fulton street where his eyes were caught by the photograph of a Woman's face. A face that someone in him knew at once as Her. And beneath the visage of the mystery read the handwritten script: "Salute to the Advent of the Truth". When Her look released him, he saw a small book lying on the table beside Her. It was called *The Mother*, its author was Sri Aurobindo and its first line read: "*There are two powers that alone can effect in their conjunction the great and difficult thing which is the aim of our endeavour, a fixed and unfailing aspiration that calls from below and a supreme Grace from above that answers.*"²⁸

It was simple. The simple lever of the transformation. A call from below, here on the earth: a fixed and unfailing call to something else, something else which is yet not other than that which calls it and which alone has the power to change this earth into that which it secretly is.

It was so simple. No more juggling of mystic formulas and esoteric sophistries, no more unnatural impositions, no more tampering with an unpossessible Power. There was nothing to do. There was only to be.

[“...To be and to be fully is Nature's aim in us ... and to be fully is to be all that is.”²⁹]

²⁷*Ibid.*, p. 208-09.

²⁸Sri Aurobindo, *The Mother*, p. 1.

²⁹Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 1217.

It was so simple. The path was a call. A surrender to That which he was. A progressive surrender until the two merged, until the True Story had inscribed itself in the characters of the earth.

6. he

Who was She, the Mother, the one in the photo? And who was He, Sri Aurobindo, the author of *The Mother*? From that moment in which he strayed into that unforeseen Centre on Fulton Street, he would begin to find out.

Sri Aurobindo was born in Calcutta on August 15th, 1872. He was the third son of Dr. Krishnadhan Ghose who had studied medicine in England and returned to India enamoured of the West. Seeking to have his sons properly 'civilized', which he seemed to equate with 'anglicized', he packed them off to England for their education. Sri Aurobindo was seven at the time, and would spend his next fourteen years mastering the culture of the West.

Despite his years of near-destitution, severed from a father he would never see again, Sri Aurobindo, whose 'first' language was already English, managed to acquire a fluency in French, Latin, Greek, German and Italian, reading Homer, Aristophanes, Dante, Goethe and Rimbaud in the original as well as Milton and the English poets. All this long before he would learn Bengali, the language of his birthplace, and Sanskrit, the confluent Mother Tongue of his countrymen. He distinguished himself at St. Paul's School in London from which he received a scholarship to King's College, Cambridge. And he conquered Cambridge with equal facility, walking off with all the prizes in Greek and Latin verse. But as he approached his twentieth year, his heart was no longer there in this "nursery of gentlemen". It had been an initiation for something else, and this stage was passing. He soon cast off the English first name his father had appended to him, joining a secret society of Indian students called the 'Lotus and Dagger'.

It was in this period of ferment that he began to deliver numerous revolutionary speeches, prefacing the inception of his evolving radicalism – an uncompromising radicalism that would not cease

until it had overthrown the last Bastilles of the Ego. Despite his merit, taking the first division in the classical Tripos, Sri Aurobindo began to establish a less conventional reputation, getting himself black-listed at Whitehall. And in a last gesture of a closing phase, Sri Aurobindo refused to appear for a riding test that technically disqualified him as a candidate for another destiny with the I.C.S. – the Indian Civil Service – which would have opened all the administrative doors to British India.

He sailed for India in February 1893, not yet twenty-one, landing in Bombay where he eventually found a job with the Maharaja of Baroda as a professor of French, later English, at the State College where he became vice-principal. It was during this period, freed from his British conditioning, that he began to recover the roots of his Mother Culture: roots which its own civilization had forgotten in the encrusting millennia and overlay of influences. And in that reawakening, he felt the anguish of Her soul subjugated under the domination of another. Refusing the advice to take up yoga as a solace, he left for Bengal in 1906 to openly plunge into the struggle to liberate India. Even then, spiritual ideals could not contradict material actions.

The movement he launched would ultimately radicalize the timid more passive agitations toward an uncompromising goal of complete Independence – *Swaraj* – from British rule. It would also see him jailed twice for sedition. In this period, he also launched a series of revolutionary journals in English and Bengali, opening up another front not stifled in demoralizing moralities. *“It is self-evident that in the actual life of man intellectual, social, political, moral,”* he would later write, *“we can make no real step forward without a struggle, a battle between what exists and lives and what seeks to exist and live and between all that stands behind either. It is impossible, at least as men and things are, to advance, to grow, to fulfill and still to observe really and utterly that principle of harmlessness which is yet placed before us as the highest and best law of conduct. We will use only soul-force and never*

destroy by war or any even defensive employment of physical violence? Good, though until soul-force is effective, the Asuric force in men and nations tramples down, breaks, slaughters, burns, pollutes (as we have seen it doing today) but then at its ease and unhindered; and you have perhaps caused as much destruction of life by your abstinence as others by resort to violence... It is not enough that our own hands should remain clean and our souls unstained for the law of strife and destruction to die out of the world; that which is its root must first disappear out of humanity.”³⁰

It would be just after Sri Aurobindo’s acquittal from his first case in 1907, amidst the political turbulence and police surveillance, that he would meet a yogi named Lele. In this meeting, Sri Aurobindo would say: *“I want to do Yoga but for work, for action, not for sannyas [renouncing the world] and Nirvana.”³¹* The experience he received from his exchange with Lele would carry Sri Aurobindo through the contradiction of traditional spiritual realizations to the beginning of his own Yoga – the base of a unique Revolution of Matter:

“It threw me suddenly into a condition above and without thought, unstained by any mental or vital movement; there was no ego, no real world – only when one looked through the immobile senses, something perceived or bore upon its sheer silence a world of empty forms, materialized shadows without true substance. There was no One or many even, only just absolutely That, featureless, relationless, sheer, indescribable, unthinkable, absolute, yet supremely real and solely real. This was no mental realization nor something glimpsed somewhere above, – no abstraction... It was positive, the only positive reality – although not a spatial physical world, pervading, occupying or rather flooding and drowning this semblance of a physical world, leaving no room or space for any reality but itself, allowing nothing else to seem at all actual, positive,

³⁰Sri Aurobindo, *Essays on the Gita*, p. 35.

³¹Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, pp. 153-54.

substantial... What it [this experience] brought was an inexpressible Peace, a stupendous silence, an infinity of release and freedom... I lived in that Nirvana day and night before it began to admit other things into itself or modify itself at all... In the end it began to disappear into a greater Super-consciousness from above... The aspect of an illusionary world gave place to one in which illusion is only a small surface phenomenon with an immense Divine Reality behind it and a supreme Divine Reality above it and an intense Divine Reality in the heart of everything that had seemed at first only a cinematic shape or shadow. And this was no re-imprisonment in the senses, no diminution or fall from supreme experience, it came as a constant heightening and widening of the Truth... Nirvana in my liberated consciousness turned out to be the beginning of my realization: a first step towards the complete thing, not the sole true attainment possible or even a culminating finale.”³² ... “Nirvana cannot be at once the ending of the Path with nothing beyond to explore ... it is the end of the lower Path through the lower Nature and the beginning of the Higher Evolution...”³³

On May 4th, 1908, in his thirty-sixth year, the British police came, revolvers drawn, and pulled Sri Aurobindo from his bed, placing him in a solitary cell in Alipore Jail. An attempt on the life of a British Magistrate had just failed, and the bomb manufactured had been traced to the garden of Barin, Sri Aurobindo’s brother. Sri Aurobindo would spend one year in solitary confinement awaiting a verdict that would mysteriously see him acquitted on May 5th, 1909 for lack of sufficient evidence; while his brother who stood beside him in the court room was sentenced to the gallows. It would be during that year of imprisonment, a seclusion spontaneously imposed upon him, that the thread of his experience would deepen and grow more decisive. And it would be someone else who would emerge from that chrysalis of his imprisonment. Recalling those twelve intense months in his understated humour: *“When I was*

³²Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, pp. 153-54.

³³Sri Aurobindo, *On Yoga, II*, Tome One, p. 71.

*asleep in the Ignorance, I came to a place of meditation full of holy men and I found this company wearisome and the place a prison; when I awoke, God took me to a prison and turned it into a place of meditation and His trusting ground.”*³⁴

After his release, he resumed his political activities for a time, but the Secret which he had stumbled upon and laboured with in Alipore jail had irrevocably altered him, overtaking the meaning of his life and life mission. And with agents still trailing him, he left for Chandernagore in February, 1910, where he slipped underground until his eventual re-emergence on April 4th in Pondicherry – a French enclave on the southern coast of what was then British India – where he would focus the remaining forty years of his life. For the Work that he had chosen to see through to the end was not, as he described it “*to propagate any religion, new or old, for humanity in the future.*” But rather “*A way to be opened that is still blocked, not a religion to be found is my conception of the matter.*”³⁵ Behind him, the seeds had already been sown for India’s Independence which, in some divine irony, would come thirty-seven years later on August 15th, Sri Aurobindo’s birthday.

For the next four years, Sri Aurobindo followed his silent course, pursuing the bedrock of his Yoga, grounding the peace, calm, silence, clarity in his being... not as passive end in themselves but as the stable base capable of containing – the transference that would offer no resistance to – the influx of a Power undistorted by the ego: a conscious Power freed to transform this present shell of material circumstances into their unfulfilled Fact. He worked alone during those years, with no one to share the awesome shadow of his unprecedented Endeavour. But gradually he began to attract a band of former political disciples who would eventually find themselves subverted from their revolutionary to his evolutionary activities. “*It*

³⁴Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. p. 13.

³⁵Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. 13.

is not a revolt against the British Government, which anyone can easily do... It is, in fact, a revolt against the whole universal Nature."³⁶ And he would one day remark to an inquirer: "No, it is not with the *Empyrean* that I am busy. I wish it were. It is rather with the opposite end of things."³⁷

He had plunged willfully from the summits into the opaque subconscious depths, digging, dredging through the hereditary doubt of his humanity that stretched back to its mineral ancestry – *a way to be opened that is still blocked* – invading the dark halls that begrudged the light, seeking a deathless sun in the Bastions of Death, a solar consciousness locked in the midnight of Matter. A "nether truth", he called it, that all the extant spiritual Traditions had denied or relegated to myth. A cross-stitch movement weaving in and out, up and down, filling in all the gaps of consciousness in a rhythm that simultaneously ascended and descended. A movement and rhythm that would reveal the meticulous integral style of his process: "On each height we conquer, we have to turn to bring down its power and its illumination into the lower mortal movement."³⁸

It was during this intense digging that he unearthed a first hint that he was not totally alone on his path, alien on this planet. It came when he read the *Vedas* for the first time in their original Sanskrit rather than through the intermediary translations of scholars whose intellects could only render a collection of primitive rites and hymns, of greater interest perhaps to anthropologists than seekers. But in these scriptures long ago elevated to obscurity, he found a cryptic confirmation of his quest: the signs of a "lost sun", "a sun dwelling in the darkness" (Rig-Veda III. 39..5), "the treasures of heaven hidden in the secret cavern...within the infinite rock." (I.130.3)³⁹

³⁶Sri Aurobindo, *Evening Talks*, (A. B. Purani), Vol. I, p. 45.

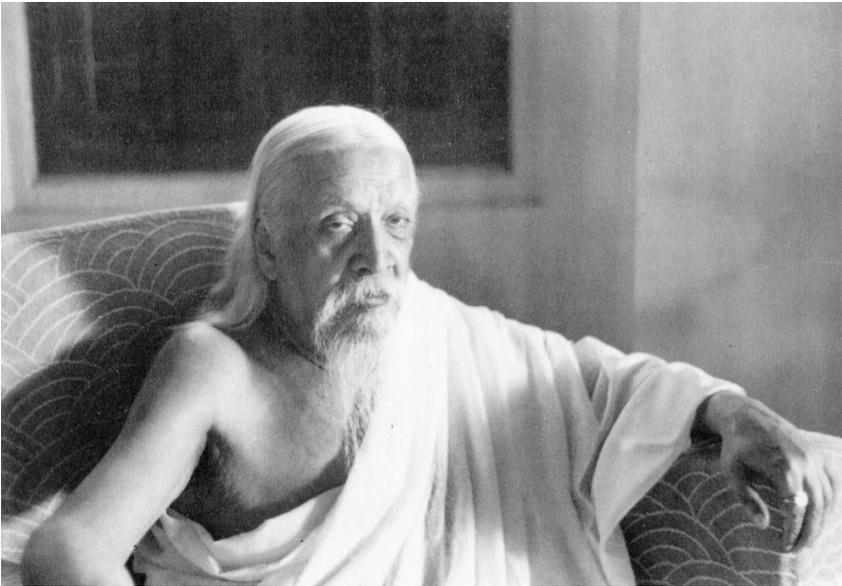
³⁷Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, p. 222.

³⁸Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 150.

³⁹All translations of *Vedas* and *Upanishads* noted here are Sri Aurobindo's.

Deciphering the extinct sense of these passages recorded as early as 6,000 years ago, he recovered a synthesis that preceded the later Ages whose Enlightenments would only place heaven and earth further and further apart. For in the body of these Vedic Works, he came across the profound double entendre of the Sacrificial Fire – Agni.

Yet Sri Aurobindo would not simply re-excavate the exoteric meaning of the Vedas. For he sought the living esoteric thread of truth the Rishis had glimpsed. *“Truly this shocked reverence for the past is a wonderful and fearful thing! After all, the Divine is infinite and the unrolling of the Truth may be an infinite process... not a thing in a nutshell cracked and its contents exhausted once and for all by the first seer or sage, while the others must religiously crack the same nutshell all over again.”*⁴⁰



⁴⁰Sri Aurobindo, *On Yoga, II*, Tome One, p. 99.

And it was this symbol-figure of Agni that lit a fire in him: Agni, the Adventurer voyaging through his own infinities – the Vedic symbol of the call, the aspiration, the power to invoke, to kindle the gods in man and his world... The power to incarnate the True Story concealed in the mask.

How shall we give to Agni? ... the lord of the brilliant flame? for it is him who in mortals is immortal, possessed of the Truth, ... strongest for sacrifice, who creates the Gods? ... Him verily form in you by your surrenderings. (I. 77.1-2)

Thou art he of the Wideness, O Will; when thou art born, thou becomst the Lord of Love when thou art entirely kindled. In thee are all the Gods, O son of Force. (Hymns to Agni, III.1)

A fire that sees: Agni, 'the one who goes in front', the evolutionary urge in the atom, the star and in the heart of man.

7. she

On March 7th, 1914, a young Frenchwoman named Mirra Alfassa would sail for India in her thirty-sixth year. A woman from the 'red evening of the West' voyaging eastward towards a converging earth.

"The universe was not made for anything other than that," she would later say: *"To unite the two poles, the two extremes of consciousness. And when we unite them, we find that the two extremes are exactly the same thing: a whole that is unique and immeasurable at the same time."*⁴¹ She would meet Him, Sri Aurobindo, on March 29th, 1914 in Pondicherry. A conjunction whose import would explain itself in time, would explain itself in matter.

She, the one who wore the face in that photograph, the one whom Sri Aurobindo would come to call The Mother.

Mirra was born in Paris on February 21st, 1878. Her mother would say of her: *"I have a daughter who is incapable of doing anything right to the end.'... – always starting, it was always like that, leaving it and then, at the end of a certain time, I started something else... It was the childlike translation of a need for always more, always better, always more, always better ... indefinitely – the sense of going forward, of going forward towards perfection, and a perfection which I felt entirely eluded what men thought – Something ... a 'something'. An indefinable something that one was seeking through everything."*⁴² From the beginning, that thirst.

And a radicalism as irrepressible as his, rooted firmly in the earth. She would later write of her inception: *"Born into a very respectable bourgeois family which considered art as a pastime rather than as a career and artists as somewhat irresponsible people easily inclined to debauchery and having a very dangerous contempt for money, I felt, perhaps out of a*

⁴¹Mother, Conversations, (17.4.51)

⁴²Mother, Extract from conversation, *Divine Materialism* (Satprem), p. 73.

spirit of contradiction, a compelling need to paint."⁴³ And yet it was not out of a sense to indulge in unconventionality but out of a pure instinct that sought for the 'something' that was missing in everything. *"From my very childhood, I felt it, this flame – a white flame. And I never had any disgust, contempt, recoil, never the feeling of being debased by anything or anyone. It was like that: a flame – white, white – so white that nothing could prevent it from being white."*⁴⁴ The unconditional innocence that *"didn't know the rules, so I didn't even have to fight against them!"*⁴⁵

It was this same Woman who felt *"that the world cannot be real unless it is absolutely One,"*⁴⁶ who also moved then among the Impressionists in Paris at the turn of the century: Monet, Degas, Renoir, Matisse, Cézanne. And who sixty years later in Pondicherry would say: *"We don't want to obey the order of Nature, even if these orders have billions of years of habit behind them."*⁴⁷ It was not a just a parallel that she shared with Sri Aurobindo but an Identity. A sense that could never accept this law of duality, this divorce of an immaterial spirituality. *"An inner illumination that takes neither the body nor outer life into account has no great utility, for it leaves the world just as it is."*⁴⁸

Matter was something ingrained in her spirit. Looking back upon that period of her life, she would recall: *"I was an absolute atheist; the very idea of God made me furious until the age of twenty. Consequently I had the most solid base – no fancies, no mystical heredity; my mother was a strong disbeliever and my father also, so from the point of view of*

⁴³Mother, *Le Grand Secret*, p. 16.

⁴⁴Mother, Extract from conversation, *Divine Materialism* (Satprem), p. 115.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, p. 46.

⁴⁶*Ibid.*, p. 107.

⁴⁷Mother, *Conversations*, (25.7.56).

⁴⁸*Ibid.*, (28.4.29)

inheritance it was very good: positivism, materialism. Only this: a will for perfection and the sense of a limitless consciousness – no limits in its progress nor in its power nor in its breadth. This, from a very early age. But mentally, an absolute refusal to believe in a ‘God’, an abhorrence of religions; I only believed in what I could see and touch. Only the feeling of a Light above (that began very early, at the age of five) and a will for perfection – a will for perfection: everything I did had to be, oh, always as good as I could make it! And then a limitless consciousness. These two things...”⁴⁹

Continuing on her thread that carried her through the fields of art and music, literature, science and mathematics – incapable of getting stuck in anything to the end – she arrived in Algeria where she spent two years between 1905 and 1906 in an intense foray of occult experience; consciously exploring other domains of being with other senses: regions whose laws and powers could neither be discerned or interpreted within the limited spectrum of the existing physical sciences. It was there in a place called Tlemcen in the Atlas Mountains that she would see the relativity of the lines men arbitrarily draw in their lives and the impossibilities they impose upon a world confined in their myopia. But not even this awesome entry into a sight and substance far more impressive than this rather drab unmiraculous-seeming planet could detain her, become an end in itself. For she was seeking the simple miracle hidden here right before our eyes in this riddle of earth. And long after she had left that scene in Algeria, she would say: *“I saw this secret. I saw that it is in terrestrial Matter, on the earth, that the Supreme becomes perfect.”*⁵⁰

So she continued on in her journey that would inevitably bring her on that March 29th of 1914 to Sri Aurobindo. She had arrived, the Mother, the one who would share his endeavour, who would embody it. *“I am on the way to discovering the illusion that must be*

⁴⁹Mother, Extract from conversation, *The Divine Materialism* (Satprem), p. 213.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, p. 199.

destroyed so that physical life can be uninterrupted."⁵¹ It was the only radically conclusive conclusion to this venture. For "*as long as there is death, things always end badly.*"⁵²

She remained in Pondicherry for one year until February 1915, when she would be called back to Europe at the outbreak of the First World War. But after a five-year sojourn, four of which were spent in Japan, she would return definitively on the 24th of April, 1920 to resume her place beside Sri Aurobindo.

It was also in 1914, that year of their first meeting, that Sri Aurobindo would begin the publication of a monthly review called the *Arya* which would continue uninterrupted until 1921, serializing in each issue nearly all of his major works that would later be cast into book form. "...*sixty-four pages a month of philosophy all to write by my lonely self,*" he would say, "... *And philosophy! Let me tell you in confidence that I never, never, never was a philosopher.*"⁵³ Even from that first contact, she had somehow already moved him to make his vision accessible. She who would give that vision form, who would see it translated in living terms.

But for him, for Sri Aurobindo, nearly 5,000 pages poured out from all the angles of his personality. For he could not confine his nature to a single style, single language, to seize a single cut-and-dried Truth. His was an elaborate simplicity, a rich synthesis, always one, but limitlessly so. Thus, he evoked the expressions of the seer, the poet, the evolutionary 'philosopher', the socio-political visionary and the spontaneous wit. And behind all of his myriad writings – *The Life Divine, Synthesis of Yoga, Future Poetry, Ideal of Human Unity, Human Cycle, Essays on the Gita, Secret of the Veda...* behind them all, there remained the simple child who never gets lost in his words,

⁵¹*Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁵²Mother, Conversations, (8.1.51).

⁵³Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*, p. 348.

who always remembered the simple, eternal theme:

*What is God after all? An eternal child playing an eternal game in an eternal garden.*⁵⁴

Of all his major works, only *Savitri* remained for another moment.

But during these six and a half years, his vision would become accessible, cast in an impeccable logic capable of disarming even the most incredulous intellect:

“The earliest preoccupation of man in his awakened thoughts and, as it seems, his inevitable and ultimate preoccupation, for it survives the longest periods of scepticism and returns after every banishment, is also the highest which his thought can envisage. It manifests itself in the divination of Godhead, the impulse towards perfection, the search after pure Truth and unmixed Bliss, the sense of a secret immortality. The ancient dawns of human knowledge have left us their witness to this constant aspiration; today we see a humanity satiated but not satisfied by victorious analysis of the externalities of Nature, preparing to return to its primeval longings...

“...To the ordinary material intellect which takes its present organisation of consciousness for the limit of its possibilities, the direct contradiction of the unrealized ideals with the realized fact is a final argument against their validity. But if we take a more deliberate view of the world’s workings, that direct opposition appears rather as part of Nature’s profoundest method and the seal of her completest sanction.

“For all problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony ... All Nature seeks a harmony, life and matter in their own spheres as much as mind in the arrangement of its perceptions. The greater the

⁵⁴Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. 9.

apparent disorder in the materials offered or the apparent disparateness, even to irreconcilable opposition, of the elements that have to be utilized, the stronger is the spur, and it drives towards a more subtle and puissant order than can normally be the result of a less difficult endeavour...

“We speak of the evolution of Life in Matter, the evolution of Mind in Matter: but evolution is a word which merely states the phenomenon without explaining it. For there seems to be no reason why life should evolve out of material elements or Mind out of living form, unless we accept the Vedantic solution that Life is already involved in Matter and Mind in Life, because in essence Matter is a form of veiled Life, Life a form of veiled Consciousness. And then there seems to be little objection to a farther step in the series and the admission that mental consciousness may itself be only a form and a veil of higher states which are beyond Mind. In that case, the unconquerable impulse of man towards God, Light, Bliss, Freedom, Immortality presents itself in its right place in the chain as simply the imperative impulse by which Nature is seeking to evolve beyond Mind... The animal is a living laboratory in which Nature has, it is said, worked out man. Man himself may well be a thinking and living laboratory in whom and with whose conscious cooperation she wills to work out the superman, the God. Or shall we not say, rather, to manifest God? For if evolution is the progressive manifestation by Nature of that which slept or worked in her, involved, it is also the overt realization of that which she secretly is. We cannot, then, bid her pause at a given stage of her evolution nor have we the right to condemn with the religionist as perverse and presumptuous or with the rationalist as a disease or hallucination any intention she may evince or effort she may make to go beyond. If it be true that Spirit is involved in Matter and apparent Nature is secret God, then the manifestation of the divine in himself and the realization of God within and without are the highest and most legitimate aim possible

to man upon earth.”⁵⁵

*“...Up till this advent of a developed thinking mind in Matter evolution had been effected not by the self-aware aspiration, intention, will or seeking of the living being, but subconsciously or subliminally by the automatic operation of Nature. This was so because the evolution began from the Inconscience and the secret Consciousness had not yet emerged sufficiently from it to operate through the self-aware participating individual will of its living creatures. But in man the necessary change has been made, – the being has become awake and aware of himself:... In him, then, the substitution of a conscious for a subconscious evolution has become conceivable and practicable...”*⁵⁶

*“... In the inner reality of things a change of consciousness was always the major fact, the evolution has always had a spiritual significance and the physical change was only instrumental; but this relation was concealed by the first abnormal balance of the two factors, the body of the external Inconscience outweighing and obscuring in importance the spiritual element, the conscious being. But once the balance has been righted, it is no longer the change of body that must precede the change of consciousness; the consciousness itself by its mutation will necessitate and operate whatever mutation is needed for the body.”*⁵⁷

In very precise and matter-of-fact terms, Sri Aurobindo was pointing to the conscious self-evolution of a new being that would fulfill the true terrestrial destiny of the earth, concluding a story that always ended badly and beginning a new one – a true story that never ends. And for the accomplishment of this Endeavour – the

⁵⁵Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, pp. 3-6.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, p. 750.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*, p. 751.

emergence of a principle that he called the Supramental – he prescribes no complex methodology, no mystic machinations, just a simple unflinching aspiration and sincere surrender. A transparent opening to allow that which is *already there* to manifest... to call it through – that secret sun – so it might manifest here... “*A need, a need, a need which only THE Thing can satisfy,*” she said.

Since the Mother’s return to Pondicherry, the small core that followed Sri Aurobindo from Calcutta had grown spontaneously into a community of seekers: an Ashram. She would inherit the responsibility for the collective development of that Ashram in 1926 – an organism that would continue to grow under her guidance, evolving extensive educational and sports facilities, crafts, industries, farms, slowly enveloping the town of Pondicherry from within as the members would swell to nearly two thousand before a sudden turn of events in 1973 would alter its character and expansion. “*This Ashram*”, he would say, “*has been created... not for the renunciation of the world but as a centre and field of practice for the evolution of another kind and form of life.*”⁵⁸ So long as it held true to this line, remained alive to change, it would endure organically. To stop, to make a religion of what has been realized, “to mistake a stage for the goal”, would leave it at the mercy of the Law of Bubbles: they pop and are surpassed.

For the grounding of a new evolutionary principle here on earth, a collective life and experience, a Community, was necessary. “*Because every physical thing,*” the Mother remarked, “*however complete it be, even though it be of an altogether superior kind, even if it be made for an altogether special work, is never but partial and limited. It represents only one truth, one law in the world, even if it may be a very complex law; but it is always only one law – and the full transformation cannot be realized through it alone, through a single body... One can attain, alone, one’s own perfection; one can become in one’s consciousness infinite and perfect. The inner realization has no limits. But the outer*

⁵⁸Sri Aurobindo, *On Yoga II*, Tome One, p. 823.

realization, on the contrary, is necessarily limited, so that if one wants to have a general action, at least a minimum number of physical beings is necessary."⁵⁹

And in this same regard Sri Aurobindo would say: "Accepting life, he (the seeker of the integral yoga) has to bear not only his own burden, but a great part of the world's burden too along with it, as a continuation of his own sufficiently heavy load. Therefore his Yoga has much more the nature of a battle than others'; but this is not only an individual battle, it is a collective war waged over a considerable country. He has not only to conquer in himself the forces of egoistic falsehood and disorder, but to conquer them as representatives of the same adverse and inexhaustible forces in the world. Their representative character gives them a much more obstinate capacity of resistance, an almost endless right to recurrence. Often he finds that after he has won persistently his own personal battle, he has still to win it over and over again in a seemingly interminable war, because his inner existence has already been so much enlarged that it not only contains his own being with its well-defined needs and experiences, but is in solidarity with the being of others, because in himself he contains the universe."⁶⁰ Or in her unequivocal footnote: "You do not any longer do your yoga for yourself alone, you do the yoga for everybody, without wanting to, automatically."⁶¹

⁵⁹Mother, extract from a conversation, *The Adventure of Consciousness* (Satprem), p. 309.

⁶⁰Sri Aurobindo, *Synthesis of Yoga*, p. 187.

⁶¹Mother, extract from a conversation, *The Adventure of Consciousness* (Satprem), p. 309.



Thus, they continued their experiment that carried in itself all of the terrestrial doubt and resistance, all of the sense of impossibility, unable to find any confirmation or reassurance outside themselves, unable to seek any support other than the conviction of their own experience. *“The obstacle is identical to the very reason of the work to be accomplished,”*⁶² she saw. And even with Sri Aurobindo’s passing on December 5th of 1950, she continued, pressing on, an irrepressible flame, an indomitable will that loved beyond limits, that could never accept the Ultimatum of death.

*A day may come when she must stand unhelped
On a dangerous brink of the world’s doom and hers,
Carrying the world’s future on her lonely breast,
Carrying the human hope in a heart left sole
To conquer or fail on a last desperate verge,...
In her the conscious Will took human shape.*⁶³

⁶²Mother, *Paroles d’ Autrefois* (21.5.12).

⁶³Sri Aurobindo, *Savitri*, p. 522.

She, who was the urge and substance of *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo's epic verse. She...

*A living choice reversed fate's cold dead turn,
Affirmed the spirit's tread on circumstance,
Pressed back the senseless dire revolving Wheel
And stopped the mute march of Necessity.
A flaming warrior from the eternal peaks
Empowered to force the door denied and closed
Smote from Death's visage its dumb absolute
And burst the bounds of consciousness and Time.*⁶⁴

She, the face in the photograph that found someone who had lost himself long ago in the trance of time... Who unlocked him, gave voice to all that dreamed in the fullness of his heart, delivering him to the dawn of his quest that would bring him home to Auroville.

*O Sun-Word, thou shalt raise the earth-soul to Light...*⁶⁵

⁶⁴*Ibid.*, p. 25.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, p. 784.

**PART TWO:
THE QUEST – A FIRE TO BE**

*A slit of dying moon
A silver flute beneath the ruin,
A god of fire hewn
A dragon wing eclipsed the noon.*

(Journal entry - 29 March, 1976)

1. india

I left San Francisco a year later as the sixties closed irrevocably behind me. With no plans other than the imperative to see Her – that one who kindled the eloquence of the Real – I boarded a charter flight for London, bound for India. My sole belongings were a backpack filled with some clothes and personal items, and a briefcase containing my Diary and *Savitri* – the fire of my quest. Enough for the passage.

After two days wandering about in London in my first experience outside North America, I took a bus to the outskirts of the City, put out my thumb and left for Dover and the ferry that would take me to France. I crossed the English Channel at midnight, arriving on the shores of the Continent at Calais. It was a well-scrambled young man who spent the rest of that night bobbing in his sleeping bag beside the quay. At dawn the following morning, still listing slightly, a red-haired wanderer from the westernmost reaches of the West began his migration Eastward through his global roots.

With back-pack and briefcase, he drifted past the endless line of hitch-hikers that had already staked their claims along the road. Perhaps he would have to walk to Paris, he mused, as he approached an attractive young girl, thumb out in the queue of arms outstretched to the horizon. But just as he drew beside her, a lorry stopped, opening the door for her; and in that spontaneous exchange of events while she explained to the driver that she could not leave without her boyfriend who was still in the restaurant, a flash of red hair hopped into the open cab without a word. Life is a question of timing, he thought to himself as the lorry lurched forward, the driver muttering a series of colourful Gaulish oaths to himself as they headed for Paris.

He would spend the next five weeks travelling overland through an assortment of conveyances as he waded back through the current of

Civilization – through a calibration of planetary culture that gradually receded in its material expression and dynamism as it withdrew from its American excesses... tempering as it slipped through Europe and crossed the Bosphorus where it began to wither in Asian lands where scales reversed... where men and animals began to carry the burden of machines in lands whose origins grew less and less mundane, whose spaces grew more austere, whose sense of time grew slower and slower, more and more eternal until it hardly seemed to move. A panorama of global consciousness: in one extreme, lost in the obsession of the object; in the other extreme, lost in the oblivion of the subject.

And after those weeks of exhausting travel passing through endless cars and buses and trains, passing through endless countries under endless skies in endless scenes that began to melt and blend until the journey became one moving tableau – one living tapestry woven from the fine green linens of European countrysides that gradually textured into the denser red and brown fibres of Asia – a long gathered momentum carried him across a last border of hills as he watched the thread wind slowly down into the plains of India, *Bharat Mata*.

From Ferozepur, the first town he encountered in the Punjab, he endured a final passage by third-class train that he noted in his diary as “comparable to cattle transport”: the aisles so cluttered with cages of chickens, crates, peasants huddled together in steamy masses, that one resigned oneself to one’s place... Until at last, a soot-covered vagabond from the West disembarked in New Delhi on the thirty-sixth day of his voyage.

Somehow, he had arrived.

He spent two days in Delhi retiring from the Wheel. His entry had coincided with the ten-day festival of Durga Puja⁶⁶ and the streets

⁶⁶Representing the victory of the goddess Durga – the Power of the Divine Mother – over the Asura, the Being of Falsehood who possesses and distorts the

were jammed with people. His senses were stunned by the contrast of cultures – the miasma of poverty pervading the explosion of sounds and colours and smells that mingled the bazaar of ginger and turmeric and sandal and jasmine with the stench of urine and decay. A contrast which he could not elevate to the exotic in this exaggerated inversion of that other poverty, that other emptiness he had left in the mechanical sterilities of New York.

With the overflow of pilgrims and travellers in that surge of Durga Puja, he was unable to book his second-class sleeper to Pondicherry; but saturated with Delhi, he took a brief retreat north by bus to Rishikesh in the Himalayan foothills where the Ganges begins its descent from the distant summits of Shiva's abode. As the bus made its way along the sacred route to Hardwar and Rishikesh, the occasional fleck of yellow robes became more prolific, condensed into a calvary of *sannyasins*, sombre, heads shaven, ochre-clad, or wild-eyed, hair matted in dung, garbed only in loin cloth and ashes. A procession of holy men following a course that never moved.

He arrived that same evening in Rishikesh, where he would spend the next few days alone. It was here in these ancient foothills that he would have his first experience of India – of an India forever there behind the façade of her millennial masks and her impoverished masses. And as he sat early that next morning on a great boulder rising from the waters of a sacred river, a vast silence filled the wilds: A silence engrained in the soil and the stones. A silence that grew tangible, deepening, enveloping the cries of the monkeys that rustled through the trees along the river banks. A silence that reverberated through the rushing rhythm of the Ganges flowing cold and clear and true like a mantra of the gods. A silence so still that it could swallow the world. A land where the earth itself was steeped in another reality, where the earth itself still bore another presence.

consciousness of men.

A Motherland so noble, so rich, so close to her soul, and yet so debased, denied by the inertia of her own sons. A country that has lived for thousands of years under the shadow of the sannyasin, the vow of the ascetic rejecting life, the persistent dogma that filtered for centuries through the body of India until it had sapped her of her vitality and her will to progress, enfeebling her, leaving behind an emaciated nation deprived of initiative and effective power, sustained only by the sheer presence of her soul. For that stream of yellow robes had turned the eyes and energies of the nation elsewhere, convincing it of the illusion of material existence, replaced the dynamism to conquer and create with the recompense of perseverance, with a capacity to endure and absorb anything. An impotence derived from a powerful truth that sought God above all else. A truth that somehow gradually deformed into an attitude that nothing matters. The poverty of spirit.

“What has ruined India is this idea that the higher consciousness deals with higher things and that lower things do not interest it at all, and that it understands nothing about them. That has been the ruin of India. Well, this error must be completely eradicated. It is the highest consciousness which sees most clearly – most clearly and truly – what the needs of the most material things must be,” the Mother said (on April 10, 1968), regarding the experiment in government that could be applied in Auroville.

It was this aeonic misconception, inevitably disconnecting the Indian will from the material plane, that pauperized her of her resources and eventually left her vulnerable to the successive conquests of the Huns, the Moguls, the Greeks, the Persians, the Mongols, the Afghans, the Portuguese and the British. And yet despite all of the cultural superimpositions, the soul of the subcontinent still lay intact. *“O Soul of India,”* Sri Aurobindo had called, *“hide thyself no longer with the darkened Pandits of the Kaliyuga in the kitchen and the chapel, veil not thyself with the soulless rite, the obsolete law... restore the hidden truth of the Vedic sacrifice, return to the*

fulfillment of an older and mightier Vedanta."⁶⁷ It was this original Vedic wholeness of heaven and earth, knowledge and power, lost to subsequent generations when the paths of East and West severed, that India would have to recover if she was to play her true role in the world.

He left Rishikesh with parrots filling the dawn of that chill Indian morning that would take him back to New Delhi. It was nearly evening when he reached Connaught Circus, the central park of the capital city. Tomorrow he would leave for Pondicherry.

He sat down in the wet grass letting the back-pack drop from his shoulders as the sun sank behind the buildings. Before him a band of long-haired travellers from the West had camped out on the lawn. The thought of trudging back through the crowds with his load all the way to the hostel while the train station lay just on the other side of the park seemed in that moment like a contortion more suited to the cautious logic of New York or San Francisco. So without further calculation, he grabbed his gear and slipped in among the colourful company spread all over the green.

He unrolled his sleeping bag as the fading violet shades slowly withdrew into the prism of night. He lay there on that turning moment of earth, a terrestrial wanderer amidst a race destined to wander: A race in transition, caught between the animal and the god. Looking back upon his voyage, upon a lengthening tapestry traversing a small planet, he saw a single procession of Culture – a single Caravan of Civilization winding along an ancient route. One Man hidden from himself among the many selves in his evolutionary spectrum. And then the image deepened, transformed into the flight of a Woman moving Westward over the earth: The flight of the Shakti – of the Power of Being, uprooted, renounced, cast forth in a blind becoming that would exhaust itself as it travelled farther from its Source... losing itself in its own

⁶⁷Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, Centenary Edition, Vol. 17, p. 122.

unconscious creative mechanism in the last frontiers of occidental materialism. A Princess asleep in Matter. But it was there in the farthest extremities that the circle would rejoin, in that last opposite that the secret of the whole would appear... *"When the highest will be manifested in the most material, that the experience will be truly conclusive."*

A single evening star held the horizon. With back-pack and briefcase secured beside him, he too drifted back into the prism. Tomorrow, the last stretch of a journey that would bring him to Her.

He tumbled out of a heavy sleep, his hand clutching his stomach as he swung round instinctively reaching for his briefcase. It was gone. A sudden ache overtook him. Nothing would focus, only this ache. How was it possible? He burst from his sleeping bag into the early hours of tomorrow, leaving his back-pack with the couple beside him. The sun had still not yet risen as he ran like a madman through the grey streets of Delhi while sweepers cleared away the debris of yesterday. He ran down the maze of alleys and lanes in Connaught looking for a phantom with a briefcase. But the streets were silent, offered him only the figure of his own shadow and the solitary sound of footsteps running. He was alone, racing in a blur somewhere in India, unsure if he had crossed the borders of sleep. But the streets yielded no one and he finally gave way, collapsing breathless on a bench.

Something was missing, but what? He turned to look at the ache as the pallid pre-dawn flushed soft crimson, suffusing the powdery morning haze. A briefcase full of personal papers and *Savitri*, the content of his quest that had brought him here to the other side of the world. How was it possible? To come all this way to India... All this way unscathed, through nights slept out alone in rugged gypsy country, through days wandering along strange roads in strange lands... And then to reach India. Refuge. Goal of the Journey.

Spiritual Mother of Nations. Thief in the Night. How ironic Her greeting. *Namasté*.

Still numbed by the sudden void on the verge of his departure for Pondicherry, he began drifting back to the park. For what else was there to do but go on? He reached the place where he had left his back-pack and sleeping bag with the sympathetic couple. A warm sunshine was beginning to filter through the park, gradually burning away the last mists that resisted. He sat there on the moist morning earth, eyes closed, another aura filtering through the films of his ego. And as he looked for the sense in the madness, he began to feel a small shadowy knot that he harboured in himself. A knot too tender to touch. An ancient pain that haunted him, followed him all this way to the end of the earth... only to torment him in this moment of his deliverance. He reached back for his missing briefcase... But all he could do now is let it go. *Let it all go...* Moving forward through the fear, through the fire, *letting go...*

And in that most painful parting moment, he began to see through the heartbreak to deeper meaning of that missing briefcase. Saw its true contents which could never be taken from him. Saw that true Need that burned through all the stories... that brought him where he was and where he yet would be... letting go, letting go, needing nothing but that one true thing that was left when all else was taken away.

Then, still shaken, he breathed a deep sigh and stood up. stood up. The train would leave in an hour so he needed to move on. Feeling the pressure in his bladder, he scanned the area looking for a nearby restroom. But only a cluster of bushes beside the fence were in sight. They would have to do. He entered the tangle of foliage and nearly stumbled over a brown briefcase, its simple contents emptied out, lying before him on the ground: Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* and my diary. Nothing of value to anyone but me. *Namasté*.

2. the dream of someone who was

The two-and-a-half day train ride on the Grand Trunk Express carried him some two thousand kilometres through the dry northern plains across the hilly mid-regions southward to the coast, passing through a staccato stream of village scenes that seemed to repeat the same sun-baked scenes: vast open expanses with an occasional silhouette of sari-clad women on the horizon carrying water jugs on their head, rice fields of jade ploughed by men in turbans trudging behind their bullocks. And as the train curved round the Coromandel Coast entering Tamil Nadu – Madras State – the speech began to slip from Hindi and its cognate tongues to the regional accents of Tamil.

He arrived in Madras Central Station late in the afternoon, pressing his way through the herd of hawkers, beggars and porters that spotted his give-away red hair, somehow managing on a last surge of adrenalin to find Egmore Station and the train that would take him through the night that final hundred miles south. It was dawn on a mid-October day when a young cinder-faced Californian found himself in a rickshaw snaking through the old French quarter of Pondicherry.

He would spend the next ten days in one of the guest houses of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram waiting for the 25th, his birthday, to see Her, the Mother. The monsoon rains had already set in on that day as he passed into the main Ashram building and mounted the narrow passageway leading to Her room. Who was it behind that door? Was it really Her? Or was this all a 15,000-mile madness? And then, there, at that portal ... to what? ... to whom? ... all the thoughts ceased, fell like a corpse, and a call arose like a phoenix – an aspiration that consumed him surged forth irresistibly: *O let it be true, let me be true*. And then the door opened and he entered with that simple call. And She looked at him, *saw* him. And no words

were spoken. Only those eyes that *saw...that created* what they saw. *Let me be true, let me be true.* Her. Yes. And it was his body that knew. Someone who was. He was before *someone who was*. And all of the old laws were broken.

From that moment facing himself in that face, he knew there was no way back... to what?... to where? Behind him the ashes of an old story, before him a flame. Then he rose slowly like a fragile flower opening, cupping that flame in his heart as he descended the stairs into another world.

He waded through the weeks that followed as the monsoon made rivers of the streets. It was an inner time, hibernating, waiting to see the next move. There was a certain atmosphere in the Ashram then, a benevolent sweetness that kept the dreary grey from getting too oppressive. But something in him knew his place was not there. For with all of its extensive departments, workshops and cultural activities, all the ingredients for the nucleus of a true collective experiment, it still remained a laboratory within a parenthesis: an ambitious attempt that was still hyphenated to the existing structure of the world, emerging within the give-and-take context of Pondicherry yet still separate from it. And as a result, despite the ideals, a certain ambiguity and disconnect remained between the inner and outer life: A certain distance, privacy, withholding of the individual to the full dynamic interchange, shared responsibility and participation in an integral collective life. In other words, it seemed that building a real inner-outer bridge would remain for a future endeavour.

He had heard of Auroville before leaving San Francisco, read about the founding of a "*city the earth needs*" in a pamphlet filled with the praise and testimonials of world leaders, the Prime Minister of India, the endorsement of UNESCO. Yet at the time, his focus was simply to see Her, so he didn't quite know what to make of this "Auroville". But here, in Pondicherry, with all this time on his

hands, he began leafing through the various pamphlets and public relations literature which mixed impressive architectural models and visions of a scale too magnified for him to grasp among the simple words and simple Charter of the Mother. What was this Auroville that she had conceived?... this other experiment just north of Pondicherry Territory in Tamil Nadu state?

He found the contrasting images between the glossy brochure visions and the simplicity of Her Dream which prefaced them confusing: *“There should be somewhere upon earth, a place that no nation could claim as its sole property, a place where all human beings of goodwill, sincere in their aspiration, could live freely as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, that of the supreme Truth...”* And in that 1954 Vision, 14 years before Auroville materialized, She realistically concluded that ... *“The earth is certainly not ready to realize such an ideal, for mankind does not yet possess the necessary knowledge to understand and accept it or the indispensable conscious force to execute it. That is why I call it a dream.”*⁶⁸

Was that humanity ready now, or would it clog the possibility once again with its doubt and the habitual lethal recoil of *“the ordinary material intellect which takes its present organization of consciousness for the limit of its possibilities, the direct contradiction of the unrealized ideals with the realized fact (as) a final argument against their validity”*? Could this Auroville be a true and free meeting point of East and West, beyond the dogmas of either? – some first concrete point of a Whole Earth? Or would old instincts to control prevail? – the territorial instinct of the ego seeking to possess, arrogating itself to the authority of that *“supreme Truth”*, unwilling to let a future slip through its hand without burying it under another respectable failure that would please everyone and change nothing?

Two stories. A story of Resistance and a story of Love. But was it time? Was the earth or a sufficient number of men – or he himself –

⁶⁸Mother, *“A Dream”*, August 1954

ready to consciously choose to emerge from that Trance where everything ends badly?

After all, She was inviting us, not imposing: *“I invite you,”* she said, *“to the Great Adventure, and in this adventure you are not to repeat spiritually what others have done before us, because our adventure begins from beyond that stage. We are here for a new creation, entirely new, carrying in it all the unforeseen, all risk, all hazards – a true adventure of which the goal is sure victory, but of which the way is unknown and has to be traced out step by step in the unexplored. It is something that has never been in the present universe and will never be in the same manner.*

*“If that interests you, well, embark. What will happen tomorrow, I do not know. You must leave behind whatever has been designed, whatever has been built up. And then, on the march into the unknown. Come what may!”*⁶⁹

It was so simple, and yet all of the arguments were there to prove it wrong, to prove that it was impossible. He knew them so well in himself.

“What has happened is truly a new thing, a new world has been born,” she said then, not *“an amelioration of the old world as it was...”*

*“At the present hour we are in the very heart of a period of transition where the two are intertwined: the old persists, still all-powerful, continues to dominate the ordinary consciousness, while the new glides in, still very modest, unnoticed to the extent that for the moment, it disturbs nothing much externally, and even in the consciousness of most people it is quite imperceptible. And yet it works, it grows till the moment when it will be strong enough to impose itself visibly.”*⁷⁰

That was in 1957 when the realists could hardly be convinced of another presence, when Western science and technology seemed

⁶⁹Mother, Conversations (10.7.57)

⁷⁰*ibid.*

about to triumph over Nature and her inconveniences, ushering in an era of ultimate security: a domesticated future, programmed and predictable. When a desperate ego-driven species governed by a disconnected mind had almost reached the limits of its blindness, constructing a civilization so absorbed in its own machinery, so impoverished in its own power, so lost in its mechanical mesmerism, that it could no longer feel the ache of something deeply missing: a civilization so numbed in a vicarious living, so caught in the cleverness of its own Mechanism that it could no longer see the brittle corner it had built itself into, the utter vulnerability on which its imposing edifice rested. The other extreme, the other Renunciation, the other Poverty.

“Europe prides herself on her practical and scientific organization and efficiency,” Sri Aurobindo had said in a time before America had established itself as the epitome of Western excess. *“I am waiting till her organization is perfect; then a child shall destroy her.”*⁷¹ But who then in the complacency of those middle 1950s could have felt this new world gliding in behind the old, about to undermine the mask? It was still a decade before the colossalization would begin to show signs of collapsing under its own weight. There was still a little time more for the gluttony, a little time more to revel in the nightmare with massive forces muzzled by science somehow placed precariously at the disposal of a dwarf consciousness. A time when the word “ecology” still belonged to the biologists. There was still a little time more before the cracks would begin to reveal themselves like great earthquake faults from Berkeley to Chicago, from Woodstock to the streets of Rimbaud’s Paris; a little more time before that first assault of waves, before the youth would turn on and the campuses would erupt and the stock markets crash and the oil fields dry up, before the soil would become ungrowable and the air unbreathable and men would begin to revolt from the suffocating Machine. The beginning of *something else* imposing itself

⁷¹Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Aphorisms*, p. 19.

visibly.

And still there would be the denial, the resistance: those of us who would claim that the answer lies in history, that the pattern is familiar, just exaggerated, that there is nothing *really* wrong. We can work this out, they would say, we can talk it over reasonably, it's not *really* necessary to change. Just a few more nuclear power plants, a few more computers, a few more...Just sign here... The bargain, the fear of letting go. That reflex to run back into the past pragmatically with the Bourgeois, fanatically with the Ayatollahs, statically with the Sannyasins. *"The end of a stage of evolution is usually marked by a powerful recrudescence of all that has to go out of the evolution,"*⁷² Sri Aurobindo remarked in 1910.

1968, a year when the West, like a young man-cornered on a Colorado mountaintop, would touch the limits of its reason, no longer able to grasp the accelerating Event that lay before it. A year when the ideals would begin to become imperatives. 1968, a planet in full labour, her contradictions quickening in the tension of the two extremes, the two poverties. And on February 28th of that leap year, Auroville was dedicated. A handful of Earth that She had set aside for the Experiment.

⁷²Sri Aurobindo, *Harmony of Virtue*, Centenary Ed. Vol. 3, p. 347.



For there in the middle of Auroville's vast vacant plateau beside an ancient banyan tree, above the sea where South Indian villagers fished with ancestral nets passed through the hands of a thousand years, children from 124 nations – the member states of the United Nations – placed the soil of their motherlands into a simple white marble Urn. A handful of Earth for a New World. And for those gathered there on that February 28th day in 1968, Her simple Auroville Charter was read out:

- 1. Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness.*
- 2. Auroville will be the place of an unending education, of constant progress, and a youth that never ages.*
- 3. Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realizations.*
- 4. Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity.*

An offering and a challenge. An offering to invoke – to materialize that Unity which was the sole Fact of our lives – and a challenge to all that resisted.

But even then, less than a month later when Auroville was still little more than a potent seed vibrating in those words, the reactions had begun. *“This is the big dispute at the moment about Auroville. In the Charter I put ‘Divine Consciousness’, so they say, ‘It reminds us of God’. I said, (laughing) ‘It doesn’t remind me of God!’ So some translate it as ‘the highest consciousness’, others put something else. I agreed with the Russians to put ‘perfect Consciousness’ but it is an approximation... And that – which cannot be named and cannot be defined – is the supreme Power.”*⁷³

Already the quibbling over words, the little innocuous grains of undoing. But what did it matter what we called it, even this name Auroville – *“call it anything, it doesn’t matter. It is the Perfection that we must become.”* That’s all – the point was simply to get there. To cut through *“this mud-hole, this imbecility, this unconsciousness, this disgusting defeatism that crushes us because we allow ourselves to be crushed.”*

Auroville. A possibility that something deeply in us cherished and another despised. A turning point of the last opposites, where the earth had come full circle, would have to meet itself, resolve itself as one *“in an immense spiritual revolution that rehabilitates matter and creation”*. Where a Woman would return from the West to recover that One *here in matter* which She had lost. That One which She secretly was and is.

Auroville. Was it all a myth, a legend, a poetic symbol cunningly conjured into a global allegory? Or was it a place where the Story would become true, finally true? – where the Dream, if it was a dream, would materialize? For after the Urn in the Amphitheatre had been filled and the world had gone home, what would remain beside the doubt?

⁷³Mother, conversations on Auroville, March 1968

3. Auroville ... because it has never been

A year after Auroville's Foundation Ceremony, that young man staying in the Ashram in Pondicherry, waiting to see the next move, would begin to find out.

He cycled several kilometres past the Pondicherry border into Tamil Nadu State, following the road that ran north along the beach until he turned left at the old clock tower in Muthialpet – an extended suburb of Pondicherry. It was there, he was told, that he would find the 'shortcut' to Auroville.

"Auroville?" he would ask shopkeepers and passersby. And the fingers would point in all directions, but most seemed to point left. And as he cycled on through that chaotic mass of bazaars and bullock carts, through a swarm of traffic where no laws seemed to apply, following a road that gradually became a track and the track a footpath disappearing into a monotone landscape punctuated only by the solitary lines of palmyras, he felt faint hesitation heard the old doubts begin to vibrate above the heat waves: Was it still not too late to turn back? Hadn't he already found what he was looking for? He cast a quick glance behind – that archaic instinct, that tiny trembling vibration of fear – but behind was out of reach.

But something in him familiar with this pattern pressed on towards this "Auroville" that seemed to have gone off the map. And somehow the footpath went on through the parched lands scarred with ravines, through the occasional ploughed fields and the stubble of thorny plants and tumbleweeds that inhabited the terrain. How exotic it would appear on a postcard read in the well-insulated cultures from which he had strayed. And yet he continued to follow the shuffle of footprints in the sandy path – the sole signs that someone had reached this mythic Auroville before him.

And then, as if in a mirage, he saw the peaks of a cluster of huts

across a canyon. His pace quickened at the sight and he scrambled up the other side of the canyon to find himself approaching some settlement which neither resembled the format of the local villages nor the brochures. A few well-camouflaged structures sparsely scattered amidst a relief of canyons and cashew nut trees. Was *this* Auroville? Was *this* the “Auroville” he had read about in Pondicherry that portrayed a City for 50,000 equipped with all the fantasies of the fifties? – the recycled projection of a future complete with moving sidewalks? He looked down incredulously at the dusty footpath that had been his sole conveyance. It was not quite as they had said. Maybe he hadn’t read the fine print.

He turned slowly around the unobstructed view that kept filling in with his own kaleidoscopic imaginings, then dissolving back into its latent actuality: *The direct contradiction of the unrealized ideals*, the phrase slipped in. Like an empty stage set with the curtain up. But where were the buildings, the impressive models he had seen? Cities meant buildings... or did they? How many times would he hear that question echoing through the nuances of indignation or astonishment or relief, expressing those familiar first reactions of visitors and newcomers in those early years? Where were the buildings, where was the City?



Before him, around him, an endless raw red terrain that offered no escape, no explanations and hardly any shade. “*At last a place where one will be able to think only of the future,*”⁷⁴ the Mother had said. The contrasting reality was dramatic. And his rational instincts revolted. The last place one could have imagined such a venture, set amidst the last imaginable cultural milieu. Accentuating the image, a herd of goats appeared out of the canyon, stripping the barren countryside of what meagre growth remained. Straggling behind, a few ragged urchins – goat-herd boys – eyed this strange red-haired intruder. “*Paisa kudu*”, one of them shouted. *Paisa kudu, paisa kudu*, they all began chanting and giggling, patting their empty stomachs in a mockery that belied the tragedy. *Paisa kudu... baksheesh*, the well-worn call of the beggar that trailed like a shadow through the farthest quarters of the Subcontinent.

If he allowed himself to think, to consider where he was and what he was doing, the whole thing felt absurd. A precise, concrete contradiction, not all abstract. A material sensation here that touched all of his civilized anxieties, triggering that impulse to run, to contract, to control, to cast this scene as quickly as possible back into the comfort-zone of a more familiar scenario...

The obstacle is identical to the very reason of the work to be accomplished.

... Something here in this no-man’s land, these goats, in the eyes of those small futureless boys, that touched the very heart of his own impossibility... Yet which perhaps held a key to a last Possible.

[“You understand, it is this which in the human common sense says: ‘It is impossible, that has never been’; it is this which has come to an end. It is finished, it is foolish; it has become a stupidity. One might say: it is possible because it has never been, It is the new world and the

⁷⁴Mother, Conversation on Auroville, January 1967.

new consciousness and it is the new power, it is possible, and this is and will be more and more because it is the new world, because it has never been. It will be because it has never been. (silence) It is beautiful: it will be because it has never been – because it has never been."⁷⁵]

He pushed his cycle toward the few huts before him which offered some human hope. Outside, a man and a woman watched him as he entered the compound. The man, then in his early thirties, was a painter, his wife a dancer, both American. Bob and Deborah. Francis, another American, also lived there in a hut farther over beside the canyon, they told him. So it happened here in *Forecomers* – the first of the pioneer outposts to begin inhabiting the vast interior of the "City" – that he would share his first Auroville meal.

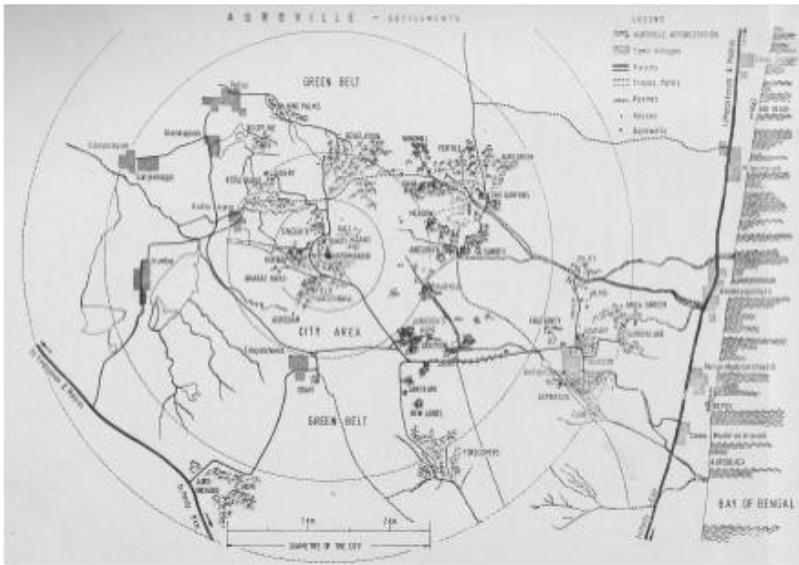
He learned of their tentative existence, the immense difficulties and hardships they faced: no electricity, barely accessible, having to haul water four miles by cycle until they could improvise a first awkward hand pump arrangement... The conditions of an unyielding environment that would eventually impel them in the years to come to pursue numerous experiments in solar and wind energy, various prototype living habitats, and the introduction of a recycling system to grow algae as a food alternative.



Forecomers: Algae tank, sleeping chamber, Francis (circa 1974)

⁷⁵Mother, conversation, May 1972.

But on that day of his Auroville initiation, there were only those first initial constructions they had built themselves with the help of some village labour: those huts he saw from the canyon. Not much to an outer look – bamboo, palm leaves, lime cement and bricks. Simple ingredients, impressive only in their imaginative simplicity and grace. And yet here, out of nothing, something that worked: something unpretentious – a first practical attempt that had materialized, withstood the seasonal assaults of sun and monsoon and goats and the impossibility of it all. But it was not so much the structures themselves that struck him as the attitude they expressed, the courage to dare such an attempt in the face of everything that reinforced the madness, the doubt, the futility.



It was this quality of a quiet heroism: this fearlessness to carry on despite all of the fears that he would feel again and again... recognizing that willingness to face the fears as the first demand of Auroville: the indispensable apprenticeship of an Aurovilian, the constant initiation into the future. For it was in this daily confrontation with the unprecedented that one faced here in the

material substance of one's life – in this conspiracy of circumstances and challenges which forced one to stop thinking if one was to survive, which *forced* one to just be and become and get on with it, all of it, down to the least details in an experience that left less and less to fall back on – that he would later perceive as the forge in a sublime process hammering out a new man... A man unafraid to live in the future, in the unprecedented, in a new world that would manifest when men stopped resisting. A new world that *already* existed, that would manifest when the inner conditions had been fulfilled, when the consciousness of men had changed.

And it was perhaps here in this handful of compact red earth, in this last opposite, that the process could emerge, *because* of that very opposition... could perhaps even emerge more swiftly, if it could be sustained here in this dense terrestrial point where all the contradictions interacted – where that pressure for change could become most concentrated, most accelerated, cracking the egg, releasing that hidden sun. If it could only be sustained.

With a red orb sinking slowly into the canyons, a young man exposed to his first experience of Auroville would make his way back from *Forecomers* to Pondy.

He spent a sleepless night struggling within himself, struggling with the events of that day...with all that denied this "Auroville" now roused in him: The churning doubt that guides our lives just beneath the surface of our reason. And as he drifted farther into his subconscious debate, the arguments slipped from their rational façade revealing the ogre behind them – the one in him, in us, who simply wants to prove it impossible before it had even begun. The one who in some perverse way revels in the destruction, enjoys the great relief of undoing, of not having to begin. The one who convinces us that it's not worth the effort, better to stay in bed, go back home, be reasonable, resign yourself to your own impotence, cooperate with your own death. After all, it's so much more

bearable, so much more manageable. But something else in him held fast, saw the duplicity at the threshold of his consciousness, was attracted to this Auroville *because* it represented the challenge and the conquest of all that denied in him, all that wanted to just go home: the formidable gravity that preferred to die rather than to face its own becoming.

And the following afternoon he caught the Auroville bus which in those days used to shuttle between the few pioneer settlements and Pondy. The bus took the main road that ran northwest towards Madras, turning right after some ten kilometres onto a small dirt road marked by an unobtrusive signpost that said 'Auroville'. The old blue Leyland bounced and jostled along the narrow packed earth road passing through an occasional Tamil village as it threaded its way through the vast open plateau of Auroville to reconnect down along the beach road to the east.

A thickening haze of red dust began to settle over the passengers as they trundled along. There was little to see then in those two thousand acres which bore the AV granite boundary markers – islands of land scattered amidst a patchwork of village and government lands extending over an area three times that size. One could usually identify the Auroville plots of that era by the ones which lay uncultivated. The actual Auroville at that time consisted of *Auro-Orchard*, an extensive farm in its initial phase; a few isolated residences and the first stages of a botanical nursery around the *Centre* near the area where the Urn was located; a temporary housing on the southern periphery of the "township" area for what would become *Auroson's Home*; the few huts of *Forecomers* invisible from the road; and the beginnings of *Aspiration*, a more concentrated "advance colony" located to the east where the plateau sloped down towards the sea.

As the bus stopped briefly at the entrance to *Auroson's Home*, two little half-naked kids hopped on the back. "Have you got any

stamps?" they asked that young man who I was re-becoming.

"No, Taddy, I asked first," Renu said. Taddy just grinned.

"Look, if you've got any stamps, please give them to me," she pleaded, "because Taddy and Hero, they always get them."

"Well," he responded, completely disarmed by these two precocious somebodies, "I don't have any stamps but if I did. . ."

"Well, if you get any," Renu interrupted quite in earnest, "you save them for me, right?" The question curled up like her eyelashes that streamed out from two golden brown miracles. "... right?" As she took his hand. How could he say no?

Taddy just grinned. Then in a flash, they were gone, running off in a blur of little brown legs.

Who were they, those kids? Were they Auroville children? He melted in his seat, touched by another Auroville, wondering why he had forgotten the stamps.



Renu and Taddy, then five and six. Renu, Mother's name which meant "golden dust", and Taddy, which just meant mischief. They were two of Shyama's three children – Hero, the third – that she had brought with her when she left Uganda to find her refuge here, in the Dream of the Mother. Their father, a Bengali writer-

revolutionary had remained in Africa when they left. It was here that Shyama, Swedish by birth, had met Frederick with whom she had her fourth child – Auroson, the first child born to Auroville and after whom the house they were building was named.

That evening after his return to Pondicherry, not allowing himself time to hesitate or consider what he was doing, he composed a short letter to the Mother in which he expressed his aspiration to live in Auroville. It was somehow the impossibility of it all that finally attracted him. That convinced him that this Auroville, whether it would succeed or not, was seeking the true thing, facing that simple confrontation here, *materially*... Choosing the very thing which we had always chosen to avoid... To avoid even in our spiritual quests, perhaps *especially* in our classic spiritual quests which inevitably led away from rather than towards. Yes, it was *because* of the contradiction that he finally wrote that letter to Her... with the help of a couple of kids.

Then he sealed the envelope, switched off the light, and entered a dream of little brown legs kicking up a field of warm golden dust as they raced towards a future forever there before them.

4. aspiration

Not long after, he received the Mother's reply accepting his request to reside in Auroville. His initiation began in *Aspiration* where he would spend his pioneering period through the end of 1971 – a moment which also witnessed the emergence of Bangladesh from East Pakistan.

Aspiration, one of the few existing settlements then, was the only point resembling a community as such. And though more than a dozen communal habitats of varying designs and densities have evolved since then across the chequered Auroville landscape, *Aspiration* for many years to come would remain the largest and most diverse of these initial outposts, in some ways becoming the crucible of its collective intensity.

When he arrived, there was a scattering of “approximate” Aurovilians in the blank spaces of an “approximate” Auroville. That approximation would grow in the decade to come to more than five hundred individuals and families from every conceivable culture, colour and cast (without the ‘e’), from more than twenty nationalities spanning the farthest recesses of East and West... migrating from middle-class city-bred backgrounds and impoverished village slums, bridging an immense diversity of humanity in microcosm.

In *Aspiration* itself, there were some twenty-five or thirty residents at the time – mostly French with a smattering of other cultures, including some North and South Indians; mostly in their twenties, a few families and their children, the rest informally single or paired. An awkward gathering finding itself somehow randomly thrown together, beginning its first embryonic gropings to discover a coherence of what it was about.

Most of that initial group had come with a caravan from Paris that

took nearly three months to reach Auroville by early October of 1969. It was not an easy transition. Despite some familiarity with the ideals and evolutionary implications, no one was prepared for that sudden entry into rural South India. Living in the first available huts as the winter monsoon began, the sense of progress became invisible, lost in the grey relentless rains. Constructing the initial stage of thirty-six huts and the completion of a community cafeteria which anticipated the aid of the residents, became protracted, bogged down in the mud inside and outside.

Those first months passed more or less incoherently, day by day. There was nobody in charge, no one as yet telling others what to do, no formulas, no directives, no directors. She had said, *"I want to insist on the fact that it will be an experiment, it is for making experiments – experiments, research, study."* Somehow each one would have to face their own freedom. She had only brought together the ingredients, and then left each one to evolve according to their own aspiration, their own sincerity. Auroville would succeed in proportion to the degree that its humanity consciously consented to change itself. Authoritarian repression and manipulation, no matter how well-intended, though effective in obtaining certain surface results, changes nothing. Humanity could not be repressed or coerced into a fabrication of unity. Unity was a *fact* that one freely became.

"No rules or laws are being framed," She had said in 1967. *"Things will get formulated as the underlying Truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate. What I mean is that usually – always so far, and now more and more – men lay down mental rules, according to their conceptions and ideals, and then they apply them (Mother brings down her fist to show the world in the grip of mind), and that is absolutely false, it is arbitrary, unreal – and the result is that things revolt or wither and disappear ... It is the experience of Life itself that should slowly elaborate rules which are as flexible and wide as possible, to be always progressive. Nothing should be fixed."*

“That is the great error of governments; they make a framework and say, ‘There you are, we have set this up and now we must live by it’; so of course they crush life and prevent it from progressing. Life itself must develop more and more in a progression towards Light, Knowledge, Power, little by little establishing rules that are as general as possible, so that they can be extremely flexible and change with the need – and change as quickly as the needs and habits do.

“The problem finally comes down to this: to replace the mental government of the intelligence by the government of a spiritualized consciousness.” (30.12.67)

Earlier that same year, She conveyed her simple *“Conditions for living in Auroville”*:

From the psychological point of view, the required conditions are:

- 1. To be convinced of the essential unity of mankind and to have the will to collaborate for the material realization of that unity;*
- 2. To have the will to collaborate in all that furthers future realizations. The material conditions will be worked out as the realization proceeds. (19.6.67)*

But despite the extraordinary freedom that was offered, or perhaps because of it, those early Aurovilians found that the sudden responsibility for their individual and collective life, with no one “in charge”, made it difficult to function. In other words, they needed some initial guidance, some practical grounding and sense of direction... Especially in this transformational field of red clay that was a confusing fusion of “material” and “spiritual”. Thus, a series of talks between the Mother and some of the residents of *Aspiration* emerged through that spring and early summer of 1970. (The following extracts represent translated portions of the unrevised texts of these conversations that she had wished, but was unable, to review prior to their use for publication.)

Q. We would like to speak to you about work in *Aspiration*. What we would like to know, what we are looking for is the right attitude.

M. *What is the trouble?*

Q. The trouble is ...

M. *Each one pulls in his own direction.*

Q. Each one pulls in his own direction. No one is really in contact with what is true...

M. *We should take into account that we are starting from the present state of humanity. So you must face all the difficulties; you must find the solution...*

Every man has his own solution, and that is the great difficulty. To be in the truth. each one has his own solution. And yet we must find a way for all these solutions to work together.

(silence)

So the framework must be vast, very flexible, and there must be a great goodwill from everyone: that is the first condition – the first individual condition, goodwill, to be flexible enough to do the best thing to be done at each moment.

Q: But for example, we are told that factories are needed, that there must be production, and some of us don't feel like doing work in that sense. They would rather do some research that is more ...

M: *More inward?*

Q: More inward rather than to launch into factories, work, production to make money, etc. That is not what we feel, that is not what we want to do in *Aspiration* at the moment. We would like to know what you think about it.

M: (*Mother concentrates – long silence*) To be practical, you must have a very clear vision of your goal, of where you are going. From this point of view, take money for example. An ideal which may be several hundred years ahead of its time, we don't know: money should be a power which belongs to nobody and which should be controlled by the most universal wisdom of the place; on earth, say, by someone who has a vision vast enough to be able to know the needs of the earth and precise enough to be able to tell where the money should go. You understand, we are very far from that, aren't we? For the moment, the gentleman still says, "This is mine", and when he is generous he says, "I give it to you". That's not it.

There is a long way to go between what we are and what must be. And for that we must be very flexible, never losing sight of the goal, but knowing that we cannot reach it at one bound and that we must find the way. Well, that is much more difficult, even more difficult than to make the inner discovery. Truly speaking, that should have been made before coming here.

For there is a starting-point: when you have found within yourself the light that never wavers, the presence which can guide you with certitude, then you become aware that constantly, in everything that happens, there is something to be learned, and that in the present state of matter, there is always a progress to be made. That is how one should come, eager to find out at every minute the progress to be made. To have a life that wants to grow and perfect itself, that is what the collective ideal of Auroville should be: "A life that wants to grow and perfect itself", and above all, not in the same way for everyone – each one in his own way.

Well, now there are thirty of you, it is difficult, isn't it? When there are thirty thousand of you, it will be easier because, naturally, there will be many more possibilities. You are the pioneers, you have the most difficult task, but I feel it is the most interesting one. Because you must establish in a concrete, durable and growing way the

attitude that is needed to truly be an Aurovilian. To learn every day the lesson of the day ... Each sunrise is an opportunity to make a discovery. So, with that state of mind, you find out. Everyone does.

And the body needs activity: if you keep it inactive, it will begin to revolt, become sick, and so on. It needs any activity, it really needs an activity like planting flowers, building a house, something really material. You must feel it. Some people do exercise, some ride bicycles. There are countless activities, but in your little group you must all come to an agreement so that each one can find the activity which suits his temperament, his nature and his needs. But not with ideas. Ideas are not much good, ideas give you preconceptions, for example, "that is a good work, that work is not worthy of me", and all that sort of nonsense. There is no bad work – there are only bad workers. All work is good when you know how to do it in the right way. Everything. And it is a kind of communion. If you are fortunate enough to be conscious of an inner light, you will see that in your manual work, it is as if you called the Divine down into things; then the communion becomes very concrete, there is a whole world to be discovered, it is marvellous ...

And in the months to come one of the Aurovilians would express to the Mother his sense of the embryonic confusion "concerning Auroville's organization, inner as well as outer," proposing that "in order to realize a greater sense of unity," some common work could be undertaken in which everyone could somehow participate – perhaps a communal garden or farm, some concrete collective focus. The Mother acknowledged the idea referring the possibility to the Matrimandir, the structure that she had envisaged as a "living symbol" of the "soul of Auroville": "We have been thinking of building the Matrimandir for a long time. It is the centre of the town, isn't it? It is like the Force, the central Force of Auroville, the Force of cohesion in Auroville ... There will be gardens, everything, all possibilities: engineers, architects, all kinds of manual work; there will be work for all..." (7.7.70). The inauguration for the Matrimandir would take place on 21

February, 1971.

Out of the need which arose from these "Aspiration Talks", the Mother formulated an indication for those seeking a line in their own development and that of the collectivity which She called "To Be a True Aurovilian":

1. *The first thing needed is the inner discovery, to find out what one truly is behind the social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances.*

At the centre there is a being, free and vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who should become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.

2. *One lives in Auroville to be free from moral and social conventions; but this freedom must not be a new enslavement to the ego, to its desires and ambitions.*

The fulfillment of one's desires bars the way to the inner discovery which can only be achieved in the peace and transparency of perfect disinterestedness.

3. *The Aurovilian should lose the sense of personal possession. For our passage in the material world, what is indispensable to our life and action is put at our disposal according to the place we must occupy.*

The more we are in conscious contact with our inner being, the more will the exact means be given to us.

4. *Work, even manual work, is something indispensable for the inner discovery. If we do not work, if we do not put our consciousness into matter, matter will never develop. To allow the consciousness to organize a little matter by means of one's body is very good. To create order around us helps to create order within us. We should organize our lives not according to outer artificial rules, but according to an organized inner consciousness, for if we let life go on without subjecting it to the control of the higher*

consciousness, it becomes dispersed and inexpressive. It is a waste of time in the sense that no conscious use is made of matter.

5. *The whole earth must prepare itself for the advent of the new species, and Auroville wants to work consciously to hasten this advent.*
6. *Little by little it will be revealed what this new species must be, and meanwhile, the best course is to consecrate ourselves entirely to the Divine. (13.6.70)*

So it was that those first Aurovilians living in Aspiration carried on in their pioneer scenarios, in the expanding parenthesis of an Auroville that would, for better or worse, reflect an exact index of the consciousness of its inhabitants: Pioneers of consciousness, carrying on in the absence of any external authority, without the reassuring possibility of peeking in the back of the book for the answers. Apprentice Aurovilians constructing their huts and community kitchens; planting and caring for their trees and gardens; setting up their first handicrafts and industries; developing their initial relationships with the local villagers; making their attempts to project a future education for themselves and their children; recovering from their parasites; while generally going about the life of a community composed of the most contradictory elements imaginable, provided with no ready-made blueprints or gospels, emerging out of the abstract in rural South India.



5. a child of humanity as a whole

He began his work – his attempt to organize a little matter – in Aspiration school which found itself abruptly cast from conception to form in two weeks, tumbling into being on December 15th, 1970 in a temporary thatch quarters with the cement floors still wet.

Those first days were explosive. With almost no materials – no books, pencils, paper or spatial dividers – where everything had to be improvised; with no organization as yet evolved and none imposed; and with a vacuous space condensed with a global amalgam of children in the same room but in different worlds – French-speaking, English-speaking, German-, Italian-, Hindi- and Tamil-speaking – what could one say? in what language?

The common language, the simple beginning, was art. All the first mornings, paintings and drawings. But how long could one paint flowers or houses, trees and suns and fishes? Alain and Gérard, both French, were offering modern math and logic, but it was necessary to simultaneously find a common tongue in which to convey symbolic concepts.

Four languages had been recognized by the Mother as basic: Tamil, the indigenous language; French; Sanskrit as the matrix and root of India's fractional vernaculars; and English as the international medium. But who would teach them? The children spoke more languages than the teachers. Initially, then, language learning was involved in whatever the form of educational medium – art, math, the environment – but the most effective means of communication was through the interplay and exchange among the children themselves. After some months the youngest were expressing in three and four languages.

With this scarcity of activities and stimuli, the heterogeneity of the group, and the absence of an arbitrary discipline, the crescendo of

energy broke out into a period of release. The children had discovered that they were no longer imprisoned. This was not a school where one was driven to learn... to fit into a behavioural norm. There was no overpowering, no compulsion, no expulsion. Respect had to be earned, not usurped. Things had become transparent. And the children could see that the emperor had no clothes.

For that initial group of adults – the teachers, most of whom had never been in this kind of relationship with children before – it was, to say the least, a humbling experience. All of the definitions, all of the over-inflated ideas that each of them (us) harboured, popped one by one. Until we found ourselves questioning those root definitions that had long ago been taken for granted. What is school? and in the context of this unprecedented experiment called Auroville, who is the child? Is the child simply a term to denote a chronological stage, a fixed numerical distinction? Or is the child an attitude? – one who aspires to know, to progress always beyond? a flame that mocks the categories of time, an eternal discoverer? And school, is it a place or is it everywhere? Is it housed in a fragment of time or in every moment? And education, is it merely what we have allowed it to become? A tool for commerce? A means to a degree and certified credentials in order to earn a living?... Or is it a lifetime process to *learn a living*? – to learn how to truly live?

This “disease” as She called it, “*is very contagious, for even children do not escape from it. At an age where one should, have dreams of beauty and greatness and perfection, perhaps too sublime for ordinary common sense, but certainly higher than this dull good sense, they dream of money and worry how to earn it.*

“*So when they think about their studies, they think about all of what can be useful to them, so that later on when they grow up, they can earn a great deal of money.*

“*And the thing that becomes most important for them is to prepare to pass*

examinations with success; for it is with diplomas and certificates and titles that they will be able to get good positions and earn much.

“For them study has no other purpose, no other interest.

“To learn in order to know, to have the knowledge of the secrets of nature and of life, to educate oneself in order to increase one’s consciousness, to discipline oneself in order to be master of oneself, to overcome one’s weaknesses, one’s incapacity and ignorance, to prepare oneself in order to progress in life towards a goal that is nobler and vaster, more generous and more true... they hardly think of that and consider all that as mere utopia. The only important thing is to be practical, to prepare and learn how to earn money.”⁷⁶

One could keep up the masquerade of “School”, but it would never be satisfying, always a compromise, until Auroville itself had consciously grown into the limitless educational experience that it was meant to be – where everything would be a field of research. For one cannot speak of a new system of education without a new society. And until that identity would begin to reveal itself, until Auroville became, as its Charter stated, *“the place of an unending education, of constant progress and a youth that never ages”*, the interim would be a stumbling affair, growing more harmonious and true in proportion to its quest for a more integral knowledge and integral life.

Yet the questions remained, echoed back to us through confused visitors who not only asked “where is the city and the buildings?” but “where is the school and the learning?” And what could we say? How to explain the experience implicit in this unique growing up?... in participating in the birth of such a global environment? And for those who would ask whether the children weren’t being deprived of the formal education and diplomas necessary to live in the world, being left unprepared, one wonders what they mean by prepared... And for which world? The old one in the process of

⁷⁶Mother, S.A.I.C.E., *Bulletin*, August 1960.

shattering? Or a new one whose examinations were much more fundamental and challenging? And yet we could not use that as a cover to excuse our inadequacies.



Through the early part of 1971, to help keep himself grounded during that centrifugal era in Aspiration, he used to go at five in the morning with a vanload from Aspiration – kids as well as adults – to the site of what would become the Matrimandir, the third element joining the Urn and the Banyan tree at the centre of Auroville. There, with their small hand-shovels (*mumptis*), picks and crowbars, they would join a first cadre of Matrimandir workers digging up the calloused red clay, removing it in flat pans (*chetties*) and wheelbarrows to the rim of a growing crater that would eventually reach a depth of 10.5 meters with a diameter of 50 meters across: The excavation site from which the Matrimandir would rise.

We worked like ants before an overwhelming task – men, women and children passing pans of burnished earth from the growing matrix to swelling mounds nearby, staining hands and bodies with its indelible red. But no one thought of the impossibility, looked for the results. You left that at the rim. Here, there was just the joy of each pan that passed from hand to hand, hand to hand. And black or white, they all got red.

And so it went, the rhythm of those weeks and months: the van arriving, a silhouette in the pale pre-dawn light, time passing like *chetties* from hand to hand... only seeing the one before you, taking it as it came; then returning in the van to *Aspiration* for a late breakfast where our humble crew would resume its other tasks for the day. And through that summer of '71, that small gesture of Aurovilians working together to realize a mystery which baffled our logic – which we could only somehow comprehend with our bodies – had managed to remove some 2,000 cubic meters of that compact red earth with their simple hand tools.

And yet, despite the remarkable effort, the pace of the excavation would need to accelerate. Rejecting the expense and undesirability of turning to heavy earth-moving equipment, it was decided to employ large numbers of local villagers using traditional hand methods. And beginning in that November, a swarm of 400 labourers arrived, chipping away bit by bit until the excavation reached its completion on February 21st, 1972. An extraordinary endeavor that displaced 20,000 cubic meters of earth by hand.



It was around this same moment – while *Aspiration* was groping between the joys and traumas of its communal infancy and the first concrete was about to be poured for the foundation of Matrimandir

– that a series of small, land-oriented settlements, following the pattern of *Forecomers*, would begin to germinate... to break ground here and there around the proposed township area... instinctively acknowledging in action a basic priority: the land and its resources.

The Mother had said, “*Auroville will be a self-supporting township ... Auroville will be a city that will try to be, or will tend to become, or attempt to be self-supporting.*” And She qualified her definition of ‘self-supporting’ as not “*to mean some kind of independence which breaks off relations with others... that is not what I mean.*” Auroville would not develop for itself, could not develop for itself, detached from the world in which it lived and which – in some nascent microcosm – had come to live in its few square miles. For in reality, the boundaries of outside and inside were no thicker than a cell wall... or an ego.

And the basis of that self-support, despite the conditioned commercial reflex, did not begin with buildings and industries. It began under our feet: with the earth... For this land we shared with our Tamil neighbours in particular and “*humanity as a whole*” was barely alive or sustainable.

For all of the factors that have led to the deterioration of our natural resources – our “*real capital*”, as Schumacher would call it – could be found in the pathology of these few thousand acres of South Indian plateau. A classic case study in environmental degradation under the already marginal living conditions of the world’s second most populous country.

And so, beginning consciously in 1972, Aurovilians took on the grass roots task of restoring the land – the land that was not theirs, the land that belonged to “*humanity as a whole*”.

It is hard to imagine, looking out on this slowly reviving terrain, that this region was once covered with rich green forests. And unfortunately this story is not an isolated phenomenon endemic to a

slice of Tamil Nadu. It is rapidly becoming the rule rather than the exception as the deserts, like vultures, follow in the footsteps of man's ignorance and greed. Here, one could read in the earth the consciousness of those who walked on it. Here, one could see the process of a living earth slowly dying into a moon, see the great claw marks of canyons ripping off the plateau, exposing the glistening surface of red clay like a coral sea bed... reversing the evolutionary cycle as life slowly died back into inert matter. And though there was a certain abstract beauty to the landscape – a certain magnificence in the cold austerities of the desert as the sun's red orb flattened out over the canyon lands – it was not an organic beauty. It was the awesome breathtaking beauty of death.

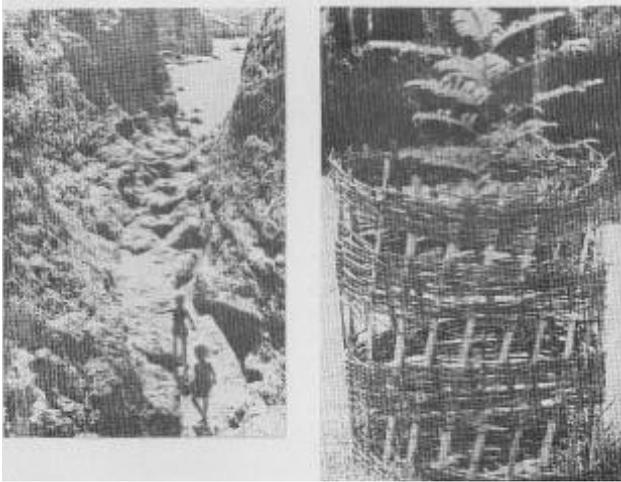
For this once fertile plain had succumbed to the impoverishment of man's consciousness. A consciousness which had not yet seen its inseparable relationship with nature. It is ironic that in a country which, for the most part, had never left the village – which had not become citified, divorced from the soil – the natural instincts had atrophied... reduced over time to a bare utilitarianism: the cattle and goats left to graze unfenced, wherever they could find scrub-brush, ravaging the countryside; the trees simply valued for their kindling wood. While the simple farmers, enamoured by Western models of "progress", proudly whitened their fields and themselves with massive doses of D.D.T.

And so in less than a century, man could undo what it took nature thousands, millions of years to build up. Such was his efficiency.

And in this little corner, he was most efficient. For the forests fell indiscriminately for firewood or timber; the land "cleared" for agriculture; the remaining natural ground-cover overgrazed; and "modern" farming methods implemented as compensation to squeeze out the last ounce of natural soil fertility: pumping the exhausted earth full of chemical fertilizers and pesticides to artificially sustain a lifeless soil, forcing it to produce more.

But more was less. For when the trees were gone, burned as firewood to cook the meals that shrank each year because the land shrank each year because the trees were cut for firewood, and when the soil cover had been eaten away by the scraggly herds of livestock, then the earth lay bare and unprotected. And the acid sun baked it, left it sterile. And the monsoon's life-giving waters could only take away what little life remained, washing across the impermeable exposed clay that sloped down to the sea, plundering the last patches of topsoil and humus in sheet floods. And the winds, no longer tempered by the patterns of trees, swept in sandstorms through the dry seasons. And each year there was a little less Tamil Nadu, a little less India, a little less Earth.

Trees, what a marvellous and simple gift.



And so the Aurovilians began the tree-planting in these early seventies: hundreds of thousands of seedlings, acres of young trees, to knit together the soil and heal the wounds of man's callousness. Trees that would temper the monsoon furies and call the rains into unexpected seasons. Trees whose roots would work their alchemy in the soil, holding it together while opening it to absorb the rains needed to replenish a severely depleted water table. Trees that

would protect the child Auroville that grew in their midst. A wide greenbelt of trees that would surround and penetrate the circular township area. And through settlements scattered like seeds themselves, with names as diverse as the cultures and approaches of their inhabitants – *Forecomers, Kottakarai, Fertile, Two Banyans, Discipline, Aurogreen, Sharnga, Douceur, Djaima...* – the Green belt grew. The Foliation Project, as Joel called it.

But it was not an easy process to reverse the entropy. It was a constant battle to protect the young trees and care for them... watering them by bullock-carted water tanks through the dry season, guarding them from the ever-present goats and armies of firewood scavengers. And in the morning, we would wake up to find the bund⁷⁷ we had so diligently built around our field the day before sliced by the familiar double rut of a *cutta vendi*: the ancient metal-rim-wheeled bullock cart.

For here the earth was so sensitive, in such a precarious balance, that a simple bullock cart cutting across a slope could be the unassuming source of a new ravine as the monsoon rains would eat away at the deep-grooved tracks. It was a war of attrition, and explanations were meaningless.

Referring to two conversations noted in 1973 for my documentation study on Auroville, Boris of *Fertile* relates that “the planting of forest trees seems to most villagers rather strange. Long-range effects – halting of erosion, retention of ground water, shade, etc. – are not easily explained in the vocabulary of twenty-five words or less that we share with the villagers. Besides... if you plant trees everywhere, where you gonna grow crops? How you gonna EAT?... Eventually if the trees do have a beneficial effect on local conditions, the relationship between our work and village agriculture will be obvious. For the moment, it is not obvious at all.”

⁷⁷bund-shallow earth mound built around fields and trees to retain water and prevent sheet floods and erosion.

It was clear that Auroville would have to share more than twenty-five words with the villagers.

In a somewhat more humorous accentuation of the same theme, Francis of *Forecomers* had approached the village farmers in his inimitable style: "I went to them and explained that they have less land than their fathers and their fathers have less land than their fathers ... and that's because of erosion ... and would they please stop cutting shrubs along the canyons and let us plant trees? ... They thought I was absolutely crazy! One day, in desperation, I even chased a farmer and his wife off *their* land..."

But we who are so quick to judge "their" mistakes, it is we of the industrialized nations who consume three-fourths of the land's resources. Their greed is the greed of poverty, ours the greed of extravagance. We have a history to work out together here in Auroville.

And this Aurovilian "we" – this global gathering initially drawn largely from the West – was sharing *their* environment. Thirty thousand villagers in a dozen villages *already there*, interspersed within or directly adjacent to this plateau called "Auroville".

She had to remind the Aurovilians that "*those in contact with the villagers should not forget that these people are worth as much as you, that they know as much, that they think and feel as well as you do. You should therefore never have an attitude of ridiculous superiority. They are at home and you are the visitors.*"



Kuiliapalayam village scene.

How easy it was to forget that they are at home and we are the visitors. How quickly the territorial instinct slips in, how quickly the ego enters unseen, undetected, wearing the masks of benevolence and goodwill.

So there we both stood, sharing a common ground together, a common matter to be worked out: A chiaroscuro of two worlds encountering one another, interpenetrating, that would have to become one. And the intensity of the contrast did not quite follow the pattern of cultural interpretations, the *ridiculous superiority*, as she called it. For there was not one group of “haves” and one of “have-nots”; one group who knew and one who had everything to learn. In this Auroville context which penetrated deeper than the socio-economic definitions, there were simply two converging poles of “have-nots” who had everything to learn. Two poverties, where the circle of earth had reached its extremes... and would have to find that missing other that alone could resolve the whole.

For Auroville was not an export from the West, a sophisticated super-imposition flavoured with a missionary smile, complete with crates showing hands shaking, stamped with our civilized concepts of “progress” and “development”. And these indigenous people

from one of the world's oldest cultures were not merely primitives who got in the way. They were part of the way we are all in.

And they too, the Tamils, carried their impressions of us... perhaps scarred much deeper. For the invasions, the days of subservience to the white man, were not so far behind. And the memories of colonialism still lingered, alive in the faces of the old men who had known its slavery and the painted smiles of its commerce. Yes, they too could wonder what was behind this Auroville. Could they – we – be trusted? For what other motives might there be behind this influx of Westerners?

One does not live down the past so easily, erase the *karma* of centuries through diplomacy. It is something that has to be *worked out in life*. And it was not by chance that Auroville was planted in rural South India where another half of the world could participate, set the material context and conditions. It was here in India – a land that had renounced matter, a land whose *Shakti* was forced to flee westward, leaving behind an impoverished civilization – that that same *Shakti* would now return, awakening its slumbering soul to call forth a new earth, a whole earth, an earth healed of its dualities.

It was here that this *working out*, this literal interaction could take place in the experience of living together, sharing a common plateau. For there cannot be half a new world, half a transformed earth. After all, "Auroville belongs to humanity *as a whole*."

6. magis of the old world

It was during those first struggling years of Auroville's childhood, while it was still vulnerable, impressionable, naïve, trusting, that the Magis of the Old World would come, each with his own professed gifts, benevolently offering to take charge of the child... Reviving the old stories, the old anthems, as the old priesthood once again sought to co-opt the simple story, the honest script, the humble quest, seeking to convert it into their own creation. And the first, most visible in his turn, was the Architect.

Roger Anger, a talented Parisian architect, had been offered the initial role of Chief Architect. It was through Roger and the design office which he began in Pondicherry that the first abstracts and models for the township emerged. But his methods showed a greater concern for results than process – the arbitrary tendency prevalent in the classic administrative consciousness which has little patience for organic growth and evolution. And despite his gift as a designer, he spent more than half the year in Paris at his architectural firm; and what remained of his time, in Pondicherry, unwilling to actually *live* the experience of Auroville, feel its needs, engage with its residents. Pondicherry, it seemed, remained the strategic location for those who held ambitions to administer Auroville but who preferred to be spared the inconvenience... discomfort... humility... of actually living there. Not that those who lived in Auroville had no ambitions. All of them did, for none was above his humanity... But at least they were willing to live there: A material fact that exposed them, a commitment that indicated their consent to change, their willingness to undergo the process of the experiment. For She had said: *"Only those who are resolved to stay definitively in Auroville have a right to intervene in its organization."* (22.1.71)

It was also difficult for Roger, as for most of us then, despite our

rhetoric, to genuinely accept what the Mother had conveyed some months prior to the Foundation ceremony: *"No rules or laws are to be framed. Things will get formulated as the underlying Truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate."* (30.12.67) But Roger was a man of blueprints, of definition. And he kept pressing for that definition. He asked Her in February '69 what the nature of Auroville's organization, present and future, should be; to which She replied: *"Organization is a discipline of action, but for Auroville we aspire to go beyond arbitrary and artificial organizations. We want an organization which is the expression of a higher consciousness working to manifest the truth of the future."*

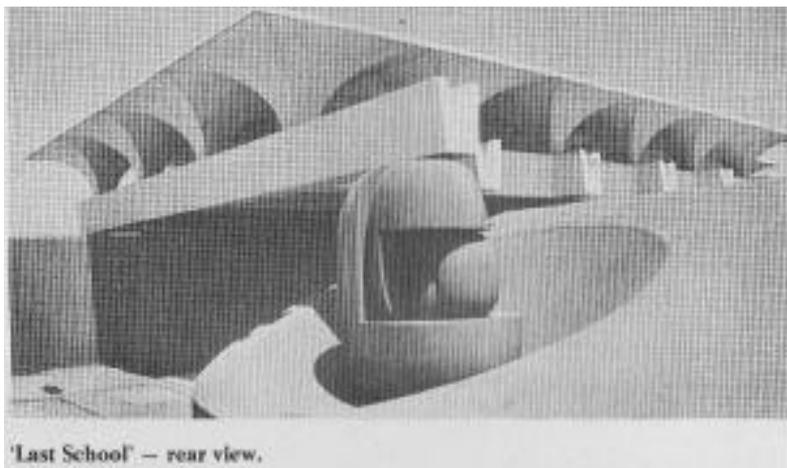
She was not terribly impressed when questioned about more rigid organizational methods that most modern systems have relied on in the past to get results. *"This is a makeshift,"* she said, *"which we should tolerate only very temporarily."* And later in that same communication, she said that *"an organization is needed for the work to be done – but the organization itself must be flexible and progressive."*

But this was still not definitive enough for Roger. He wanted a definition now. He couldn't see, as most of us then, that that was the total contradiction of Auroville.

Even "if to wait is the solution", he politely persisted, "nevertheless, isn't it necessary to define organizational principles and avoid uncontrollable disorders?" To which She responded, *"All those who wish to live and work at Auroville must have an integral good will; a constant aspiration to know the truth and submit to it; enough plasticity to confront the exigencies of work and an endless will to progress so as to move forward towards the ultimate Truth."* Then She added... *"And, finally, a word of advice: be more concerned with your own faults than with those of others. If each one worked seriously at his own self-perfection, the perfection of the whole would follow automatically."* (6.2.69)

It was October of 1971, the winter monsoon was in the wings; and while Aurovilians were still preoccupied, involved in the mechanics

of their groping survival, Roger's first creation, a building which the Mother called "Last School", materialized. Despite its abstract beauty – a sculpture sharing something of the austere elegance of the canyon-carved terrain – it would remain an enigma in concrete for those of us who tried to work within it functionally... standing somehow over the years as a symbol of man's insistence on imposing his fragmentary arbitrary vision over the living reality: An eloquent expression of a single dimension. A beauty of form divorced from the context of life. A testimony that concretized a partial seeing in a closing moment when "ecology" still belonged to the vocabulary of the biologists, and Auroville residents had still not found the inner leverage to determine their own collective destiny.



So it was that "Last School" and several of its companion pieces in varying stages of incompleteness, emerged along the slope from *Aspiration* towards the sea: Isolated monuments, *beaux gestes*, it seemed, to the architectural superimposition of an arbitrary future that would remain for another moment to integrate. The concrete first reminders that Aurovilians would have to become more conscious of questions that concerned the whole: The simple questions, the decisive questions, the questions of a consciousness

widening to another reference point. “*We want the Truth,*” She said. “*For most men it is what they want that they label Truth. The Aurovilians must want the Truth whatever it may be.*” (2.5.70)

It was a question of sincerity, of integrity. And She never imposed, never interfered, neither with Roger nor the residents who lived there. They were all ingredients that existed in the world, playing out their parts in a story that would have to evolve freely if something was to finally change, if something was to finally become real. “*The Adversary will disappear only when he is no longer necessary in the world. And we know very well that he is necessary, as the touchstone for gold, to find out if one is true.*”⁷⁸ She had said.

This Auroville perhaps was, after all, a symbol, a global allegory, a myth – but a conscious myth, a myth of consciousness where the script was alive with characters that actually breathed, or tried to. Characters who could have been anyone, interchangeably you and I. And in this unpredictable script where none of the conventional rules retained their inviolability, where all the laws, literary and otherwise, were in transition, one of those characters, a young voyager with red hair whom She had come to call Savitra, was about to slip from third to first person. First person singular, nobody in particular.

I left on the first of a series of trips back to the States in January of 1972, unknowingly about to enter a process that would hasten a confrontation with other Magis much more powerful: Magis whose domains were not Architecture but Money and Power.

The ostensible reason for the trips was to develop a dialogue that could lead to the exchange of research grants and information. Earlier that summer the Mother had asked me to return to America to begin this liaison process for Auroville. She gave no precise definitions or instructions in her note, only “*remain in the true consciousness.*” It was for Her the *only* work... The work by which

⁷⁸Mother, extract from a conversation, *Adventure of Consciousness* (Satprem), p.78.

everything else would become clear, reveal itself. But for those of us used to more precise indications and instructions, not very well spelled out.

Only the general context was evident. She had told us that Auroville would be self-supporting. But in this initial stage of its experiment while it was establishing its first sense of directions, it needed a certain liberty, a certain assistance. For it could not just throw itself into instant capitalistic ventures without losing itself at the beginning in the morass of commercial motives that risked selling oneself out, risked obscuring and stifling the emergence of a truer sense of priorities. After all, true self-reliance takes time to grow: time to identify true priorities, time to find the true allies and donors to provide the initial capital to grow the trees, the farms, while we discover the new methods to evolve a system that is capable and conscious enough to support itself. After all, most of our more “successful” systems operating in the world are still running on illusions and the energies of others. For despite their massive GNP, they still depend on the exploitation of fragile resources that exceed their own sustainability... and eventually the earth’s.

What we were seeking, then, was a system that truly discerned and recognized real needs and priorities rather than simply proliferated them. A system that was capable of developing the means to fulfill true needs in ways that saw nature as a partner, not an object to exploit. A system in which all the components supported one another, complemented one another in a conscious cycle which in its transition could grow the food it *needed*, discover the renewable means of alternative energy sources for the fuel it *needed*, and create the handicrafts and industries to produce the things it *needed* – not as ends in themselves, but as researches: As means to form a material base stable enough yet flexible enough to make the transitions necessary to allow the emergence of another Consciousness. *“Auroville wants to be a new creation expressing a new*

consciousness in a new way and according to new methods.” (18.8.69)

And so in preparation for this new role, I began an informal research into a deeper way of looking at this thing called Economics. In other words, how *was* Auroville being supported and what *did* it really need? Simple questions that would lead to other questions of how Auroville worked... Questions of responsibility, collaboration, system equilibrium and system harmony.

We already knew and asked the questions at the local day-to-day level of life and work. Because we were the workers living the life of Auroville. What size fitting does the pipe need? What was the mixture of your compost? Can you give me some good drought-resistant seedlings? How's your windmill doing? Where's the basketball? But the larger questions and decisions that determined our directions and priorities as a Community, the ones beyond the daily details... Who was making them? And on what basis? And why were we getting office furniture instead of wells?

It was somehow the mundane translation of a collective awakening to a stage in evolution which Sri Aurobindo described as the emergence of a “*secret Consciousness*” involved in the “*Inconscience*”. a Consciousness that had operated “*subconsciously or subliminally by the automatic operation of Nature,*” now in the process of extricating itself, repossessing itself “*sufficiently from it to operate through the self-aware participating individual will of its living creatures.*”⁷⁹ The self-aware participating individual will of its living creatures.

Yes, how *was* Auroville being supported and what *did* it really need? And who *was* gathering and spending the money, publishing the brochures that represented Auroville?

The Sri Aurobindo Society, founded in 1960 under the then General Secretaryship of Sri Navajata (previously known as Keshavdev Poddar) had been entrusted by the Mother, Auroville's Founder

⁷⁹Sri Aurobindo, *Life Divine*, Centenary Ed. Vol. 18. P. 843.

and overseer President of the Society (which hereafter shall be referred to as the SAS) with providing the initial apparatus necessary to set Auroville upon its own momentum. Located in Pondicherry, it represented an organization through which Auroville, which had no legal status of its own, could be recognized. It was the repository for all of Auroville's land deeds and, being the initial recipient of full tax-exemption on the basis of Auroville, it was its channel for funds. Consequently, it was the representative intermediary for Auroville with outside agencies such as UNESCO and the Government of India. Thus, the SAS could serve in Auroville's earliest stages, prior to the presence of its own internal organization, as a provisional stable framework, legally and economically, through which basic administrative tasks could be handled.

The primary objectives of the SAS prior to it being entrusted with the initial sponsorship of Auroville had been to collect funds for the Ashram as well as for the maintenance of its own extensive network of SAS centers, conferences and programs. In its new role, it would also assume the oversight of Auroville's financial affairs until the Community had reached a sufficient stage in its own development when it could express its own conscious aspiration, will and capability to assume its own responsibility. Until that time, the SAS operated Auroville's "General Fund" – a Fund which was comprised of contributions from Aurovilians (who theoretically contributed all their financial resources and in return were to be supported by the Fund), as well as contributions which came in from other sources, public and private, including several large Government grants in those formative years. This Auroville "General Fund", managed by the SAS, was overseen by its (then) Secretary, Shyamsundar Jhunjunwala. He was at the time the organizational counterpart to Sri Navajata. They both belonged to the North Indian clan known as Marwaris, well-known for their business orientation and facility with finance. Yet despite their

common roots, they made an odd couple: Nava, short and a bit plump; Shyam, tall, lean and a lawyer.

So there we stood, the characters in this Play... drawn from all the stories, cultures, archetypes East and West: the Architect, the Men of Money and Power, and this representative collection of the world's people – these Aurovilians who vaguely knew that they had gathered to live a new life, discover a new world, but who had little as yet to show for it... barely beginning to set down their roots, discover what they were about, or describe the methodologies and efficacies of the process they were living. And yet, they could have been any of us as they struggled to find their truth, their new world in this enigmatic Auroville. *"The Aurovilians must want the Truth, whatever it may be,"* She reminded us: But were we ready, you and I? *"At last a place where nothing will have the right to impose itself as the exclusive Truth,"* She offered us the possibility. But were we willing, you and I? And was our humanity ready to accept its oneness, released from its possession?

7. endorsing the secret

So I began criss-crossing this seamless planet through those early 1970s, weaving between an obscure corner in South India and its diametrical extreme, America, in the quest for a meeting point.

Auroville had little to show then: A series of not-very-well-defined communities, some farms, the educational “experiment” and cultural diversity. Little more than a promise and a hope. For Auroville had not yet begun to manifest its practical relevance, the works which the world could see and understand as meaningful. And yet, just the fact that Auroville could *be* – this flame that burned and burned for a new world, this courageous adventuring soul that would carry on despite the moments when all seemed lost and in vain. But how to put that into a project proposal? And what is the budget to cultivate a living soul?

I would spend much of those early visits to the State learning, listening, seeing Auroville and this world from another vantage point, trying to catch the true indications that would lead to some constructive process. The phenomenon of “ecology” had begun to proliferate during that era, gradually filtering through the consciousness of the West. A first rational acknowledgement of oneness that had somehow crept into the culture plates of the biologist and the quantum theories of physicists who now, perhaps to their utter chagrin, had to concede that, at least theoretically, “all life really *is* one”. For it was indeed the inescapable conclusion when the simple questions were followed to their source. For indeed, this pale blue globe floating through time and space was in fact a single cell waiting to become conscious of itself.

And from California to New York to Washington D.C., following the patterns of a Movement growing more consistent, more material yet more profound, the waves would again begin to sweep ashore: the demonstrations, protests, alternatives... deeper and deeper this

Other Revolution pressed on, expressing the outcry of a planet no longer able to bear the abuse of its body, the pollution of its environment, the imbalance of its eco-systems – of its water, air, soil poisoned by the residue of toxic chemicals and the radiation that poured from the factories and systems of a consciousness governed by greed. And where the sixties had borne the passionate reawakening of men to their freedom – the Revolt of the Soul – the seventies would convulse with the first cryptic signs of the Revolt of the Body, individual and terrestrial: The rising up of the Women – of Nature erupting in a multiple convergence of events: the sudden burgeoning of health food stores and the concern for organic methods of agriculture; the upsurge of grass-roots activism to protect the wilds, the forests, the rivers and seas; the campaigns against smoking; the enactment of stringent anti-pollution laws and laws demanding the labelling of ingredients in consumer products; the turn towards alternative sources of energy and the more aggressive protests against the madness of nuclear power; the interest in preventive medicine; and the plethora of techniques and experiments in physical awareness from jogging to massage... trying to touch the body, to feel and develop a consciousness in the body, to awaken a sense in matter.

And it was from this milieu, this growing awareness of the environment and its fragile relationship to the economics of consciousness, that one could see a first true meeting point, a common priority, between an embryonic Auroville and the world in which it found itself: Trees. The hundreds of thousands of trees that Aurovilians were planting that would one day change the face of the earth. For somehow, without plans or preconceptions, simply following the thread of their experience – the need which life was showing them step by step instinctively, inevitably – they had begun to respond in a gesture whose relevance required no convincing rhetoric, no arm-twisting spokesman.

And so, setting aside all the embarrassingly arbitrary schemes and overblown budgets which I so diligently collected from the offices of Roger, Navajata and Shyamsunder; and likewise, beginning humbly, scaling down from the Ford and Rockefeller Foundations which could find no category for this not-very-bureaucratically-definable Auroville, I gathered my notes from interviews in our Greenbelt communities and transformed them into a proposal titled "Reforestation and Organic Agricultural Programs in Auroville, 1973" – a simple proposal based on *real* needs and *real* works that didn't ask more than was necessary. And following that same humbler process which planted the trees that had inspired the proposal, I would find my way to the offices of the Sierra Club – an international environmental protection agency in San Francisco where I began my explorations. I was particularly struck by a sentence in bold type that caught my eye on the cover of one of their introductory pamphlet: "Life is one and the world is one and all these questions are interlinked..." – Indira Gandhi.

As it turned out, that inquiry at the Sierra Club would link me to a Foundation established from the profits of the *Whole Earth Catalog*. It was there where I met one of its Trustees – Huey Johnson, who later started the Trust for Public Land. Huey took me under his wing, tutored me in grant-writing, and, advocating on behalf of the proposal I submitted, succeeded in getting us Auroville's first American grant: A seed grant that would jump-start a coordinated reforestation programme. A first collaboration that didn't see Auroville as some remote project *over there*, but simply as a project *here*, on this earth we all share. (In that same spirit, Huey would link me up with other allies – Michael Murphy, Esalen co-founder; David Brower, renowned environmental pioneer; Amory Lovins, Rocky Mountain Institute's barrier-breaking energy economist... one thing leading to another, threads weaving together into a collaborative web...)

The success of this first grant, however, was more than just funding the initial reforestation project. For under Huey's mentorship, I went through an invaluable training: learning to see ourselves from outside ourselves, hear the real questions the world was asking of us. Questions which Aurovilians had yet to begin asking ourselves, such as: How does your government work? How are decisions made? How do you prioritize? How do you plan to become economically viable? How are you integrated in India? Questions that would have to be confronted honestly yet without compromising the mystery and spontaneity that made Auroville Auroville. Another invaluable thing this training taught me was to be honest in my representation. To say what I knew from real experience, and to admit what I didn't know, what we didn't know. After all, Auroville was a journey, a process, an exploration, an experiment. Not a place that had ready-made answers. *"Finally, all that one says,"* The Mother said, *"all that one has said and all that one will say, is nothing but an extremely clumsy and limited way of expressing something which can be lived but never described."*

Auroville was a secret... An open secret that belonged to humanity as a whole.

I left the West Coast for New York , arriving on a cold autumn day in 1973. The streets were grey, the building were grey, the sky was grey, the suits were grey. And I was a thousand worlds away from a little flame burning in some obscure corner of south India...until I looked inside and saw that same small flame. *O let it be true, let me be true.*

A week later, on October 25th, I had my first long-awaited meeting with renowned anthropologist Margaret Mead. I remember crossing the wilds of Central park – a last haven between a forest of buildings – to reach the American Museum of Natural History where Dr. Mead was, among other things, Curator Emeritus of Ethnology. At the front desk, I mentioned my appointment to one of

the receptionists; and after a confirmation, the young lady gave me a pass that allowed me to enter the musty labyrinth of offices and archives that inhabited the upper floors of the Museum.

I recall making my way through the maze of corridors, elevators and stairways that snaked through halls filled with every conceivable artifact of man, passing closet after closet that I was sure bore the skeletons of all of our antecedents. Without a guide, I gradually became convinced that only those who were really meant to see Dr. Mead could. And just when I thought I might not make it – thought that in fact those closets might be full of the bones of those who didn't make it – I tripped through some arcane alcove and into Margaret Mead's attic.

After a brief introduction with her assistants, I was escorted to her study where, across the desk from me as I entered, was one of the most enchanting faces and personalities I was to ever have the privilege of meeting. A remarkable woman whom men addressed with respect as Dr. Mead.

At her cue, I sat down in an old padded leather chair. We exchanged smiles, then began a sweet, to-the-point exchange that lasted an hour but felt timeless for this young star-struck seeker. I gave her what written material I had, which she thoroughly scrutinized before she began her questioning.

She asked a lot about the children... How we related to them in the community? What was their place in our society? What was the structure of the family unit? How did we approach education? during our exchange, I noted this unique reflex of hers, tongue flicking out like a comma between the phrases. We discussed other aspects as well, more technical, but her probings clearly focussed on the priority of the child and child-rearing which, for her, seemed to be key to the future evolution of human culture. Through a lifetime of profound experience, she had clearly learned which questions mattered. At the conclusion of our discussion, she asked how she

might help me. Touched by her generosity, I asked if she might give me a personal endorsement to strengthen my credibility as a representative for Auroville here in America where it was virtually unknown.

She said yes, and that was the conclusion of my first meeting with that extraordinary lady.

The following week I received a letter on American Museum of Natural History stationery, dated October 30, 1973, which read:

To Whom It May Concern:

Anthropologists who have worked in living communities, especially, communities in the process of change, have found such materials invaluable in giving greater understanding of the whole process of cultural change. However, when we study communities which are emerging from earlier technological stages, all of them use as models other more technologically advanced societies. But for the most technologically advanced levels of contemporary global society, there are no models to be followed. Artificial blueprints of new towns prove highly unsatisfactory; the most imaginative architects are still struggling to come up with fully satisfactory ways of embodying the process of living in the process of design.

Auroville is a community dedicated to working on process in an attempt to develop living forms, both external architectural and environmental forms, and internal styles of human relations, which will transcend our present level of community living which is fraught with such heavy penalties to human beings and to the global environment.

I believe that Auroville deserves help, and that help might very well be attached to arrangements for keeping at least narrative records of what is happening, something that a community too pressed by subsistence needs may find hard to do.

Sincerely yours,
(S/d) Margaret Mead
Curator Emeritus of Ethnology,
The American Museum of Natural History
Fogarty Scholar-in-Residence,
The National Institute of Health

8. parting comments and inescapable conclusions

I arrived back in Auroville on November 9th, 1973. A week later, in the evening of the 17th, the same moment that the final concreting of the four support pillars for the Matrimandir was completed, the one whom we knew simply as the Mother passed away. How inadequate our language is. Heart failure, the doctors said.



Matrimandir, Nov. 17, 1973 – completion of the pillars.

If there was one thing that was incapable of failure in her frail ninety-five year old body that had borne so much, it was her heart. And yet, the one who had grounded this Auroville from a Dream, who had watched over it to see that it could freely grow and become itself, was no longer to be found outside ourselves. Now the lid would come off and our true natures, if one can call them true, would reveal themselves, the masks would begin to fall.

Navajata wasted no time in passing a resolution through his caucus, the Executive Committee of the SAS, elevating himself to President of the SAS, the honorary position previously held by the Mother. But the uproar of indignation, even among the usually staid and

passive disciples of the Ashram, was so immediate that Sri Navajata was forced to amend the resolution, creating a new title for himself that no one could dispute or contest. He became Chairman of the SAS, vacating his General Secretary-ship to Shyamsunder.

But in that heart-wrenching moment, I was unaware of these events. I only felt that something, *someone*, was deeply missing: Someone we would now have to find in ourselves. For Auroville was now somehow an orphan that would have to find the Truth of its own being – a Truth without compromise that She had asked of us.

After my experiences in the States and Margaret Mead's prompt, I began the attempt to simply record, transcribe Auroville's unfolding process from its seed in 1968 through its first six years. Something as literal as possible, as free from interpretations as humans are capable. Something that could simply trace the actual development, letting Auroville speak for itself, tell its own story. For enough had manifested so that one no longer needed the padding of philosophies or intermediaries to explain it to us. It could speak plainly now its own first sentences, stand on its own feet.

In this research, I spent that entire winter of '73-'74 living and moving through each of the more than a dozen communities and settlements that were slowly bringing new life to that Auroville plateau. And the more notes I took – about the communities; the work on the land; the challenges of growing amidst the villages; the education of our children and ourselves; the organics of our agriculture; the emergence of a simple direct economic awareness; the discovery of a progressively workable yet virtually invisible process of self-governing ourselves – the more I was overwhelmed by how little any of us knew what we were living in. Something *was* there.

One could not imagine the utter richness and diversity of people, cultures, approaches, structures, trees, farms and accents that were

the very fabric of Auroville. An unimaginable and continuously renewing diversity, never the same, yet somehow growing consciously one despite the layers of resistance... moving towards a living union, toward a wholeness which escaped the grasp of man's constructions which could only equate unity with the mental counterfeit of uniformity. For here was one process of unsegmented change.



An emerging process which I tried to describe in a 102-page documentation study called *Auroville – the First Six Years: 1968-1974*, noting in its Introduction: “Through six years that process has

emerged – materialized – six years have revealed themselves. They speak plainly – the errors as well as the truths along the way – requiring no spokesman, no interpreters, no priests. Auroville alone is capable of defining itself.” And in that same entry I would also note that the “SAS is not a policy-making organ for Auroville or those who inhabit it. Its role is that of a sponsoring body and will continue to function in this respect proportional to Auroville’s transitional capacities, receding in accordance with an emergent internal initiative. Decisions evolve from within Auroville as does the organization of individual and collective discipline, rather than arbitrary imposition from without. This is a basic element in the theme and fabric of Auroville’s experiment.”

It was late in that summer of '74 and I was busy seeing *The First Six Years* through the printing process, preparing for what I thought would be a last trip back to the States in the culmination of a particular phase of work. Things still wore the facade of harmony. The problems, the struggles were there, but they were simply the daily labour pains of Auroville... learning how to make do with less and less of what we think we need: How to get enough compost. How to keep the cows out of the future forests. How to find a dry corner in the monsoon while everything turned to mildew. How to understand more than 25 words of Tamil. And how to get rid of these damned parasites.

By late fall of that year, I would find myself heading East, overland from San Francisco across the great plains and snow-covered mesas, across a land that still dreamed... a land that somehow still belonged to the frontiersman and the pioneer, to Thoreau and Whitman, Twain and Cummings... A land unfathomable and irrepressible despite the malignancy of its cities.

Four non-stop days later I arrived in the metropolis known as the Big Apple. Staying with a friend out in Queens, I awoke from my first night’s sleep in days to the unexpected news that Nava was in

town, staying at the Waldorf Astoria. The contrasts had an air of surreality as I recalled the contents of a letter I received from Francis just before leaving California. He had, in his unadorned eloquence, just wanted to inform me that the winter monsoon simply didn't happen. And that all the crops depending on the rains had died – that the vegetation had withered, the parched landscape had dried to dust.

With that troubling image in mind, I learned later that day why the SAS Chairman was in New York. He had been canvassing the various American Centres affiliated with Auroville or the Ashram to form some kind of central organization; and toward that end, he had acquired the services of a lawyer from a prestigious Park Avenue law firm. The following are excerpts from a document which Sri Navajata formulated, indicating the directions and methods of this organization:

J. (his lawyer) of Weston, Connecticut, is hereby appointed and directed to form and manage the Association for Auroville, and such other organizations as necessary to foster, promote, support and develop charitable education, literary, cultural and scientific activities throughout the world devoted to peace, understanding and unity between all individuals and nations. The activities to which the Association for Auroville are devoted include, but are not limited to Auroville in India and the centres and branches of the Sri Aurobindo Society in the United States.

J. is directed to take all actions necessary to fulfill the thought of Sri Aurobindo and the goals of Peace, understanding, unity and Auroville in America. The actions J. may take include but are not limited to the management, association, merger, consolidation and assistance of all organizations or corporations presently or subsequently in existence in the Americas which are affiliated with the Sri Aurobindo Society

or with Auroville and to request and obtain the co-operation and assistance of all persons in the Americas who believe and accept the thought and ideas of Sri Aurobindo and Auroville. J's agreement to work in an honorary capacity is deeply appreciated.

(signed) Navajata,
Chairman, Sri Aurobindo
Society and Auroville
31.1.75

Thus read the introductory statement of authorization and intentions which Nava – now signing as Chairman of SAS and Auroville, as if Auroville was a corporation rather than a Community – had drafted on that January, 1975. The text continued:

In order to assist in the promotion, fostering, support and development of activities throughout the Americas and the world devoted to the thought of Sri Aurobindo and the goals of peace, understanding and unity and Auroville, we propose the following:

The establishment of Sri Aurobindo-Americas (SA-A) as an umbrella to co-ordinate all organizations and activities in the Americas. *Sri Aurobindo-Americas* will be composed of four departments: (1) *Secretariat*, (2) *Planning*, (3) *Finance* and (4) *Development*.

The *Secretariat* will be the administrative centre for SA-A and will, in addition to the normal administrative functions, establish and maintain membership lists of persons and organizations and affiliated activities. The *Secretariat* will also be responsible for membership activities leading to greater number of devotees to Sri Aurobindo, and coordination of all fund raising lists.

Planning will develop plans and programs for the various

centres and classes of members and affiliated activities. Particular emphasis must be made to reach and make Sri Aurobindo available to youth, college, young adult and adult age persons and to those showing particular interest in the arts, literature, philosophy and religion.

The management of *Sri Aurobindo-Americas* will reside in the board of directors which will be not more than 15 persons. To implement the decisions of the board and act as advisor to the board there will be an advisory committee of five persons. The Chairman of the Executive (i.e., Navajata) will be the director of SA-A and a member of the board of directors/trustees of all associated or affiliated corporations, organizations or activities. There can be appointed additional representatives on the boards of the associated or affiliated corporations, etc. upon the request of the Director.

[“... *but for Auroville we aspire to go beyond arbitrary and artificial organizations.*” (The Mother, 6.2.69)]

All persons who have or do come in contact with Sri Aurobindo or Auroville must be encouraged to become members of and associated with a Sri Aurobindo Centre. Upon initial contact, information regarding the person must be obtained and sent to the Secretariat and a copy maintained in the nearest centre's file. Personal follow-up must be made leading to a personal commitment by the prospect to become a devotee and involved with some centre activity including meditation and study and a division activity. All individuals, departments, centres and divisions are interrelated, self-supportive and elevating through continuous interaction. Because of this interaction all individuals will be touched by every aspect of Sri Aurobindo for the greater fulfillment of the person and society.

[“No recruiting is to be done.” (The Mother, October 1972)]

It is felt there should be membership dues payable in cash or services as determined by the Executive Committee of SA-A. Dues should be great enough to evidence a commitment on the person’s part but not burdensome. With these criteria in mind the sum of \$67.50 per year should be used.

... In addition to the dues a voluntary commitment of a donation of a percentage of the person’s net income per year should be encouraged...

...The board of SA-A will determine the disposition of all funds received by SA-A except those donated for a specific purpose.

Immediately

... (2) All names of persons in contact with the New York centre must be copied, reviewed and evaluated.

(3) Persons must be contacted who are believed best suited to fulfill specific immediate missions.

(4) Programmes for college age and young adult persons must be prepared.

(5) Support for devotees highly dedicated and knowledgeable must be prepared to aid those who come in contact with Sri Aurobindo to reach their own fulfillment.

“I don’t believe in advertisement, except for books, etc. and in propaganda except for politics and potent medicines. But for serious work, it is a poison. It means either a stunt or a boom and stunts and booms exhaust the thing they carry on their crest and leave it lifeless and broken, high and dry on the shores of nowhere – or it means a movement. A movement in the case of a work like mine means the founding of a school or a sect or some other damned nonsense. It means that hundreds or thousands of useless people join in and corrupt the work or reduce it to a farce ... It is

what has happened to the 'religions' and is the reason for their failure.'-
Sri Aurobindo, October 1934.]

It seems we always carry in ourselves the shadow of our opposite. The very resistance of the thing we are meant to realize.

I threw on my best Levi jacket and caught the first subway train heading downtown. I was on my way to the Waldorf Astoria for a visit, unannounced and unexpected.

I entered the hotel and asked for Sri Navajata's room. A phone call from the desk offered a brief forewarning as I entered the elevator for his twelfth-floor, two-room suite.

I knocked on the door and a young man from room service, who was just wheeling out a silver tea tray, let me in. I stood there a moment at the door, with Francis' dry letter quietly burning inside me; then proceeded to sit down in a chair facing some Victorian style settee that was occupied by two gentlemen. One, the Chairman, Sri Navajata, the other, his lawyer.

I cleared my throat, remembering a promise I had made to myself and to Her before this work began: No compromises. Before me, the collision course was now inevitable. I gunned the engines and went straight ahead.

Navajata asked me what I was doing and how could we coordinate our work. I brushed the question aside and asked him how he could draft such a preposterous proposal. Had he shown even the minimum courtesy of at least informing Aurovilians of his plans to propagate such a venture in Auroville's name? Had he shown even the slightest sensitivity for the integrity of Auroville and those centers here who had offered to help in its realization? Without pausing I turned to his unwitting, well-meaning accomplice, his lawyer from Weston, Conn., who was by now a bit understandably confused. Here he thought he was in the concluding stages of wrapping up an agreement. What was the meaning of this

Aurovilian in front of him lighting a match to all his good intentions? I politely explained to him that nobody in Auroville had the slightest idea that such a plan was being schemed and that Auroville was not interested in recruiting nor in having its name used for the purposes of conversion or exploitation. That that sanctimonious document which he had helped to draft was a complete misrepresentation of everything Auroville stood for. And would he please have the decency to respect Auroville's right to be consulted before proceeding with such a proposal.

It was not an easy moment. One which I could never have imagined when I made my commitment to Auroville. But if in a circumstance such as this, one can't speak frankly – if one had to suppress one's deepest convictions to maintain the patina of harmony – then Auroville had no meaning, and sooner or later it would just become another politely impressive failure.

After some awkward parting words, I left the room, which had an air of smoking pistols, and took a long walk uptown, through the snowy slush towards the relief of Central Park.

Not long after that episode, I would go to the United Nations, knowing that Auroville had been acknowledged through the Indian delegation to UNESCO as an NGO – a Non-Governmental Organization in consultative status with the U.N. I was interested to see if Auroville could be invited to participate in the UN's Habitat Conference on Human Settlements planned for Vancouver the following year. After passing through the various bureaucratic formalities, I would discover that Auroville could not directly participate through its own initiative, but only through the request of the SAS in whose name Auroville was recognized. And in fact, that following year, despite the protests of Aurovilians, Navajata would send his nephew, Prabhat Poddar – a resident of Pondicherry, not Auroville, who shared no regard for the actual experience of Auroville or its internal processes – to represent the

Community of Auroville in Vancouver.

In looking back at that exhausting, troubling series of experiences in America – through all of the meetings, papers, presentations and notes – one sentence caught my eye, synthesizing the comments and insights I received there: A comment whose directness somehow cut through all of the technical jargon and academic inquiries. It was a phrase from the last paragraph of an endorsement letter (dated February 20, 1975) I had received from world-recognized environmental planner Christopher Alexander after he read my *Auroville – the first six years: 1969-1974*. His excerpt read: “I am impressed, above all, by the fact that the people involved in this project are willing to put themselves – their own lives, their own bodies – on the line, to demonstrate what can be done, and what they believe must be done, in the times ahead ...”

Yes, it is only when we place our bodies on the line that things really change.

9. compost

I arrived back in Auroville some time in the early spring of '75. From the pale-faced winters of the West to a bronze plateau burning under a lidless sun. From ice to fire.

I'd been moving in the world of words too long and needed to feel the living touch of the earth – to get my whitened soles back into that tell-tale Auroville red clay. It was time to change scripts, to translate in the language of the soil, to put the body on the line.

I found myself gravitating to the Centre, that area known as “Peace” which surrounded the Matrimandir. As I looked out from Unity office, a “temporary” building at the Centre which has seen several functions – from administration to land use coordination to resource and information exchange – I would observe a vast rotating wasteland delimited by a ring of casuarinas. The sole inhabitants within that ring: a proud yet disfigured Banyan tree, an urn in a red-earth amphitheatre, and a concrete sphere gradually emerging from a deep cavern in the earth. A barren landscape that we hoped one day would come to life, transforming into the park-like Gardens of the Matrimandir.

From Unity's office loft, I could see one small figure patiently watering and weeding a speck of that bare immensity. I thought she was crazy... and so I joined her. And together with Patricia and a handful of others, we began the “Gardens Team”.

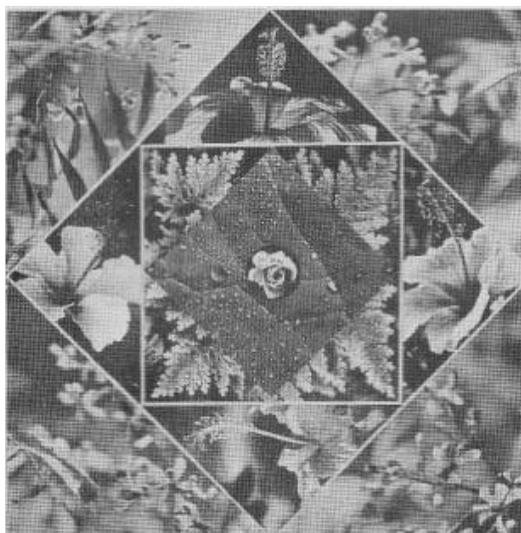
Prior to that coming together, the preparatory work of that future park-to-be was germinating in the confines of the Matrimandir Nursery – an expanding acreage located on the western periphery of “Peace”.

Narad, a gifted horticulturist, along with Mary Helen, Alan and revolving others, persevered through the endless procession of obstacles that seem to welcome every Auroville endeavour. In this

case, they were attempting to establish one of the most extensive nursery environments in this region of the world. A true living research that would both learn and develop the capacity to grow the trees and plants for that garden-to-be.

Referring to “The First Six Years”...

The Nursery’s beginning (February 21st, 1970) recalled many other difficult beginnings. With no water and a barren patch of land which later expanded to six acres, the first four Aurovilians found themselves gardening with two barrels of water a day hauled by bullock. Months passed in this precarious fashion until a pipeline could be rigged to a well some distance away. Its 1,200 litres per hour barely permitted selective watering, no irrigation. With the resulting lack of ground cover, each plant had to be “bundled” and mulched as much as possible. During the summers of the power cuts during daylight hours, watering continued till midnight. With no fencing, no initial protection, the first planting was wiped out by the cows.



A familiar scenario.

If one walks now, a decade later, through this wonder of rich, textured green sprayed with an exotic explosion of colours and fragrances, through the Japanese fern garden and beneath the trees strung with orchids that arch the pond of lotus and water lilies – this nursery which has become a haven for what in 1974 already numbered 20,000 plants, many of which were endangered species – one can see the floral alchemy which is Nature's response to Man when we work consciously with her. Flowers, a consciousness which the Mother found much more sensitive and receptive than men.

But we were still in that late spring of '75, in the dry vacant landscape that was to be the actual site of the Gardens. Only a point of green to the west reminded us of what was possible in this earth whose crust blunted even the crowbars.

And so the six of us began, reinforced by Perumal and one or two other Tamil villagers later to join in the labour. A motley planetary crew standing somehow for the Earth.

We began by digging the meter-square pits for the future trees. Endless pits. Hundreds of pits. We were in a race with the coming monsoons. And in those next months, in between the digging, we completed the construction of our rubber-tired bullock cart to haul the necessary compost and water which would serve as our mobile irrigation system until we could finish the bore-well and lay the lacework of water-pipes.

It seemed that nearly every week during that frantic season, we journeyed on our *vandi* – the Tamil word for vehicle, in this case, a bullock cart – into the neighbouring villages to gather the organic waste and cow dung to supplement our own meagre supplies. And after dozens of such anomalous forays, we gradually became connoisseurs of compost. But for the villagers, this band of mostly

white men entering their villages on a bullock cart to collect their organic waste must have presented an unprecedented image.

There were many mornings that we spent watering and turning those tons of steaming piles of decaying death that would somehow support new life. The compost of a New World. But this cycle of compost, however, touched a larger cycle in the life that Auroville shares with the villages, representing a challenging example of the story we have to work out with the indigenous people in order to make a new story possible. For large portions of land in this area which were bought up for the experiment of Auroville forced those villagers who had owned the land to turn to something else besides agriculture. And one of the quickest transfers of their newly-gained cash was cattle. It represented an asset that multiplied by itself and required almost no upkeep as the cows were simply grazed where they could. But as more and more Auroville land began to be used, revived, either with trees or crops or simply protected so that it could regenerate itself, the village herds were increasing out of all proportion. And for the villager, the available grazing lands were reducing while his cattle were swelling exponentially. An equation that spelled trouble for both of us. A conversation with some of the residents of *Kottakarai* Community reveals this point of interface:

Pierre: We spoke yesterday of this problem: as more and more land was sold to Auroville, people bought more and more cows with the money, and now there is less and less land to graze upon...

Jaap: That's especially the last couple of years. A lot of land has been taken up by people and it's cutting down the area for grazing, so the pressure is mounting.

P: What will come?

J: WAR! (laughter) That's what it's going to be if nothing else happens ... I mean, sometimes in the monsoon it becomes very tight, and it's getting worse every year. There were a couple of

hundred acres around there north of Matrimandir and all around towards *Sharnaga* – all that was practically unoccupied. But now people are settling there also... Joel's place, Marc's place, *Revelation* has taken up land there, and there is Peter... And so basically what it amounts to is that there are too many cows – the ratio of cattle to the land is completely off. The land just can't carry that much cattle.

P: You were suggesting yesterday that. . .

Liesbeth: Ya. . . the only solution I see is that they get fewer cattle that produce more milk.

J: Yes, they will have to shift from a very extensive system of farming and dairying... In fact they are not really into dairying, they don't really have the cattle for the milk. It's partly a status symbol. The more cattle you have, you know... And secondly it's for the manure. And the milk is completely secondary, it doesn't even figure in, the milk is somehow an added thing. And for the goats it's of course the meat. Goats are a big thing, there is really a lot of money involved in goats, and the goats are much worse than the cows (as far as denuding the land)... Now they keep the cattle as a sort of security, it's a sort of investment they can always get back. If they have a tough time they can sell some animals, and so unless they get an alternative for their security they are not going to get rid of these animals. They're going to be put uptight for the animals but they are not going to get rid of them unless they have something else, and that something else... somehow someone will have to show them an alternative, and possibly some financial help. One alternative would be to shift from having a herd of fifty cows to having five cows, you know, that produce a lot of milk so it's much more efficient; but whatever solution we come up with usually involves an incredible investment, at least for them.

Angad: You mean they are not willing to experiment on the

commercial aspect? They can earn money out of milk.

J: They're probably willing to, but I don't think they have the cash around to do it Mainly very small farms are here – just a couple of acres. . . . And to set up something intensive, you know, it takes capital There are a couple of people who are into keeping decent cows for milk – they usually buy them on government loans So I mean, there is a way of doing it, but still, that's only one of the possibilities. Another possibility is if things like some industry and handicraft expand in Auroville and then provide employment; for if people have some kind of job security, they won't feel so pushed any more to keep their cows as a way of security....

P: But this process of changing their extensive to intensive farming has to happen, no? So it will require some kind of education or training ... and in that direction, maybe what Ivar is doing could help in the future . . . as a first contact and then. . .

J: The value of what he is doing is mainly for the time being in establishing a contact with the next generation of people we will be going to deal with in the villages. Trying to change the habits of adults is a really difficult thing – they are so fixed in their way of life, there is very little flexibility. So the only hope is to work with young kids, because they can catch on to something new; and if they get into it, then there is hope that they'll be involved in Auroville and the possibility of a different way of life. . .

Simple, rational explanations and requests mean nothing. The educational process that will and must happen is a slow one. And for this problem which is now *our* problem – which clearly shows where our worlds overlap and interpenetrate – we will have to find a common workable solution. Not as missionaries, not as exponents of charity and “superimposed progress”, but as those who are sharing a mutual and very immediate dilemma which will soon reach a point where something will *have to change*.

And the alternatives which will need to be found – whether the development of rotating village pasture lands or the transfer of investment from cattle into a more productive asset or means of employment, or more probably some combination of alternatives, all of which will require funding assistance – will carry us to a stage not merely of mutual tolerance but of mutual collaboration. Learning to live together, truly.

Meanwhile, we continued to turn the compost, turning all the old stories within the more ancient ones, hoping to grow something new: a grain that some sudden wind would carry from elsewhere.

10. collective awakenings

But while the forest was growing through the trees, other movements less organic were being propagated in Pondicherry during that spring of '75.

A reconstituted version of the old CAA – *Comité Administratif d'Auroville* – had been instigated largely through the efforts of Roger Anger. Roger was interested in “building the city”. He had had enough of this “community experience”. As chief Architect with a Mediterranean nature, he was more than a bit frustrated that almost nothing of his master plan for Auroville – not even his prototype concept of *Auromodèle* – had manifested. For him Auroville was bogged down between administrative incompetence in Pondicherry and the equally intransigent Aurovilians who were too lost in their quest for a “collective consciousness” to see his City.

The original CAA, which had ceased to function in February of 1971, had been something revived and implemented as an interim body, no doubt intended to offer a coherence until Aurovilians had evolved some internal coherence, discipline, purpose, direction. Its initial extinction coincided with a message from the Mother on that 17th of February, 1971: “*More committees, more useless talk.*”⁸⁰ But through the insistence of a few men who refused to acknowledge what she called “*the great error of governments*” that “*lay down mental rules according to their conceptions and ideals, and then apply them.*” For “*that is absolutely false... It is arbitrary, unreal – and the result is that things revolt or wither .and disappear...*” Yet despite Her warning, they would still attempt their CAA as an external leverage. And from the minutes of the March 29, 1975 CAA meeting held in Navajata’s Pondicherry office, there emerged a “new” core group

⁸⁰Note by Gilles G.: The actual quote is “Plus de comités, plus de bavardages inutiles”, which translates into: “No more committees, no more useless talks”. (The above is a common translation mistake.)

with Navajata, Chairman; Roger, member; Shamsunder, member. . . with an agenda whose third point read: "3.) Consideration and finalization of objective programme for Auroville." They clearly wanted that damned definition now!

Nava's concern, it seems, was not so much architectural as financial. He was feeling the pressure from a steadily accumulating seven-figure rupee debt to the State Bank of India. And the prospects for repayment were not promising. On the contrary, the liabilities were increasing.

His initial direction had poured immense investments – all borrowed – into arbitrary and out-of-proportion industrial ventures. They were approaching Auroville like the businessmen they were... A consciousness which unfortunately represented the benevolent blindness through which most of the world's systems still make their decisions. It would never occur to them that a community must first seek to stabilize the means for its basic capital, the things on which it depends: food, water, and a supportable living environment. For such humbly authentic priorities were too simple, too obvious and not very impressive. Humility never is. They could only think on paper, in terms of making money – it didn't matter how – and trees and other such "researches" were not very commercially profitable investments.

It is ironic to note in a memo which Navajata sent to the CAA (April 11th, 1975) the means he saw towards rectifying the mistakes which contributed to the liabilities that plagued his approach to Auroville affairs: "Bad publicity harms the work and must be avoided, and the only way is what is mentioned in item 5 [of his steps to be implemented]." ... "item 5.) pictorial and brief progress reports." In other words, don't look for the *real* solution, just keep up the image.

As for the third character, Shyamsunder, it was difficult to tell which angle he was coming from. And perhaps at that time, he himself didn't know. He always kept his options open. He was a

lawyer. And many of us in Auroville, despite his guardedness, still trusted him, still felt he was worthy of the responsibilities She had entrusted to him. Besides, he was the only one of them all in a kind of daily contact with Auroville, having built a large house in Auroson's community that he began to use concurrently with the Pondicherry residence he still maintained.

It was that same May, while I was busy turning compost and other things, that Francis came to me and asked if I would take over his role as Greenbelt Coordinator. He was going through that periodic cycle that we all do: the need to withdraw from the paper side of things, to throw oneself into matter. He wanted to be free to work full-time on the construction at Matrimandir. And since I was already involved in trees, it seemed natural – so I accepted.

As Greenbelt coordinator, I would meet from time to time with members of the then eight Greenbelt communities, and we would try to see together our needs and directions as a whole. This meant evaluating our means and possibilities, sharing our practical experience, trying to get some more conscious approach to Auroville's tree and food needs so we could grow towards it. We were able to produce a substantial amount of dry crop grains and millet but not sufficient quantities of vegetables – that required intensive irrigation. So in the commonsense spirit of common action and investment, we often found ourselves calculating our collective requirements together for things like compost and hay so we could purchase in bulk and avoid internal competition. It was another of Auroville's basic exercises in understanding why we had to be one.

Once a month I would go to Pondy to receive the Rs. 5,000 (\$ 650) from the SAS that was budgeted for the Green Fund – which somehow had to support all the recurring expenses for the eight "green-work" communities, inhabited at that time by 66 Aurovilians, their animals, gardens and trees. It was not really a development budget, barely even a maintenance budget. But

somehow we managed to keep ourselves and the environment alive. But for them – for this revived CAA – it was seen as a continuous down-the-drain Rs. 5,000... turned into compost for trees which couldn't pay back spiraling bank debts. They didn't see that trees were paying back a much deeper debt: one with thousands of years of interest owed to the Earth. And yet one day, I was simply informed that due to pressing financial difficulties, the Rs. 5,000 would no longer be available for the Green Fund. None of us really believed that. It just seemed that their priorities and ours didn't correspond.

So there we were, the Greenbelt, abruptly on our own. We met together, knew there was no way back, knew that what money we might beg through the CAA would have too many strings attached; so we began to pool what little resources we had among ourselves while I prepared an "Auroville Green Fund Financial Survey" which we sent out to friends and international Centres, giving a perspective of the Greenbelt communities, their work and their minimum budgetary needs. And somehow we managed to get by through this patchwork support.

But by now the body of Auroville had begun to reject the pathology of this CAA.

Frederick, in a letter to the CAA dated 18 April 1975, wrote:

I consider it only fair to the CAA and particularly to Roger to make my position clear before Roger leaves for Paris. I and all those in Auroville to whom I spoke lately are aware of the need for an organized and truly representative structure of self-governing in Auroville. But contrary to those who now form the CAA, I believe that in Auroville itself an adequate governing body (...) will evolve provided time and wise judgement is given.

It is better to work for this evolution than to superimpose an

administration which has no touch with the existing realities.

I object to the members, to the objectives and to the methods and will work towards a change. I hope that it will come about without being a reaction towards the present malrepresentation, but rather as an action that will stand on its own truth.

Roger, you are leaving, and the change will occur while you are away. I hope that you will be able to accept a new situation which will not be master-minded by anybody, but which externally has been triggered by the present inadequate situation.

And Jocelyn Elder, another Auroville resident, in a similar memo addressed to the CAA later that same month, observed:

... I have recently made a survey in Auroville, as some of you are aware, to ascertain how many Aurovilians recognized as valid the Committee which you have constructed. My findings reveal that not only do the majority of Aurovilians not recognize the validity of your newly-formed CAA, but by and large they do not even wish to accord it enough recognition to actively deny it . . .

Something was beginning to arouse: a child beginning to awaken, to forcibly discover himself under the oppressive control of an overbearing guardian.

And Shyamsunder could sense this. He lived among us, and we shared our frank misgivings with him. He seemed to understand. He seemed to sympathize. He began absenting himself from the CAA circus.

But the circus continued along with the side-shows and the juggling, books and all.

Then, on the 26th of April, Shyamsunder, the General Secretary and

Treasurer of the SAS, made his move. In a short communique “to the Auroville communities”, he offered a brief five-point statement clarifying his position, the fourth point of which said, “My participation in the CAA has ended”. Most of us were grateful, for he had thrown in his lot with the residents of Auroville. Or so we thought. And we turned to him, convinced that he could appreciate the organics of this awkward and unruly child that we were and the tolerance this child needed in order to grow.

And whether out of designs of his own or due to the influence of the Aurovilians who prevailed upon him – or more probably out of some mixture of both – Shyamsunder began to challenge Navajata’s supremacy, entering into open contention with the Chairman in a duel that remains indecipherable and enigmatic to most of us. Two archetypal personalities, it seemed, repeating a struggle for power: An enigmatic struggle to control. The seed-war of the absolute “I”.

And beginning in early June, they exchanged a series of terse letters confirming the controversy in writing. In a letter of the 14th June, Shyamsunder writes to Nava: “Both by its composition and its acts it (the CAA) is now an imposition on Auroville by yourself, Roger and some others none of whom is a resident of Auroville. The acts of the CAA are neither regular nor binding on Auroville... You repeatedly refer to the resolution dated 2 December ’73 perhaps because you forget that you are not the President of the Society and the resolution (Delegation of Powers) is applicable to a president and not to you. . .”

Nava, in his reply dated 14th June, begins with: “I am pained at the way the correspondence is now developing”; then proceeds to refute point by point Shyam’s accusations; and concludes with the nearly prophetic phrase: “. . . if we go on like this we will ruin the Auroville project.”

Nava had the conservative backing of the Ashram Trustees, particularly Sri Counouma, the Managing Trustee – also a lawyer –

who did not appreciate the exposure that Shyamsunder was attracting to the affair which was bound to reflect adversely on the Ashram. He was also a firm believer in the dictum that "bad publicity harms the work and must be avoided." But by June of '75, despite all of their attempts to re-inflate it, the CAA bubble popped.

Through the remainder of that summer and into the early fall, an endless stream of Aurovilians approached Nava with a variation of proposals, all seeking some form of harmonious autonomy for Auroville, including the co-option of some resident Aurovilians chosen *by* Aurovilians onto the elite Executive Committee of the SAS now that the CAA charade was over. But all of these dialogues and negotiations to bring about a more direct participation of Aurovilians in their own affairs never got beyond the satisfaction of words and the over-sweetened lemonade he served us. For there were always the promises and reassurances "that we would look into this". And some of us then were still gullible enough to leave convinced that we had converted him.

But now, someone in us had been aroused from his slumber... awakened to the first stirrings for freedom. Someone we would become despite our stumblings and the humbling awareness of our inadequacies. A collective Someone who was All of Us Together.

11. the labour of being

Auroville was being propelled on a course that would carry it beyond itself. The past which was trying to overtake it was somehow provoking its future. And though in the months and years to come we would look over our collective shoulders numberless times, caught in the hesitations of witnessing our bridges burning behind us and unable to see where all this was leading – stranded on the uncertain ground of an eroding red plateau in rural South India on the margin of survival, dangling by the delicate threads of our visas – we would go on, as She said, *into the unknown, come what may!* We had a commitment to this Auroville, a commitment that went much deeper than we could know. That went through to that other story, forever there, vibrating in the atom, the star and the heart of man.

Ironically at this time, these first rebellious acts of the child Auroville – first stirrings of self-hood, primordial rememberings of freedom – would emanate from *Auroson's Home*, where Auroville's first child lived. It was only later that a more dramatic revolutionary movement would rise up in the community of *Aspiration*. A movement which some other Auroville residents would try to rise above, remaining what was eventually labeled the "Neutrals".

In early October of 1975, one of the last and perhaps most petty and outrageous acts was staged through the interplay of this subtle feud between Navajata and Shyamsunder. A check which had been sent for the rather desperate Green Fund from American Centres in response to the "Financial Survey" I had sent them landed up in Shyamsunder's hands. He informed me *afterwards* that he felt obliged to turn it over to Nava's newly-formed Auroville Financial Committee since he himself was a member, even though he knew this Committee had made an agreement to turn over half its receipts to the State Bank of India towards repayment of the growing debt.

Just as he probably knew the course of action I would, and did, take. He was well versed in the politics of Pavlov.

For I sent the following "Open Letter to the SAS's newly-formed "Auroville Financial Committee" from Unity Office, dated October 21, 1975:

On the 1st of June, 1975, the Rs. 5,000 previously provided by the Auroville General Fund to the Green Belt communities towards their maintenance and program expenses was suspended.

The reason given for the suspension was the extreme state of Auroville's financial deficit. This rendered the Green Fund a fund in name only.

Accepting the action positively, the Green Fund has since attempted to develop independent sources of income. Toward this goal, an "Auroville Green Fund Financial Survey" was compiled, stating the present economic conditions along with a brief bio-data description and working resume of the eight green belt communities. This Survey was then circulated freely in Auroville and abroad through certain Centres in the States as a vehicle of information as well as a request for assistance. As a result, a small but genuine response began to generate.

Last week I learned that a \$300 check (Rs. 2,600) sent by the East-West Cultural Centre in America for the Green Fund, was turned over to the newly-formed Auroville Financial Committee; whereupon it was decided (without unanimous consensus) that half the sum was to revert to the General Fund for repayment of overdraft accounts and the remaining half released for the Green Fund.

The growing of trees and the rebuilding of soil is not a commercial enterprise but a service – a service invaluable to the future of Auroville – and as such should not be evaluated

in the narrow terms of monetary return and cash equivalent. Yet, when the Old Committee determined that money was no longer available for the Green Fund, the Green Fund undertook the initiative to seek its own support and bear its own burden, however awkwardly. It now finds itself in the ironic position of not only having been cut off from the General Fund support. . . but having to provide half of its own barely visible resources according to the discretion of the new regime. Presently the Green Fund is reduced to virtually nothing, while half a dozen communities are caught in the bind between trying to meet the expenses of harvesting the last crop and planting the new one.

One can only hope that those who look upon themselves as decision-makers see that the diversion of funds donated for specific projects without the mutual consent of the donor and the intended recipient is bound to disrupt the flow of money, the flow of trust, and the flow of Truth.

At the service of Truth,
(signed) Savitra

I added my own little irritant by indicating that copies of this letter had been sent to the donor and to the Centres concerned in America. This was understandably intolerable to those who did not wish such exposure. It might harm the work. What work? dammit! The work of effectively blocking and undermining Auroville's work behind closed doors? Enough of the polite sophistries of these Gentlemen who did not wish to disturb decorum or dignity but who were prepared to smother Auroville's first breaths, honourably of course, by the rules. Priests who were prepared to sacrifice this living grain of a Dream before their altar of Law.

There were several sequels to that open letter. The first and most obvious was that the Green Fund never even got half the donation which we were told we would get. The second was that the term

“foreigners” entered into the vocabulary of the SAS and Ashram Executives. We were now considered “foreigners” meddling in “their” Auroville affairs. [*“Auroville wants to be Universal township where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realize human unity.”* (The Mother, 8.9.65)]

The third sequel to that letter was a spontaneous discussion I had with Frederick concerning the present events in which we concluded, “We’ve had enough”. We *had* had enough.

Frederick, of German origins, was one of Auroville’s earliest inhabitants and the father of Auroson. He lived with Shyama – Auroson’s mother – in the house bearing their son’s name. At the time, Shyama was pregnant with their second child.

Auroson’s Home had de facto become the chrysalis for these first embryonic movements of a free Auroville: the focus of the ferment, the place of incubation. Interestingly, it had been dedicated by the Mother as “*a new house for a new consciousness*”.

During the last days of October, a series of decisions took place at *Auroson’s Home* between a number of Auroville residents who had felt that things had gone too far: that Auroville was slowly being suffocated by the SAS and its Chairman; that one by one, all of Auroville’s attempts to become itself, to express itself, were being squeezed out before it could be born; that all the life-lines were being cut. For we had no chance to determine our priorities, no way to receive our finances, no way to represent or communicate ourselves, no way to even be recognized except through the SAS. For even the land we worked on was held in their name. So they could swallow us alive and everything was legal.

It was not long before these talks and the questions which they forced us to ask ourselves led us to an inevitable conclusion: Auroville had to be free. Auroville could no longer be imposed

upon, would no longer meekly submit to the grip that was tightening. *"And the result is that things revolt or wither and disappear,"* I recalled the Mother's words from 1967.

For we could no longer deny that Auroville, despite all of the internal resistances that each of us carried in ourselves, was in revolt... following the most basic law of all: the law *To Be*.

The conclusions were now inescapable. It was only a question of how, of methods. The most logical, though perhaps not the most inspiring course, was to seek an independent legal status for Auroville whereby it could freely exercise its living functions which now had been usurped by the the SAS's Executive Committee. Some legally-recognised identity which could offer a protection, even if only transitionally, so that Auroville could live according to its Charter whose first line says: *"Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole."* The line which at the very outset challenged the Rule of the Ego.

However we could not at that time anticipate the implications of such a legal course of action. Nor could we envisage its limitations. For just as Auroville was something that defied traditional bureaucratic categories, it was also something that didn't lend itself to existing legal formulations. In other words, we didn't realize then that even if we succeeded, we might be heading into another straight-jacket of our own making. But it was the only step in front of us then which seemed available. And one must take that first step, even if one stumbles. For it's the lever and learning process to the next one and the next. After all, there are no ultimate mistakes except to stand still.

Frederick, along with Toine and Ruud – two Dutchmen involved with the Matrimandir – and Yusuf, an Indian also living in a home near Frederick's, had reached the point of combustion. They began to translate their feelings into action... which led to a series of discussions with Shyamsunder who, as a lawyer and as one who

seemed sympathetic to Auroville's aspirations, could offer the necessary legal advice.

Simultaneously in this rapidly converging Moment-To-Be, as if in some race to avoid the inevitable, Counouma, Managing Trustee of the Ashram and a lawyer in his own right, sent off an urgent memo to Nava and Shyamsunder dated 23rd October, 1975:

We were to appoint to the Executive Committee of Sri Aurobindo Society two more members from Auroville. As previously decided, if the both of you have agreed on two names, please send me those names. If not, we are to sit with Dyuman [another Ashram Trustee and the fourth member of the then Executive Committee] to find out two good people acceptable to all concerned. For that purpose, could you please come to my house tomorrow at 10:30 A.M. Dyuman has been informed. This matter must not be delayed, as it is very important for all of us not to lose our credibility.

(s/d) Counouma

But it was already too late for them to agree. For they could never condescend to meet Aurovilians as equals. Especially Westerners, as we would later find out. And so in the accelerating vortex of that moment, all those last desperate attempts to compromise burned in a pyre to the Past, burning along with it their pathetic masks and and any semblance of credibility.

All of the forces, it seemed, were playing out their parts, doing what they had to do in that pregnant moment which nothing could stop. In fact even all our resistances, denials and deformations could only serve now to quicken the birth – to hasten the process of a free Auroville which none of us could control. None of us.

And so it was, as if out of some ancient allegory, some archetypal

myth, that Shyamsunder handed over a document to four Aurovilians that he had long ago prepared. A document which had lain dormant for a year when men like Roger had first conspired to carve Auroville out of the SAS Empire: A document called "Memorandum of Association and Rules and Regulations of Auroville". It was a legal document to be used for the formal registration of a Society called "Auroville".

There it was. Ready-made. Immediately useable. Tempting. And ironically modelled upon the Constitution of the SAS – the very body from which Auroville was seeking its freedom. But even rotten apples carry seeds of new and unforeseen possibilities.

Yusuf hesitated, felt the old format grafted on. But Frederick was impatient, driven like the rest of us to our destiny. For him it was *now...* and the Constitution was only a temporal instrument. It could be changed. But the moment could not be delayed.

And so it was that seven names of Aurovilians were gathered: the minimum number of Trustees required to constitute a Society in Tamil Nadu, India. There was already Yusuf, Toine, Ruud and Frederick. And then Boris, a young Frenchman from Fertile happened by to see his wife and new-born son. And that made five. Two more. They thought it would be good to have another Indian and at least one woman. Frederick turned to Rajan, a young Indian who had graduated through the ranks from SAS employee to become an Aurovilian; then to Shraddhavan, an English woman, formerly known as Maggie, teaching in *Aspiration*. And there was seven. Shraddhavan, the single woman member, was invited to be Chairman.

On the eve of that moment, Frederick spoke with Bomi of the imminent event. Bomi, a fiery and uncompromising Gujarati of Parsee descent, was himself fiercely in the midst of legal consultations in Madras towards the same end. He was terribly disappointed to hear of the impending act. Why couldn't you wait?

he asked Fred, Why were you so impatient? You knew I was working with a lawyer myself. And why Shyamsunder? Bomi was one of those who distrusted Shyam from the beginning.

Frederick tried to be conciliatory, realizing his own tendencies toward bulliness. He told Bomi that there was still time if he wished to be an eighth signatory. But Bomi was a proud man and answered Fred with a story of a wandering swami who had come to the door of a householder in search of some milk. Carefully the householder's wife poured the milk for him, watching closely so that the cream she guarded should not spill out into his bowl. But she could not prevent some of the cream from slipping out. The swami observed her sudden reflex to retrieve it, and before she could explain herself, the swami politely returned the milk to the woman. "No thank you," he said, then left. "No thank you, *yar*," Bomi told Frederick. Bomi always called his friends "*yar*". He clearly felt we had been passed a rotten apple.

But even rotten apples carry the seeds of something else, something perhaps incorruptible.

And on the morning of 4th November, 1975, seven Auroville residents did what they had to, going to the Registrar of Societies in Cuddalore where they duly registered a Society whose name was "Auroville".

12. babes in the woods

No one could have foreseen the reverberations of this single act. Surely they must have had some presentiments, these seven Aurovilians. But if they could have known the chain of events that their signatures on a piece of paper would precipitate, unleash, one wonders how many of them would have signed it. For it seems we are still most often and most powerfully instruments not because of ourselves but in spite of ourselves – we who are so well-versed in the past but illiterate of the future.

I remember on the morning of November 5th coming back from some digging work in the gardens when Toine, broad-grinned, handed me a piece of paper which began, “We are happy to announce that Auroville has at last its own independent legal status. . .” I put my sweaty earth-stained hands around the shoulders of Toine’s starched white shirt and laughed. We had done what we had to do.

From extensive notes, documents, transcripts of meetings as well as indelible personal experience, I sought to compile the chronology and composition of those first embryonic weeks: to trace the pattern of threads that was somehow spontaneously emerging. The following narrative is based on or directly drawn from my “Synopsis of Events Regarding the Registration of Auroville as a Society (4 November to 24 November 1975)”. Interspersed with it are some of the between-the-lines happenings which did not fit then into its more journalistic prose:

On the 4th of November 1975, a group of seven Aurovilians became the signatories of a memorandum and set of by-laws so that Auroville could be registered in its own name as a duly recognized Society in India.

This legal action was brought to the public notice of

Aurovilians and the SAS the following day, 5th November. As a result of its impact, it became necessary to provide a forum in which the background and motivation could be aired before all concerned. This took the form of an open meeting to be held under the Banyan Tree at the Centre of Auroville on the 9th of November at 9:00 A.M.

Several messages were issued from the Ashram (Trustees) following the 5th November, urging the immediate dissolution of the newly-formed Society and cancellation of the open meeting planned for the 9th...

... The meeting, however, was held, attended by more than 150 people who came to hear the reasons which prompted the action of the seven signatories and to consider the continuance or dissolution of the Society.

It was a meeting where Auroville had butterflies in its stomach. And while Aurovilians and those genuinely concerned with Auroville's growth were for the first time openly and collectively enquiring, wrestling with this question of responsibility and self-government – a question which they had never before been allowed the liberty to ask – the very same gentlemen who had deprived them of this basic liberty were themselves, in total disregard for the whole issue, taking the necessary steps to legally suppress the question. For at a hastily called meeting of the Executive Committee of the SAS on the 8th November, the day *before* Auroville's open meeting, Navajata, Counouma, Kishorilal, Dyuman and Harikant (minus Shyam) passed three resolutions:

1. Resolved that the Society called Auroville which has filed papers at Cuddalore and which is arrogating to itself the rights of the SAS whose project is Auroville, is ill-conceived and malafide, and that the result will be the destruction of the Mother's Auroville, and that immediate steps should be taken to secure its cancellation and/or nullification and stop

this mischievous move.

2. Resolved that Navajata, the Chairman of SAS, and Kishorilal be and hereby are authorized to take all necessary steps, including legal action, in order to cancel the registration or nullify its action, jointly or severally. The General Secretary (Shyamsunder) is mainly responsible for the establishment of this spurious organization.

Their intent to plot court action is already clearly indicated here on the 8th, never even considering the preliminary deficiencies of a dialogue to find out why such a thing had occurred. They were beyond that stage, though of course they kept up a façade of negotiations. For them, we were babes in the woods. It was Shyamsunder, according to their over-simplification of the issue, who was the problem, and their third resolution would deal with that:

... resolved further that in the interests of good, effective and harmonious administration, the authority so long enjoyed by Shri Shyamsunder Jhunjhunwala, the General Secretary and Treasurer... be and is hereby withdrawn and do vest in and be exercised by Sri Navajata, the Chairman, and Sri Harikant Patel, Member of the Executive Committee of SAS...

On the evening of the 7th, the night before these resolutions, Rajan, one of the original seven signatories came to Frederick's house, shaken and dazed. They had already gotten to him. He was the most vulnerable of the seven. A young Indian with a wife and children, conditioned through the hierarchy of having been an SAS employee, knowing that he was still totally dependent on them financially in a country where one doesn't experiment with what little security one has. I was there. I saw for myself the pathetic sight of a man who was broken. And I was still capable of being shocked and outraged. But we understood what had to be done; and so with what feeble consolation we could give him, we accepted Rajan's

resignation as a Trustee of the Auroville Society. They had wasted no time, these Gentlemen.

I would motorcycle to Cuddalore on the morning of the 8th to sign as the missing seventh signatory to prevent the undoing of the Auroville Society on a technicality before it could even have the chance to deliver its seeds. But the government offices were closed due to a holiday. We had to be content now with the information that the Society could only be dissolved through a resolution of its own or through the courts. What had to be would be.

It was proposed by those representing the legal initiative for autonomy that the registration of Auroville as a Society and the accompanying constitutional by-laws be seen not as a finished product but as a provisional action to serve as a platform from which Aurovilians could express themselves in accordance with their highest ideal. The present seven "Trustees" of the new Society, which was the minimum number required under Indian law for registration purposes, stated that they were prepared to resign; and that the constitution, which they were likewise required to provide, was an interim constitution which Aurovilians could amend, revise or totally reformulate in accordance with the will of their truest aspirations.

Dissent was expressed in the meeting regarding the clandestine manner in which the registration was taken without the general body's prior consultation. Similar dissatisfaction was displayed regarding the aforementioned constitutional memorandum and by-laws. With reply to the first point, it was stated that had such a move for legal registration of Auroville been publicly disclosed prior to its enactment, second or third parties (i.e. SAS) could have at any time taken legal action which would have permanently blocked the possibility. Thus, the initial registration of

Auroville as a Society assured the grounds for a genuine debate in which the will of the general body and all parties concerned could prevail. (Relevant to this, it was noted that two other groups in Auroville were simultaneously, though independently and without awareness of one another's workings, exploring the process for the establishment of Auroville as an autonomous legal entity.) Regarding dissatisfaction with the present wording of the constitution, it was reminded that the constitution as it stood was simply a vehicle to be revised or wholly redrafted to reflect the "living truth" of Auroville and Aurovilians.

At the conclusion of the meeting, which lasted more than four hours, five Aurovilians were delegated to open a dialogue with the SAS Executive Committee regarding the present state of affairs. The results of their discussion would then be conveyed to the general body which agreed to reconvene for this purpose the following evening, November 10th, at *Auromodèle*.

Thus was aired before Auroville as a whole under the limbs of an ancient Banyan Tree the Great Blasphemy: let Auroville be free. The Aurovilians for the first time together, despite the attempts of Navajata (which means "new birth") and his loyalists to abort it heard themselves plainly speaking of autonomy and the right to be. And from these initial meetings which wrestled with the principles of autonomy would emerge other meetings to set the momentum and clarity towards the actual *working out* of these principles toward a de facto autonomy.

But for now, we were fully in the trauma and drama of accepting the undiluted responsibility of being Aurovilians. In other words, the protective membrane that had provided our initial protection had now to be torn from us with our own childlike hands or it would suffocate us. In other words, we had to dare the courage *to*

be. For they had conveyed to us through Shraddhavan in that very first meeting: "The dissolution of the Auroville Society is the precondition for all future negotiations with the SAS". I.e., either we dissolve ourselves back in them or we become ourselves in Auroville. "*The whole world yearns after freedom*", Sri Aurobindo remarked, "*yet each creature is in love with his chains; this is the first paradox and inextricable knot of our nature.*"⁸¹

And on the day following that cathartic November 9 meeting where we expressed all of our doubts and dreams, and while old men were muttering to themselves in Pondicherry, a child was born to Shyama and Frederick in Auroson's Home. A child named Aurosylle who, for me, was both the Daughter of the Revolution and the most eloquent statement for Auroville's own new birth.

On the morning of the 10th, the delegation of Aurovilians had a first formal opportunity to express their composite attitudes concerning the formation of the new Society directly to the full body of the SAS Executive Committee. After listening attentively to the exchange, Counouma, representing the Ashram Trustees present on the Committee, concluded that while he could not give a decision, he could give a suggestion, which was that the situation "revert back to status quo ante-Nov. 4"; and that Aurovilians take up "immediate participation" (in their own administration).

That same evening, some 60 Aurovilians met in *Auromodèle* as previously arranged to hear a detailed report of the interchange. Discussion focussed on interpreting the meaning of "status quo ante-Nov. 4th" and "participation". As the events catalyzed by the action of Nov. 4th had already begun to generate a serious effort toward self-organization, it was considered that the immediate preoccupation with the status of the new Society be set aside. Consequently, a two-part

⁸¹Sri Aurobindo, *Thoughts and Glimpses*, Centenary Ed. Vol. 16, p. 385.

statement was drafted representing the consensus of those present: 1.) We will study and work on all aspects of the administration of Auroville and proceed as if on 3.11.75; 2.) We will come forward with a proposal for Aurovilians to participate actively in the administration of Auroville'. It was decided that another general body meeting be held the following night, 11 November, at *Fraternity*.

How innocent we still were, responding to them on the face of their words, while behind the scene they had already set the legal machinery in motion to nullify the Auroville Society. Their mind was made up, long ago, and they could give a damn for our proposals. They just needed the time to preoccupy us while they prepared to crush us. But apple seeds are very dense.

The meeting at Fraternity was attended by 60 Aurovilians. A reply received from Satprem apropos the present situation was read aloud and became the preamble of the assembly that evening. Its message was that a change in systems was not sufficient: that the true change lay in proportion to one's sincerity and freedom from ego.

For among all the initial messages, threats, warnings that came to us from the Ashram attempting to suppress us, turn us back, forbid us to do what we had done, it was Satprem⁸² alone who offered us a word of hope: a direction rather than a negation; a flame with which to keep our fragile flickering fire alive, still burning in a night that threatened to engulf us. I include below the full English translation of his November 10th letter (originally drafted in French in reply to Gilles, Jean-Claude and Supriya who had written to him of the situation):

⁸²Satprem - author of Sri Aurobindo's biography, *The Adventure of Consciousness* and a biographical trilogy on the Mother, entrusted by Her as the instrument to publish unexpurgated the Mother's 13-volume *Agenda* which reveals Her intimate conversations and experiences recorded between 1951 and 1973 – an *Agenda* which the same forces seeking to control Auroville sought to suppress.

I have spent my life in being outside of “Institutions”, such as they are. I even left to go to the forest because I did not want any law or any government.

Here I have been close to Mother, one point, that’s all.

I always saw and felt that men had a need to let themselves be governed because they were incapable of themselves having the vision and the inner knowledge – but that is the only true government. The only one which I accept. Otherwise the forces change their mask and everything starts again under another ego.

Thus, the situation of Auroville, *such as it is*, is a makeshift while waiting until each one has sufficiently lost his ego to see clearly and obey spontaneously the Rhythm of Truth which is in perpetual change.

“*We want a race without ego*”, Mother said – that is the key to the true government of Auroville.

Here is what Sri Aurobindo says:

“Governments, societies, kings, police, judges, institutions, churches, laws, customs, armies, are temporary necessities imposed on us for a few groups of centuries, because God has concealed His face from us. When it appears to us again in its truth and beauty, then in that light they will vanish.” – *Thoughts and Aphorisms*.

In the meantime, let the Aurovilians follow their highest consciousness and the results will be in exact proportion to their sincerity and their freedom from ego.

Satprem

Somehow, through this trap-door event that we had suddenly fallen through, we were being forced to become aware of what it means to be responsible, *truly* responsible. And we could see through the

questions which this confrontation posed that we were not yet there. For time and again through the exhaustion of these meetings where we fumbled with our fantasies of freedom, a persistent Auroville voice would cut through the soliloquies and remind us of what this story was about: "Once again I repeat myself," Francis – one of the most persistent of those voices – said at an 8th December meeting in *Abri*, "we are again placing the emphasis on Pondy. How the movement started is immaterial. Aurovilians want to change their direction. Are we, as a body, mature enough to direct Auroville?... For where is the co-ordination to find out what has to be done to move in any particular direction? Let's leave Nava and Shyam where they are. If this is a true movement, we have to find a direction ourselves, find our own guidance and not continuously react to this outside influence. For if we are given independence tomorrow, we will fall flat on our faces!"

We would have to *stand* for our freedom. Somehow on this razor's edge where we suddenly found ourselves, with no supports and no reassuring strings attached, we would have to stand on our own.

For despite all of man's professed ideals, he does not change unless he has to, unless there is no other choice. And we Aurovilians, despite all of our cherished commitments, shared this same human frailty. After all, it was only when the practical material level touched us – the suspension of our food, our money our visas – that we understood and did what we had to, did what was needed. For finally, *one only understands with the body*. She knew this but could not explain it.

On the morning of the 14th, those delegated by the previous evening's general body met with Navajata and Counouma. Navajata expressed the difficulties which the new Society posed to him as Chairman of the SAS and reaffirmed his position that the Auroville Society must be dissolved. He indicated that a report of the situation had been requested by

the Government of India. When asked to permit a joint report with Aurovilians, he refused, adding that he would however consider clipping to his own report an Aurovilian version. The meeting concluded with Navajata re-emphasizing the deadlock, and informing the group that he was preparing a legal brief with intent to take court action against the new Society.

At 9:00 A.M. on the 16th, 130 Aurovilians met under the Centre Banyan Tree and heard a report of the meeting with Counouma and Navajata. A period of discussion focussed on forms of internal organization. But the attention was drawn back to Pondicherry when it was announced that Navajata, as Chairman of the SAS, had instituted legal proceedings against the new Society...

We were all a bit incredulous about the possibilities of them actually taking us to court. It was too preposterous to even consider. It would create a public scandal – something that would break their cardinal rule about bad publicity. But we knew little of what desperate men will do when someone challenges their most cardinal rule: Cardinal Rule.

But something was beginning to crystallize through these spontaneous meetings which this action had precipitated. And the next gathering, attended by some 75 persons, began with reports from two working groups which had met the previous day – one on “communications and information”, the other on “food and maintenance”. At last we were beginning to work. The need for the Adversary was revealing itself.

But Shraddhavan – who represented our most stubborn innocence, espoused Auroville’s most noble virtues, yet also refused to see and acknowledge the deceit we were before – was their next target. After all, we were vulnerable, naïve, and couldn’t bring ourselves to believe that such a thing was happening: That men in whom we

placed such a very special trust could be doing this. No, it must somehow be our fault. Forgive us for mistrusting you, some of us repented, wanting to make things right, recover the previous "harmony", even if it was a lie. For our childlike goodwill still wanted to believe the best, leaving us vulnerable to power-players who would play upon our guilt.

For according to the transcripts of that November 19th meeting, Shraddhavan reported that "Pradyot (one of the Ashram Trustees) had guaranteed participation. He said it was a question of organization and that it could be guaranteed. It was a simple matter. And Conouma said he was open, that any Aurovilian could come and he was ready to listen. And those who doubted, should go and see him, and see how they love us". Yes, we should see how they love us. And we would.

But Francis brought back that persistent reminder: "Turn your face away from Pondicherry. It's *here* where we are"... Which led to a report on the type of information we needed to gather in order to actually begin co-ordinating an autonomous organization: information which involved evaluating the resources presently at our disposal, determining what we needed to feed and maintain ourselves, and the more abstract question of how to develop a minimum basis for Auroville's present that would not interfere with or inhibit its progressive future unfolding.

On 23rd November, 100 Aurovilians came together at *Unity*... Following the train of legal events, the assembly was informed that Navajata, as Chairman of the SAS, had filed a suit on the 15th of November for a permanent injunction of the Auroville Society; and that a consequent temporary injunction had been filed restraining the said Society and its 7 signatories from any activities in Auroville. A list of the major points of the suit was read out.

It was noted that on the 20th, the 7 signatories had met together

and decided to seek options to a court case. A tentative proposal was put forward by them to the Ashram Trustees in which the SAS would co-opt 5 members selected by Aurovilians to its Executive Committee to serve as trustees regarding the affairs of Auroville; and that with the co-opted trustees present, a process of de facto autonomy for Aurovilians would be initiated and eventually confirmed de jure within a specified time frame. The dissolution of the new Society would be phased out according to the implementation of the above agreement...

It was then reported that in reply to our proposal submitted to the Ashram Trustees by the 7 signatories, Counouma stated the following: 5 co-opted members was too many because of the present composition of the SAS Executive Committee. There would be an Auroville committee to decide Auroville affairs with decision-making and fiscal powers; but that there could be no time limit for de facto autonomy until the matter of liabilities had been cleared.

Concern was expressed that the affairs not be brought into the courts...

And in this same inexorable moment, with things moving toward some unforeseeable but inescapable conclusion, Shraddhavan, shaken by the unforeseen consequences of her participation, pained by the unexpected conflict, unforeseen turn of events, and subsequent estrangement that seemed to result from seven signatories on a piece of paper that declared Auroville's independence from the SAS, withdrew her name on a document submitted on November 24th, 1975.

And despite our shock and disbelief, and despite ourselves, my "Synopsis of Events Regarding the Registration of Auroville as a Society (4 November to 24 November 1975)" concluded:

On the morning of the 24th of November, the Auroville Society and its signatories entered the courtroom in Pondicherry.

13. identity papers

For years Aurovilians had sought home-grown methods to express themselves and their identity through the existing framework of the SAS. And for years they had been diplomatically double-talked and politely prostituted. Now, out of utter frustration and disillusion, they had resorted to an external leverage – the legal registration of a Society. Not something terribly new or inspiring but, as it turned out, the only way to pierce the crust, crack the façade, slowly unravelling the intricate veils behind which the ego operates.

On November 26th, 1975, Aurovilians met in another open meeting held in the Matrimandir construction office to learn of the happenings in the court. We all felt this court business was a madness, an aberration. None of us believed that the SAS was really placing the fate of Auroville in the hands of the Second Additional Munsiff's Court in Pondicherry. For it was unimaginable that we had come from the farthest corners of the earth to participate in this bizarre case of jurisprudence. And yet, there was the enigmatic footnote reminding us of Sri Aurobindo's experience in a Calcutta courtroom.

After Ruud's brief resume of the present legal state of affairs – that the hearing had been delayed until December 6th – Frederick went into a lengthy monologue about the many efforts underway by concerned and sympathetic third parties to prevent this mess from spilling out into the courts. He was sure, as most of us wanted to believe then, that there would still be that last minute reprieve.

But Dennis, representing that persistent Auroville apple seed, said: "The court situation goes on and on and takes up all of our attention. But it isn't the main thing we should be focussing on. Maybe the only meaning of the Auroville Society was to set something off – a collective leap in wanting to know more about Auroville and about assuming responsibility... Is there somebody(s)

in Auroville, some of us that are ready to do what Pondicherry has handled? We should know, otherwise we can give it back to them.”

Toine then responded, saying that twelve Aurovilians had met, had made a list of the major areas of responsibility still under the external control of the SAS: visas, financial maintenance, government liaison, land affairs, public relations, etc. And that some had already offered to start working. Even the possibility of a newsletter was mentioned as something to keep us all informed. Things were happening so quickly. We needed to know, we needed a vehicle of communication wider than the circumference of these meetings.

And it was in this same meeting of the 26th that we could feel our collective exhaustion as well as the wane of these general gatherings. We had said all we had to say in words, gotten it all out, made our speeches in all the possible accents of humanity, reaching, it felt, the end of the verbal cocoon.

In any case, that judgement we awaited didn't depend on the laws of men but on whether we could learn to fly on our own. And that story was in the wings.

And yet as much as we wished to be free from this preoccupying ballast in Pondicherry, to get on with the “real work of Auroville”, as we called it, something continued to ground us – to face us in two directions at the same time. Something which had exposed our weaknesses and which would not leave us, it seemed, until it had helped us find our strength.

On the 27th November, the next day, the ugly connotation of that word “foreigner”, which had first been heard in late October, resurfaced. Navajata began working with one of his most powerful weapons to force Aurovilians back into submission: the visa. After all, it was the SAS at that time which was providing the guarantee to the Government of India for “foreign” residents in Auroville. The

following is the abbreviated text of an interview that took place in Nava's Pondy office with Howard, a Japanese American and long-time resident of Auroville whose visa was expiring and needed to be renewed:

Present: Navajata, Harikant, Sushila (Nava's personal secretary) and Howard.

(After preliminary inquiries about work, residence and financial status, the following conversation ensued:)

Nava: You know that in Auroville we must collaborate. Do you understand? Are you willing to collaborate with the Executive Committee of the SAS?

Howard: (replies that his allegiance is to the Truth behind Auroville.)

Nava: ... but are you willing to collaborate with the SAS?

Howard: Much depends on the outcome of the situation in Auroville.

I am willing to abide by what Aurovilians decide.

Nava: I don't clearly understand what you are saying. Let us not beat around the bush. I don't want to speak nicely, then stab you in the back. I say clearly that if you are not willing to collaborate with the SAS, we cannot extend the financial guarantee for your visa.

(silence)

Howard: So?

Nava: Even though you were just a witness (a witnessing signatory for the Auroville Society registration), we can forget the past and start anew. Shraddhavan and Rajan have withdrawn their signatures and support for the new Society.

Howard: I feel that if all the different elements and groups – the SAS, the new Society, the Aurovilians – all assume their appropriate roles and functions, and come together for a harmonious agreement, then surely collaboration is possible.

Harikant: You know the Ashram and the SAS do not recognize the new Society.

Howard: Yes, I know.

Nava: All you have to do is to say, “I will collaborate with the SAS”, and you will have your visa.

Harikant: If you support the new Society, then we can have nothing to do with you. Do you support the new Society?

Howard: Yes, I support the new Society.

Harikant: Then we can have nothing to do with you.

Nava: Then it is clear.

Howard: You will return my application papers for the visa?

Nava: The decision is to be finalized by the Executive Committee.

Howard: Then you will inform me of your decision?

Nava: Yes, of course.

(The interview ends.)

Aurovilians were shocked. And would be again and again and again. Howard eventually did not lose his visa, but two other signatories of the following petition – the precursor of many petitions to come – would find similar petitions made out in their behalf:

“Every Aurovilian has a right to live in Auroville. We declare our solidarity and readiness to protect any Aurovilian

threatened by expulsion, unless it is a case of clear offense against the Charter of Auroville or the Law of the country. . .”

It was initially signed by 45 Aurovilians. The number of names would swell to 250 in the appeals to come, representing almost the entire adult population of Auroville during those times.

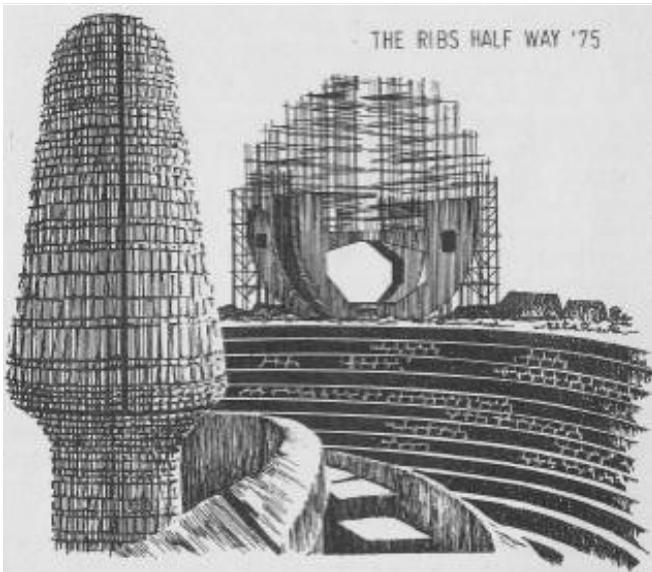
We were reeling then from one blow to the next. I don't know how we took those first unexpected punches. We had all the good reasons to call it quits. And under any other set of circumstances, we would have all packed up and gone home. Except *we were home*. For where else was there to go?

So there we were, Aurovilians, aspirants for a new world, faced with all that denied it. And yet, despite the exhaustive preoccupation with this unforeseen legal drama, the body of Auroville continued to grow. The trees and the children, the flowers and the windmills, and all the myriad constructions and experiments that surged from this irrepressible child. Only this clash of human egos distracted our attention from the truer work at hand – leaving a small group of Aurovilians, none of them lawyers, to labour around a large wobbly table in the electricity workshop behind Matrimandir... burying themselves in drafts and redrafts in the attempt to respond to the SAS's case without compromising Auroville in oppressive legalese.

And from that brooding scene lost in the convolutions that the minds of men move in, a young man stepped out into the twilight to breathe, to remember. *Oh, let me be true, let us be true*. That young man – me – walked past the carpenter's workshop and the piles of shuttering planks that would find their way into the jig-saw puzzle of scaffolding and support for the Matrimandir structure that stood before me. And that whirlwind of papers, rejoinders, affidavits, proposals – the flux of our lives spinning in the vast, pulsating, centrifuge of Auroville's becoming – suddenly stilled, steadied and came to rest in the massive concrete outline of a thirty meter sphere.

A sphere flattened like that sunlit ball of fire poised on the western rim of the earth. And in that moment, amidst the turbulence of these unsettled energies, each moving according to its own nature and rhythm, bumping and jarring egos clashing and clamouring in their unconscious unison towards some inescapable conclusion that somehow contained all our contradictions, the Matrimandir stood solidly before me, its steel-reinforced roots reaching deep into the earth. The secret of perfect speed is being there.

In the West, a fire sank back into the earth, burning our precious pile of identity papers. We were someone else.



14. in the wings

But there are those who spend their whole lives fighting for identity papers. For them life is not something one lives. No, that is too risky. After all, where is the proof? For them life is something which only becomes real when it is certified on paper signed in their name.

“When you find a diamond that belongs to nobody, it is yours. When you discover an island that belongs to nobody, it is yours. When you get on idea before anyone else, you take out a patent on it: it is yours. So with me: I own the stars, because nobody else before me ever thought of owning them.”

“Yes, that is true,” said the little prince. “And what do you do with them?”

“I administer them,” replied the businessman. “I count them and recount them. It is difficult. But I am a man who is naturally interested in matters of consequence.” ... On matters of consequence, the little prince had ideas which were very different from those of grown-ups.⁸³

And here was Auroville, obviously something not conceived by or for grown-ups. Something whose very Charter astonishingly states in its first line: “*Auroville belongs to nobody in particular...*”

But the men “naturally interested in matters of consequence” could not tolerate such a childish notion. They would have to take out a patent. The following are excerpts from the Rejoinder Affidavit filed on behalf of the Petitioner (the SAS) on the 2nd of December, 1975:

In the legal sense, it (Auroville) is a project which is part and parcel of the SAS and takes within it all the land, property, buildings, equipments which are now situated in the complex known as Auroville. (p. 1, para 2)

⁸³From Saint Exupéry’s “The Little Prince”.

The charter of Auroville is a spiritual declaration. It is inappropriate to quote from the Charter in a legal document.

All the land, equipment, etc., in Auroville are the properties of the SAS and no person can set any title to the properties or claim the right to manage same. (p. 2, para 4)

The defendants have no right, much less a statutory right, to carry on any activities in Auroville or in respect of Auroville, except to carry on the work allotted to them by the plaintiff Society. (p. 3, para 7)

Auroville is the property of SAS and is under the management of the Executive Committee of the SAS. The loose expression "Aurovilians" has no place in a legal document, (p. 5, para 10)

I sat through four and a half hours in that pitiful Pondicherry courtroom with the plaster cracking, watching their slick Madras High Court lawyer sweeping through his legal pirouettes. The judgment was deferred until the 19th.

But it was interesting to see in that black and white language how they looked at things. Auroville the dream, and everything that had been offered for its realization, was now "their" exclusive property. And we "Aurovilians" – that "loose expression" which "has no place in a legal document" – were merely serfs, without any rights of our own other than to "carry on the work allotted to them by the plaintiff Society." How inspiring.

So this was what the Mother meant when she said, "*Auroville wants to be a new creation expressing a new consciousness in a new way and according to new methods.*" Imagine if they had put all that rejoinder stuff in their brochures. It would have saved us all the trouble of coming, and them the inconvenience and embarrassment.

But while the old stories were turning in that courtroom in Pondicherry, the story that was in the *wings* began to unfold. And

out of the matrix of those general body meetings where the collective was forced to face itself for the first time, precipitated by that sudden registration of a Society called "Auroville", two primary areas of responsibility were internalized: Information and Finance. They began under the names of the "Auroville Notes" and "Pour Tous".

The "Auroville Notes", a hand-typed initiative I launched in late 1975, emerged directly out of the general meetings and the need to share and coordinate information. On a collective scale, dispersed over the vast expanses of the Auroville plateau, we had become aware of the need to become aware – to become aware beyond our many local points to reach a collective reference point for Auroville as a whole. So much was happening beyond the confines of our little fragments that was affecting *each* of us. Auroville was a collective realization and we were beginning to realize that. And we needed a vehicle to help us thread together our distances, provide us the information and event schedules that should be available to *all* of us. So the "Notes" became a first humble means to decentralize knowledge and power, to place responsibility on *each* of us.

"*Pour Tous*", the French meaning "*For All*", was the name given by the Mother to the Auroville central food distribution system. The money and marketing side had previously been provided through the SAS which had been managing Auroville's General Fund. But when they began to withhold the Community's funds in late December, as if it was "their" money and not money donated expressly for Auroville under a tax-exemption given expressly for Auroville, we had to do something. All this talk about self-government and autonomy was fine – we could continue to discuss it vehemently over the dinner table. But when there was no dinner on the table, you *do* something! You take your life into your own hands and become responsible for yourself.

And in Auroville, as in any organism, it was not enough for one or two of us to become responsible, not even a group. We *all* had to be responsible for our lives that were inseparable from the context of the whole. Independence does not contradict interdependence. It is its conscious consequence. Only a body conscious down to its last cells is free.

And so together with Barbara, our super typist who recorded the transcripts of meetings during that period, we began drafting and circulating several dozen typed copies of the "Auroville Notes" from Unity Office. The first one appeared on December 3rd with a brief *note on the NOTES...*

This Newsletter, is meant to serve as another medium for communicating among ourselves. It is not oriented for outside readership as in the case of other Auroville publications. It will appear as often as there is sufficient content or as needed. It can be as meaningful or as meaningless as we make it.

This newsletter does not represent any particular viewpoint; it seeks to be neutral and open, simply to reflect the composite of Aurovilians' aspirations, insights and self-expression.

Materials can be sent to Barbara c/o Unity. It should be as condensed as possible. If the length exceeds practical limits, it may require editing, in which case the complete text will be available at Unity Office.

That first issue also included articles on *Communications in Auroville* ("Perhaps it is good if Aurovilians begin to communicate... "); *Report of the Meeting on 12 Columns* regarding the construction of the Matrimandir inner chamber ("In answer to Roger's offer that the decision on the 12 columns be left to the consciousness of the Aurovilians, the following letter was drafted..."); *Firewood* ("1. several communities, in addition to two bakeries, require firewood; 2. At the centre there are more than 11 acres of casuarina that need

thinning out..."); *Report on Legal Proceedings* ("The hearing about the lifting of the temporary injunction..."); *Green Fund Meeting* ("Sunday morning, Dec.7, 9:30 AM at Jaap's house, Kottakarai, to discuss: 1) distribution of funds; 2) status of harvest and coordination of internal distribution; 3) access to free firewood; 4) how to proceed..."); *Twenty-seven Positions* ("Auroville, that child, surprised us in the November of our seventh year...").

And so it went, the Auroville Notes, gaining its momentum, increasing its pages, changing with the changing Aurovilles that it was sharing with resident Aurovilians. And in the second column of the third page of its third edition, dated 13-14 December 1975, the first signs and movements of a renascent *Pour Tous* was emerging – a *Pour Tous* that was to one day fulfill a crucial phase in coordinating and consolidating Auroville's collective economy – were recorded in an article entitled *What's Cooking?*:

"An informal meeting was held at Unity dining room on 13 December regarding kitchens and the coordination of food arrangements. People from Pour Tous, the Bakery, Centre and the Green Fund were present...

"...those willing to work on centralizing food, Prosperity [that name would eventually be dropped to the humbler equivalents of personal maintenance and Free Store], purchasing and circulation will meet at Pour Tous on Tuesday morning, 9:00 AM, 16th December. Also, those willing to try a new financial flow could speak with Yusuf, Jocelyn or Alain Bernard."

And the following article *On Food and Finance*, drawn from excerpts of information received from Lisa, pursues this same converging theme. It reflects Lisa's slightly Dutch accent as well as the practical efficiency that she manifested in *Aurocreation* – one of Auroville's most productive and many-sided handicrafts ventures, which also awakened the skills and imaginations of hundreds of villagers over the years:

[With money being cut by the SAS]...Unless we make an effort and consider what we still have inside of Auroville, we cannot even solve the problem of this month... Is it not our own responsibility to start planning what we really need, where we can reduce, how we could share and how material things could circulate much more effectively?

Questions: Who can formulate the exact monthly requirements of Auroville for January? Who will pay back X? Who can contribute towards the second half of this month? Who has good ideas and could bring into practice how we could eventually eat with Rs. 75 a month?

We all know that there are still private sources of income in Auroville: are those persons ready to participate in a common pool, governed by the same who contribute with all they have?

Are we ready for a free store where we exchange whatever we do not need for what we do need? Are there some among us willing to keep the free store intact? That means repair, arrange, imagine an Aurovilian way how to manage that everything remains balanced? Because our tendency seems always to be to take and hardly to give, to not care how to take or to give.

Only *Auroshika* (Auroville's original incense unit which later was withdrawn into the Ashram Trust) and *Aurocreation* are directly feeding their profits back into Auroville's general needs. We hope to keep this income as a monthly base for whatever private sources of income can add. This effort we can call our real common pool of finance.

...Agro-communities should contribute towards community central kitchens even when it would be more profitable to sell their products outside...

As noted in Lisa's article and the meetings preceding it, the

ground for *Pour Tous (For All)* was ripe. In this light, we are forever grateful to the Plaintiff Society for helping this “loose term ‘Aurovilian’ ” deliver itself, get its act together. For this conglomeration of communities and projects planted here and there over a sprawling red plateau was beginning to act as one conscious body. Not because it *wanted to* – though it was always quoting it in one form or another – but because it *had to*. For we were learning a lesson that humanity as a whole will one day have to face – is in fact facing. And this planetary body will likewise, despite its obstinate protests, come to accept its oneness, not because it *wants to* – though one can quote from its centuries of poets and mystics and philosophers who voiced that wish – but because it *has to*. It is in matter, after all, in the body and not in some rarefied retreat, that the secret will be found, the most sublime and most profound realized.

15. hills and valleys and the roses of a little prince

It was in that same third issue of the Auroville Notes that I ran across a short paragraph footnoting where I was in that moment in between the drama of meetings, legal proceedings and frantic news deadlines. It was called *Matrimandir Gardens Contour Work*, and it mentioned that “contour work for the continuation of hills along the south to southwest quadrant of the Outer Gardens will start before the end of this year. This landscape ground work is necessary if there are to be tree plantings next season. Initially two Tamil digging teams will have to be organized in order to move the large amounts of earth required. Anyone familiar with or interested in the process of earthwork and earth-moving is welcome...”

We had planted out all of the available areas in that initial undertaking of the Matrimandir Gardens. The next phase in the organics of the process involved a wide, barren arc of brittle terrain contained by the band of young casuarinas stretching from south to west. To add a relief to the unbroken monotony of the landscape, there would be hills here: gradually rolling waves of earth. And they would have to be there before the trees could be planted in time for the next monsoon.

With this season planted out, with the pits dug and the last of the compost turned, some of the gardens team left to work on the structure of the Matrimandir whose four massive ribs were slowly curving inward and upward towards one another to be joined at their intersection by a concrete ring. The few remaining from our original team were needed to care for and maintain the acres of species that had already begun to inhabit this once botanical void. And I was standing alone in the middle of a flat crusty piece of terra firma trying to convince myself that it could somehow grow hills.

I remember Piero, our chief engineer of the Matrimandir and an architect in his own right, asking me for some construction plans

before initiating with the earthwork. Being accustomed to the most precise engineering drawings before he himself would proceed on the remarkably delicate structural feat which the Matrimandir represented – a labour which could only find its true artisan in the hands and passions and genius of an Italian – Piero expressed more than a passing scepticism when we walked through the imaginary hillsides where I pointed vaguely to areas where I could “feel” the hills. His knotted silvery eye-brows conveyed the reluctance which was his Florentine way of saying “Baloney!”

I tried to persuade him – as well as myself – that one didn’t approach gardens and landscapes as one approached static constructions. But I had to get past the rhetoric and my own anticipated inadequacies – this wasn’t on the scale of a sand box, after all – and into the work. Otherwise we could never find out. After all, the mind can entertain itself for eternities devising flawless arguments, every one of which is relatively true. But the proof lies in the doing, in calling the bluff of one’s impotence.

That next chilly December morning at 6 AM, casting a number of staccato glances over my shoulder, – but it was too late now to back out – I met with Govindaswamy and 25 villagers who comprised his digging team. In my less than 25 words of Tamil, I marked off an area with Govindaswamy and told him to clear off the ten-centimetre thick topsoil layer, piling it in convenient locations nearby. The plan was to eventually recover the “hills” with it. For what meagre topsoil we had was too precious to waste, and that preliminary task would give me the breather to see how to grow a hill.

One of the obvious ingredients to grow a hill is earth. Transport was a problem and there weren’t any vast earth mounds in easy reach. I stared down at this flat riddle of clay, imploring some mute earth-god to rescue me before they had cleared all the topsoil. And as I stared, the riddle itself proved to be the solution. I was standing on

it. An easily accessible and inexhaustible source of earth. Right under our feet, where the simple answers always are. Maybe we could grow hills after all! For by digging out valleys, we would have the contents for corresponding rises. A relief of miniature valleys, dales and hills simply by readjusting the same space.

Imagine, no bulldozers, no ingeniously complex diagrams, just two dozen men with *mumpties* (hand shovels) and baskets to dig and pass the soil from here to there.

And with my newly-found confidence inspired by a simple pact with the earth, I casually directed the first baskets of displaced earth *there*, where it "felt" like the heart of a hill. And when the mound grew to sufficient height, I placed a stake in it: tied a string to the stake which marked the high point of the hill; then stretched out the string to a length of ten, maybe twenty meters, depending on the slope and gradient one wished to achieve; and fixed it to the flat ground marking the fluid boundaries where the hill merged back into meadow or valley.

And so the hills grew from dales and the dales from hills, slowly emerging from south to west as that empty landscape which surrounded the Matrimandir began its metamorphosis into a park-to-be.

In that same moment, on the 18th December, 1975, while the earth was moving, Roger Anger drafted a letter resigning as Chief Architect in protest to the stagnating influence of the SAS. Roger alone among those early Magis still retained an innate sense of chivalry and noblesse:

The desire for power, lack of comprehension, rigidity have led Auroville to an unjustifiable situation with regard to the very nature of its message of Unity.

This shows clearly that Auroville must be independent of all forms of direction that are not able to guide it towards its

highest aspirations.

The only positive result of these past weeks is the emergence of a collective consciousness of Auroville that wishes to affirm itself and be.

We must all give ourselves to this so that it may become a reality, allowing us to go beyond limitations and egoisms and unify the participants as a whole with the purpose of creating an Auroville which would conform to the directives clearly laid out in its Charter.

I feel that in this perspective, my withdrawal from all activities would provide a greater chance for the emergence of such a collective consciousness – to associate myself with which, I remain ready.

(s/d. Roger Anger)

Meanwhile, the court judgement, due on the 19th but postponed till the 23rd, sustained the interim injunction against the Auroville Society, which then filed an appeal whose verdict would be given in early February of '76.

On the 24th, the day before the Christmas of that waning year, Shyamsunder issued the following statement:

The group-soul of Auroville aspires for true liberty and I deem it a privilege to be with Auroville.

The Mother has put me at the service of Auroville and I would love to be at the disposal of Aurovilians where they wish me to be.

S/d. Shyamsunder

His actions in the years to come would reveal the unique interpretation of his genuine "love to be at the disposal of Aurovilians where they wish me to be."

And “on the 30th of December, one thousand nine hundred and seventy-five,” as dated on the document on the eve of that dying year, Navajata, “hereinafter called ‘The Settler’ ”, along with Dyuman, Harikant and Kishorilal, formed a business trust called Aurotrust. They would take no more chances. Now it would be iron-clad, if paper can ever be iron-clad, or the roses and stars of a Little Prince ever be owned.

In this “Indenture”, as it was called, this mis-Trust with its mis-Trustees had neatly sewed up the loose ends. For since Auroville was nowhere mentioned in the memorandum of the SAS which was registered on September 24, 1960, it could now declare Auroville as its undeniable property through this Aurotrust. For this cleverly created Trust document now unequivocally stated its primary object as being: “To assist in the establishment, development and maintenance of the SAS and *its projects including Auroville. . .*” (italics mine)

According to a “legal memorandum” prepared by my American friend Joseph Spanier, a graduate of Harvard Law School class of ‘35, it is a basic rule of trust law that one cannot create a trust with something, subjecting it to the provisions of such a trust, unless one *owns* that thing. SAS, then, was clearly creating a document based on the (false) assumption that it *owned* Auroville – the very assumption which the Aurovilians were challenging based on the Mother’s Charter of Auroville which in the most simple terms – in the terms of a true and implicit Trust – stated that: “*Auroville belongs to nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole.*”

And as a further distortion, this Aurotrust granted absolute powers to its “trustees” (none of whom lived in Auroville) to utilize “the entire income and corpus of the Trust” (which included Auroville) according to their own discretion and interpretations as to the objects of their Trust. In other words, they had legally co-opted the handicrafts and production units of Auroville under the control of

this Aurotrust – which could now use what little profits there might be, if they wished, along with any of the other principal assets and land estates in Auroville – for the projects and related objects of the SAS as mentioned in the Trust Deed. In other words, the few struggling Auroville industries could no longer direct their incomes into the Community which was their *raison d'être*, but were compelled to turn over their finances to the managerial discretion of Navajata and Co.

Incredible! We were escaping from one tyranny and backing into another, all legal of course. Is it any wonder then that our Civilization was exploding, breaking free from the cages of such a fossilized hypocrisy? For we needed to breathe... Freed from the suffocating laws of an old world that was dying. Freed from the corrupt laws of a world that threatened to take us all down with it – laws that had become the instruments to oppress the very liberties they were meant to protect. Yet why couldn't we acknowledge what we all saw, dammit? That the very soul of truth and justice was being sold to the highest bidder.

And yet, if the laws had been more accommodating, more benevolent, we would never have been challenged to find the truer leverage of change in ourselves. We would still be drowning in our comfortably suffocating milieus, shuffling along, content to follow the way of our arthritic worlds.

But the plaster in the courtroom was cracking.

And on that same December 30th, the fourth issue of the Auroville Notes emerged carrying an article on the continuing saga of Food, Finance and *Pour Tous*. The more Auroville was being pressed into submission, the more self-reliant it sought to become. And what had merely been a food store called *Pour Tous* was about to become a coordinating link in Auroville's interdependence as well as an initial base for its independence.

The first paras of that article reported about a meeting held in the *Pour Tous* store on the 16th of December to discuss the practicalities of integrating the various community kitchen facilities through one common arrangement. The conversation eventually “led into a discussion about the present maintenance system (personal needs) and the possibility of bringing it into Auroville, internalizing it also under the name *Pour Tous* (For All)...”. “With these two new approaches regarding food arrangements and essential items, a simple system to begin the elimination of internal exchange of money was expressed, in which the units of *Pour Tous* (still ambiguously referring here to the name of the food store), the Bakery, the Green Fund, *Auroshri* (then the shop in Pondy marketing Auroville crafts) and the Aspiration Laundry would centralize their accounts in one common fund...”

A pattern was slowly beginning to take shape: The elements and relationships of a living whole – long ago dismembered and disconnected as man’s consciousness and civilization became more specialized, isolated, quality-blind – now striving to recover that lost whole... functions that once competed with one another under the mesmerism of money now complementing one another, rejoining, recovering their interconnection. The mundane movements of a long forgotten love story.

These concentrated meetings continued like time-lapse sequences following the collective alchemy, and on 23rd, “... The conversation returned to the need for actualizing a truer internal arrangement of services i.e.: the conversion of Auroville agriculture from an ‘industry’ which had previously been forced to grow crops as an income-earning activity into growing crops directly as food for the Community’s own internal consumption... in the same way that a future *Pour Tous* could become a model for more consciously recycling Auroville goods back into the Community.”

“On the 27th, the meeting resumed at *Pour Tous*. A common

accounting system had been formulated under the name of 'Pour Tous Fund' and was prepared to begin functioning from the first of January 1976." The article then went on to mention the initial services prepared to "act as one economic unit, eliminating exchange of money between themselves and between community-supported Aurovilians and themselves"... indicating that "a more detailed statement about this experimental venture" would be circulated on community notice-boards along with the follow-up meetings open to all to clarify the implications of the attempt.

The article concluded with the recognition that "For this evolution to have any meaning, the concept of Pour Tous must be widened. It is not simply an isolated entity. Pour Tous is Pour Tous (For All) and it must grow into that. Its success or failure lies with us all."

It was happening. An initial core of services, production units, food-growers and Aurovillian residents were gathering themselves out of a common need around a common economic denominator – economic not in the sense that has come to be equated with "commercial", but in its fundamental sense which shares the same Greek root "*oikos*", meaning "house"... which was also the root origin for the word "ecology". In other words: the sense of an inter-related and balanced circulation and distribution of energy and material through a system growing one. *Alors*, we were beginning to get our house – a house that no one owned – in order.

Excerpts from the draft proposing the new experiment of "Pour Tous Fund" to the community of Auroville reveal this attempt by Aurovilians to catch that fleeting indication hovering around us and give it some initial formulation:

The following is an attempt to explain how the Pour Tous Fund will function during the 2-month trial period from 1-1 to 28-2-76:

1. Those Aurovilians who are supported by Auroville (two cases):
 - (a) Those Aurovilians completely dependent on community

support may benefit freely from the services of Pour Tous, remaining conscious of the present financial situation and trying to maintain their needs within the previously accustomed limits of Rs. 125/- per month.

(b) Those Aurovilians supported by Auroville but who still receive or have access to supplementary incomes... will likewise benefit freely from the Pour Tous Fund services but are encouraged within their means to contribute from their supplementary sources towards the services rendered by Pour Tous. If at any time this supplementary income should cease, the full responsibility for support will be assumed without question by the Pour Tous Fund.

2. Those Aurovilians who support themselves...may draw from the services of Pour Tous in proportion to their contribution which will be credited to their personal account. If they have surplus income which remains over and above their needs, they are invited to offer it to the Fund for the benefit of Auroville. They may also keep their money on deposit in the Pour Tous Fund as in a bank, to be available on demand (refer to Bank of Pour Tous, no.3).

N.B.: ...By virtue of 'personal' money being kept in an open collective fund, it may become the basis for a clearer and more conscious use of money for the benefit of ALL...

3. How will the various services associated with Pour Tous function? . . .

(a) Pour Tous Store – functioning as before with orders and baskets (of food and personal items) provided for individuals, families and kitchens. . .

(b) Bank of Pour Tous – will initially be situated in the office of the Pour Tous Store. . .

...For all operations of deposits and withdrawals, a duplicate

voucher will be made. As an individual participant with the Pour Tous Fund, one can make use of all the services involved without the exchange of money. The services will turn in daily records to the bank which will then simply debit or credit accordingly the individual accounts. . .

(e) *Auroshri* – the return of profits from Auroville-made goods will be credited through the Pour Tous Fund to the account of those individuals or communities who produced them.

(f) Green Fund and agricultural communities – a more conscious effort will be made to use the produce grown on Auroville soil. The money received for Green Fund projects will be kept on deposit in the Pour Tous Bank.

N.B.: Only visitors will still exchange money directly with pour Tous services under the new arrangement; however, they will also be able to open an account in Pour Tous Fund for the duration of their stay if it is more than one month.

4. Initial procedures in the functioning of Pour Tous Fund:

(a) Cards and account books of the Pour Tous Fund will always be open and available to the Aurovilians who may wish to see them for whatever reason.

(b) At regular intervals, perhaps quarterly, a financial report of the services within the Pour Tous Fund will be made available. Any surplus registered will become the property of ALL, to be redistributed for collective necessities or reinvested for improving the services of Pour Tous Fund.

(c) For the time being seven Aurovilians will serve as the signatories for cheques: Yusuf, Lisa, Savitra, Ramachandra Rao, Alain B., Shanti and Chris... These persons will meet weekly to follow the evolution of the movement. All interested are welcome to participate in these meetings.

These Pour Tous meetings – which began as weekly working sessions to evaluate, adjust, re-evaluate and re-adjust the initial framework of Pour Tous Fund so that it could continue to correspond and remain alive to the progressive actualities of Auroville – gradually outgrew themselves to become the regular Thursday morning collective crucible where Aurovilians could meet and interact with one another, discuss needs, share the multitude of Auroville viewpoints and experiences, wrestle with one another in an intimate embrace that only Aurovilians could appreciate. It was not a static expression of pampered oneness and well-modulated harmony. It was where we could frankly, sometimes aggressively, often foolishly, occasionally brilliantly and always unexpectedly hear what Auroville was telling us: the mundane mantra in thick French accents or Oxford English, in tea-shop Tamil or passionate Italian. It was a mirror where we got back precisely where we were as well as the leaven for our collective direction which gave rise to other functions and working groups that would eventually unburden the meeting of its over-accumulating roles.

And yet no matter how we tried over those years to define among ourselves the function of these Pour Tous Meetings – which some have called our information forum, others a decision-making vehicle, others vehemently denying that decisions are actually made in the meetings, some even claiming that it is our collective headache – it remains all of these and more; and we still go on in larger or smaller numbers Thursday mornings to find out...

...To find out the depths of our oneness, test the strength of our unity. Is it brittle, cosmetic, skin-deep, just another vogue mask that's in fashion this season? Or is the oneness *there*, at the roots, unquestionably there with no need for excuses and justifications? And if it is there, then *that* is the only rule of the game. We no longer need fear one another, maintain a pretence of harmony that would crack at the drop of a mask. We could go through it all together. Because *we were*.

16. the worm and the fire

But in Auroville's inimitable style of irony, in order to open a bank account for Pour Tous Fund, for the new experience, we found that we needed the permission of the SAS. With our present lack of legal status, the State Bank of India would only recognize us at that time as a sub-account of SAS. What an incredible parody of the whole situation!

Somehow Alain Bernard did what had to be done, went to Navajata who was in the midst of cutting off the General Fund source for Auroville, to ask if we could open up a fund of our own. We got the bank account, but Nava still set the conditions, which included dropping the names of Yusuf and Savitra as signatories.

There wasn't much room to manoeuvre. When I heard the story I was fuming, but there was nothing to do but bite your tongue. We were still some comically, karmically bizarre mixture... some mythic beast half this, half that. We had crawled up on the land, but we still carried our tails behind – a bit between our legs, it felt at that moment.

And to compound the absurdity, Navajata issued the following "Circular" on January 10th: "Sri Dayanand will resume charge of Auroville land and Estate Management. . ." He had seen the move that Aurovilians were taking, the step toward self-sufficiency; and he put in one of his most efficient trustworthy circuit-breakers, Dayanand, to prevent Aurovilian food-growers – who were beginning to bring back fertility and productivity to the tortured land – from reaching their inescapable conclusions: A ground of self-support.

Dayanand was ruthless in his efficiency. We would see the methods that he and other "agents" of his were prepared to use to put a wedge between us and the land as well as between us and the

land's local Tamil inhabitants: leasing out of our fields and groves to them, paying off villagers to maximize frictions, foment conflict... resorting to anything, even if it meant destroying all of the labour that had gone into regenerating the soil, all the fragile relationships we had begun to grow with the villagers. Because it wasn't really Auroville the SAS was concerned with. It was simply *their control* of it. And to control it, they were prepared to destroy it.

Somehow the New Year had entered: 1976. But it was still so cluttered with the past.

Ahead lay a mine field. But why? – why was it so difficult to be simple? Why must we deform everything we touch?...including this dream of a new world. "*There should be somewhere upon earth a place ...*" But where was this place that needed to be, that I needed to live in? Why must we resist, time after time? Why must we listen to this troll in us who takes such pleasure in tearing the petals from the flower, in assuring us that existence is an essentially ugly condition that we must resign ourselves to for a few brief or prolonged moments, seeking solace in our assorted civilized anaesthetics? Why do we prefer to perpetuate the nightmare, taking such great pains to prove that it must be so? Why do we choose to believe our doubts rather than our dreams? What is this habit, this reflex so deep in us, so second-nature, that we do not even see that we can choose to turn the doubt back upon itself? to turn its own cynical negation back upon itself? What is this worm of an ego that poisons every apple?.. this worm of an ego that can let nothing be because it is afraid to let go. For behind the undisputed dominion of its power to possess and corrupt is a quaking little fear.

It was this worm which had lived for centuries, hidden in our own hearts, infecting our humanity, leaving the hopes of each new year rotten, polluting our dreams with its all-consuming doubt.

It was this worm that Auroville was now challenging with its fire. Yes, it said to the worm whom no one had ever questioned. For in that Auroville heart there burned the fire of a new world. Yes!

AUM NAMO BHAGAVATÉ.

17. through the be-wilderness

Francis and I were in Shyama's rose garden. Aurosyllé, the Daughter of the Revolution, would be two months old next week. It was January 3rd and Francis reminded me that it was Nava's birthday. Francis had a very wry sense of humour. I caught his point, we winked at one another, and Shyama cut us two magnificent bouquets of fresh roses.

Fifteen minutes later by motorcycle, Francis and I were winding our way up a staircase in the Ashram to the room that Nava occasionally sat in. When we reached the balcony, Sushila, his personal secretary, met us and asked us our purpose. We revealed the two bouquets of roses and she pointed to the room inside, telling us that Nava had taken a vow of silence for the afternoon. We entered, saw Nava huddled in a chair, and presented him with the roses. "From Auroville with love," I told him.

His jaw dropped eloquently and we left. Francis and I would soon understand the double irony of that jaw dropping.

Returning to the chronicle of the Notes, the new experiment of Pour Tous seemed to be alive and viable. Passages from the sixth issue dated 22nd January informed us that. . .

At last Thursday's (15.1.76) weekly Pour Tous Fund meeting, discussion began with a quick assessment of how Aurovilians were drawing in proportion to the budget available with the Fund for January. (Were more goods being consumed in the first half of January than the budget could cover?) According to the accounting cards, the budgetary frame was being maintained.

The experiment of placing the responsibility of self-discipline upon the Aurovilians themselves rather than imposing a rigid enforcement of explicit monetary limits... has not resulted thus

far in an unleashing of desires and abuses. (It was thought in this context to post the total month's receipt for food money so that community-supported Aurovilians could have a sense of how to manage themselves for that month). . .

It was mentioned that the evolving Pour Tous arrangement had become a meeting point between the Green Belt and Pour Tous – between Auroville as food producer and Auroville as consumer and distributor. Auroville grains and produce were being more consciously recycled in Auroville (i.e. Pour Tous had 'purchased' roughly 90 to 100 bags of Auroville-grown *varagu* millet – maybe six months stock at the present rate of consumption)... Pour Tous mentioned that it was even worth paying (investing) slightly more for Auroville-grown organic products because the quality was higher and the funds would subsidize Auroville agriculture rather than the bazaar.

Despite that hypnotic doubt, we were making it. The occasional glance over the shoulder was still there, like a stutter, but we had found our base to stand on. The arrangements of Pour Tous would of course change proportionately with our own individual and collective progress in the months and years to come: i.e., the system of keeping accounting cards on Aurovilians to see that there was no excessive or flagrant disregard for the actual budget within our means would be discarded, obsolete, as Aurovilians demonstrated their trustworthiness and sense of individual responsibility. Likewise, the archaic language of 'purchasing' goods and material from one another would drop as we began to realize that our new collective fund represented the economy of Auroville as a whole: So there was no longer this accustomed commercial division between producer and consumer.

February 4th, 1976, was a dense day in the epic of Auroville. And the days to come would grow denser, yielding only the slender thread of a trail through the be-wilderness.

The morning edition of the Auroville Notes number seven had appeared. The first crossing of swords with Dayanand was beginning in the long War of the Land that would drag on for years. The article, entitled *Land Use and the Green Communities*, attempted to define Auroville's attitude toward the land, anticipating that Dayanand was about to begin indiscriminate leasing of lands out from under the Aurovilians who were working them:

An informal Green Belt meeting was held at Jaap's house in Kottakarai on Sunday, 1.2.76, to discuss land use and land-lease policies.

Some years ago, a policy had emerged in which Green Belt and other land-oriented communities would be responsible for the management of lands around their community. This, however, still left certain Auroville lands unlooked-after, which then became known as the "land estates". During the ensuing period of time, some or much (unknown) of this land within the "land estates" had been leased out to villagers. It had never been made clear to those involved with the reforestation and agricultural programs in Auroville what criteria (if any) were established in the leasing of Auroville's land and where the income from these leases have gone.

As a result, members of the reforesting and food-growing communities met together again on Wednesday 4.2.76 to clarify their own position and attitudes about land-use policies. It was decided that this initial arrangement whereby Aurovilians manage (act as stewards for) the lands within their own domain should continue. In the case where Aurovilians would wish to lease land in their areas, this would be co-ordinated through the legal offices of the "land estates" with Dayanand. Where this land happens to be productive orchards (cashew topes, mango groves), the Green Belt's internal policy would be to reinvest whatever return comes

from the harvest into the land where it came from until the orchard was capable of producing a surplus. The surplus income (harvest) would then be turned over in-full to Pour Tous.

In the case of the Auroville land presently untended by communities and managed directly by the “land estate”, the Green Belt members proposed a series of principles which recognize land not only as a money-producer but as a value in and of itself:

1) We do not own the land. We are its trustees and should act as such to see that it is properly cared for and its fertility preserved and protected.

2) That in the case of leasing crop-lands to villagers or other third parties, conditions should be made clearly that the land is to be properly *bunded*, composted and kept free from chemical pesticides and fertilizers. (i.e., Kottakarai has had experience in the past where short-term leased land was leached out by those who used it for purely economic motives and returned it in a depleted state.)

3) The return from crop-lands leased discriminatively (i.e., qualitatively) to villagers could either go into a fund for village progress or into a revolving fund to see that those “leased” lands are improved and properly maintained (i.e., additional quantities of compost supplemented, bunds repaired, check dams established where necessary, etc.).

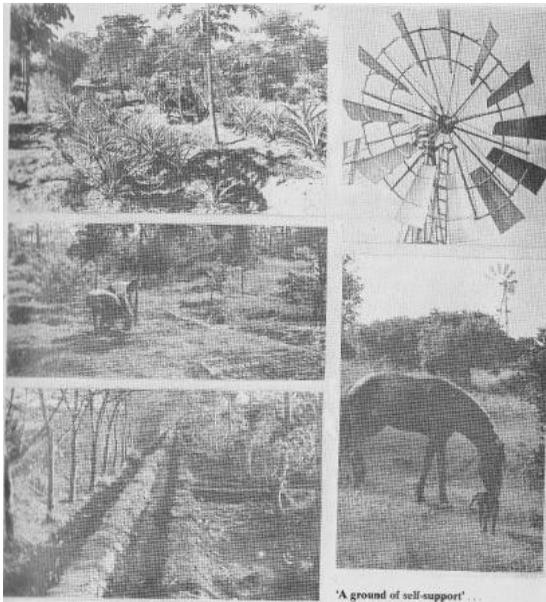
4) In the case of leasing orchard lands, the income should be given to Pour Tous.

On February 5th, the appeal filed by the Auroville Society for the lifting of the interim injunction was granted, and the stay order requested by the SAS was refused. For the first time since its creation, the Auroville Society was legally operable, though

litigation by SAS for a permanent injunction was underway.

But Auroville had its hands full now with simply being Auroville; and the platform which Auroville Society had offered was somehow now only a potent symbol whose reality was being actualized de facto in the very life of Auroville.

On the 6th of February in that run of days, the following letter was sent to Dayanand who was carrying on his private land dealings, keeping us in the dark and ignoring our requests to find out what was going on:



TO: Dayanand, Land Estate Management

FROM: Green Belt and other Land-oriented Auroville communities

In order to improve cooperation between Land Estates management and Auroville communities, we feel the Land Estate Management should take note of the following points:

1) To avoid legal conflicts over leasing and contracting the Auroville community-managed lands, we request to be informed in writing of all regulations concerning land use, especially with regard to leasing and contracting.

2) We enclose a copy of the Auroville Notes dated 4 February 1976 in which Green Belt communities make clear their positions and principles on land use as arrived at after several meetings. We would draw your attention to a map delineating lands which have been managed for several years by individual Auroville communities who expect to continue this responsibility. A copy of this map is kept at Unity.

3) If any agreement has already been concluded between Land Estates Management and other parties for the current year, we ask to be informed of the contents of these agreements and the dates on which they were concluded.

4) We would like to know the present plans for lands now under Land Estate Management with a view towards making a common plan for land management and cultivation of all Auroville lands for the current year.

We hope we can all meet together in the near future to discuss and develop this common Plan.

At the service of Truth,
on behalf of the Green Belt and other land-based communities,
s/d Savitra

On the seventh, the following morning, I ran into Francis on my way out of *Aspiration*. He was as tight and shaken as I have ever seen him – and he had an incredible capacity for up-tightness. What, Franny, what is it?

He showed me the contents of a registered letter he had just signed which was from the Collector's Office, Cuddalore – the local district

government chief administrator – dated 4 February, 1976. Wading through the bureaucratic blah-blah of numbers and cross reference memos at the top of the “Notice”, it said in the second and third paras:

The Government of India in their letter No. 18017/555/7-FII Ministry of Home Affairs dated 18.12.75 have informed The Government of Tamil Nadu that since the SAS *has withdrawn the guarantee furnished on behalf of Mr. Francis Edmund Spaulding*⁸⁴, American National, he should not be permitted to stay in India. The Government of Tamil Nadu in their Memo second cited have requested to take necessary action in the matter.

In the above circumstances, the extension of stay granted to the foreigner in this office proceedings first cited is hereby cancelled and Mr. Francis Edmund Spaulding, an American National, residing at Peace, Auroville, is hereby directed to leave India within a period of 30 days from the date of receipt of this notice. He is also informed that if he is found to be overstaying in India, even after the time allowed in this notice, necessary action will be taken against him for the contravention of the rules.

What could I say, except that I didn't know his middle name was Edmund? Now I could understand why that Gentleman's jaw dropped in Pondicherry when we handed him his birthday bouquets. He knew what he had done months ago. It plainly said in the notice that the Central Government had already instructed the State Government of the guarantee withdrawal as early as mid-December of the previous year. But there were *two* bouquets...

I did the only thing I could do. I had to act to keep from thinking. I took Franny and together we went to Unity Office, where I drafted a letter to the Collector which was appropriately decorated with all

⁸⁴Italics mine.

those memo numbers and cross references that reassure the bureaucrats that this is a letter worth reading. I learned that from the Little Prince. The note said:

With reference to your above mentioned notification, we should like to clarify the position of the SAS as reconfirming the guarantee on behalf of Mr. Francis Edmund Spaulding, American national.

We kindly request you to take the necessary action as soon as possible to reinstate his extension of stay.

The punchline is that it was supposed to be signed by Navajata, the Chairman. I had done a lot of ghost-writing in these last months – for Green Fund, Pour Tous, the “Notes” – but this was the *real* thing.

Of course it never got sent because Nava wouldn’t sign it. But it was a moment, as the next and the next would be, when something had to be done.

The news spread like wildfire through Auroville. Nava was playing one of his last and deadliest trump cards. The visa. The blackmail was apparent. Francis in exchange for the Auroville Society and the obedience of the Aurovilians.

And as a fitting footnote to the madness that no one could believe was happening, on the 9th I received a reply marked “confidential” from Dayanand to my letter of the 6th. It began with the inspired assertion that: “All land belongs to SAS and no one else has any legal or other right over it” . It ended with: “Greater issues are at stake – not one of them (sic) is who leases the topes – Are we to change and outgrow our weakness and be shining examples to others or do we sink in the mud of our own creation? – that is the question.”

Yes, that *is* the question. I never heard back from Dayanand

following that communication.

Rumours began to reach me through Frederick and others that there had been a second guarantee withdrawal, mine; but that for some unknown reason, it had been delayed in reaching me. And sure enough, on the 12th, I received a notice from the Collector dated 4 February 1976, duplicating Franny's in every detail except the name. This one said "Alan Sasha Lithman", which corresponded to the one in my passport. The second bouquet.

I'm sure Francis didn't know me by my full English name either. For in Auroville, everyone knew me simply as "Savitra", the name She gave me. Later, Aurosylle would abbreviate that to "Sasa".

It's funny how things change when it's you – when the subject becomes first person. For Franny, I was outraged, in high gear; but when it came to me, it was different. That piece of paper with my name on it had touched something, challenged something – *someone* – deeper in me. Its very threat unearthed a deeper self, roused a deeper me from my amnesia, re-calling someone I'd forgotten I was. *Wake up, wake up*. The moment inverted. And in that instant, something was torn away: My past rather than just my visa had been cancelled. *Go with it*, a voice within me said. *Fight, but go with it*. I felt a fire awake, surge forth in me: A secret fire we carry within ourselves. A fire that had always been there. A fire that I recognized now as my irrevocable home, *our* irrevocable home.

And though that rare and unbound moment, self-contained and free, would slowly slip under the intruding tide of events and influences in the days to come, gradually obscuring that deeper me under the spell of an ancient trance which disempowers us, a seed of that fire was awakened at the source, vibrating and vigilant. That same seed in all, beneath all, which knows no defeat.

18. partners

From that brief flash of an eye in the storm, I felt myself drawn back into the tempestuous surface flux.

Somehow, I had been mysteriously coupled with my polar partner, Francis. I'm sure he must have been equally puzzled by the combination. In those days between February 12th and 14th, Francis and I were playing out our last solos as we were slowly welded together. Francis was taking all the cues he could get, moving helter-skelter here and there, writing letters of appeal to the local government, trying to invoke the support of influential and respected members of the Ashram, trying to get a foothold, a leverage. I was for the most part withdrawn, trying to see where the line of hills that was growing would lead me, trying to get another leverage. Each of us was fighting for our lives, for our commitments, for the Community and the Dream we cherished... in our own ways.

I did not have much faith at that time in going through a government process. I remembered that the piece of paper from the Collector said the order had been issued because the SAS had withdrawn its guarantee. I wanted to get to the point in my own way. But what are you going to *do*? that persistent Auroville voice kept asking me daily, mostly voiced through Frederick and Shyama. What are you going to do?

The first thing I did was leave the labour of the hills in the capable hands of a British brother, Shraddhalu, so I could join the workers on that enigmatic sphere She called the Matrimandir, taking refuge in the process of building that structure whose four curving ribs were rising to join one another at the top. The second thing, I went to see Counouma, Managing Trustee of the Ashram.

When I entered his Pondicherry office, there, conveniently enough,

were the two other Ashram Trustees who had been dragged into the SAS morass. I wasted no time with ritual pleasantries. I asked them if they were familiar with my situation and Francis. Counouma said yes. I asked his advice since he was a lawyer aware of all the sordid threads. He advised me to write a petition to the collector asking for more time in the hopes that something could be worked out. I reminded him that it was now the third week of February and the notice gave me until early March. I also reminded him that the reason for the expulsion stated on the notice was not under the initiative of the Government but because of the guarantee withdrawal by the Chairman which had already been in process for months. He told me that he had been informed by Nava that it was the Government that had pressured that action because Francis and I were under suspicion of being subversives. I asked him if he believed that? He didn't answer. And even if the Government initiated the action, why, I asked him, did the notice state that the reason for our expulsion was the SAS withdrawal of our visa guarantee? Did the Government need to hide behind the SAS? After all, it didn't have to give any reason, it could have simply cancelled our visas. And if Nava knew months ago that he was being "pressured" by the Government, why didn't he have the decency to inform us when we might have been able to do something? Counouma had no answers.

I began following another line, more intimate. I looked at each one of those three men sitting on a couch in front of me. And I asked them if they understood what they were passively – I am not so sure – allowing to happen. After all, they represented the Ashram Elders who had the privilege of working closely with the Mother. So how could they show so little concern, callously allowing the personal dictates of the Chairman determine our fates, our choices at such a fundamental level. Especially since the Mother had personally accepted me into the Ashram, and later accepted both Francis and me into Auroville where we had been living almost

since its inception. It was our life, I reminded them. So how could one man deny that, over-ride Her?

I knew Francis' anguish. I knew the dread he bore when he considered being permanently exiled from his life in Auroville which was his *only* life. I asked them if they could condone such a decree, separating someone so brutally from their destiny. In my own case, I turned more to the collective question. For I too had chosen Auroville in the most irrevocable sense. And if Nava, for personal reasons, could throw me out, then no Aurovilian was secure. And his authoritarian rule would reduce the first premise of Auroville and its Charter to an absurdity. After all, the Aurovilians who had come from the farthest reaches of the planet, sacrificing their comfort and security to help realize Auroville, had even less rights than a poor villager who at least could not be disenfranchised from their home. So how could they permit such a disgrace? They did not answer. They simply stared blankly, waiting patiently for me to finish my histrionics.

As I turned to leave the room, I looked back at these Gentlemen, daring to tell them that they would share the consequences of the deed they were silently condoning, perhaps encouraging. Behind me a door closed decisively. And I went back to work on the Matrimandir.

I was counting time in days, refusing to make a plan, not knowing what I would do until I did it. I spent that evening with Fred and Shyama at *Auroson's Home*. Wake up, Frederick kept telling me. There's only two weeks left, the wheels are turning and what are you *doing*? He addressed me like the innocent I seemed to be. Don't you realize, he said, that Nava's sewing it all up in Delhi while you guys are wasting your precious moments immobilized? Okay, Fred, what do you propose? Try to wake up the Aurovilians, he said, most of whom still don't really understand what's happening. (For there were indeed a lot of contradictory rumours floating around.)

Then go to Delhi to make a personal appeal. It's your only chance. Shyama started asking me if I had any decent long pants, that I couldn't just go in the shorts I always seemed to inhabit.

All right, Fred, the door behind was closed, let's proceed. Frederick and Shyama were perhaps more moved than anyone else in Auroville concerning our circumstances. They loved us both through many Auroville years – many lifetimes, it felt – and they also knew that the role they played in creating the Auroville Society was the visible agent which precipitated our predicament.

That night in Auroson's Home, under the watchful eye of two friends that were somehow more concerned about me than I was, I composed the following message that appeared in the February 23rd issue of Auroville Notes. It would be one of my last articles for several months:

HEART TO HEART

To clarify matters and dispel any misinformation that may be circulating, Francis and I have received a notification stating that the SAS has withdrawn our guarantees and as a result, we have thirty days in which to leave India (which means in the beginning of March). This situation still remains as of today.

Whatever actions may have been taken, let it be clear, this situation still hangs over us. Thirty days to leave India. Early March. This is not just a bad dream except in the realest sense. We can't just pull the covers over our eyes and pretend that it will just go POOF and disappear. This is it.

So what are you going to do? You is we. That's one thing that ought to be getting clear by now. What are you going to do? Pray? If that's your nature, do it; but do it like your life depended on it – the only life worth living. Talk? Talk to who? Talk to the ones who you feel have some influence in this drama. If no one else is there, talk to yourself... Act? But what

to do? Auroville is for doers. Act like an Aurovilian. But what would an Aurovilian do if two of his brothers were being packed off?...

If you can't do any of the above, then lie back and realize the "purusha consciousness", watching the inevitable unfold (though I must say, Auroville does not seem to be the place to withdraw into the Purusha without missing the whole point). But please, no *tamas*!

One to another. . .

Savitra

In the beginning of that same week, a last melodramatic attempt was made to change the course of events from Pondicherry. A meeting had been arranged in Nava's house between Nava, Shyam, Franny and Sasa. Odd couples.

The meeting, which resembled Chicago more than South India, was like a coded conversation. Sitting around a large wooden table, the Chairman dealt out his bargain with such finesse that I never got the message. Franny, who's much more sensitive to these refinements, knew exactly what he was saying. When the code was cracked, the equation read: two American nationals for one Auroville Society.

When we finally left the stalemate, Francis was fuming. He felt he had bit the bait. We walked a few streets, breathed some fresh air, and then I told Franny that I wanted another go with Nava alone. I went back to his house, caught him in his reception room, and we sat down to our last séance in Pondicherry. Nava, I said, don't you realize that the last hope you have of regaining your credibility with Aurovilians would be to make the gesture of re-affirming our visas. But I can't do that, he replied, it's not in my power, it's the Government who has instigated the move. Be cool, Sasa, be cool, I said to myself. But Nava, I know your influence, I know that if you

wished to reverse the situation by putting your weight behind it, you could, I replied.

Then he went into some rambling fantasy about all of his visions for Auroville, how all the agencies and institutions for a World Union could have their headquarters in Auroville, how it could be the spiritual conference centre for East and West – and as he went on rambling, I could see him imagining himself as the Chairman of all this. The Supreme Chairman. But Nava, I delicately interrupted, about our visas, you do have it in your power to revalidate them, to clear up the confusion. *Despite yourself*, I thought to myself, *despite yourself*, Nava, you can be an instrument to do what must be done. And he replied: I will try. Tomorrow I will go to Delhi.

Oh my god, I thought. Is the power of the Dream stronger than the power of the Doubt?

The next day, he did go to Delhi, and helpfully closed all of the doors, dropping a few names like CIA, anticipating that we would probably make a personal appeal ourselves. But he would still prove to be an instrument despite himself. We all would.

When we heard of his efficient negotiations on our behalf in Delhi, we sat together, furiously drafting letters of appeal to the Central Home Ministry; had Barbara stay up half the night typing the stuff; then made plans to leave on the next available flight for New Delhi – that place where I once lost a briefcase.

During this same moment, Dennis (later renamed Namas) had taken up the ongoing correspondence concerning the land, transparently recording the futile but exhaustive process we went through to just get the recognition of a reply – which we never did – let alone the simple cooperation we were seeking. His second letter to the Chairman, dated March 6, begins:

Dear Sir,

Although the letter of 24th February on behalf of the land-based communities in Auroville has as yet received no response, it was decided at a Green Belt meeting on 5th March that recent developments on the land in Auroville necessitated further communication with you.

It has recently been made known to us that, acting under the authority of the Executive Committee of SAS, Dayanand has arranged for the leasing of mango and cashew groves currently managed by the following communities: Forecomers, Fertile, Two Banyans, Abri, Ami, Gratitude, Auroson's Home. Over a period of years, members of these communities have spent time, energy and money on the management and development of the lands concerned. Nonetheless, arrangements for leasing of these lands were made without any prior consultation or intimation. We are now confronted by individuals unknown to us claiming to have rights to lands on which we live and work. In some cases, watchmen in our employ have been threatened with physical violence by these individuals.

Under these circumstances, we are gravely concerned for the security and privacy of our homes, which are in many cases located on contracted topes.

Thanks to last year's rains, 1976 promises to be an excellent year for fruit harvests. Therefore, we were most surprised to learn that, according to information supplied by the Land Estates Department, revenues agreed upon for contracts on these topes were considerably lower than previous experience had led us to expect. For example, in 1974, a poor year for fruit orchards, the cashews at Fertile were contracted out for Rs. 1,600. This year, the tree were put under contract for only Rs. 1,350. When questioned on this point, Dayanand replied that if more satisfactory arrangements could be made by resident

Aurovilians, he would be willing to take them into consideration.

Land-based communities in Auroville re-affirm their willingness to continue their trusteeship of the lands in question and, in view of the above mentioned circumstances and the current critical financial situation in Auroville, we propose the following:

- 1) As of now we are willing to resume full responsibility for the leasing, harvesting and maintenance of these topes and to guarantee substantial higher revenues than those offered in the proposed contracts mentioned above;
- 2) Decisions regarding disbursement of revenues thus raised should be made only after consultation with Pour Tous...

Truth,
s/d Dennis,
on behalf of land-based communities

A third letter from Dennis – a very persistent Auroville voice – to Nava on 12 March, repeated the same theme and indicated that the withholding of information concerning the lease contracts was creating a volatile situation. “Under the circumstances, confusion and possible conflict between members of Auroville Communities and holders of doubtful harvesting contracts seems inevitable. To avoid such a state of affairs, an immediate and straight-forward response from your side is essential.”

But despite the efforts of Aurovilians to reach a decision purged of politics, the lands got ripped off that season and the next and the next at less than bargain rates. We were sitting ducks, despite our labour and appeals thus far to the Government. For the land titles are all in the name of the SAS. And even litigation, as we were learning, didn’t hold much promise, because the case could drag on endlessly; and with our resources limited to surviving, we could

never match their high-powered legal experts.

On the afternoon of 25th February, two under-cover Aurovilians wearing long-sleeve shirts and full-length trousers got into a taxi headed for Madras and the airport. I remember Franny, who was experienced with this kind of story, leaning over to check the fuel gauge. It's almost empty, he told the driver. Oh no, the driver reassured us, we have plenty. I know this vehicle. Right, Franny said. About fifteen kilometres out of Auroville on the Madras Trunk road, twenty kilometres from the nearest petrol station, the old Ambassador sputtered and wheezed, and we coasted, off the road beside some rice fields.

The driver turned around and said, "The car is out of petrol," as a bullock cart passed us by. Franny and Sasa had difficulty keeping their radiators from over-heating.

The driver caught a local bus to Tindivanam, brought back a tin of petrol, and half an hour later, in the purpling dusk, we were racing down that bumpy ribbon to Madras a hundred miles north.

We reached Madras about nine that evening and spent the night in the house of the German Consul, one of Frederick's friends. After a late dinner, a quick shower and an abbreviated sleep, we were up and on our way to the airport at 5 AM. The plane left at six. After the inevitable ritual hassle with the taxi driver over prices, we scrambled into Madras Airport and over to the Indian Airlines information counter.

And while we were fumbling with our tickets and confirming timings, who appears beside us checking in for the same Delhi flight but our shadow? – none other than the Chairman himself! Even he was a bit speechless for a moment. But he quickly regained his poise and said most dryly, "I hope you don't plan to stay at the SAS Centre in Delhi." We assured him that we had no such intentions.

It was clear that he was making his second trip to Delhi in the week

for two reasons. And both of them happened to be travelling on the same plane with him.

We arrived in Delhi later that morning on the 26th. And as we waded through the onslaught of taxi drivers into the nearest cab, we saw Nava, led by a turbaned chauffeur, disappear in a private car headed for the Ashoka Hotel.

We made our way to Ute's house, an address Frederick had given us of another friend in the German Embassy. It was located in Shanti Niketan, a quarter in New Delhi not far from the embassies. It was there that we would spend the next two weeks.

19. the last bouquet

On the wane of that first chilly February 26th day in New Delhi, we took turns – in vain, it seemed – at trying to get the hot-water heater to temper the shock of our icy showers. It did, however, succeed to clear our brain-fog; and, sufficiently awakened, we began sorting out our first moves, setting a number of papers we brought with us on a table in the guest room: copies of our expulsion notices; our written appeal to the Home Ministry with an attached statement of alternative sponsorship; a letter of endorsement from Piero, Chief Engineer of the Matrimandir, attesting to the responsibility and execution of our work; and a letter of introduction from Dr. Chamanlal Gupta to contacts of his who might be able to advise or assist us in our mission. Chamanlal was a scientist, well respected in the field of solar energy, who had been teaching in the Ashram School. He was also a dear friend and ally deeply concerned with our plight.

But even with these documents, we knew we'd have to play it by ear, following the trail that unfolded, the doors that opened. That evening, after some preliminary phone calls trying to set our directions, we had a quiet candlelight dinner with our gracious host Ute. A most welcome contrast to the task ahead... which began the next day when Francis and I met with friends of Chamanlal. They listened sympathetically as we shared the events which lead up to the SAS withdrawal of our guarantees and the consequent expulsion notices from the Government of India. Genuinely touched by our desperate dilemma, they advised us to pursue our appeals directly to the Government.

With at least a direction for a starting point in our quest, we went by motor-rickshaw for tea at a little outdoor cafe in the middle of Connaught Circus. It was in this cafe – ironically not far from the bushes where I stumbled over my briefcase years (lifetimes, it

seemed) earlier – that Franny and I would come after our subsequent meetings/appointments to reconstruct their contents. It was also where I transcribed our conversations into notes that became the transcript of our Delhi experience.

On the 28th of February, Auroville's eighth birth day, Francis and I wandered into the magnificent neo-Moghul complex of buildings housing the Central Secretariat of the Government of India. It was there that the Prime Minister and the Chief Ministries of Home and Defence were located. We entered the main entrance of the Home Ministry and explained to the receptionist that we had come to make an appeal concerning the extension of our visas. Who should we see? After a few moments in the crowded waiting room and some impatient reminders that we were still there, the receptionist informed us that we could meet R.A.S. Mani, a Deputy Secretary, at 3 PM in his office. At last. The first open door.

We returned just before three that afternoon, picked up our appointment passes, and entered the inner sanctum of India's massive bureaucracy for domestic affairs. We passed through the corridors and up some flights of stairs to reach the office of Mr. Mani. Entering the room, we found ourselves seated before a rather short, prim man, carrying the crisp air of a proper government civil servant. From my transcript, the 25-minute conversation went something like this:

(Brief introductory exchange. He asks us about our work. We show him the notification from his Department, our appeal, and indicate that we have an alternative sponsor.)

Mani: But why did they (SAS) withdraw the guarantee?

(We explained Navajata's version of Government pressure, that he said we were considered national security risks.)

Mani: On what basis did he have his information?

(We responded jointly that we did not know as he would not tell us.)

Francis: If there is any truth to this, could you inform us?

Mani: If there was, I supposed he was not free to say. (He looks through our presentation material and reads Piero's endorsement letter which also clearly questions Nava's motives for the withdrawal.)

What is at the core of this withdrawal of your guarantee?

(Together, Francis and I briefly recount the history of internal differences that have arisen between resident Aurovilians and the Chairman of the SAS.)

Mani: What is the nature of these differences?

(We briefly explain the nature of the power struggle and the threat it poses to Auroville and its residents. I then provide him with a paper detailing the present situation in Auroville and one indicating the present stage of the legal position. He shows surprise to discover that litigation is in process, and asks why the new Society was formed and what is its relation to SAS, particularly whether the movement is hostile. We replied that it was not, that it was an expression of a deep frustration and an attempt to provide a legitimate legal platform for Auroville to express itself.)

Mani: Are you one of the seven signatories?

(We replied that we were not.)

Mani: Is this just an isolated case or are there others?

(We inform him that others have been threatened.)

Mani : Why weren't any of the guarantees for the seven withdrawn?

Savitra: Because the motives would be too obvious as they were under litigation.

Francis: We were being used as examples to those not agreeing with the Chairman's policies...

Savitra: . . . to squash the movement.

(The question of an alternative sponsor then arose.) . . .

Mani: Once a guarantee has been given by a sponsor and then withdrawn, the Government is forced to cancel this visa which cannot be transferred to another guarantor without reapplication from abroad.

Savitra: The time factor is acute. Can we not have some interim extension to allow for a more thorough consideration of our appeal?

Mani: I must have some time to enquire into the matter.

(He keeps our presentation papers; we reiterate the urgency of the situation; he assures us that the Government is neither callous nor inhuman.)

Francis: When can we see you next to know your position?

Mani: Next Wednesday.

(We depart)

We motor-rickshawed to our little rendezvous in Connaught Circus, nourishing our flicker of hope over ice cream. For a moment, the visa that had magnetized my senses disappeared, and I found myself simply in the middle of a park somewhere on a planet whose borders had blurred.

I have no records for March 1st; I only recall the image of Franny's ever-present Eno Fruit Salts and his Liv 52 ayurvedic liver pills. The 2nd shows Francis calling Mr. Mani, who asked to be called back at 4 PM to confirm the Wednesday meeting. At 3:45, I called him back, introduced myself and asked about our visa matters. The following

conversation ensued:

Mani: You should leave India as soon as possible.

Savitra: (blown out) For what reasons must we leave?

Mani: It is not necessary for me to explain.

Savitra: What recourse do we have to this decision?

(Mani does not understand what I mean by 'recourse'.)

Savitra: What advice could you offer us under these circumstances?

Mani: To leave India . . . I can give you an additional week or two.

(At this point, I'm really scrapping to keep the conversation alive, as if our visas were dangling by a telephone wire.)

Savitra: How will the two-week extension be granted – will you convey the information to the local Cuddalore Government?

Mani: Yes, I will do that.

Savitra: So at least we are assured of a two-week extension?

Mani: Yes.

Click.

I didn't have to explain to Francis. He had heard the whole thing. I heard the cap pop off his liver pills. I was beginning to wonder if maybe I wasn't a CIA agent and didn't know it.

The 4th, 5th, and 6th of March, 1976 were spent in exhausting days extending late into the night, knocking on all the possible doors of Government available to us. But a mysterious pattern was beginning to emerge, following us wherever we went: Whether it was the Minister who was handling Auroville liaison on up to the then Vice President of India who had been the former Governor of Pondicherry (and therefore somewhat familiar with the Ashram

and Auroville)... in each case we would get a sympathetic first hearing from their private secretaries who offered to enquire into the matter; then when we would contact them a second time, something had changed in their tone of voice and we were politely told that there was nothing that could be done through their offices. Who or what was getting in between that first and second hearing? We could never find out.

With the circle narrowing and the doors closing one after another on that fragile gossamer of hope, we were put before our last resort in New Delhi. The Ashoka Hotel.

At 9:30 on the morning of March 7th, Francis and Savitra strolled into the majestic lobby of the Ashoka. After confirmation at the desk, we proceeded up the elevator to Nava's room. When we entered, several SAS dignitaries and devotees were also present. Much of what Nava said to us then was directed for their benefit. It had the air of some Circus Maximus, and went something like this:

Francis: We have spoken with Mani and others and we can get no information. The implications from these conversations and the unofficial advice we have been given is that if our differences can be settled at home, everything else could be worked out. But that depends on you. Surely you understand the desperateness of our situation, don't you?

Nava: Are you willing to live in Auroville according to the ideals...
And not according to divisive groups?

(He accuses Francis of being Shyamsunder's man, to which Franny responds, expressing his dissatisfaction with the CAA.)

Nava: And you, Savitra, with the "Auroville Notes", not even conferring with the management about what you print...

(I started to make a reply, then saw the futility.)

Nava: How can we justify to those looking to Auroville as an

example... all this sex and drugs? (Francis and I look at each other wondering what Auroville he was talking about.) How does it look to those who contribute (turning to his devotees)? The SAS is paying Rs. 60,000 a month just to maintain Auroville, how to explain that to the contributors? (Francis and I start feeling a bit nauseous.) Will you be willing to collaborate with the ideals?...

Savitra: There is no question of our willingness to collaborate with the ideals. But we don't want some mental imitation. What can we do now to change the situation between the three of us?

Nava: We'll talk about this visa matter privately tomorrow, but now let us talk about Auroville. I have heard things recently that have troubled me very much. For a while, I had thought that Shyamsunder and I had come one hundred percent together, but now it seems only seventy per cent.

Francis: ... It seems as if the whole thing is snow-balling, and we have to go back to the real issue.

Nava: Shyamsunder came to see me some days ago and said that Frederick was unwilling to dissolve (the Auroville Society). Here in Auroville, we must recognize our proper roles. I have always left full freedom...

Savitra: But Nava, let us try to extricate our matter from the Auroville Society...

Nava: But there is something you can do... you remember that conversation in Pondicherry?... You know what I mean (referring to the bargain of us for the Society's dissolution). You meditate on it.

Savitra: If I understand you, to be frank, you would like us to use our influence to coerce Fred to dissolve the Society. (Nava nods.) But why do you continue to talk to the parties separately? – now

to Francis, now to Shyamsunder, now to Fred, now to Counouma... Why don't we all sit together in the full presence of one another and say what we mean? There could even be respected third parties who would be willing to participate...

Nava: We can sit together, but no outsiders. Let the Ashram Trustees be the ones we sit before.

(silence)

Savitra: So let us not take up any more of your time – there are others waiting to see you. We shall contact you tomorrow as you asked.

Nava: Yes, you call me if something comes up.

(we depart)

Those were not easy meetings to sit through. Particularly when we had just received word from Auroville that Nava was threatening to close down Auroville. If he couldn't have it, nobody could. Somehow, nobody could. After all, as the Charter states: Auroville belongs to *Nobody in Particular*.

Francis and I were beginning to reach our Delhi limits. Everything was leading to the same dead-end. We were exhausted and we missed Auroville – that kindergarten for secret agents of a new world. The next day Francis Edmund Spaulding and Alan Sasha Lithman would meet Keshav dev Poddar (alias Navajata) for the last time.

It was the 8th of March, almost six in the evening, when we began our fugue. Nava had reached his own conclusions and advised us to leave the country. He said that we should contact him again after three months and that this Auroville Society must be

dissolved.

Francis: Is this final – this leaving for three months – is it irrevocable?

Nava: Yes.

Savitra: . . . Be straight. . . Is our staying no longer dependent on the dissolution of the Society?

Nava: No, it is passed that. But if you leave and contact us in three months, we will see what we can do. All depends on whether the matter in Auroville clears up or not.

Francis: But as I understand it, once we leave India with a cancelled visa, we cannot re-enter the country.

Nava: You can contact us in three months and we will see from here, depending on how things clear up in Auroville.

Francis: So there is nothing more than can be done?

Nava: Nothing.

Francis: One more thing: I have no money, how will I get back to the States?

Nava: That is no problem, it is our responsibility to take care of the tickets.

Tribhuvan Sugla (an SAS regional head present during the discussion): Once the Government machinery is started, it cannot be stopped. If something had been done earlier. . .

Francis: . . .like three months ago. . .

(Nava leaves)

Sugla: Why not take it as a vacation, a holiday?. . .

(We leave)

We took a taxi back to Ute's, told her the outcome which she as a trained diplomat had anticipated from the beginning; then brooded over our fate and Ute's familiar dinner repertoire. The only thing missing was Wagner.

The following day, our last in Delhi, I drafted a letter which would be our parting gesture. It was a plea addressed to Indira Gandhi, Prime Minister of India. Dated March 9, 1976, the letter began:

Dear Mrs. Gandhi,

We write you at this moment because it seems, having exhausted all other recourse, you are the last person who can help us. We have diligently appealed through the course of proper channels and procedures – from the local government level up to the Central Home Ministry – only to find a series of polite but closed doors. The matter concerns our most precious yet vulnerable privilege granted by a government: our visas, which have been cancelled. . .

We made one more trip to the Ashoka, this time to the flower shop where we selected a bouquet of roses for Ute. It was the final bouquet in a scene rapidly drawing towards its inescapable conclusions. We left the following day to arrive back in Auroville on March 10th. We had spent fourteen precious days in Delhi, only to return with a verbal assurance from a Deputy Secretary in the Home Ministry who said that we could have two weeks more from the cancellation date. That gave us till the 18th of March. Eight more days.

20. long night's journey into day

We were back in Auroville on borrowed time. It was a unique experience. There was not a moment to lose. Literally. The impending absence made me that much more conscious of Auroville's presence: The trees, the hills, the angle of the sun, the strip of sea below, the faces of those too close to recognize, and this warm red earth awakening to a new rhythm. Each detail became distinct, precious, full of a significance beyond its meaning.

Francis and I returned to our work on the top of Matrimandir. We were part of a team preparing the shuttering and emplacement of the curving steel reinforcement rods that preceded each concreted segment of the four-pillared ribs which would soon join in a connecting ring at the summit of the sphere. The working space was a cramped jungle of pipe scaffolding, steel rods, twisted binding wire, sheets of shuttering wood. Above us – above the open space which the ring would encircle – was a platform of planks supporting the crane which would lift the wheel-barrows of concrete that were needed for the continuing concretings which grew in segments, one upon the other.

I tried to simply lose myself in the work, to become the size 12 spanner wrench in my hand. But the pain of my co-workers – my co-“loose term Aurovilians” – was palpably present. Nevertheless, we went on. There was nothing else to do. There never is.

During that next week, I wrestled with that most intimate process of coming to meet my fate. Francis, with whom I had become hyphenated during these last aeonic weeks, had arrived at his own decision. The conclusion for him was inevitable and he no longer chose to resist. He released himself from the compression chamber we were sharing. He would accept his ticket back to the States. What else was there to do?

What else *was* there to do? I asked myself that question until I became that question. *What else?* The other option was to stay with the apparent consequences being imprisonment or deportation. But there are moments when one does not consider the consequences. When one acts without conditions. Nothing is fixed until we glue it in the law of our doubts.

I kept looking within, looking within, what to do, *what to do?* There was no answer. But nothing was telling me to go. I drifted for days in this void with nothing telling me to go. Until the 18th of March arrived. *Oh let me be true, let me be true.*

Today, we were supposed to have left India. It was true that as yet we had received no official confirmation, even our tickets had not been finalized along with some formality papers that needed to be cleared. These could maybe buy us a few more days; but technically we were now illegal aliens in India, subject to prosecution under the Foreigners Act. I worked that whole day under the assumption that I had now passed the line. That the decision had been taken by itself. I was still here. In Auroville. In India. Come what may.

As the day began to fade, and the other Aurovilians around me began to descend from the top of the shadow-streaked sphere, I remained on the crane platform above with Piero. The wind was beginning to blow cold when a tiny figure running in the distance appeared below. It was Francis, and in a cryptic message, he yelled up to me that "our friends were looking for us." And then he disappeared. In the distance, as the sun eclipsed behind the earth, I heard the rumbling of a motorcycle. It grew louder as the point on the road approached and turned off onto the access to the Matrimandir. There are times when life exaggerates to melodrama. This felt like one of those times.

Beneath the bulge of the Matrimandir, a police officer dismounted from his motorcycle and asked the straggling Aurovilians around the site where I was. True to their honesty, they pointed up. I asked

Piero to go down and get rid of him. He said he would, then left my side down the well-worn vertical steel ladder. It was now a fire escape, but I was staying.

I rolled over onto the center of the platform, out of sight from below, pulling some empty cement bags around me. It had suddenly become very cold and grey on the top alone, in nothing but my familiar green shorts. I was preparing to spend the night, here on a last point in a myth that was growing ominously true.

I heard the motor start up, then fade off into the night. Then everything became silent except for the wind whistling through the pipes.

In that next hour of solitary confinement, it seemed that the decision I was waiting for had been taken ... here, thirty meters up on a crane platform.

Then suddenly someone switched on the spotlights and the Matrimandir appeared out of the blackness like some Theatre of the Unexpected. Voices below were calling my name, but I did not answer. Then I heard Claudine: "Come down," she said, "it's all right." Without speaking, I slipped quietly down the long ladder which descended through the scaffolds of the east pillar.

"Claudine," I said, "What is it?"

She told me that the policeman had come to deliver a notice to me and Francis indicating that we had been given an extension until March 29th.

My god, March 29th, how incredible. The day that Mother and Sri Aurobindo had met in 1914. I asked her where it was, and she told me he had left it in the dining room below Unity office. That last moment kept being pushed back, played out to its full finalé.

I walked with Claudine over to the dining room and had one of the most enjoyable dinners I never remembered as I read a notice dated

16 March 1976, issued by the District Intelligence Bureau, South Arcot, Cuddalore. It was marked "Most Urgent" and had a long list of memo numbers and cross references at the top. It was addressed jointly to Savitra and Francis and – after some preliminary sentences reminding us that we should have already left – said:

"... You have been given an additional time...as a special case, to make it convenient for you to leave India on or before 29 March 1976, failing which necessary action will be taken by prosecuting you in the court of law under Foreigners' Act for contravention of the orders of the Government of India. You will note that no further time will be allowed under any circumstances ..."

In the days that followed, I returned to live in that question which had now been temporarily revalidated. *What to do?* What needed to be done regardless of the imprisoning circumstances? I needed to know; and that need which was consuming me took the form of a letter dated March 20th which I sent to Satprem – the only one at that time who I trusted sufficiently to ask such a question. We had met with him before our trip to Delhi. My letter to him now conveyed the present situation, explaining the temporary extension which gave us until March 29th; then got to the point:

... Francis has decided to depart from the limbo of the struggle and return to America. The voices of fellow Aurovilians which earlier were so strong and adamant that we must not leave have now become tempered, tame, more reasonable; and some counsel me to go quickly and painlessly and not cause further complications nor jeopardize my future return to Auroville due to deportation or imprisonment.

It is here that I am alone. The voice of reason – and perhaps it is the voice of Truth? – is quite convincing. It strikes its more awesome note with the threat of permanent or prolonged severance from Auroville if one does not submit to quietly going.

I do not know why but as yet I am not convinced. Do I entertain the notion of staying in the way that one vital ego meets another? Is it simply pride or some deep conceit of playing the hero? Or what?

All the signs around me seem to say “go” – but are they the voices of wisdom or fear?... I wish to do the true thing... I am prepared to transgress reason, but not to follow in the footsteps of the Titan...

The following day, I received a reply from Satprem which began:

Savitra,

It is not the rule of the Government of India that you must fight, it is the misrule of Auroville. For that you suffer. And I say your sacrifice plays a part in the downfall of those who misuse their power in Auroville – their days are numbered. That much I know.

So take it as your sacrifice for the freedom of Auroville. And you will come back soon in a free Auroville. If you take this sad happening with the right inner attitude, I am sure that the Divine will use these months of exile to make you stronger and even more useful for the future of Auroville. It is not a wasted time, it is an opportunity for something else which will reveal itself in time. You are not defeated, you carry your part of the battle.

Now may your forced departure make those who remain in Auroville more aware that they cannot let their brothers be kicked out and continue themselves to accept food and money from their blackmailers. Either the Aurovilians are one, or Auroville has no meaning...

The confusion for me was clarified. I was released to follow that unimposing little voice which had first told me, *Go with it; fight, but*

go with it. Something more than my visa was being cancelled.

And under the incredible cross-fire of that inflamed moment, seven signatories – two of whom were newly co-opted – reluctantly placed their names on a document entitled: “(Circular) Resolution No. 5 Passed by the Council of Trustees of the Auroville Society on 26.3.1976:

“5. Resolved that the suit filed by the SAS against the Auroville Society now pending in the courts, will not be contested any further with effect from 29.3.1976. Further resolved that this resolution cancels and nullifies the previous resolutions No. 2 dated 7.2.76 and No.4 dated 21.2.76.”

The Auroville Society which had been rendered operable by the Courts on February 5th now made its final resolution, freely surrendering itself. Its principle from the beginning had been self-determination and its fate could not be decided by the laws of men. But the apple had delivered its seeds. Auroville had been awakened to its responsibilities, broken from its moorings; and despite our glances behind, the sedate and seductive harbour slipped further and further away. Another wind had taken our sails.

On that same morning of the 26th, I wrote a note to myself called “Long Night’s Journey Into Day”. It was a call welling from the struggle and the passions that burn in the blood of all men who aspire to be free. It was not composed from some transcendent, tranquil poise of one who silently sat on the summits alone and detached; but from one here below who shared in a Promethean labour with his fellow humanity. This fire for freedom that has always burned in man... from the Vedic hymns to Agni... kindling the primal Flame which threaded the ages... awakening the undying spark passed on through the long nights...lighting the torches held aloft by the sons of that Flame.

It was addressed “To the Family”, but I only showed it to Frederick

and Shyama, later to Ann. It was directed at that last vulnerability of ours: Our secret fears and insecurities, our obsessively misguided notion of “harmony” through which Nava and others could still “touch” us, exploit our vulnerability, taint our collective actions with an element of hesitation, distrust and division:

“You must be prepared to leave Auroville in order to stay”, I wrote, “you must be prepared to give up Auroville to have it... that is the true freedom, the basis by which we may be worthy of being here. (. . .) We must be prepared to throw ourselves into the fire (. . .) find the Truth of Auroville in our hearts, the seeds of this new world which no one can touch or take away – we must want that only and nothing less, and for that we must be ready to leave and by that we are worthy of staying.

“But we still bargain and think of what is best for ourselves: ‘Oh, if I have to leave, what if they pull my visa or my money...’ And we are ready to abandon this little calling within – the very thing we know to be truer – so that we can be “safe”... or at least maintain our illusion of safety and security so that we can stay in Auroville. *But where is Auroville then* if we sacrifice the true thing in order to stay? For that *true thing* is Auroville! – is what makes Auroville, *Auroville*.

“But then Reason, our faithful guide, comes forth and says: ‘Harmony’. But what is this thing we call Harmony? Is it the willingness to compromise truth in exchange for security? Is that what we mean? Words are comforting, but let’s not use them as a cover-up... Have the courage to see the real faces appearing, the bed-fellows we choose. Is that who we wish to harmonize with?

“‘But to protect the existence of Auroville,’ you say. But isn’t it this selling of our soul and our core values which threatens the existence of Auroville? *Isn’t this is the true threat?*...

“Do we want to stay here under submission (...) or are we ready to sacrifice our most cherished attachment for the thing we love?

“Where do we stand? On *their* land? *their* property? Or *Hers*? Must I get *their* permission to speak to you now from my heart? Find that freedom which liberates us to act according to our highest truth rather than according to our lowest fear. Find the place that they cannot touch. Hold to it. Hold to your true value: the thing that makes you and Auroville valuable – *invaluable!*

“It is the moment to choose – past or the future? What stuff are we made of? It is the moment to choose? If you choose to stay, as I have, you must also be willing to leave rather than to submit. To stay means to stay according to the Charter – no compromise, no hedging, no self-deceit. You must fight for it. Nothing of value is cheaply bought”.

Most of those passages to myself would later turn to cliché, but in the nakedness of that moment, none of it was.

I awoke before five on that March 29th of 1976. The unborn day still lay within the womb of night. Tiny constellations of diamonds studded the ebony velvet and a slit of dying moon hung like a golden crescent from the forehead of Shiva. I slipped outside into the stillness. There was no wind, no movement, only the faint AUM of the sea far-off below.

I stood there alone, a speck of consciousness in that fathomless immensity. And slowly the earth rolled in its motionless rhythm, and the eastern sky grew pale washed in some magic water colour. And through the sudden breach, an eye of light broke across a scarlet frontier and grew into a golden sun that rose above the rim.

I returned slowly to my room, finished what left-over packing remained, made my last bed, shaved and showered; then walked

the hundred yards to the dining room where I sat down to a meal among friends whose eyes avoided mine. I spent most of that remaining Auroville day in *Auroson's Home*.

At about two o'clock, I returned to my room, collected my suitcase, and carried it over to the Matrimandir where a car conscientiously provided by SAS would meet us at three to see us safely to the airport. I left the suitcase beside the construction office and began climbing up the vertical ladder to the top.

Francis joined me some moments later, and together we paced around the limits of the crane platform. He was his most outrageous self, having recently shaved off his hair and beard, strolling about the top of the Matrimandir wrapped in a golden shawl. There was something magnificent in Francis' madness. And in those months to come, my sanctimonious asceticism would acknowledge the genius of his incorrigible divinity.

Patricia, Francois, Gloria, Piero, Divakar... We stood with them in those closing moments as they twisted their binding wire, readjusted the distances of the iron rods. What could we say? What could any of us say?

And then, off in the distances, a small grey dust-trailed dot disturbed the far left corner of the view, moving along the curving clay road that swung from *Auroson's Home* around the arc leading to the Matrimandir. Something lumped in our throats as the grey Ambassador pulled up below.

We descended that inverted fire escape and stumbled through the embraces of the Aurovilians who had gathered there to be with us. I cannot see their faces anymore. For me then, there was only one face. Only after, in the car, I looked at some notes that were given to me and I knew some of their names: Shradhdhalu, Minou, Yusuf ... Yusuf's said, "our *sadhana* now will be to bring you home." Frederick was there at the car, the last to see us off. We held each

other and I knew him then as I have rarely known another man. And then we were gone.

Franny and Sasa were on the road.

I turned over my right shoulder to watch the outline of a sphere and a wide-limbed banyan tree recede into a point of concrete and a point of green until they disappeared behind the veil of trees as we turned onto the trunk road to Madras.

We were off on our "holiday".

For the next half hour, the time it took us to reach Tindivanam from the point where Auroville connects with the main road, we sat quietly in the back seat, Franny smoking his beedies – small brown-leafed Indian cigarettes – while the gentleman in the front seated next to the driver profusely apologized for the situation we were in and assured us he had no part in it. "Sure", we consoled him, as Francis blew little pungent-puffed trails his way.

We approached the crossroads at the centre of Tindivanam where the road to Madras turns right. The traffic was moving exceptionally slowly, and when we reached the turn we understood why. Policemen were checking all of the vehicles headed from the direction in which we had come. And as we reached their road block, we discovered they were looking for two American nationals who were being expelled: us. The Chairman was taking no chances.

It seems that he had pressed the Superintendent of Police in Cuddalore to issue instructions that we were to get a police escort to the Madras Airport. He wanted to be sure we got on that plane.

Our car was waved across the highway to the Tindivanam Police Station – a quaint little red-brick painted compound that we would become more familiar with in a later chapter. The inspector checked our passports, smiling all the time through his moustache, and then sat us down at his table for tea and pleasantries. He also apologized

for the inconvenience but said that orders were orders; then proceeded to tell us about some relative of his going to college in the States. We were treated more like celebrities than castaways. But after several grinning minutes, I asked him when we could continue on our way. He sheepishly replied that – uh – they would have to find a car – uh – and get some – uh – petrol. And would we mind waiting a little while longer?

The Indian metaphor of the Keystone Kops.

After what was at least another half an hour of over-sweetened tea and jokes, a small unmarked car pulled up, and the Inspector ordered some of his constables to get in it. Then, with all of his rotund grace and good humour, he shook our hands warmly, apologized once again, and wished us a good trip. Sometimes in the most insipid of circumstances, one is struck by the simplicity of the Indian heart.

We got back into our grey Ambassador, slammed the doors, and were once again on our way – this time tailed by a little brown vehicle stuffed with constables. But the slapstick still wasn't over. About half way to Madras, the little car overtook us, told us they had some business elsewhere, and that they would catch up to us at the airport. And sure enough, blowing what was left of our minds, they pulled off the road in another direction... And it wasn't until just before we reached Madras Meenambakkam Airport that they reappeared, sure enough, as they said they would, escorting us to the main entrance... where they too offered us their most robust handshakes before turning back towards Tindivanam.

Francis, bald and puffing a beedi, and his red-haired shaggy-maned counterpart entered the door marked "exit", headed for the Indian Airlines counter to clear their tickets for the evening flight to Bombay where they would depart on an Air India jumbo jet called the "Emperor Ashoka" bound for New York. We would arrive later that March 29th evening in Bombay's Santa Cruz International

Airport where Francis would check once more his precious hand baggage stuffed with what he hoped was a three-month supply of Ganesh beedis to carry him through what he hoped would only be a three-month exile. Then we would turn over our American passports along with our expulsion notices to the immigration authorities who unstapled our visa papers and handed us back our passports.

Two hours beyond the midnight of March 29th, 1976, Franny and Sasa left India as a 747 banked out over the moonless Arabian Sea headed towards another hemisphere where it was still yesterday.

PART THREE: SUN-WORD RISING

*A secret hidden in earth's core
She did not know the one she bore
Asleep upon an endless shore
She lay unrecognizing.
A sun-seed stirred within her breast
Her earth convulsed, she bore the test
A flame broke through a world possessed
Her need so magnetizing.
That shaft of light the shadows tore
Shot through the dungeoned Dark Lord's Door
Awoke in her the Child once more
Her Earth a Sun-Word rising.*

(Journal entry - 21 February, 1979)

1. the exile

I smiled at the travelling companion seated beside me, his head swaying between two ear phones while his left hand switched through the seven channels that ran from Classical Indian music to Country & Western. Ah, Integral Yoga. After thirty exhausting hours spent at thirty thousand feet, we finally crossed a thin white strip bordering a field of emerald blue that marked the merger of the Atlantic Ocean and the United States of America. We made our final pass over the flat marshlands that flanked New York's Kennedy Airport. And on a late March 30th, 1976 afternoon, jet-lagged on U.S. Eastern Standard Time, two incorrigible Aurovilians landed in Bicentennial America.

We collected our baggage, then cleared through customs which left our suitcases deprived of their last vestiges of propriety. They especially gave Franny the eye when they came across his satchel full of funny-looking Ganesh beedis. What can you say to the guy except offer him one?

We passed that next week in the City, with Francis suffering from a sensory overdose and me from an acute emptiness that seemed to settle somewhere in the region of the chest. It surprised me. I thought I was a veteran of such circumstances. We never know ourselves as well as we think we do.

I spent a lot of the time on long walks through Central Park, boat rides around the Island and ferry trips up and back past the Statue of Liberty. But nothing was filling the void that was collapsing in upon itself. On my other trips, my purpose, my direction, had been clear. But now I was simply here, indecipherably here. And even if I had wanted to repeat some of my old scenarios in America, how could I possibly represent Auroville, speak of Auroville now, under these circumstances?

With my instinctive fields of action blocked, I was simply an extract from there who suddenly found himself here. I walked all the way down the Avenues to the United Nations Building and entered one of the wings where I could be alone. I sat before a long plate-glass window looking out on the East River below where I composed my first letter from the States back to Auroville. It was addressed to Renu, that little brown miracle who had once asked me for stamps. She was now eleven, yet still that sublime blend of Swedish ice and Indian fire. In that letter, behind my insufferable witticisms, I freely indulged in my one-pointed will to come home. In my passionate fashion, I recounted how in these first days here, I had ascetically resisted the temptation to think of returning, telling myself that I was here for some reason I was yet to discover, scolding myself for looking back. But still that backward glance persisted, pervading my dreams as well as my days. Until I surrendered to it, accepted it, took that will to return as my purpose, my direction for being here. That will that belonged to nobody in particular.

In the days that followed I told Francis of my convictions, and that I was already exploring the possibilities of summer charter flights to London from where we could easily pick up another charter to India. After putting a match to our last hesitations – we didn't even know how we would get a return visa – I went down to the charter agency that I had singled out and put up the non-refundable deposit for two one-way, mid-June tickets to London.

It took us less than two weeks in America to find out that we only had two months to go.

In that remaining week together in New York before Francis and I would go our separate ways to meet up again in California, I would pay a return visit to Margaret Mead. I called her office to make an appointment, found out that she was in Washington, D.C., planning a brief stopover in New York before continuing en route to the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements – HABITAT –

which was to take place later that spring in Vancouver, British Columbia. I managed to squeeze into the dense schedule of her short sojourn in Manhattan.

We met one April afternoon in her Columbia University office and I explained my predicament. She was surprised to see Auroville so quickly embroiled in the old power plays, expressing concern for its future. I asked her whether we should make any efforts to draw public attention to it while I was in the States. She cautioned me against it, sensing that if the story got into the hands of journalists unfamiliar with the background, it would become simply another media fantasy feeding upon the cynicism of the exotic, which in turn would stigmatize Auroville and effectively undermine our discreet return.

I asked her then what she could suggest and perhaps do. I knew that she was highly-regarded in India, had even been the recipient of some of its highest national honours. She sat a moment, tongue flicking; then offered to write a letter on my behalf addressed to me, sending a copy of it as well as to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi along with a personal note. I asked her to include Francis and she agreed. Though we stayed in touch through letters, it was the last time I would see Margaret Mead, one of the Earth's finest First Ladies.

Her letter, written on American Museum of Natural History stationery, dated June 15, 1976, read:

Dear Mr. Lithman,

I was exceedingly sorry to hear that there have been difficulties in the continuation of Auroville as the first international settlement of its kind. I have followed your reports during the last six years with great interest and had high hopes that Auroville would make a mark in history, which would be a credit to the dedication of yourself and your

associates, like Francis Spaulding, who have given so generously of your time and strength, and to all the other international and Indian members of the community. It has been a great credit to India and India's commitments to the world, and I very much hope the organizational difficulties which seem too trivial to justify any interruption of Auroville's development, will soon be smoothed out.

I am sending a copy of this letter to Mrs. Gandhi.

Sincerely yours,
S/d. Margaret Mead,
Curator Emeritus

Meantime, secluded in our Northern California sanctuary, we began receiving delayed mail reports reminding us that the battle in that far off corner of south India was still raging.

An earlier note dated April 23rd revealed that the SAS Executive Committee had passed a resolution appointing two new signatories to join the three existing Auroville-chosen signatories who were operating the SAS-authorized Pour Tous Fund bank account. It was another unilateral power play to regain a foothold inside the *Pour Tous* system, as well as an effective move to stir internal conflict and division between Indian and non-Indian residents in Auroville. After all, both of their chosen signatories were SAS-loyal Indians.

The original Auroville signatories to the Fund attempted to withdraw the Community's money from the jeopardy of the situation; however this was interpreted from Pondy as another move against the authority of the SAS – which it was. As a result, the SAS Executive Committee decided to freeze the Pour Tous Fund bank account, effectively blocking Rs. 15,000 of the Community's own self-generated resources.

To this day, those urgently-needed funds have never been released. The period which followed that incident forced the Pour Tous Fund

to operate in a decentralized “underground” arrangement since the Community’s financial survival depended upon it. In any case, there was no longer access to a bank account in Auroville’s name.

During this same interval, visa pressure continued to be applied. The SAS was no longer, as a matter of course, renewing the yearly re-application of residence visas for Aurovilians whom it considered as undesirable. This placed up to thirty Aurovilians – including Frederick, Shyama and their children – who had assumed that their visas were being re-processed as usual, on the wrong side of the law.

And to tighten the screws, the SAS Executive Committee amended admission forms (as excerpted below), requiring even long-time Aurovilians to sign it in order to receive SAS’s guarantee:

TO: The Executive Committee
Sri Aurobindo Society
Pondicherry-605002

Dear Friends,

The ideals of Auroville appeal to me, and I request for permission to stay in Auroville. I accept the ideals and shall actively work for the realization. I have read this form and agree to all conditions mentioned in it, and will also abide by all administrative and other decisions of the Executive Committee of SAS whether made so far or in future. Assuring you of my cooperation,

I remain sincerely,
(signature)

Note 1. Auroville is a project of Sri Aurobindo Society, and is administered by it through its Executive Committee.

Note 3. After the probationary period, a decision is taken by the applicant whether he wants to stay in Auroville or not. By this

time, the Administration is also able to decide... whether he can be accepted as a resident of Auroville or not. The decision will also depend on the availability of funds for the purpose. After acceptance, if Auroville is asked to meet the individual's full needs, it is expected that he then offers all he has to Auroville.

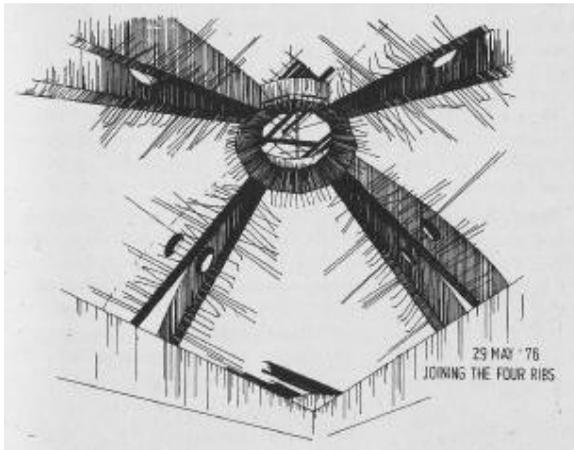
...

Note 5. The township with all its property, belongs to SAS. In all matters the decision of its Executive Committee will be final.

Note 6. Please send this form to:

The Personnel Section,
Auroville Office,
Sri Aurobindo Society,
Pondicherry - 605002

In contrast to this depressing news, we received word that on May 29th, 1976, the four arcing pillars of the Matrimandir were joined in the concreting of the ring – a symbol of that invincible aspiration toward unity. Thrice inscribed in its band was the Sanskrit mantra, *Aum Namō Bhagavatē*.



That next day, I took Francis down to the Indian Consulate in San Francisco where we both applied for three-month tourist visas. It was the only possibility available to us that could at least set us back on that patch of red clay. We filled out the forms hoping that the unanswerable questions wouldn't be asked, holding our breath as the visa officer glanced down at our application papers, giving occasional suspicious looks at Francis who was in one of his more unconventional costumes. But at the end of the ritual, despite himself, it seemed, the consulate official stamped our passports with the lion-headed Wheel of Ashoka – the emblematic seals granting us three months in India from the time of our entry.

We were in.

Francis shoved off on his explorations soon after, and we would not meet up again until mid-June some weeks later in New York. In his absence, I was the only one to receive our mail and bear the next burden of painful prose from Fred and Minou, another Auroville sister. Things continued to spin further and further out of hand. Auroville was like a runaway stallion galloping wildly across a sea-blown plateau, jumping valiantly through the growing web of ropes and corrals of those whose reins meant death for such a high-spirited being.

The latest news informed us that eight Aurovilians had been arrested in *Aspiration* on May 29th – the same day as the ring's completion – charged by the SAS with trespassing, house-breaking, theft and unlawful assembly. The letter went on to say that Nava was publicly announcing his intention to close down Auroville. I was sitting on ice and fire here on the other side of the planet, stuck in time, not even sure if there would be an Auroville to go back to. I never felt so out of place. I *needed* to be there, but there was no way to speed it up, only to slow myself down. The tickets for London said 16 June.

I would later piece together the story that led to that arrest. It went

something like this: Navajata expressed his wish to stay in *Aspiration* in December of 1975. This was still at an early period in the struggle, before the revealing events had fully revealed themselves. His request was interpreted as a gesture of good will towards Auroville and, as a result, the usual community procedure of hut allocation based on a waiting list according to need was set aside to find him an accommodation. A large family hut built by Vincenzo had recently been vacated by him and his family. It was this hut which was offered to Nava.

For less than a week, he inhabited the hut, taking some of his meals in *Aspiration*. Then he disappeared back into his Pondicherry tower never to return. By the beginning of May, five months later, with the hut still remaining unoccupied, with the subsequent actions of the Chairman now clearly exposing his unique “good will” to Auroville, and with a growing waiting list of Aurovilians in need of housing, the hypocrisy could no longer be supported. A brief community meeting was held in *Aspiration* on May 9th. At that meeting, the thirty-five residents who attended it decided that the former hut of Vincenzo should be made available to a family of three. It was one of the first conscious applications – test cases – by an Auroville community applying the Mother’s principle that: “*At Auroville nothing belongs to anyone in particular. All is collective property, to be utilized with my blessings for the welfare of all.*”

That same day, the few personal belongings left behind by Nava were removed, placed safely under lock and key, and the hut reoccupied by Aurovilians. The following morning at 6:30 AM, without bothering to waste any time discussing the matter, police arrived to inform *Aspiration* that a complaint had been filed on behalf of the Chairman. Between the period of the 10th May and into the second week of June, a massive police presence was installed in *Aspiration* at the invitation and permission of Navajata who obviously placed considerable pressure upon local law enforcement officers to make a serious criminal case out of what was clearly an

internal affair. Referring to a written statement of June 6th made by Jocelyn, one of the *Aspiration* residents at that time: "... The situation today – three of the *Aspiration* huts are being fully utilized (in other words, taken over) by the police force. A fourth hut is now being utilized with Navajata's permission by Mohan, an employee of Dayanand."

On May 27th, 1976, a letter signed "For some *Aspiration* residents" was sent to the Inspector of Police, Marakannam-Circle:

Dear Sir:

To avoid any further misunderstandings regarding any requirements of your personnel on duty, please arrange it with the SAS, as we in *Aspiration*, Auroville, do not have the necessary facilities for their requirements; i.e., showers, sleeping places, etc.

In the present circumstances, as you will appreciate, we are not in a proper psychological mood. However, we assure you of our good will and cooperation and hope you will also appreciate our predicament.

It is difficult to imagine the atmosphere that was physically superimposed on *Aspiration* during those weeks: A community where the children could not play without running into a policeman, where meals were indigestible because of the police sleeping in the dining room. And it would not be the last time that *Aspiration* would bear such a nightmare intrusion at the behest of the Chairman.

The arrest itself took place on Saturday evening, May 29th, when two police vans – one empty, one containing helmeted police troops – entered the community. Under the orders of their commanding officer, they proceeded to round up eight residents – seven French and one American, including a woman – who were then ushered into the empty van which transported them to Marakannam Police

Headquarters where they spent the night. The following day, they were transferred to the third-class Tindivanam sub-jail where they spent the next week in remand custody. Only on the eighth day were they released on bail through an intervening order passed by the Madras High Court.

It was through this continuing pattern of such unbearably blatant acts unleashed upon the Community by the SAS that Auroville was forced to seek the intervention of third parties, invoking what protection it could receive through the Government of India. Auroville residents kept going along with this drama, naively believing that sooner or later someone with a shred of impartiality and dignity would see what was happening and say, Stop! My god, I wondered, how much longer could it be so blatantly ignored. And yet, it was... all legal, for they had the papers.

But as I sat there in my northern California refuge reading those few paragraphs mentioning the arrest, unaware, thank god, of all the details, I could feel my Auroville self burning through that drifting golden bubble in which I lay suspended.

It was not long before I was on the night flight headed for New York.

I rejoined Francis, sharing the grim news with him as we spent those waning moments in New York, buying an assortment of last-chance presents for our besieged family.

We left our American episode before its 200th birthday on a sardine-packed midnight flight from Kennedy. The chartered DC-8 arrived early next morning into the mid-June mists of London's Heathrow Airport. It was there in London that we learned later of a joint "Declaration" sent from European Auroville International Centres and affiliates to the Government of India. It said:

We, as representatives of the undersigned European Centres, at a meeting in Paris on June 11th, 1976, herewith openly

declare that we no longer have any confidence in the Trustees of the Ashram, the Sri Aurobindo Society and the Auro Trust.

The way in which of late they have been handling affairs is, we are convinced, in important respects inconsistent with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and with the Charter of Auroville.

We therefore withdraw our support, financial and otherwise, from the above-mentioned bodies under their present administration, and will advise all people concerned to do likewise.

We will continue in every lawful and practical way to encourage the implementation of the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, the diffusion in our countries of their ideals, and to support the progressive growth of Auroville.

s/d.

Auroville International, France

Auroville International, Great Britain

Auroville International, Sweden

Auroville International, Switzerland

Centre Anandamayi, Ancona, Italy

Sri Aurobindo Auroville Society, Holland

Sri Aurobindo Centre, Cambridge, England

Sri Aurobindo Society of Great Britain

Sri Aurobindo Auroville Society, Belgium

Auroville Relaciones, Barcelona, Spain

Aurora-Zentrale Der Freunde Aurovilles, Germany

The earliest available charter flight to Bombay was not until the 27th of June, which left us with ten days in England. Time felt like glue. And that procession of less than a fortnight passed with the stinginess of a miser clinging to each stale minute.

I can only recall three vivid instants from that time-bog: A rather grotesque film about an alien from another planet, peopled by a more sensitive and highly-evolved species, who finds himself permanently exiled amidst the civilized barbarity of our earth; a ballet performance by Rudolf Nureyev that I caught in London with Jackie, a New York artist on her way to the Ashram in Pondicherry; and a brief retreat with Joy and Edith, two grand old ladies in Cambridge, where we visited the University attended by Sri Aurobindo. It was in that same King's College, in the chapel, that I found Francis solemnly reading what turned out to be an erotic novel. Tsk. tsk.

On the afternoon of June 27th, a day we thought would never arrive, Francis and Savitra, joined by Jackie, boarded a Singapore Airlines DC-10 headed for Bombay. At last, we were going home. *Home*.

That uncontainable joy as we glided through the tufts of swirling cloud cathedrals above the pastel peaks of the Alps below spilled over into an abbreviated sonnet that I scribbled on Jackie's note pad:

*She feels his will though summit-bound
Invade her earthly form Profound;
Awake the lonely mystic heights
Within her warm-limbed, time-born nights.
The utter gulfs in them were healed
And love in matter stood revealed.*

2. two flew over the cuckoo's nest

On the morning of the 28th June, we began our final descent into the humid air currents that blanketed Bombay. We passed over a last stretch of slums as the tarmac of Santa Cruz International Airport warped in the shimmering heat weaves before us. And at 10:15 AM on that unpredictable day, a Singapore Airlines flight from London touched down in Bombay. Franny and Sasa were back on Indian soil.

We disembarked, waltzing our way towards the immigration area, waving like kids when we saw Fred on the observation deck where he had come to meet us in response to our telegram from London. It was three months ago to the day on that March 29th when we departed from this same airport into a midnight that disclosed no hints.

But even now there were still some potent last-minute surprises in store.

We were in the process of clearing through customs when the immigration authorities gave a double-take at our passports and proceeded to confiscate them along with the two American nationals whose name appeared in them. No, not again. Somebody must have confused the script. We had just done this act.

But the gentlemen in the grey uniforms were not convinced. It seems that our trustworthy Chairman had caught wind of our return and filed a formal complaint in Delhi to prevent our re-entry. The telegram on the counter even had our flight number on it. Nava had bigger ears than we anticipated.

I asked the airport officials what this meant and they told me that we would be flown back on the next Singapore Airlines London flight scheduled for that evening. That didn't leave us much time. Before they put us out of reach, I slipped a frantic note to Jackie,

who was standing glazed and dumbfounded on the other side of the counter, and told her to pass it to Frederick. It was our last hope.

They allowed us to collect our bags and then escorted us under police guard to the transit lounge – a small enclosed lobby adjoined to a fifty meter arcade of shops which served as the waiting area for on-going passengers of international flights that had scheduled stops in Bombay.

Namaste, India.

Little did we know then that this public transit lounge would be our home for the next 16 days while we sat in suspense, under constant 24-hour police guard, awaiting the outcome of future appeals. It would become the most extended limbo in Franny and Sasa's in-between experience.

As soon as Fred got our message – (I could imagine his shock as well) – he contacted J.R.D. Tata, a personal friend of his. For Tata not only happened to be one of the most highly regarded Indian industrialists who helped pioneer an independent Indian economy, but he was also Chairman of Air India, the country's flag carrier which he had founded. Through Tata's influence, moved by his sense of the utter injustice perpetrated by another Chairman, he was able to get the airport authorities to keep us under detention until the matter could be resolved through an urgent appeal to the Central Home Ministry. At least our hopes would not be immediately snuffed out, deported on the next flight back to god-knows-where.

Those following first days, as I look back through some wrinkled notes, were something out of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. We spent that first night – as most of the other 15 claustrophobic nights – camped out on the floor of a public airport transit lobby under the reassuring eyes of our two uniformed companions. We had just managed to drift into something resembling sleep when a herd of

two hundred supercharged travelers stampeded into the transit lounge. It was the eleven o'clock jumbo jet en route to god-knows-where.

It was sheer madness – a cleverly devised conspiracy to drive us up the wall or onto the next flight back – as the courteous and thoughtful airport staff treated their transiting guests to an hour of the most torturously boring documentary films which we only got to see sixteen times. Through that whole first night – loudspeakers blaring their incomprehensible static about arrivals and departures and miscellaneous passenger requests, with bleary-eyed travelers tripping over us – Franny and I persevered.

And as we eventually became accustomed to the flight patterns, the one we enjoyed the most was the 2 AM 747 bound for Australia. I remember one night, having made a desperate attempt with Francis to pull some lounge chairs together into an abbreviated couch, being blasted bolt-upright to find the arms of our chairs crowded with bouncing bottoms.

And while we endured as best we could, we kept getting messages from Fred – they would rarely let him visit us – assuring us that it would not be long, maybe a day or two more. That promised day or two more ate away at us like acid as one week passed into two. Yet there was nothing to do but go on. It became painfully clear somehow that our only defeat would be to call it quits and take that return flight out of this hellish limbo. But no, we would go on despite ourselves.

Through Tata's intervention, we would even be occasionally released from this transit-lounge nightmare to spend an evening in the privacy of the adjoining V.I.P. lounge. Those reprieves totaled four nights out of the sixteen, with airport authorities continually evicting us for ministers and visiting dignitaries. But this occasional privilege to the V.I.P. lounge was beginning to confuse our guards as to our status. For they knew Tata was directly involved. In my

June 30th notes, I wrote a marginal comment: "The guards are obviously very puzzled by the class of their prisoners; the prisoners are likewise puzzled..." That same day we received one of those tantalizingly torturing telegrams from Frederick who was trying to pull the rabbit out of that hat in Delhi: "Submitted urgent appeal STOP expect instant positive reply STOP inform immigration authorities to detain you at Bombay till reversal orders." Stop.

Fred was in Delhi with papers from Tata who had offered to personally sponsor us. That obviously carried some weight. Nevertheless, feeding the fumes of cynicism after our first eviction from the V.I.P. lounge for a minister who never showed up, Fred called through the phone facilities of a friendly shop in the arcade to say: "Don't worry, they won't ship you out, we'll have a confirmation in a few days..." Don't hold your breath, I reminded myself.

During this extended phantasmagoric transit-lounge "holiday", we secretly disconnected the wires to the blaring loudspeakers. We also found ourselves treated to a most unique culinary adventure which further enriched the dimensions of our experience. Anytime between six AM and noon we would receive breakfast. It was the same unvarying cycle of eggs floating on a fine film of oil, well oiled toast, canned fruit formaldehyde and coffee. Sixteen days. Lunch was another delight. Mutton curry for ten straight days. I had been a seven year vegetarian. Now I understood why. Dinner was the same as lunch. After ten days of protesting, pleading for something else, anything but that damned mutton curry that was oozing out of all our pores, we refused to eat. Finally they got the message: and for the next six days, lunch and dinner, we got fried fish.

After sixteen days, Franny and Sasa looked like grease blotters. We survived only through smuggled Limca sodas and glucose biscuits available to the transit passengers.

There was a moment, however, in that insanity which seemed to

make some sense of our presence. It involved John, a young Rhodesian black, who shared our detention on the 28th and 29th. He had escaped from the Rhodesian atrocities to Tanzania, carrying a valid Commonwealth passport. He had been accepted at some Madras University where he was headed when he was stopped at Bombay Immigration and told that he would be deported back to Rhodesia. The immigration officials had given him no reasons for the deportation order.

We felt an instant comradeship with John – one which hated to think of the fate that awaited him if he were deported back to Rhodesia after his unauthorized escape. I asked him if his passport was valid. He said it was. I asked him if he had a letter of acceptance from the Indian University that he spoke of. He said he did. I asked him why he was being turned back. He said he didn't know, they would explain nothing. I asked him what appeals he had tried. He told me that he had tried to contact the British High Commissioner but without success. And now you're just going to quietly get onto the return flight to Rhodesia? I asked him. He shrugged his shoulders as if to say, what else can I do?

Dammit, here's a guy who knows better than I do the death-sentence that awaited him if he went back. Yet he just shrugs his shoulders. There was something powerfully pure in John's resignation. But we couldn't just let him walk off the cliff like that, despite himself. He only had half a day before they'd pack him off. Come on, John, I said, let's try the British High Commission again.

I bullied my way past the guards, taking John with me down to the last shop in the arcade where there was a phone. After a short exchange with the humane proprietor of the shop, I rang up the British Consulate. After half an hour of misfires and secretaries who couldn't help, I was put in touch with some senior official in the High Commission.

At last someone who understood the urgency and had enough rank

to do something. I told him that if somebody didn't come down here soon to intervene, John was going to be freighted back beyond hope.

An hour later a representative from the British High Commission arrived, and on that same afternoon of the 29th June, grinning from ear to ear, John walked out a free man in India. We shook hands, the three of us, sharing more than skin-deep smiles... and then there were two.

On July 3rd we received a call from Tata informing us that our matter which was placed before the Home Ministry had now precipitated a review of the entire Auroville affair from which it was inseparable. He said that a resolution to the situation in general was expected by the 7th or 8th, and he hoped that orders would be sent today through the Maharashtra State Secretariat releasing us on his (Tata's) personal recognizance.

But that was not to be: we still had ten more days in the Santa Cruz International Airport transit lounge. It had become clear now, however, that our case had forced the Government to pry open the whole Auroville can of worms – and until that was sorted out, we were on ice. Ice and fire.

We spent a unique 4th of July, 1976, celebrating the two hundredth anniversary of America's freedom watching the planes come and go through our plate glass cage. There goes another one.

The days dragged on, blurring into one another as our senses began to warp under the sleeplessness and surreality of it all. Even Fred's constant reassurances began to reveal his own eroding confidence, curling at the end into a question rather than a statement. Francis and I had somehow arrived at an unspoken understanding. Despite ourselves, we would hold on.

In one of the more humorous scenes in our tragicomedy that occurred on the evening of July 7th, we had just been escorted by Air

India officials back to our V.I.P. sanctuary when the Airport Manager informed us that we would have to vacate for some ambassador and his entourage arriving later that night. Damn the diplomats. We were not going to surrender this possibility of a night's sleep for anyone! So we assured him we would leave just to get rid of the guy, then hid ourselves in our sleeping bags behind the furniture. At about midnight the door opened, someone switched on the lights, and in marched some impeccably dressed dignitary, his exquisite wife and their aides. They proceeded with well-rehearsed grace to seat themselves around a table, dismissing the airline personnel. It was a most astonishing display of poise and discipline as each of them in turn noticed the presence of two sets of legs sticking out behind the couches beside the wall... each, one by one, flinch... then continue their conversation – French, I believe – diplomatically ignoring the bodies. It took almost as much poise and discipline for us to keep from bursting out in the laughter we managed to suppress as it took for them to carry on as if nothing was there.

After some hours, they finally departed. The staff turned off the lights and the room went silent, as if they had never been there. Perhaps they had not. Perhaps this was just a hallucinogenic dream.

On the sixteenth morning of our limbo, beginning to feel that Godot would never come, and that we might be condemned to an eternity of mutton curry, the Airport Police Inspector arrived to inform us that he had orders to release us. The local government had been instructed from Delhi that we were free to enter India. Only some paper formalities remained.

Oh my god! We had persevered...

I called Tata – by now, Frederick had returned to Auroville exhausted, having done all he could do – and he confirmed the release. We had broken through. Finally, unbelievably, broken through somehow despite it all.

We packed our scrambled baggage, shook hands with our jubilant guards, and made our way down into the Air-India office where we were escorted out into the moist afternoon drafts of July 13th where a Mercedes Benz provided by Mr. Tata awaited us. We breathed our first precious breaths of fresh air in sixteen days. How wonderful it felt just to breathe freely, mixed as it was with the fumes and gases of jet exhausts.

It had a kind of Cinderella touch as we entered into that chauffeur-driven Mercedes that transported us to one of Tata's guest houses where we spent the evening of the 13th and the day of the 14th recovering our sleep and our senses. On the morning of the 14th, we met Mr. Tata in his office to thank him personally. This modest silver-haired gentleman whose name was a trademark from steel to textiles to scientific research, refused to accept any credit. There are few such entrepreneurs in the world who have attained the self-made legacies of J.R.D. Tata, and who have retained such a spontaneous sense of integrity and humility.

We caught the evening flight back to Madras where we were met by a rag-tag team of Aurovilian die-hards who had braved the early summer squalls to pick us up. The joy of our re-union there in Meenambakkam Airport was eclipsed by the news that Diane, a young woman close to both of us, had fallen twenty meters through the pipe scaffolding at the Matrimandir on that same July 13th morning of our release. She had survived but lay paralyzed. A shadow stained the sun.

3. the city through the trees

Our taxi from the Airport crossed the threshold of Auroville as July 14th passed into the 15th. I can't even remember where I slept that first night.

The next days and weeks in Auroville remain slightly out of focus. The previous three months, the last sixteen days in particular, had taken us irretrievably out of our former selves, our former roles. And the Auroville to which we returned was going through its own turbulent changes.

Understandably, the readjustments, re-synchronizing of rhythms, would take time. Nevertheless, we were caught in the ambivalent cross-currents of consciousness: embraced as returning heroes or anti-heroes, eulogized or satirized. And edging all of our moments, placing everything slightly off balance, was the weight of Diane's fall.

Bomi, we also discovered, had left. My fiery Gujarati "yar" had had enough, taking his family back to the North. A letter dated June, 2, 1976, addressed to the SAS Chairman from Bomi, his wife and son, explained his departure:

Sir,

It is with a mixed feeling of grief, anxiety and joy we are leaving Auroville; Auroville that has become a part of ourselves.

Auroville for which we burned our bridges with the world we knew and loved has, for us, receded far away as we are leaving Sri Aurobindo Society's Auroville. This Auroville which the President of Sri Aurobindo Society⁸⁵ conceived and

⁸⁵ Author's note: a ridicule of SAS's court statement claiming that the Mother *in her capacity as president of S.A.S.* founded Auroville.

which is now inherited by the SAS with all the lands, buildings and equipment, where Aurovilians – a loose term – have no right, much less the statutory right to carry on any activity in Auroville except to carry on the work allotted to them by the said SAS. So it is that we leave your Auroville. Your Auroville clutched tightly in the tentacles of the hereditary trustees of Auro-Trust...

The catharsis of leaving has cleansed us of the anger we felt towards you, the Executive Committee of Sri Aurobindo Society in general and Sri Navajata and Sri Counouma in particular. Now it is only with grief that we think of what you all have done to Auroville and to us. Still we hope and pray that our parting may not be a permanent one, and when Auroville is restored to its own status, we return.

I believe that Sri Aurobindo Society (Sri Shyam Sunder included) who administered Auroville, mis-administered it to the brink of this spiritual, moral and economic disaster. Aurovilians were denied participation where it counted most.

Sri Aurobindo Society chose to go to court against Auroville Society instead of trying for a solution without precondition and finding the root causes of frustration that led some Aurovilians to register the Auroville Society.

The Rejoinder Affidavit signed by Sri Navajata only made public what the Chairman may have believed about Auroville in private.

The role Sri Dayanand played as your Estate Manager was to say the least deplorable. He succeeded in driving the edge of the wedge which subsequently broke apart the unity between the local people and non-Indian section of Aurovilians on one hand, and Indian Aurovilians and non-Indian Aurovilians on the other...

You not only refused visas on the ground of “which party you belong to” but now, signing of a new application form which makes you the unconditional legal masters of Auroville is made one of the criteria for the renewal of the visas and for new admissions.

You procrastinated the processing of visas papers and put many of us on the wrong side of the law.

From February onwards food money, electricity bills, etc., were not paid by Sri Aurobindo Society; thus you shirked the responsibility taken before the Mother and went back on the word given to the donor Aurovilians when they joined: “You give what you have and we will look after you.” (Monies from Auroshikha and Aurocreation do not come morally from Sri Aurobindo Society. Aurocreation was coerced into joining AuroTrust and Auroshikha has joined Harpagon Trust.) You formed “Auro-Trust”, a beautiful legal instrument that ties Auroville into a neat package to be used by the Settler and Trustees for life and by their children, if any, after their demise.

And to crown it all! The Police Case against our non-Indian brothers whose aspiration and frustration took an undesired twist... This act of yours was an unpardonable and un-Aurovilian act which has wiped off what little guilt “the undesired twist” had.

We pray to come back to the Auroville that has been envisaged by The Mother whom we revere. And we pray this Auroville becomes independent from the crushing burden of the Sri Aurobindo Society, administered humanely and compassionately by its own inmates.

I pray this time may not be far off.

Yours sincerely,

But by the end of July, the leaden atmosphere began to lift. The delirium of diversions, aggressions and aberrations that seemed to seize Auroville began to subside, revealing a Community that could face its shadow – that could find its light in the face of its shadow, enduring its denial, growing stronger, affirming itself and its inextinguishable will to be.

On the 24th of July, the then Union Minister for Home Affairs visited Auroville. It was through his offices that an investigation into our case was undertaken: An investigation which led to a probe into the circumstances that led to our expulsion. Under the Banyan Tree before an open gathering of Auroville residents, he openly apologized for the injustices, assuring us that the Government was preparing something which would protect us from further harassments, particularly regarding the question of visa guarantees whose privilege had been misused by the SAS.

It was a first hope that the siege might lift. And we began to fantasize about our freedom that seemed almost within reach.

During his brief visit, Frederick and a small number of other Aurovilians met him later; and in a more personal gesture, presented him with a written documentation of the whole sordid relationship between Auroville and the SAS, including a definition of our existing internal organization. This document became the basis for future documentation studies tracking our progressively unfolding organizational forms... Something I had learned from Margaret Mead, and which we would continue to present to Government agencies and non-governmental organizations during the coming years, translating this un-translatable Auroville into a language they could understand. A language describing the relevant systems Auroville Community had already evolved: functional systems which demonstrated that we were capable of self-government, that we were responsible.

Yet even with these research studies, Auroville's secret code still remained unbroken, undefinable.

Nevertheless, these concentrated exercises attempting to define our collective functioning not only helped communicate a coherence to those outside for whom Auroville was still a mystery, but also provided us within the Auroville experiment a clearer more synthetic look at ourselves. In other words, a mirror for a collective to observe itself, become conscious of itself and the unfolding directions emerging within it... Providing us a process to witness the birth and evolution of a collective consciousness that was manifesting through us.

After all, it is a sublime and magical privilege to be present at the birth of oneself – to witness the attempt to birth a new world from within the process of which we are a part. And yet, we are still only at the edge of self-awareness, experiencing the first trickles of a new consciousness which still eludes our attempts to express it... in the same way that an infant cannot yet verbalize what it is experiencing. For we were straining to express something for which we had not yet found the words, the clarity, the language.

After all, the birth of a collective being – beginning with a community, a city and eventually a world – repeats the same process as the birth of a human being. The difference lies only in scale: For the proportions of time and space are much vaster, the movements of an infant collective being more sluggish... in slow motion relative to the individual... frustrating for our impatient self forced to constantly wait for his larger, more lumbering collective self to catch up with him... preferring to race ahead into his own infinity if he could. But though the swift-arrow flight of the individual intensity is tempered, his solo plunge into the Absolute deferred, the compensation – if one can speak in such mercantile terms – is the active experience of a collective realization far richer and more fulfilling than the more ephemeral short-cut ecstasies of

the alone to the Alone. In other words, it is the difference between a line of solitary illumined individuals and a unified transformed humanity which has become the base for a new earthly evolution.

Returning from this perspective to our humbler mundane reality... *Pour Tous*, the Green Fund, the Auroville Notes and a succession of functions to come – Land Service, Visa Service, Information Service, all later coordinated through what would become the Auroville Cooperative – embodied in their humble unfolding a first terrestrial translation of this new consciousness for the earth.

In that summer of '76, *Pour Tous*, despite the fact that it legally did not exist, had become more and more viable... the Community learning through the labor pains of weekly *Pour Tous* meetings, struggling to recognize the real needs and manage the economy accordingly – an economy which itself was living through a drastic re-definition as Auroville continued to synthesize relationships between its various emerging systems.

And on August 5th after a lapse of nearly four months, I resuscitated the Auroville Notes, picking up the thread with issue number 12 that began with an introductory article titled *In-Communicado* which gave expression to the need to express what we need so we could share in fulfilling it:

As a Community of communities set in scattered and out-of-the-way places ... the passage of information is often delayed, somewhat mistranslated if not entirely blocked. Our insularity inhibits a free-flowing circulation.

Though on the one hand this situation is quite understandable and in some cases even desirable, it is not a virtue for us to remain so in the dark about ourselves. A collective being moving through the incredible number of day-to-day matters of its community life wastes enormous amounts of time and energy when its left hand doesn't know what its right hand is

doing.

... *Pour Tous*, and the Freestore have already begun liberating the circuits through which goods and services can cycle and recycle through the Auroville system. The AV Notes would deal with another kind of exchange: Information. All of these are various forms and modes of a communication process – of an organism getting in touch with itself, getting coordinated, getting it together. I.e., becoming more practically one.

Because the Notes is starting again from scratch – that means no staff of reporters and typists – its contents will depend on the goodwill of the community to take note of what it considers newsworthy and pass it on: i.e., a green belt meeting worth sharing, or a cultural happening here or there, or a call for assistance with a harvest, or a concreting coming up, or a need for more bakers, or a road that needs repair, or an item that someone needs which is probably hidden somewhere in the suburbs of the collective, or whatever... Let's find out what's going on. For by simply stating our needs clearly, we'll begin to make use of the resources and know-how available within and among ourselves...

The same theme was pursued in the following article, *Along the Same Lines...*

Have you noticed over the years our incapacity to sustain an information centre? Part of our ritual futility rites, no doubt... How many times have the same (yawn) facts been collected and then nobody knows whatever happens to them?

Partly, it's because there's nothing more oppressive than statistics; partly, it's because we don't know yet what information is relevant or what relevant information is. It's like the collective consciousness just blanks out – or chokes – because most of the stuff is simply not relevant, i.e., not alive, worth keeping or remembering.

There are certain kinds of data though that should be available for even the most basic organic planning. How can someone choose responsibly a site for a residence or some agricultural project if there is no coherent land use policy as a framework? And how can an ecological land use policy evolve without recognizing the carrying capacity of the land (how much life it can support without depleting its precious reserves of soil and water, in other words, how many people, animals, plants, structures and machines a region can sustain without losing its balance)? And how can the carrying capacity of the land be determined without basic reference to tools such as a hydro-geological survey map and a comprehensive soil map?

If we could somehow get past the fetish for statistics and catch the living thread of real and useful information, then we could escape the tyranny of experts. The tools would be in our own hands, the secrets would be out. Even the commonest Aurovilian would have access to a growing framework of information that would permit him to make his own appropriate decisions, satisfying both his personal needs while recognizing and respecting those of the surrounding community environment. The dominion of a technical elite would be softened to a supportive role and everyone would have an equal chance at the Dream.



(from bottom left clockwise) Aero-mobile residence; Francis' house, Forthcoming; Sharrig ranch house; Fraternity handicrafts workshop; Aero-green farm house; Aspirinix hut; (middle) Greenbelt 'capsule'.

It was through this constant responsibility of *each one* remaining informed, identifying himself with the collective context, that a new form of government could emerge – a government which no longer relied on the convenience that conferred the responsibility, concentrated the authority, in a few while the rest accepted their impotence. In other words, a government which reconciled the conflict between the Individual and the State, in which the consciousness of each was no longer separate from the consciousness of all.

It was during this same summer that Auroville began to reexamine itself through the implications of “township”. A number of meetings and more-or-less formal discussions took place among Aurovilians concerned with the question – or the resistance to the question – of town planning. Through the fall the “Notes” was full of reports from working groups involved with various approaches and considerations of the question. What did it mean, Auroville as a town? One of the most provocative articles in that period was by Divakar who deeply sensed the need for an initiative which corresponded to the scale of our actualities, yet which did not compromise our ingrained sense of organic growth.

We found ourselves wrestling with these two tendencies – planning and spontaneity – as well as all of the classic dualities and contradictions that men oscillate between and fight their wars over in a foolish effort to establish the exclusive supremacy of one over the other. But wasn’t Auroville meant to be a place of doing, of work? And wasn’t it there somehow, when one got down to the actual matter of working together, that the contradictions resolved? For it was not a question of either-or, it was a question of other. Something else which revealed itself in the process of actions – of working together rather than through endless discussions. After all, Matter has no ideology.

Nevertheless, the question remained. And as much as some of us tried to bury it under the polemics of “organic growth”, the collective would become increasingly aware of the need for a planning process that also invited creative input – not in the abstract but in the actual. In other words, we needed to coordinate structural-infrastructure development in a way that avoided the split between planning and spontaneity: An outer split which resolved through an integration of consciousness.

So we went on building our houses, our structures and projects here and there, without a rigid master plan; yet sensitive to – feeling out

– the pattern that was emerging: the relationship between roads, water systems, energy sources, waste disposal: i.e., the need to discipline ourselves to avoid a haphazard chaos of unstructured growth. For it was becoming clearer that there was some simple inherent design which we needed to see, to discover, in the process of working together... listening to the needs of the land, maximizing the efficient use of resources while simultaneously minimizing the adverse impact upon the natural environment. Centralizing and dispersing at the same time.

But these are principles, explanations, clever words, which most Aurovilians would probably never articulate other than through the application of their bodies. That, after all, is the only thing people ultimately listen to in Auroville. For it is self-convincing.

And when the buildings would have finally found their true place and form, we would still hardly see the City through the trees... Through the hundreds of thousands of trees which Aurovilians have already planted, which will one day transform Auroville from the desert where we began into the garden it would become.

4. the paradox of power and the politics of oneness

In November of '76 with its 24th issue, I withdrew from my involvement with the Notes. I suppose I had become too intimately attached to it, identified with it. And at that same period, some others expressed interest in a more free-style, creative format – something less journalistic, more provocative or experimental perhaps. It's true I had a strong motivation with and direction for the Notes, seeing it primarily as a vehicle for information relevant to our practical functioning. This other movement to expand the Notes into other formats, other styles of presentation, seemed for me the moment to move on.

The original Notes, after all, would still be there in archive format, capturing a glimpse of our collective emergence through that extraordinary transitional period through which we were still passing. And though this more experimental, artistic replacement did not sustain, a new incarnation of the original Notes format did, continuing without break to this day under revolving editors who gradually returned it to its original format which placed the emphasis on exchange of information.

In this same transitional moment, the momentum of collective meetings in that late fall of '76 focussed on exploring an appropriate planning process for Auroville as a future city. Much of that focus, it seemed, was brought about by possibilities that arose after the Home Minister's visit which seemed to indicate positive interest from the Government under Indira Gandhi's sympathetic Prime Ministership. In fact, talk had even circulated that some governmental committee might be set up to provide reassurance for the Community as well as look into the abuses that had plagued it.

As a result, there was a certain sense of excitement and anticipation in the air... Even rumours and speculation that our terrible twelve-month ordeal might finally be over – that we might be delivered by

Christmas with the Government somehow handing us the keys to the City and our long-awaited freedom. Could this finally be our long-awaited breakthrough moment? If so, we had to be ready.

The lull in the siege and the promise of some imminent emancipation seemed to inflate us. And we began to slip into bravado, prematurely celebrating a victory we had not yet won. But it was understandable after all, even though out of character for us. For we were desperate for relief. Yet even through that giddy childlike release, I recalled a more sobering conversation following a Sunday baseball game at Centre Field when of us asked: "But then after our freedom, then what? what are we going to *do*?"

It was the end of 1976. We had made immense strides as a Community to transpose ourselves in less than a year from a nebulous collection of disjointed projects and "loose term" Aurovilians into a cohesive and responsive collective body becoming increasingly more alert to and capable of governing itself. But despite our momentary self-intoxication, there were still gaps.

And these gaps were not simply in terms of our practical efficiency and internal organization, but in terms of our oneness – the *something else* which seemed to be obscured in that instant when we turned perhaps too much outside ourselves for the answer... drawn into the frenzy of plans and projections and development programs bubbling up from our assumed deliverance.

And the Pour Tous meetings of this moment began to reflect that same outward gusto and brassiness which rang a bit hollow. A malaise had entered, unseen among us... just behind where you cannot put your finger on it. We had held together through an extended and most trying time, worked through one more layer of the onion skin. But behind it lay another and another as we descended into the volcano towards some fundamental ground,

into that molten sea of fire where we are one.

We had passed through one door and now stood before another. And all of the challenges would repeat themselves in other forms, more subtle, until nothing stood between us any longer, until those last primordial sheaths of ego had been peeled away.

It was an unsettling interval, one in which we had hardly tasted the apparent victory before it was snatched away and we were thrown back into another riddle.

It was at this juncture that *Pour Tous* itself began to experience its first deficits since beginning the experiment in January. For in those beginnings, the spurt of assistance from Centres and friends that poured in to the rescue actually overwhelmed us; but as time wore on, many of the outside sources began to fluctuate and fade – they were sprinters, not long-distance runners able to sustain Auroville through its protracted conflict. And Auroville itself had not been able to compensate in significantly developing its own internal resources due to lack of investment capital. What little funds were available were consumed in the maintenance and running expenses.

In addition, the fact that the SAS – which was no longer contributing to Auroville yet still retained the tax-exemption for Auroville – made it almost impossible to solicit any substantial sums in India. Development and project grants were likewise crippled since Auroville had no legal status as a recipient body; and the growing controversy, later inflamed by SAS's versions of the affair which appeared in the local media, discouraged participation within India as well as abroad.

It was an extraordinary balancing act simply to survive. Aside from all the other levels of assault that the community had been bearing, it now found itself wedged between a blockade of funds from external sources and no capital reserves to develop an effective base of self-sustenance.

Something in us, it felt, was over-ripe, needing to express itself; but it didn't have the available means. And as a result, things became cramped and began to sour in that constricted malaise which we felt then. These factors also contributed to our over-reliance on some form of Government intervention to break the deadlock.

On the 23rd of December, an article appeared in the Indian Express, one of India's largest dailies, headlined "Committee to go into Auroville Problems". It was datelined "New Delhi" and stated that the Union Government had set up a high-level committee to study the problems of Auroville. It went on to mention that the three-man committee consisted of the Lt. Governor of Pondicherry, the Chief Secretary of Madras State, and an Additional Secretary in the Ministry of Home Affairs. "The Committee's brief," it said, "is to look into the township's problems in depth and suggest solutions to promote the objectives set by the Mother in the Auroville Charter." It went on to say:

The Committee will also evolve an appropriate procedure regarding foreigners' entry into and stay in Auroville.

The Auroville Township was founded on the basis of a Charter announced by the Mother on February 28, 1968. The Union Government and a number of State Governments have contributed substantially to Auroville.

The Union Government, an official resolution said, has special responsibility in regard to the founding and developing of Auroville as a township of international importance.

During the past one year, the Government resolution says, a number of problems of varied nature have arisen affecting the smooth running of the township and those call for urgent solutions. These problems cannot be tackled piecemeal and on an ad-hoc basis. This had led to the Government's decision to set up the three-man committee.

Could this be the long-awaited Christmas present? Interestingly, the entire news report never once mentioned the SAS. The Government of India, it seemed, was recognizing Auroville. We were on the edge of our seats, as if in the last act of some Greek drama, awaiting the Deus ex Machina – the intervention of Providence through some external agency.

But somehow something in all this was out of character for us. We had imperceptibly retired to the audience... which in a way was cheating. For we had never been given anything which we had not in some way already become.

It was a moment of many threads – paradoxical, almost indecipherable even years later. A moment that simultaneously saw the formal school system of classroom conventions break down, dissolve and blend as best it could into the life of the Community. It was all inseparable: the internal upheavals, the educational revolution – re-adjustment or reintegration, if you prefer – the economic constriction, the indefinable malaise... all during the lull in the siege, when it seemed like the Government was about to deliver the goods.

Turning through old forgotten papers, I came across a page dated 21 November 1976, which footnoted that unsettling autumn:

“... One feels the intensity mount and mount until one almost becomes accustomed to it, and yet everything seems shrouded, as if in a cloud, concealed, eclipsed. You try to see where it goes ... but you cannot, you only feel the intensity mount. We think it cannot go much farther... but it does; we think the curve cannot continue its descent ... but it does: we think we have reached our limits ... but someone or something ignores our protests, and our weaknesses.

The enemy with whom we struggled so long outside ourselves now stands within, as intangible and deceptive as our own selves. The

force of disruption and disharmony, before so easily identifiable, now enters among us and turns us one against another. Its face is our own. And though we all know this, we seem helpless before the distrust which we allow to undermine our actions, our gestures, our efforts together.

We are on the verge of what men call 'freedom', of receiving the right to be responsible as individuals and as a collective being; but it seems for the moment that we have become preoccupied with the mechanics – the struggle to establish this system or that system, this ideology or that one, this discipline or that extravagance. We may use different names and remind ourselves that this is Auroville, but the process still revolves around the same human cycle, the same human trap.

There is a hollowness echoing in our collective life. We seem, for the moment, to have forgotten the focus – the fire, the simple call from within which joins us together and brings the new. In our progress, we have fallen back into reliance upon mechanical means and external contrivance. The assertive and aggressive dominates. In our desire to be effective, perhaps we block our own path, perhaps we stand in our own way. Perhaps we just need deeply to remember – perhaps we need only to remember – this thing which burns silently in us, which calls for the true thing, the pure and right movement, without interference from our subtlest colourings of how it should be – our pastel freedoms, our brain-gray disciplines.

It is this aspiration – this need in us which simply calls for the true thing, which reaffirms our uniqueness – which is the basis of our unity and our clarity. It is this which gives that little turn to Auroville which makes the something else of which we cannot conceive possible, which gives the sense and significance to all of our practical actions.”

For a year, we had coasted instinctively through that initial assumption of our own collective responsibilities. They presented themselves to us one by one, in larger and larger gulps, and we took

them on without a second thought because we had to. But now we had begun to internalize the power that had for so long tyrannized us from without. Now we would have to learn to deal with that power which we had called within ourselves – not power, but Power: that Force which is necessary to bring about any realization; that same Force which is inherent in self-responsibility but which men have never succeeded to use truly, always in some measure deforming it, getting burned by it in their greed to control it... in proportion to their ego.

Power was an essential ingredient for Auroville, for a new world. To shun it meant impotence. But for Auroville as in all things, it *"belonged to nobody in particular"*. Auroville would have to discover itself in terms of a Trust for Power – in the same way that it conceived itself, its assets and its properties, as a Trust for Land and Material Wealth. The Aurovilians would have to discover for themselves what it meant to be Trustees: impersonal instruments for Power, freely and creatively used for the whole and not for the inflation of a part.

Power was not in itself intrinsically corrupting, only the presence of the ego. It was this further initiation into an ego-less society that Auroville now faced. *"The ideal of the Aurovilians,"* she said in October of 1971, *"must be to become egoless – not at all to satisfy their ego. If they follow the old human way of selfish claim, how can they hope the world to change?"*

The power was in our hands now, whether we liked it or not, despite ourselves. Another era of innocence had exploded, despite ourselves. This presence of power among us – which even the most devout and spiritually adept have denied, knowing and fearing the challenge that the exposure to power represented, preferring the simpler, sacred escapes of renunciation rather than the herculean transformation of the ego – which previous human systems of government have only succeeded to muzzle under the stranglehold

of laws or under the façade of a more refined rationalism which seethed just beneath the surface and could ignite in an unforeseen flash of brutality... Yes, this presence of power would now become our acid test... eating away at the seemingly endless layers of egoism that our humanity hides within.

It was this influx of raw power – the force that energizes life’s myriad forms as well as man’s decisions – that had entered our collective. A collective still crude and clumsy, still so much in its formational process, barely a year after it had first severed its own umbilical cord.

For Power, which in itself is the force of Life, can, with just a slight tap of the ego’s Midas touch, turn into its opposite.

It was for this reason that we would have to call forth a purity, a selflessness, not merely individual but collective. A call not motivated by some external authority in the name of collectivism or communism or some other imposed ideology, but out of a pressure from within: an evolutionary urge that awakens within us as we find ourselves on a planet whose fate somehow lies in our own hands; as we find ourselves forced from within to discover a transience capable of handling the sudden outpouring of a Power in this moment which can either transform the earth or destroy it.

It is this challenge before which we all now stand. A challenge which none of us can escape. And it is in this sense that Auroville is a laboratory for the Earth as a whole. Because the Earth, the Whole, *is* Auroville’s reference point. And everything we do here is done, is offered to that Whole which our Charter states: “*belongs to nobody in particular ... belongs to humanity as a whole*”. Something which all of us on this shared terrestrial voyage would have to translate into practice.

For it is only the resistance that makes us suffer.

And the resistance to wholeness is exclusion – is that which seeks to

exclusively possess for itself, to have what it cannot be. The ego. That worm in the apple.

For it was this force of exclusivity – this proprietary instinct, of “mine” – that Auroville was being impelled to purge from itself, individually and collectively. To change individually and *collectively*. Because it was not simply a transfer of egoism from the individual to the Community. Auroville belonged to no *body*. No matter how big. Auroville did not even belong to itself – to that growing number of “loose term” Aurovilians – but to “*humanity as a whole*”. And this was not a textbook concept. It was something which would radically shift the Consciousness of the Earth from mine to ours. And from ours as owners to ours as trustees. For one does not possess by *owning* but by *becoming*. And then it is free. For there is no other. Whether we speak of Auroville or of the world.

And the uniqueness of this process that Auroville now found itself undergoing as it approached its ninth year was that there could no longer be one charismatic leader, one chosen individual or elite group that the collective could lean on. No messiah who had *The Word* and no oligarchy who got the last word. The Power was simply there, flowing in, but no one, no one group could possess it. We had only entrusted the Mother in that role. But even she had discouraged that, refrained from giving out ready-made answers, pressing us to have our own experience, develop our own inner strength and guidance. And now she was no longer available to us, at least not outside ourselves.

In which case, we would have to be the intermediary instrument ourselves to embody the one we sought, our emerging collectivity becoming the vessel through which a truer Force could act...

A truer Force that could work through our organizations, our planning and coordinating bodies. But those make-shift bodies would consciously understand that the Power was not theirs. That they simply were the instruments through which it could act.

And this was not just spiritual rhetoric, as perhaps these words may sound. For Auroville was discovering, as the earth would, that the government of a new world by a new consciousness is Anarchy. For Anarchy, despite the ominous – perhaps blasphemous – connotations that imply chaos, simply stems from the Greek root meaning “without leader”.

And perhaps it was this deeper transition to a truer Anarchy that we were unknowingly pursuing in Auroville’s experiment in self-governance. An Anarchy that was confronting the entrenched Leadership of the Ego and its primitive instinct to possess and control what it cannot Be. In this case, Nava’s exclusive dominion over Auroville, as well as all of the minor power-players claiming their little empires and kingdoms.

And much as we would like to externalize the blame on “them”, we too had our egos. We too had internalized the claim to power: claiming “my” *Pour Tous*, “my” forest, “my” harmony, “my” visa service, “my” (fill in the blank). And each of us in turn would feel that fire until the last of our territorial claims had burned into unity. For the functions would remain. In fact, become more clearly defined and developed. But the possessives would drop, turning Auroville’s Government into a movement that freely harmonizes and integrates, rather than claims to own and control.

What political organization do you want for Auroville, the Mother was asked in 1972.

“An amusing definition occurs to me,” She replied: “A divine anarchy. But the world will not understand. Men must become conscious of their psychic being and organize themselves spontaneously, without fixed rules and laws – that is the ideal.

“For this, one must be in contact with one’s psychic being, one must be guided by it, and the ego’s authority and influence must disappear.”
(28.12.1972)

5. the lotus and the mud

Through the meetings and months to come, we began to see, trace, the actual process of a collective emerging into a community “without ruler” – elevating “anarchy” from “chaos” and “disorder” to a self-governing system that defined itself as we went, freed from arbitrary preconceptions, following the true needs that guided our direction. A community that *had* to become one to survive.

And the pressure on the individual to change – to abdicate his sovereignty, lend himself and his energies to forge this collective being – was irresistible. A pressure which was not a coercion from without, but rather a great river of power that broke from within, inexorably sweeping aside our damned egos, no matter how well-fortified, how well entrenched, whether singular or plural. And yet, it was not just a levelling of the individual, a sacrifice of the individual to the State in some subtilized version of Marxism. The individual – Auroville’s unique soul ingredient – was simply placed in this most challenging moment squarely before its commitment to the whole: To this living context where individual and whole meet in a shared destiny.

After all, why come to Auroville anyway, if it was just to live out our more or less exclusive, more or less personal trips? For surely we didn’t come together all this way from god knows where just to carry on our little solos. It was this question which Aurovilians now faced fiercely in the mirror of those *Pour Tous* meetings through the end of ’76 and into ’77... in gatherings that forged the basis for a truer common action, common seeing: meetings that served as the anvil where we hammered out the crude matter we were, clashing in showers of sparks that wore away our resistance to that unity we professed... clashing and hammering and re-forging ourselves in a *Pour Tous* process we hoped would lead us to a new equilibrium, a truer collaboration.

For all problems of existence are essentially problems of harmony. They arise from the perception of an unsolved discord and the instinct of an undiscovered agreement of unity. To rest content with an unsolved discord is possible for the practical and more animal part of man, but impossible for his fully awakened mind, and usually even his practical parts escape from the general necessity either by shutting out the problem, or by accepting a rough, utilitarian and un-illuminated compromise. For essentially, all Nature seeks a harmony, life and matter in their own sphere as much as in mind in the arrangement of its perceptions. The greater the apparent disorder of the materials offered or the apparent disparateness, even to irreconcilable opposition, of the elements that have to be utilized, the stronger is the spur, and it drives towards a more subtle and puissant order than can normally be the result of a less difficult endeavour.⁸⁶

This menagerie of human diversity would indeed continue its struggle to become one, facing its resistances in a community process that struggled to define, clarify, consolidate itself.

And the months to come through that early 1977 would reveal this tentative, evolving process of self-definition and self-purification – a process that simultaneously confronted the forces within ourselves as well as the forces without.

In February the Community would formulate an initial procedure for receiving newcomers who wished to stay on as resident Aurovilians – a procedure whereby those individuals interested in joining the Community were invited to present themselves in the general meetings (later, this function would be assumed by the Auroville Cooperative), expressing their feelings and perhaps their plans and directions. This offered a first contact with the larger communal body, which then, if there were no striking objections, accepted the individual(s) on an informal “probationary” basis. In

⁸⁶Sri Aurobindo, *The Life Divine*, p. 4.

other words, we would find out through the actual living arrangements in the particular settlements whether the experiment was mutually successful.

The Notes went on to ask “with particular regard to financial matters vis-a-vis Pour Tous, how is this transition from private to collective life to be achieved?” What arose from that discussion was that a fixed sum of Rs. 360 (about \$ 45) would be asked from the individual to cover his monthly food, maintenance and lodging expenses for approximately (though not limited to) one year. And when he no longer could rely on his own reserves, or if he didn't have any to begin with, the Community – once the individual was clearly accepted as a member – would assume their financial responsibility. In this sense, money was neither a bar nor a buy-off for Auroville.

This procedure – which was much more obvious in practice than in the abstract, and which would be considered and applied according to the individual merits and circumstances of each case rather than by one dogmatic norm – would become more precise with the formation of the Auroville Co-operative in late December of '78, as it also involved Auroville's collective responsibility for undertaking the guarantee of their visas (for foreign nationals) with the Government of India.

Another sequence of definitions – more or less imprinted by now in the life itself – reached a consensus in that same February regarding houses and ownership:

“-There should be no private ownership of houses, buildings and lands in Auroville, no real estate to be bought and sold. Expenses incurred (where private) in the construction of houses or buildings are to be considered as a donation to Auroville and are not refundable.

“-When a person goes away from Auroville definitively or for

a long period, he should make clear arrangements with the community for the use of the house before leaving.

“-When a person returns to Auroville, the Community should make every effort to resettle him.”

The emphasis continued to be on a humane commonsense community-based approach.

In June, the question of drugs arose – Auroville’s attitude toward drugs. We were a wide open community that cherished its liberty and experimentation; and yet, we knew the Mother herself, despite her abhorrence for rules, had said: *No drugs in Auroville*. And though She never imposed, we arrived ourselves by late July at a collective statement clearly indicating that the community of Auroville neither condones nor tolerates the use of drugs in Auroville. It was not a matter of moral judgements, we were not interested in converting or saving anyone – those who wished to have their experience with drugs were free to do so... but not in Auroville.

Even the *Pour Tous* meetings themselves in this defining moment did not escape the furnace. For they too were only a larger circumference within Auroville’s expanding context. And those meetings continued to be reminded of this. For Auroville was simultaneously struggling against the tendency towards exclusiveness within as well as without. And none of our institutions was beyond ego, including the *Pour Tous* meetings... which had to constantly reaffirm its *For All*-ness to avoid the inertia of becoming a Thursday Club – a Tyranny of the Group, of the Majority.

And yet, at the same time, it had to maintain its direction, its role of consolidating and unifying a nebulous and amorphous population “without leader” into a coherent and practically efficient Community, countering the opposite pull which tended towards

dis-integration. It was a delicate balancing act, rarely satisfying for anyone in this awkward stage.

Nevertheless, in response to this humbling reminder, the *Pour Tous* meetings began to revolve chairmen and locations so no one could be accused of overplaying his personal direction or of loading the dice; and no settlement could subtly annex or influence its decision-making process or priorities. Of course we would go on accusing, and of course we would go on being guilty. That was the sorcerer's caprice, the ego in its echo chamber and hall of mirrors, chastising its phantoms by proxy. But the true gesture had been made.

Meanwhile, as the internal process of self-defining continued to accelerate, a similar decisiveness began to express itself with regard to the influences that continued to impose from without. Aurovilians began to install the first road blocks to the SAS tourist bus and its Pondicherry "information" office. For the SAS had been operating a lucrative tourist business under the name of "Auroville Information" located across from the main Ashram building in Pondy. And it would take visitors, who assumed that this was the Community's acknowledged representative, on a tour of Auroville conducted by guides who didn't live in Auroville, for a profitable fee which visitors assumed was going towards the Community's support.

In addition to this cleverly-misrepresented exploitation of Auroville, the SAS had confiscated Auroville's school bus that had been donated for the Community. They could do this since everything including motor vehicles had been initially registered in the name of SAS. So despite their donation to Auroville, their titles were in the name of SAS. So technically, legally, they could do as they liked. Even a large yellow Mercedes bus driven overland from Europe and given to the Community by the caravan that came to reside in Auroville was appropriated, remaining to this day in Pondicherry at the disposal of the SAS. Auroville, which by this

time numbered nearly 500 residents, was left with only two small vans which operated alternately for the entire Community.

It was from this background that Aurovilians had begun to feel that they had had enough of this intrusive little lie. And so one day, without any particular planning – spontaneously, as we liked to call these things – *Aspiration* refused to let the tour bus pass through its residential settlement. They simply refused and didn't budge – something which *Aspiration*, to the exasperation of much of the rest of Auroville, would develop to an art form. The French revolutionary art of “*Non!*”

They politely explained to the visitors in the bus that the tour was a hoax, unrelated in any way to the Community, and *voilà...*

That first successful Auroville attempt to block the SAS intrusion drove them to appeal before the Lt. Governor of Pondicherry who was then Chairman of the new Indian Government Committee. Technically, we were told, we couldn't stop the SAS – that they had the papers and the Government had to acknowledge them. The L.G. was also a bit miffed with our breast-beating over what he considered trivial “details”. And we were duly counselled that the Government was concerned with resolving the “larger questions”. So we backed off. At least for the time being.

It's funny how matters of consequence seem to always be preoccupied with the “larger questions”, never the humbler “details”. But life lives in the details.

That spring of '77, a similar frustration would occur, accentuating the Community's need to express itself toward matters imposed on it. In this case, a youth association from Kuilapalayam, the Tamil village neighbouring *Aspiration*, had begun to develop a close link with Aurovilians; and the possibilities of mutual projects and exchange grew through the friendships. Aurovilians offered the youth association a hut in which the contacts could further develop.

But when the SAS heard of this, they immediately filed a complaint with the police, asserting their authority and questioning our right to “give away” Auroville property.

This led to the deeper question which faced that week’s Pour Tous meeting: “Whether we have the right to make our own decisions in such matters. Are we a policy-making body? If so, do we stick with our decisions or withdraw because the result might offend them (SAS)? It is generally felt that we must take a very firm stand, expressing our right to decide. SAS was already leasing peanut fields for next year. It was again emphasized that whatever has been done regarding the leasing and harvesting of crops this year...is not (even) the central issue. But it is important that we consider whether we want to take whatever steps are possible to avoid revolving year after year around the same situation. It is felt rather strongly that Auroville must make a collective statement – something to the effect that ‘we do not recognize claims of ownership or rights to manipulate the land’. If we do this, we must implement it, and it should be endorsed by the whole Community...”

The frustrations were building. One could only wait so long. And whether sanctioned or not, authorized or not, Auroville would one day have to take action on its own. For who else was willing or able to do this *for* us?

This continuous confrontation between internal and external events during that period found a dilemma where both joined. It concerned the question of a small compound called *Fidelity* where a group of six members were followers of a guru-figure called Jagadish, a non-resident who had de facto taken up residence in Auroville. We had already begun to define our Community process with regard to receiving newcomers; but we had not yet faced this more unpleasant challenge which our Community would sooner or later have to confront: The right to ask individuals to leave... either because they threatened the safety of other residents or somehow

jeopardized the security and integrity of the Community itself.

Left in the abstract, it felt uncomfortable to consider, especially in view of what the SAS had done to us. But such decisions – which we had never taken before and which we would only be forced to consider in extreme cases – are part of the responsibilities for a Community-based collective body. After all, Anarchy means “without ruler”, not “without justice”.

Nevertheless, we had to be careful. For one man’s justice is another man’s tyranny. And the *Fidelity* matter became the first test case. For here was a small fringe group following a guru-figure called Jagadish who was not even an Aurovilian himself. In addition to their cult behaviour, they chose not to participate in any collective work or service to the Community for over a year, yet continued to draw upon Community resources. And further exaggerating their disconnect, they pledged their allegiance to the SAS and its efforts to re-appropriate Auroville.

So what *should* we do, what *could* we do? For the decision to expel a group from Auroville was neither something to be taken lightly, nor something to be ignored, even though it risked creating divisions among ourselves. After all, there would be instances when certain behavior was simply unacceptable in Auroville. And when the Mother herself said that “*No rules or laws are being framed,*” she also stated in the next sentence that “*things will get formulated as the underlying Truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively.*” She also quite clearly stated: No drugs in Auroville.

This issue led to a series of meetings among residents of the Centre area where *Fidelity* was located. The last of these meetings was held on May 20th, 1977 in the Matrimandir construction office. But Centre residents, unlike *Aspiration’s* zealous freedom-fighters, still could not reach consensus on a decision. Which left the matter in limbo.

It was a painful period for us. For churning the subconscious mud,

flushing out the clogged pipes in the caverns of our humanity, was a messy business. – a plumber’s work.

It is impossible to imagine how all this appeared from outside... For even our most sympathetic friends who tried their best not to judge had difficulty reconciling between the ideal of human unity for which we strove and the mire in which we dove. But we held our noses and went on, descending deeper and deeper, long ago leaving behind the surface harmonies which cloaked a oneness much more profound and infinitely more powerful – a oneness unbearable for the ego.

For ours was not a tepid or ethereal love for Auroville and one another. Ours was a love of fire: a fire of love that needed to be unearthed.

What you say about the ‘Evil Persona’ interests me greatly as it answers to my consistent experience that a person greatly endowed for the work has, always or almost always ... a being attached to him, sometimes appearing like a part of him, which is just the contradiction of the thing he centrally represents in the work to be done. Or, if it is not there at first, not bound to his personality, a force of this kind enters into his environment as soon as he begins his movement to realize. Its business seems to be to oppose, to create stumbling blocks and wrong conditions; in a word, to set before him the whole problem of the work he has started to do. It would seem as if the problem could not, in the occult economy of things, be solved otherwise than by the predestined instrument making the difficulty his own, that would explain many things that seemed disconcerting on the surface.⁸⁷

And if that person was a collective being whose work was to realize human unity...

⁸⁷Sri Aurobindo, Letters on Yoga, Cent. Ed. Vol. 24, p. 1,660

6. the interregnum of consciousness and the economics of oneness

*Nine years a Child-King in quest of his crown,
Ere the sixth the Queen Mother lay veiled in the frown
Of the Grey Regents who had conspired to drown
The golden-eyed Child and plunder his Town.*

It was February 28, 1977. Auroville had completed its ninth year. Despite the Chairman, despite us. It would be *because* it had never been.

From the notes of the meeting we held on that birthday: "It is largely a question of formulating relationships within Auroville: who is who? who belongs where? who joins what? who stands where?... Auroville is trying to find its new identity... It boils, ripens, searches..."

On that same day, an article entitled *Establishing Priorities for Auroville* indicated that, "Auroville has been asked to submit a list of priorities to the Chairman of the Government Committee for Auroville, based on its genuine needs and its ability to implement them..." It seemed to represent the climax of a thread that had been running for months through a combination of housing, development, land use and environmental planning meetings in an attempt to define some perspective in terms of Auroville's growth as a township-in-the-making. The image of "City" was still the index and definition through which most external bodies, particularly the Government, could relate to us and consider their own involvement.

These assorted working meetings seemed to be reaching a crescendo in February and early March as we raced to envision and formulate our coming stages of development in order to fill in the

apparent vacuum for committees whose bureaucratic mindsets accustomed them to Five-Year-Plans. Pushed from this recognition that if we didn't look respectable and convincing – at least on paper – some well-intentioned *other* might officially begin to advise us and eventually implement their contents according to their own definition. So, pressed by our own dwindling incomes in a no-way-out situation as well as the attraction of substantial assistance, we doggedly formulated this “development” exercise to provide a response.

Toward this goal, a short notice appeared in the communities: “Without compromising our collective approach to administration of Auroville, a certain structure reflecting our *modus operandi* budget needs to be presented which would enable us to undertake a relationship with government agencies, organizations such as Tata, etc. It was proposed that rather than titles and personalities, the structure to be presented should emphasize areas of work and functions...”

The meetings that followed, though concentrated, were not held behind closed doors. Not because we needed to pry on one another, but because somehow each one of us needed to at least have the opportunity to engage oneself, participate if we wished, in these processes. The openness of our internal systems was an essential quality for this educational element inseparable from our lives. Auroville was a kindergarten where we learned to become responsible; and there was no place for professional exclusiveness, no matter how benign. On the other hand, this was not meant to override the individual's need for creative space – which it sometimes did.

While this “Development Plan” for 1977-78 was crystallizing, we found ourselves entering the moment of our first collective deficits. And those directly involved with Community finances which passed through *Pour Tous* Fund found themselves abruptly thrown

out of their first year's honeymoon. We began to castigate ourselves, appeal to ourselves to become more conscious of our spending and consumption, discussing ways for the communities to reduce and cut back wherever possible. It was true that our budget already seemed to be on the marginal line; and it was true that outside sources had become more unreliable or were blocked because of the SAS embargo which effectively closed off any tax-exempt donations from India; and it was also true that we had no cache of capital stashed away somewhere to help meet our needs, subsidize our self-sufficiency.

And though all of these constrictions might be miraculously erased by the Government and others who had appeared on the horizon to save us – we hoped – just in the nick of time, nevertheless some subtle connecting threads were beginning to fray between the *Pour Tous* arrangement and the Community. There was now even a “between” *Pour Tous* and the Community. The relationship had somehow slipped from identity to association. For *Pour Tous* – despite our protests, struggles and denials – had begun to disconnect from its core definition: *For All*.

And yet there was no one else to blame but us: *all* of us, *each* one of us, without exception. For something had happened between us that began to take the *Pour Tous* system for granted; began to see it as something other than us... letting it fall into the responsibility of a few to whom we went to fulfill our needs, unintentionally thereby reducing it to a dispensation: A welfare system for needy Aurovilians.

After all, the management of *Pour Tous* – of Auroville's economy – was not only *for* us all but *depended* on us all: on the consciousness of the Community as a whole, on the active awareness and participation of us all. In other words, we responded to needs not because we were told to by some one of us who had now become an *other*, but because we were all personally responsible for the shared

details of our lives in Auroville.

“Either the Aurovilians are one or Auroville has no meaning,” I recalled the line from Satprem’s letter. It was not a passionate proverb. It was a practical necessity, an essential definition.

After all, it was not ultimately *Pour Tous* which had become exclusive (though we could point the finger at many faux pas of the group that came to be labelled *Pour Tous*). It was *we* who had begun to exclude ourselves. And this trend, this slippage of ours, would continue until the divorce between the individual and our collective economics was no longer sustainable. The attempt to reverse this decline, renew the more living definition of *Pour Tous*, would begin in the autumn of ’78.

In the meantime, for reasons that were not difficult to imagine under the compressed circumstances, the deficits began. We were spending more than we had, blaming it on this reason or that, this system or that impossible restriction . But with our belts already tightened to the last notch, we were running out of excuses and others to blame. The fact was, we had simply lost touch with ourselves, and our economy reflected that disconnection. We were making others of ourselves, blaming others who managed our collective finances for the deficit spending of our own money – drawing from the pool of funds which Aurovilians had deposited in the *Pour Tous* Fund to compensate for the Community’s consumption which no longer corresponded to its means...

...Losing touch with heartfelt hands-on economics, community-based sharing and whole-system priorities... risking a backslide into the macro-patterns of an unbalanced world: of a teetering dinosaur Culture whose increasing populations have no conscious connection with their economies, surrendering responsibility to an elite well-armed with accountants and the armies to back them up.

For even here in Auroville, on a scale where things were still local

and far more transparent, we had registered an immediate budgetary imbalance as soon as our individual sense of responsibility was delinked from the economic equation. Even here in a Community whose residents had consciously committed themselves to change – a Community that was challenged to practice a truer economics, challenged to bridge the gap of consciousness between the individual and the collective, placing a shared decentralized sense of responsibility upon *all* of its members. For in this Auroville, there was no place to hide and no one else to blame. But in the world's present transition, where systems have complexified and outgrown all sense of proportion and relationship, one wonders how much longer the jugglers can still continue to make ends meet. The ends which by now were no longer even identifiable.

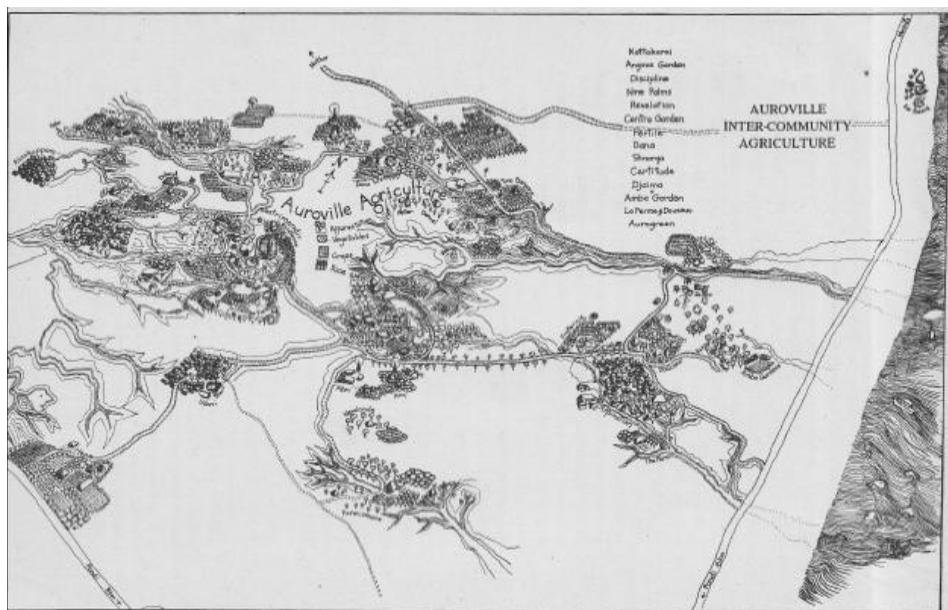
Europe prides herself on her practical and scientific organization and efficiency.

I am waiting till her organization is perfect; then a child shall destroy her. (Sri Aurobindo)

And so in that fall of 1978, the Community would reluctantly accept that responsibility, take that decision to live within its means and find out what those means actually were, undistorted by loans and deficit spending. Thus would begin what came to be known as the "Envelope System" – an attempt to bring a collective transparency to Auroville's finances.

The principle was simple. You use what you have and *only* what you have: what incomes you have, what food you grow. And then you see where you *really* are and what's still needed, see what you *really* need. And for many weeks, many of us – especially in the large collective dining rooms – ate little more than some grains we grew and a few coarse vegetables. Breakfast, lunch and dinner. And

we suddenly all understood directly, with the body, where we were. And this experience pressed us into the phase of rapidly developing our farms and intensive gardens, steadily moving us toward a truer self-sufficiency as the percentage of food and milk products grown and produced in Auroville rose from insignificance to become the mainstay of the Community's diet within a year. Similarly, the involvement of our crafts and industries became less abstract, more dynamic. And none of this happened because a few pushed the many; but because the many spontaneously understood and responded accordingly, naturally, progressively toward a practical com-unity.



At the same time, we continued to refine and redefine our understanding of "need", discovering the means which the easy and prosperous way out never pushes one to find: learning to improvise what we needed out of what we had: which wasn't much, but which somehow contained a potential fulfillment if we could see clearly enough. And it was in the weekly exercise of these

“Envelope Meetings” that we really began to learn this process of seeing clearly and collectively together...with representatives from each of the communities gathering together to assess the week’s needs and expenses, calculating the week’s internal income as well as the contributions from friends and Centres abroad; then disbursing the funds according to mutually acknowledged priorities. And these weekly accounts were then posted in each of the communities so that everyone could follow the progress, identify with the process, consciously participate in a synergy that, we hoped, would overtake existing artificial hierarchies, establishing the efficacy of a living Oneness in the details of our most external activities.

But this ambitious exercise would only manifest eighteen months later. For now, Aurovilians in that mid-March of 1977 were still awaiting a first grant to be released through India’s Government Committee. For it seemed that the reinforcements we desperately needed might finally arrive. And then suddenly, a week later, in that same March of 1977, with the Emergency Rule in India lifted, Mrs. Gandhi and her administration fell unexpectedly in the elections that she herself had called. And with that sudden and unforeseen event, the Government Committee for Auroville gradually became defunct, lost in the transition of administrative bureaucracies that followed as the newly-forged coalition of the more conservative Janata Party sorted itself out, becoming progressively more preoccupied with its own internal dissensions.

India, that unpredictable Woman, had just pulled out another rug from under us. Her timing was incredible. Just when the rescue seemed at hand, just when the development plans had crystallized. Yet somehow, it was not to be. For apparently our independence, our freedom, could not be given to us by another. It would come when we were ready, when we had earned it. And perhaps if we had gotten it the easy way, we would have missed a critical step in our own developmental process.

Nevertheless, on that Monday morning following the disastrous election outcome, the hopeful fervour that filled our development meetings froze. Half a dozen grim-faced Aurovilians who had diligently finished their paperwork could now use it for kindling to break the chill that hung over the room. As a Community we were left speechless, in shock, drawn within to calm our shattered collective nerves in that instant which struck without forewarning: a lighting bolt shattering past and future. leaving us in a present with no projections, no expectations, no saviour.

For our protector – the Government Committee for Auroville which had barely functioned for three months – gradually dissolved, recalled back into that great bulk of bureaucratic protoplasm. Yet it had accomplished three things in those three months – three simple tasks, none of which could be called hand-outs: It had enabled an initial bank account to be opened through which collective funds could be channelled to the Community. It had played a role in suspending the SAS's exclusive power to guarantee or deny visas for Auroville. And it had filed a report documenting the extensive mismanagement of large sums of funds by the SAS, particularly government grants in the early years, which now lay somewhere shelved in some office in Delhi.

But the gift we had desperately hoped for could not be given. It seemed we would still have to discover it for ourselves...

7. by the law of a new world

But now, with the Government no longer there to protect us, the SAS reappeared from behind the bushes, wasting no time in renewing its more overt harassments. By the end of March, we learned that they wanted to confiscate the cement mixer presently in use at Matrimandir for “their” Bharat Nivas – a construction site originally meant to become cultural pavilions for India and its various States. The site, which was left for years in a stage of incompleteness, had now been appropriated by the SAS as their “field headquarters” – their last geographical foothold in Auroville.

If this story was a fiction rather than a documentation of actual unfolding events, it would seem that the story was stuck, repeating episodes of unimaginable redundancy. For where were the swift heroic movements? the passages that finally break through this hopelessly repetitive script? No one was asking this question more intensely than me, than us – the characters trapped in this torturous tale. For we desperately wanted *something else!*... were *dying* for *something else!*

After all, yes, we planted our trees. Yes, we revived our soil, reversed the erosion. Yes, we built our ecological houses, our windmills, our appropriate technologies. Yes, we made our experiments that worked, that backfired, that exploded or yielded some unexpected brilliance. Yes, we stumbled along discovering our roots and relations with our village brothers. And yes, we shared our lives fully with our children in this town that somehow continued to unfold before us, despite the SAS, despite us and our resistances. For we were both the lock and the key. The problem and the solution in a story dying to turn true. Just as we, the living characters, were dying to turn true with it. Or at least for now, to turn the page of the past.

For even in our deepest despair, our most oppressive chapters,

where every paragraph seemed to deny that new story, a prayer would suddenly break through between the lines as we recalled for a moment our truer lines... recalling a call that burned through these pages and pages, volumes and volumes of human habit: An aspiration that irresistibly called for a new world to be...

... Even when every chapter seemed to deny that possibility.

The SAS Chairman – aware of our vulnerability, our lowered resistance, braced and emboldened by his calculated political risk to openly back the Janata Party which had defeated Indira Gandhi's Congress Party – began to plant his agents, his forces of division, among us. And in our vulnerable state of exhaustion, they preyed upon our weaknesses: our debilitated defenses, Achilles heart, emotional confusion, exhaustion and guilt-ridden self-doubts... All of which played into Nava's hands as he tempted us with harmony, security, relief in exchange for collaboration. But behind his "benevolence", he was effectively turning us against one another: Indian against foreigner, French against Anglo-Saxon, the Community against *Pour Tous*. The classic divide and conquer.

And there were times when he nearly succeeded. But even he had underestimated the depth of our commitment and cohesion to Her and this Auroville we cherished.

Nevertheless, the *Pour Tous* meetings through that spring and on into the fall of that year reflected our grave inner struggle. For we had to constantly reclarify our collective position with regard to the SAS, constantly fend off the doubts and insecurities that sought to undermine and divide us, constantly reaffirm our fragile yet uncompromising inner strength.

For the tendency to doubt oneself is still so compelling, so second-nature. After all, how else to explain this reflex to repent before our Inquisitors? to confess our sins, accept our guilt, give up on ourselves, running back into the comfort-zone of our slavery to

avoid the burden of our freedom?

This year, 1977, would become the test for our decisiveness as a Community – our ability to choose and stand firmly by our choice, regardless of the consequences.

At the conclusion of one of the *Pour Tous* meetings toward the end of June, dispensing with his usual financial sermons, Alain Bernard read out an English translation of a letter which he had drafted responding to those dissatisfied with the decisive – some would say defiant – turn which the meetings had taken. It was an unmistakable gauloise expression from another one of us bursting at the seams... who had had enough of our self-imposed impotence. The extracts from that letter which follow are a presentiment of what was in the wings later that summer:

... The *Pour Tous* Meeting (that has not yet been de-baptized) remains the necessary democratic organ allowing everybody that dares to express himself. An end to Auroville's impotence to decide and act. (...)

... What is there for the time being in Auroville? A kind of anarchy? Does it function? Yes or no? Are we eating, drinking, sleeping in the dry? Yes or no? Is the Matrimandir growing? Yes or no? Are we making more mistakes today than when Shyamsunder was at the head? Not more, I'm sure, probably less.

... Some resent in some way *Pour Tous*, as if it was in some way a usurper. Just imagine, the grocery store has become the spine of an organization and it just mushroomed like that. The *Pour Tous* meetings at the beginning were supposed above all to serve and see together the material problems and how to solve them. Not the problems that one invents by rummaging in his brain, but those that present themselves day by day, by "chance". And then, *Pour Tous* meetings grew up around food,

clothing, soap, water, electricity, wells and roofs and trees to be planted, etc. They have grown as the occasion for the only Community meeting of Auroville. Maybe it was not allowed to do that, be careful not to confuse *Pour Tous* and Auroville. But it has done it and continues with highs and lows of consciousness, highs not very high and lows as deep as the deepest dungeon. Nobody denies it, but it continues without anybody particularly insisting on it.

(...)

Auroville is a moving train that... one tries to prevent from derailing. One has not even the time to wonder where it goes, it is rolling and will continue to roll... If it must derail, then it will derail. Don't worry about it, and it won't be even the Aurovilians who make it derail. Our action is at the level of executing the details, and a round or a square window was never seen to be responsible for the derailing of a train. My only true responsibility in Auroville is what I am at each moment within, and the true importance of my work or occupation is only in proportion to their helping me to become truer...

Besides the particular pretext, which perhaps did not even warrant such a response, it stood as a statement of Auroville's conviction and determination to be what it *had* to be, to do what it *had* to do, despite the surface appearances which we didn't bother to cover in cosmetics. It was a statement that could easily be seen as arrogant and insular – and sometime, perhaps often, we were – but which found the fire of its expression in a deeper recognition that our ultimate allegiance was to the truth that we sought... and that we need not fear to seek openly, without compromise, despite the consequences. For we had nothing to lose except our own worst fears.

After all, we had endured the anguish of '76, hoping that someone

would see and intervene. And we had seen those hopes crushed in the next moment. And still we lingered through '77 under the assumption that some resolution through the Central Government – which we kept being assured was just around the bureaucratic corner – would alleviate our feudal conditions. But how much longer could we suppress the definitions that pressed from within us to manifest? How much longer could we deny ourselves, deny this Auroville which surged within us to be? how much longer could we hold our breath, put on another face to satisfy this other that we were told would deliver us?

For in fact we were already born. We did not need someone to deliver us. Auroville existed *de facto*, even if not *de jure*. And we could not delay our legitimate self expression without deforming or disfiguring our own growth. You cannot ask a tree to stop growing until it is legally recognized.

An open letter accentuating this same intensity appeared in the Notes from Pierre, commenting on a meeting which reverberated with the lingering question of the *Fidelity* group:

... But if we continue to hide the whole issue behind words, if we pretend to be saints and pure and “above”, how will the transformation come?...

...Our darker parts plead for leniency, patience and see the intense battle ahead – the battle of purification – and all its suffering, longing for past bonds and sweetness and comfort!...

What awaits us is light, joy, and strength, love and harmony, yes... But, the love and harmony of warriors, of strong individuals, happy and clear. Not the harmony of frightened, weak and impotent petty “saints” broken by life and by obstacles and challenges denied...

It was perhaps the prologue, the last writing on the wall before it fell.

But even Pierre could not foresee the events that would explode in those next weeks of August. The following reconstruction of those days between the 7th and 27th of August is largely drawn literally from or paraphrased from the details of a 27-page report I drafted called "Auroville: the Present Circumstances". It was submitted by the Community to the Government of India by a delegation of five Aurovilians. The first part of the report was a background chronology providing the context of the problem with the SAS; but beginning on page ten, the wall with the writing on it, etched in a thousand languages, began to fall...

On Sunday, the 7th August, many Aurovilians from various parts of Auroville met under the Banyan Tree at Centre at about 3:00 P.M. The purpose of the meeting was to see in which way Auroville wished to respond to the report it had received earlier in the week that the SAS and its agents were planning to have regular Sunday meetings under the Banyan Tree or in the Matrimandir. Aurovilians felt that the presence of the SAS in this blatant form at the very heart of Auroville was a violation which could not be tolerated.

The provocative aspect of the move – engineered from their Bharat Nivas Trojan Horse – was unmistakable. It was the week just prior to the SAS's Annual Conference which coincided with Sri Aurobindo's birthday on August 15th. And many members from all over India would be in Pondicherry. A considerable audience for whom to stage a well-timed drama. Politically speaking, they had all the leverage. And we had none. Only that thing within which couldn't be moved.

At about 4:00 P.M. the SAS bus arrived at the entrance to the Matrimandir area. Spontaneously a group of Aurovilians left the Banyan Tree to prevent their entry. Gradually all of the Aurovilians present joined them and locked arms in a chain to prevent the intrusion of the SAS...

None of this was foreseen when the Aurovilians had gathered. It happened spontaneously, without any prior planning. Even some of our youth – Renu and Stephanie who just happened to be at the baseball game at Centre field on that Sunday – stumbled across the event and joined the impromptu chain. We were breaking our chains and making them at the same time across that small dirt access road to Matrimandir. And at any time, that wayward busload could have simply gone around us. After all, there was a 360 degree access by foot to the Matrimandir. But the symbolism was clear. For they chose to go through us.

After about half an hour, Jagadish came with his *Fidelity* group of six followers, inciting the SAS contingent to break the chain. Jagadish fired up the sentiments of the SAS personnel, and Govind, a leader within the SAS ranks, began abusing Aurovilians in Hindi, accusing them of being ‘colonialists’ and ‘anti-Indian’.

We made no response. We didn’t budge.

But Jagadish – who had now shown his true colours before even the most disbelieving among us – and Govind continued their tirades and tantrums, picking out the Indians among us –Yusuf, Prem, Dipti, Arjun... and calling them “traitors to the nation”. When I asked Yusuf later what Govind had said in Hindi, he told me: “Only Hindi will be spoken in Auroville”. The venom of racism that expressed itself in that moment revealed what seethed beneath the rational facade.

But we did not reply. We did not budge.

By then, they too had sat down in the road facing us, stalemated. There was a ten-meter no-man’s land between us – but in those ten meters lay all of the distances between fascism and freedom.

At this point...

... Govind went and called the police. He returned with the

Kottakupam Police Sub-Inspector, and discussions took place as to why Aurovilians would not allow the SAS passage...

By now the sun was setting and it looked like we were in for a hard day's night. Aurovilians, whose numbers had continued to swell, began preparing for the evening, gathering mats, making helter-skelter tents – like Bedouins of a new world. The event provided a split-vision image: at once, grim and heavy, festive and free. And that night, while the SAS bus – “our” previous school bus – rumbled up and back to Pondy bringing provisions and replacements for their SAS “invaders”; and while police officers remained between the two parties, Laurence – accompanied her brother, François on the guitar – overflowed with songs until she was hoarse.

The next morning, we were still there and so were they. So we began to build a small shelter out of scaffolding and canvas “borrowed” from the Matrimandir to shield ourselves from the sun. We soon found ourselves joined by a bus-load of helmeted police parked beside the SAS bus. “The District Collector of South Arcot, along with the Sub-Collector and other local officials arrived at around 10:30 AM, and discussions began with them.”

Through that morning and into the early afternoon, the Collector and other law and order agents – for their involvement in this enigma was purely from the interpretation of “law and order” based on the paper premise of SAS as “owners” – made efforts to negotiate with us, pleading with us to let them pass – “don’t put us in an embarrassing situation”, etc. – but we were not negotiable. We politely refused to budge.

The image was striking: officials ordering us to disperse, obviously perplexed by the unprecedented situation that they faced; behind them, ranks of policemen; and behind them, well-protected, the SAS. While in the front sat the firmly-planted Aurovilians, serenaded now by Pascal’s satires, which at one point broke into a

quick fandango with Big Patrice.

By about 3:00 PM, the local officials were visibly shaken. They didn't know what to do with these Aurovilians who wouldn't listen to reason. Finally the Collector left, unable to mediate, and the order was given by the Sub-collector and Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) that if we did not disperse, the troops would be called in to move through us.

We became silent, put down our guitars, and sat down together in rows across that narrow clay road. We were approaching the climax.

"I'll give you just a little while longer," the nervous sub-collector told us. But we just sat there, arms linked, concentrated in silence. He was pleading with us.

Then the DSP intervened. No more hesitations. "I'll give you five minutes to disperse." He meant business. So did we. We became immobile, gathered in one impenetrable silence. He called in the squadrons of police who had put on their helmets and taken up their sticks.

In that silence, eyes closed, calling for something else, calling for a new world, we could hear the order being given: "You have three minutes to disperse"; and we could hear the crunching sound of boots as they marched towards us. "Two minutes to disperse". Silence. A new world. The tramp of marching boots. "One minute". Silence. We are one. We are one. It is the law of a new world we seek. *Aum Namó Bhagavaté*. The law of a new world. Nothing can touch that. Nothing can touch that. Silence. The sound of boots beating the earth. Tramp. Tramp, Tramp, then voices. The sixty seconds extends to the age of an earth. Then silence. The crunch of boots begins to fade. We open our eyes. They are marching away.

What happened?

A telephone message had just come from New Delhi from someone whom we trusted. "Yield to a Government order". As firmly as we had been resolved to stay – whatever the consequences – we were not entrenched. We had made our point and now, unexpectedly, we could release.

We informed the DSP that the SAS was free to pass. But at that point, confused by the sudden reversal, the DSP said that he would have to inform his superior, the Collector, and await further instructions. Two hours later, as the sun flattened on the horizon, the mechanical clearance was given, and a not-very-sure-of-themselves group of SAS fanatics made their uncertain way, escorted by a corps of police, to the Matrimandir where they could make their well-guarded pious gestures.

And while the ambiguous brood disappeared behind the Matrimandir, Ruud, a former priest, and Alain Bernard, a former seminary student, organized a flash rehearsal with Aurovilians of the Requiem Mass in Latin. And as the SAS group returned with their police escort, two parallel line of Aurovilians flanked them on the road, holding incense sticks and solemnly chanting in full chorale the Requiem in Latin.

It was like some Rabelais or Aristophanes version of a religious spectacle: the funeral procession of a dying world with laughing children following in their wake.

We had broken through the shell of our internal exile. It was perhaps a forceps birth, but without intermediaries. Despite the missing birth certificate, *we were*. We had joyfully accepted in that moment the responsibility of our lives, in the face of all that opposed, armed with its full paraphernalia of mechanical law enforcement. We had stood our ground on the law of a new world.

8. a self-defining laugh

Returning to the script of the Report...

On Wednesday evening, the 10th of August, prior to the *Pour Tous* meeting, an open general meeting of Aurovilians was held at the Centre. The purpose of this meeting was to decide whether Jagadish, a non-Aurovilian lodged in *Fidelity* ... should be permitted to stay in Auroville (particularly in view of the role he played in the incident of August 7th...). Considering his past and present history with Auroville, the meeting as a whole decided to evict Jagadish...

The formal decision by the Community was communicated eventually through a notice sent to Jagadish – Appendix B of the Report, which began:

We wish to inform you of an open meeting held at Centre on August 11,1977: You are hereby no longer welcome in Auroville and the Community rejects your presence, specifically from a hut in *Fidelity* which you have inhabited secretly without the consent of the Community of Auroville...

Following the sequence:

On Thursday. the 11th, a delegation of Aurovilians left the *Pour Tous* meeting to inform Jagadish at *Fidelity* and to enforce the Community's decision to evict him. Jagadish was not there when the Aurovilians arrived, so they remained, occupying 'his' hut until his return. The other six 'residents' of *Fidelity* – Jagadish's loyal followers – proceeded to take steps by which complaints were filed for 'breaking and entering' with the Police against the Aurovilians representing this action; and soon thereafter, the police were on the scene, stationed in the *Fidelity* compound.

But despite the police presence,...

As the 11th passed, many other Aurovilians and children came to keep vigil in *Fidelity* to convey the unity of Aurovilians' resolve.

The night was spent with songs and the irrepressible laughter that carried through the grimace of the next months. An all-conquering laughter that cut through the fearsome façade. A spontaneous laughter, royal and free.

The vigil of Aurovilians, now revolving in shifts, passed through the 12th and 13th. Auroville was quietly but firmly maintaining its presence and occupation of Jagadish's hut... in view of which he chose not to return.

Apparently he was afraid of the laughter – that laughter which mocked his cherished pretensions, stripping him of his dazzling pseudo-powers.

The 'residents' of *Fidelity* remained secluded in one of the three huts in the compound, while the police presence (expanded by three van-loads) camped in the verandah of the middle hut or stood milling around the yard. Aurovilians spent most of these two days reading, singing songs and planting trees, while the children played games to keep themselves occupied. The kitchen at Centre was now staffed by Aurovilians from Aspiration as well as Centre in order to provide for the larger numbers. The action of the last days had become a practical bond between the two communities.

We were joyfully exhausted through the coming days and nights that merged into some lengthening celebration that continued to gather momentum since that 7th of August. Even the police gradually thawed from tense to puzzled to touched. Who were these crazy, unpredictable Aurovilians who corresponded to no identifiable category? What moved them? And was this outbreak of joy that breached *Fidelity* their crime? – the irreverent crime of these

barrier-breakers, house-breakers, of a new world that invaded us from within?

A simple case of proprietary owners exerting their lawful rights, the police initially thought. But it had become too simple, too cheerful, confusing the law-and-order officials.

During the evening of the 13th, the residents of *Fidelity* left the hut which they had continued to occupy, and were replaced by members of the SAS and their agents or employees from Pondicherry. The following morning, Sunday, August 14th, Aurovilians occupying the former hut of Jagadish recognized that there was no one remaining in *Fidelity* besides themselves, police and SAS personnel. It was felt that these SAS personnel had no reason to be here, and that if they would leave, the tense atmosphere of confrontation would disappear.

A general meeting was called for 1:00 PM on the 14th to collectively approach this next step. The meeting itself was held in and around the verandah of the hut occupied by the SAS personnel.

Actually, the 'meeting' which crammed the tiny verandah consisted most of original ballads composed by Pascal which we all sang. The lyrics and melody swept through us like waves. I remember those days and the days to come most vividly through those songs we sang – those chants which came like a warm and golden cascade of sound that gathered us together beyond ourselves, awakening a child within us that we all recognized as if after some long, long oblivion.

Yes, who were these Aurovilians and what moved them?

Apparently, those magic, living lyrics and the humour that followed them seemed painful to the SAS, and they withdrew... It seemed these last diehards found our joy unbearable.

According to the drier version in the Report, “The presence of this meeting itself generated an action which made the SAS personnel feel un-welcome, and they gradually retreated to the middle hut where the police were camping...”

That same morning, one of the former ‘residents’ of *Fidelity* was conspicuously guiding tourists and visitors who had come to Pondicherry for the August 15th celebration of Sri Aurobindo’s birthday, taking them toward the *Fidelity* area and pointing out the Aurovilians present as ‘terrorists to India’. These tactics, along with others instigated by the SAS Chairman, attempted to smear Aurovilians and Auroville throughout India, creating an image that was not very inviting.

By the end of that day, Jagadish finally made his appearance. But every step he took to enter, from any direction, was blocked by a living chain of Aurovilians. We said nothing. We spoke with our bodies. He could not enter. With what dignity he could still summon, he turned and left. And at that same moment when he began to walk away, the clouds opened up in a torrential and unexpected downpour. And as we joyfully ran for cover under the verandah that now “*belonged to nobody in particular*”, we watched him – abandoned by his fleeing entourage – slowly retreat toward his taxi drenched to the bone.

On the 15th of August, all was quiet at *Fidelity* – Aurovilians maintained their occupancy of the former hut of Jagadish and protected the area from further SAS intrusion, while only a residual police force remained (since complaints and formal charges had been filed through the office of the SAS).

And since that day, *Fidelity* has remained free, liberated, true to the Charter of Auroville.

There was a pause between the 18th and 20th, but the momentum of the moment broke through again on the 21st. For on that Sunday

morning, “Aurovilians met and decided to prevent further intrusion by the SAS into the Bharat Nivas area, India’s unfinished cultural pavilion which the SAS had effectively usurped for their own private offices.” It had become their clandestine citadel where they brewed their strategies to harass us, particularly playing on the sentiments of racism – another point of intolerability which the body of Auroville would no longer support.

While the morning sun rose above the palmyras and dozens of Auroville kids scaled the steep angular roof of the Bharat Nivas auditorium, I hastily put together a “Memo to the SAS regarding the takeover of Bharat Nivas” in anticipation of their arrival (Appendix D in the Report). It read:

We, the Community of Auroville, have decided to prevent the SAS from further intrusion into the Bharat Nivas for the following reasons:

1. The Bharat Nivas was conceived as a cultural pavilion to represent the soul and life of Indian culture within the International zone of Auroville, an area envisioned by the Mother where the diversity and genius of world cultures could be expressed within various pavilions designed expressly for that purpose.
2. The construction of Bharat Nivas, as yet incomplete, has been funded directly by the Central Government of India (as well as through numerous State Governments) for the express purpose of realising India’s genius among the cultures of the world.
3. Despite the express use for which the Bharat Nivas was conceived and designed, despite the Government funding donated to Bharat Nivas for this explicit use, and despite the fact that the pavilion is still under construction, the SAS had lodged itself within the Bharat Nivas for the purposes of

maintaining its private offices for which it has neither received Government sanctions nor sanctions from the Community of Auroville.

4. In addition to the explicit misuse of the Bharat Nivas by SAS for the reasons clearly stated above, the SAS has actually used Bharat Nivas as a field headquarters for many provocative incidents designed to create disharmony in Auroville and among Aurovilians...

In view of these factors which have continued for several months, the community of Auroville feels the presence of the SAS in Bharat Nivas is a violation of Bharat Nivas and of Auroville, and as such takes the initiative to prevent their further intrusion.

The Community of Auroville

The atmosphere was a replay of the previous series of confrontations: songs, multi-lingual jokes, picnic lunches under the palmyras... and then...

At about 4 PM on the 21st, a busload of SAS personnel arrived on the scene, accompanied by a large contingent of helmeted police. Local district officials and the DSP were also present.

At this point the nearly 90 Aurovilians present, representing the collective position of Auroville with regard to SAS, blocked the road... The statement drafted as the explanation of this action was given to Govind... He refused to accept the statement but it was later received by Ravindra, one of the SAS agents.

In the meantime, a squadron of helmeted police assembled in two rows had been ordered into position between the Aurovilians and the SAS. The Aurovilians were then informed by police officials... to disperse as they constituted an 'unlawful assembly'.

... Earlier discussions with the police officials, trying to get them to understand the principles of our actions, seemed now futile as it was clear that once again, they were simply mechanical instruments bound to follow the letter of the law in a dispute where SAS claimed proprietary rights.

But we remained quietly sitting together with the many children among us who too had chosen to stay. The consequences were clearly in front of us. In two rows with boots, sticks and helmets. But our choice had been made elsewhere, long ago, despite us. And we would stand where we were. For there was no other ground to stand on.

We had placed our lives clearly – very clearly, for all to see – on the line. The commitment was not at all abstract. And we called again in our silence for a new world. We stood on the ground of a new world that no one recognized. It was the same ground, but different, two worlds superimposed – one standing over us with sticks and black boots, the other armed with an unwavering flame.

The Aurovilians present were then informed that they had broken the order to disperse and had therefore broken the law...

We had broken their law – the bankrupt law that supported the Lie of the old world. But at this moment, under a blazing sun in some vacant field in south India, we would stand on another Law – a truer law which lived in our hearts. A law for which we had given up our pasts. And if we could not be free, now, to live this truer law, then Auroville and our lives were meaningless:

But these were not things one could explain in words. And so we sat silently before our fate, at knee-level.

Then, some negotiations took place in the background between SAS officials and police, in which it seems the SAS would not press to enter Bharat Nivas but would be content if

the Aurovilians were charged with law-breaking. At this point the SAS personnel left the scene and police began to take the name of the Aurovilians present...

And so another episode concluded. But now the time was compressed – there were no pauses – and we still had one more piece of unfinished business before the moment could release us.

That evening, I composed another flash notice (Appendix E in this Report) entitled “Community of Auroville Statement to the SAS regarding misuse of Auroville’s bus for commercial tourist exploitation”. It was addressed to Govind:

From today onwards, your SAS-operated tourist bus is no longer welcome in Auroville. The Community of Auroville has taken this collective decision on the basis of two violations:

(1) That your tourist bus is an agency of the SAS and its propaganda which has claimed proprietary rights over Auroville, and with whom, in this moment, Auroville is waging a decisive battle for its freedom; and

(2) That you have used Auroville for commercial exploitation, charging tourists a substantial fee, none of which goes to Auroville.

In view of this decision we, the Aurovilians, advise you to cease from operating this fraudulent activity. If, however, you insist on attempting to violate Auroville’s integrity with your bus business, we will be forced to deny its entry and explain to the tourists the cause of our actions...

And in our inimitable style, scores of us gathered together the following day, Monday the 22nd. At the periphery of the Matrimandir area to see if the tourist bus would show up. By this time, we had become quite a formidable chorus, singing the simple rounds we knew by heart in three-part harmony.

And just when we thought it might end in some unbroken major chord, a jarring bass note rumbled down the dusty road. We still had to face the music.

... When the tourist bus arrived at approximately 4:30 PM, it was stopped by the delegation of Aurovilians on the periphery of the Centre area. The visitors were invited to disembark and were guided around the Matrimandir area by Aurovilians who could speak from actual experience about the area. The visitors were then given tea at the Centre kitchen and transported back to Pondicherry by Auroville's one functioning van...

Meanwhile, the SAS tourist guide along with the driver, carrying a copy of our Notice to Govind, walked back to Pondy, unburdened of "their" bus. It was a bit Chaplin-esque, the whole affair, but particularly that fading shot of two figures waddling off into the dusty distance.

We had taken back 'our' bus. The one with 'Auroville' printed clearly on its side. But it would soon be impounded by the police, while we chalked up another charge in the growing list of charges. We had stolen our bus. But they had the papers. And in this wall-papered world we were still inhabiting, nothing mattered unless it was certified in writing.

But there is still one secret which sees through all the paper-people's power: Fire.

9. the transformation of the cells

On the morning of 23rd August, the former Sub-Inspector from Kottakuppam came to *Aspiration*, saw me and called me aside to explain that there was to be a meeting at the Centre at 1:30 PM between Aurovilians, local police and government officials. The purpose of the meeting, he informed me, was “that the Central Government had asked the police authorities and the local Tahsildar (district government officer) to hear the grievances of Aurovilians.”...

In good faith, we fell for their line and organized to meet with them.

Two dozen Aurovilians, taking the police at their word, waited at Matrimandir office until 2:30 PM when police officers, the Tahsildar and the Sub-Collector together with the DSP, arrived. After a pleasant exchange during which the police spoke about ‘peace and harmony’, the law enforcement officials abruptly read out a list of 22 Aurovilians who were to be arrested immediately. The Aurovilians present could see that the whole thing was a trap to apprehend Aurovilians under the pretence of a meeting. Some of them (us) managed to escape... in order to inform the rest of Auroville so that all might gather together as one Community – the principle being that all of the Aurovilians charged with offenses were representing Auroville as a whole, and it was the Community of Auroville that was prepared to receive the consequences.

I remember British Shraddhalu getting the tractor and trailer which soon was overflowing with what could have been an international sampling of refugees – men, women, children, infants, baby bottles and blankets. From all over we came, by trailer, by motorcycle, by foot, from *Aspiration*, *Centre*, even the Greenbelt. The happening that we were gathering for was an Arrest. Ours.

When we reached the Centre area, we could see the white-caged police vans parked at the site of our first roadblock; and to prevent being prematurely arrested, we emptied from the trailer, left our motorcycles, and walked through the Matrimandir Gardens area to the Banyan Tree which was slowly filling with a sea of Aurovilians.

By 5:00 PM we were all together seated under the Banyan. In the distance, down the access road, were three white mobile cages and a swarm of khaki figures coagulating into a formation. During this tense no-man's-land moment while the scene built to its denouement, I was feverishly trying to get phone messages through to Delhi and the Chief Secretary in Madras. In a mood of dark humour, it was a time when I deeply questioned the utility of the Indian telephone system.

But just after I finally got through to the Chief Secretary's office and his aide mumbled something about being in a conference, I saw the ranks of khaki on the horizon begin marching towards the Banyan. It was one of those instants where one chooses consciously, despite oneself. I hung up the babbling receiver and sprinted the hundred meters to the Banyan to get there just before the police.

I remember squeezing into the middle of the concentric circles in which we were sitting, finding a place between Claude Borg and one of our Tibetan children, just before the troops arrived sealing off entry and exit.

At 5:30 PM, three busloads of helmeted police arrived with their sticks at the Banyan Tree. They encircled the body of Aurovilians who at this point were sitting closely together in concentric circles, arms locked together... The DSP began calling out the names of the 22 Aurovilians on the list, but no one responded. Then he gave the order to take them by force...

We huddled together ever more closely, fiercely, like a human knot,

determined to not let our brothers and sisters be torn from us. How much we felt ourselves physically one body then, how much we held together then, yet how much something wished to deny us, divide us.

He called off those first names, – once, twice, – those first names that “belonged to nobody in particular”. But Nobody moved. We went in deeper and deeper. Calling deeper and deeper. Holding one another deeper and deeper. *Aum Namó Bhagavaté*. Deeper and deeper. *Aum Namó Bhagavaté*.

In that dense and crushing silence, two voices were heard: SAS officials who pointed out to the DSP the names of Aurovilians on the list from among the body of Aurovilians under the Banyan Tree. Then the DSP – who later lost his job – unleashed the squads of helmeted police who began breaking through the embrace of Aurovilians.

We held for our lives to one another, but they brutally tore us apart. Each one that they pulled from us, we grabbed for again, holding his/her legs as they would try to drag us away. But the force they employed – they “did not hesitate to use their sticks, their boots and their fists as indiscriminately with the women and the children as with the men” – snapped the links, one by one. Still we clung desperately, but the rings broke as another link and then another had been ripped apart.

It was a violation so condensed, so gross under that Banyan Tree – the tree which was called the “Tree of Unity”. It felt like all the brutality that had been unleashed over the years against us, and all that yet seethed under the cloak of discretion, erupted in that act, revealing in a point the whole story. The Story of Love and its mask of Resistance.

And as they carried us off to the waiting vans, some even by the hair and ears, we called for that new world – even in the very face

of its contradiction. We called and we called and we called. Under that Banyan, we simply became a call. For there was nothing else to do, to be. Around us this suffocation. Within, the only breath, this call.

At this point police began indiscriminate arrests of whichever Aurovilians they could grab. The first busload of Auroville prisoners had already departed, carrying with it a child among the adults...

I was the first one to be thrown into the second van. It was the first moment since the intensity exploded that I was looking at the event from "outside" – through a cage. It was a battlefield. Little children were running and crying here and there, calling for their parents, many of whom would be taken away during those thirty minutes. Aurovilians were still sprawled all around the tree as the police charged through those who remained. Sandals, bags and clothing were scattered everywhere.

I watched as they dragged off my comrades to join me. Claude – my sitting partner and a mother of two – was among the next to share the cage with me. I flashed her a little reassuring wink. Don't worry, I told her, it's only speeding up the process, it's only speeding up the process.

The second police bus filled rapidly with new prisoners when suddenly most of the remaining Aurovilians, realizing that half of us had already been taken into police vans, spontaneously rushed to the open van and voluntarily jumped inside to join their brothers and sisters...

With or without charges, with or without police escort, Aurovilians freely swarmed into the half-filled cages. Then "...police immediately locked the second van and drove off, carrying away two more children with the adults."

As we pulled away, most of us still stunned by the incredible

experience that we had just passed through, I watched the few straggling adults left standing in a daze under the Banyan. I began to feel the ache in my left shoulder where I had gotten hit with a police baton during the melee. I turned to discover the faces of those who were among us. And there was Renu, in the front, overwhelmed, crying and smiling at the same time.

It was a most unexpected journey in this most Unexpected Journey.

... The first van was taken directly to the police station at Killianur in South Arcot District; however the second van, packed with more than 25 Aurovilians, was taken to Tindivanam (some 30 kilometres north). The normal half-hour journey took three hours...

The sun had already slipped away... and it was on a dark highway somewhere between Auroville and Tindivanam that they stopped our van and forced half of us out into another van. During the transfer, the police escorting us between the vans got in some good punches, "... carefully avoiding our faces so as not to leave visible traces of the incident..." By the time our two vans reached Tindivanam Police Station at 8:30 PM, I thought my bladder would burst.

... The approximately 30 Aurovilians were then herded into a keet shed (3x5 meters) behind the station. The other group of 11 Aurovilians spent the night on the verandah of the Killianur Police Station. In all, 40 Aurovilians were taken into custody (including three children) of whom only 14 were on the (original) arrest list.

The list of 22 would soon grow to 70 charged with various combinations of more than a dozen counts.

That night we slept body to body on that rough mud floor accompanied by the whine of mosquitoes which by morning could hardly fly after their orgy. I remember going through the motions of sleep with some tomatoes in my right hand. They had been brought to us by some visiting Aurovilians that evening; but some of us felt

to keep them for another purpose. It had been rumoured that Jagadish and some of his followers were supposed to come when we were safely asleep to identify us. But the tomatoes were still in my hand when I awoke. They never had the courage to get close enough to us.

... The following morning at 6:00 AM on the 24th, after having spent the night on the floor of the shed, the Aurovilians in custody in Tindivanam were joined by the 11 others who had been remanded to Kilianur. The reunion was very powerful...

... Most of the day was spent dealing with police bureaucracy. They were trying to list the Aurovilians under two separate charge sheets. But Aurovilians expressed the unanimous will to stay together and face all charges equally (since in fact, all actions taken were representative of a collective will and shared principle).

That same morning, in groups of four and five, we were escorted by armed police guards outside the station across the main street of Tindivanam to the single available public-shower. Which consisted of two leaky taps. It was quite an attraction for the local townspeople as we were paraded up and back. The police Inspector later had to order the crowds away as they were jamming up against the walls of the police compound to witness this strange assemblage of prisoners.

By the end of the afternoon, Aurovilians were finally convinced that for the purpose of bail application, two separate charges had to be drawn to up. So they agreed to sign their names on condition that all would be charged with the same offence and eventually be remanded to the same jail. Aurovilians also took a pact among themselves that if one group was refused bail, then the other group would voluntarily refuse bail even if it were granted.

But despite our agreement with the police, they still split us into

two groups, one of twelve persons who remained in Tindivanam to appear before the Magistrate on lesser charges; and another twenty-eight of us who were later bussed that evening to Villupuram to appear before the Magistrate on more serious charges.

It is ironic that the police were so precise about the charge list and the names which appeared on each, while they hardly even acknowledge the interchangeability of Aurovilians under arrest on that same day. It was a game of musical chairs between prisoners and visitors: "In several case, Aurovilians who had been on the original charge sheets were replaced by other Aurovilians volunteering themselves for arrest. In some cases, Aurovilians who came as visitors enlisted themselves as prisoners. It seemed that the only factor the police were concerned with was maintaining an accurate numerical quota of men and women to total 40."

By the 24th evening, the twelve who had appeared before the Tindivanam Magistrate were immediately locked up after waiving bail which they had been refused pending the outcome of the other group. The other twenty-eight of us arrived an hour later in Villupuram where we were presented before the Magistrate, processed and remanded to custody without bail. We were obliged to spend that night under guard on the verandah of the Magistrate's court until the formalities, which lasted past midnight, concluded. Renu, half asleep and too groggy to protest, was "kidnapped" back to Auroville with our van driver. She had been considered underage by the judge.

... At 6:00 AM in the morning of the 25th, the 27 (minus Renu) in Villupuram were transferred to the local jail compound with its miserable conditions: one outdoor tap was available at certain hours for washing... the cells, none of which had windows, were not larger than 2½ x 4 meters, and were barren except for a toilet hole in the back floor...

We would be accommodated in a row of six of those barred cells,

approximately five Aurovilians per cell.

We spent much of that morning with buckets of detergent and disinfectant, scrubbing out the floors and walls of those indescribable holes before the incredulous looks of our wardens. And in the next days, despite the poverty around us, we shared a laughter and joy that bailed us out – that transformed and liberated those cells, breaking us free within the walls of our prisons.

Between the bars, inside those stagnant cubes, a smile flashed and a new life pulsed – a freedom that knew no opposite, a sun that no dungeon could hide.

Who were these Aurovilians and what moved them?

Later that afternoon, while we mixed together on the platform, sabotaging all the iron-clad rules of prison etiquette, we received a letter from Renu which I read out to everyone twice. The following is its unretouched text, complete with indigenous spelling:



Dear whoever is in Jail ... and papa. Please explain why I was checked out. When I woke up I was in the van at Tindivanam. I tried to jump out but Kannan put me back in (*not fare* I wanted to stay) at least get Craig and Olivier to stay. Tell any policemen you see 'SUCH A BRAGGER' from me. Also tell Savitra that I used his *Hitody* to go to Aspiration. Us guys over here are going to do mischief, I won't say

what because a police might read this letter. In France they told what has happened on the radios. If by any good luck they say that I signed my name in the FAT MAN'S BOOK and I have to come back I'll be very happy. I would like to come at least to see you all.

LOTS AND LOTS AND LOTS OF LOVE Renu XXXXXXX

On the back of her note, she had drawn a sketch of the DSP that she had mistakenly called the Sub-Inspector. The resemblance was striking, as anybody there could tell you.

In the days that followed, we received an endless stream of visitors who snuck their way past the guards. Many of our Tamil village friends and co-workers also came to see us in what was becoming a daily celebration under the noses of our prison officials. Our joy was blowing their whole depressing atmosphere and they didn't know what to do. Was this a prison or what? How would they explain to their superiors? Why wasn't everyone penitent and suffering?

By Saturday, the 27th, we had gotten word that our bail release was inevitable. The twelve from Tindivanam, hearing of our imminent release, accepted their bail and joined us in Villupuram. There was only one hitch – which never materialized: that our bail might be contingent on the conditions that we cause no further trouble to SAS and allow them free movement in Auroville. This stipulation would have been totally unacceptable to us, and we were prepared to refuse bail unless it was unconditional.

In anticipation of this, I drafted a quick statement which all 27 of us signed and passed on to the authorities. It began...

We, the undersigned Aurovilians, representing one-fifth of the responsible working force of Auroville, are prepared to respect the laws of India and to live peaceably; however, the laws of India must not be exclusively under the interpretation of the SAS...

After some dialectical paragraphs following from this premise, the statement concluded:

...We feel it is the SAS who has, under the mask of law, in fact broken the spirit of law and made a mockery of the judicial process... We restate that we are prepared to respect and

honour the laws of India and to maintain peace and order in our Community, but we cannot tolerate the violations which the SAS inflicts upon us and our rightful functioning, strangling our progress and threatening our survival...

But on the evening of the 27th August, at 6:00 PM, we received word that there were no conditions; and we would all be released on bail without strings attached. Toine, who had spent several sleepless nights running between lawyers, judges and police officials to pull it off, had broken the news to us. And in the courtyard of Villupuram's third-class jail, Aurovilians gathered themselves, their mats, their toothpaste, soap and dirty laundry. We were going home. Free.

And no one could deny it.

We were floating in our jubilation as the caravan of taxis carried us back to our celebration dinner in Aspiration. And when we arrived, all of our brothers and sisters were standing there, waiting for us. Our ship had arrived. Another world had drifted in and mingled with our own. I saw it in their eyes – Claude, Martin, Laurence – and they were not *other*. And we danced and hugged our way into the dining room that could have been a banquet hall in some fairy tale when the lost prince returned.

And those days – strung like pearls of a warm golden joy and sweetness without reason – melted us, merged us, filled us with a magic that we have not since known so densely and so prolonged. As if it might be grounded forever in our earth. But slowly our veils – the onion skins of our egos that remained – would gradually conceal it in a thickening mist from which only flashes would remind us that the secret we shared was still alive.

Nevertheless, it *was* there, a sun flooding our cellars with light... a million cellular suns.

10. light and shadow

But despite the report and the representation we made to the Government – even making a personal appeal directly to the then Prime Minister Morarji Desai in September of 1977 – we saw that they could do nothing. But what can I do? the Prime Minister asked of us. What can I do?

We presented him three proposals along with our covering letter: The first, suggesting that the Government issue an injunction restraining the SAS and its agents from interfering with Auroville's internal workings; the second, requesting that the massive police presence in Auroville be removed; the third, that the tax exemption granted for Auroville be transferred from the SAS directly to Auroville.

Our visit probably achieved the second request. But the first and third, which represented the formal crux of the whole Auroville problem, placed the Government in a delicate situation. For it asked the newly-established Janata Administration with its Nationalist agenda – already beset with internal power struggles that continued to plague executive direction and decisiveness through 1978 – to accord de facto autonomy to a Community largely comprised of “foreigners”.

Reflecting back on those ten September days in Delhi, we did however sense through backdoor rumours and off-the-record inquiries that another high-level committee was being planned by the Government to attempt to ameliorate the problem. What the motivations, powers and composition of such a committee would be varied according to the interpretations of the different senior officials we questioned.

This recycling myth of a “Committee”, once again dangled before us, would keep us – at least some of us – still holding out hope

through the next six months for some imminent resolution through the Government. Nava it seemed, was also was preoccupied with this possibility and was doing his best to either stack it in his favour or neutralize it. An interesting letter sent to the Home Minister by one of Nava's close supporters, a Member of Parliament from the militant RSS faction, reveals the line he was taking. It was dated 2nd September, the same day we saw the Prime Minister:

I would like to draw your kind attention to our talk yesterday about Auroville, a project of the Sri Aurobindo Society.

I have been associated with Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's philosophy for a very long time. I have also become a member of the Executive Committee of Sri Aurobindo Society. In the last few months specially, I have been in close touch with the people concerned in Pondicherry and have well-acquainted myself with the state of affairs in Auroville.

After a careful assessment over the last few months, I have come to the conclusion that the trouble in Auroville has been solely due to the high-handedness of the previous Government [referring to Indira Gandhi's administration]. One cannot miss the stamp of the previous administration's interference in Auroville during the Emergency. Before the Emergency, all those people who wanted to reside in Auroville were screened by the Sri Aurobindo Society, who either rejected or accepted them depending upon the ability of the person to do Sadhana and to follow the discipline of Auroville as spelled out by The Mother. After admitting the person, if the Sri Aurobindo Society found that the person was not following the discipline he had agreed to practice, the Society could withdraw his financial guarantee and recommendation. The Government would then cancel the visa of the person/persons concerned. This is an inherent right of the Sri Aurobindo Society and necessary for a spiritual project

like Auroville.

But the above procedure was broken forcibly by the previous Government. Every Tom, Dick and Harry and people who had no faith in the Mother's philosophy of world change started living in Auroville. The Society's right to screen people before admission into Auroville was overlooked and the Society could not do anything due to the Emergency. All the protestations of the Sri Aurobindo Society fell on deaf ears. In fact, two persons who were sent back from Auroville by the Sri Aurobindo Society at the Society's expense were allowed to go back and live in Auroville again. This is when the trouble started and the discipline of Auroville stood broken. Obvious lawless acts were committed in growing intensity but the previous Government took no action. Some unscrupulous people in New Delhi in close touch with the caucus were guiding the hooligans in Auroville. Residents of Auroville who believed in the vision of the Mother were intimidated and thrown-out of their homes. This hooliganism continued even after April 1977 but the present Government also did not take any action until very recently. I believe some people have been arrested. Had this action been taken two years ago when the first incident took place, there would have been no trouble in Auroville. However, for this we can blame only the previous administration. The people who have been arrested should not be allowed to go back to Auroville. I do hope their visas shall be cancelled at the earliest and the right of the Sri Aurobindo Society in the matter of admitting people into Auroville would be respected.

The foregoing is my assessment of the state of affairs in Auroville. However, I came to see you yesterday as I was very perturbed when I gathered that a solution is being evolved for the problems of Auroville which according to me, will not only damage Auroville but will also hurt the feelings of all

spiritual organisations in India. I gather that a fairly large committee consisting of some public men and Government officials may be set up for Auroville. I cannot understand how such a committee will be able to function in a manner that would help in the growth of Auroville as per the Mother's vision. This committee will perhaps meet not more than two or three times a year. I take it that the people of this committee will be busy people. I wonder if they will be able to devote enough time to the project even if they understand the Mother's vision of Auroville. I am of the firm view that nothing should be done which would amount to undue Government interference in a spiritual organization like Auroville. The Government must only take those steps which will nourish spirituality in the country. As far as Auroville is concerned, I feel that the Government should attend only to law and order and the questions of visas, since many foreigners are involved. The Government must retain the right to turn out such foreigners, which it deems unfit for living in the country. Apart from this, all matters should be left to the Sri Aurobindo Society which has a very effective executive committee, besides having many illustrious public men as office bearers. I feel that we, i.e., the Sri Aurobindo Society are capable of looking after the entire matter if we receive adequate co-operation on matters relating to law and order and visas. My considered opinion is that instead of having a large committee consisting of many public men and Government officials, the Government of India should form a small committee of two or three Government officials to keep a watch on the law and order situation and visas. Moreover, I may inform you that there is already a sub-committee of the Society's Executive Committee looking after the affairs of Auroville. I have also offered myself to be on this sub-committee to further strengthen it.

I believe your Ministry has already enquired into this matter in detail and have also examined the financial records of the Society. I am sure that there is nothing wrong. However, if there is any discrepancy, please let us know and I assure you that we shall correct the same.

I am indeed grateful to you for having given me so much time. I am quite certain that whatever steps you will take will be fair and conducive to the growth of Auroville and the Mother's vision.

With kind regards,
Yours sincerely,
s/d. Madhav Prasad Tripathi, M.P.

It was in this same moment while we were in Delhi that *Pour Tous* was in the process of widening – in transition towards a more direct participation as Auroville continued to outgrow and overtake its progressively altering definitions.

After all, a form, no matter how true in a given moment, only remains true when it corresponds to the living moment. If it fails to respond to the changing needs that life presents, if it clings out of habit to its past methods – no matter how alive and organically appropriate they once were – the form eventually dies, fossilizing from a biological process to a mechanical one. For every system, every religion, every body, carries in itself this grain of death. And it will take us down if we refuse to change, refuse to outgrow the gravity of habit-patterns that will entomb us in our past.

In this sobering light, no matter how dominant the SAS appeared to be in this struggle, it would fail to crush Auroville if we could keep alive this undying inner flame, this Vedic *Agni* – this undying will to press through the gravity of death. For that Flame would carry us beyond our ego-defined limits: our individual egos, our *Pour Tous* egos, our Greenbelt egos, our *Aspiration* egos, our Matrimandir

egos... so long as we refused to give up and give in – so long as we fed this Flame with our faith-in-action, refusing to let this Auroville Dream be dragged down by the quicksand of our doubts, refusing to be defeated by the power of our own powerlessness, refusing to let our inner flame die...

...Arising like a phoenix from our own ashes.

In a meeting with the Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu on October 11th, we learned that the Chairman was once again pressing the strategy of expulsion, and that a list of “chief troublemakers” had been submitted to the Home Ministry which was now in the process of considering the cancellation of their visas.

With that crucial piece of information, I drafted an urgent countermeasure to the Home Minister the following day, signed by five of us on behalf of the Community of Auroville. The first paragraphs of our response focussed on the misinterpretation of the problem and the faulty logic which assumed that the removal of some “chief troublemakers” would restore an appearance of peace and order.

In fact, such a move to expel other Auroville residents would only re-incite the very opposite:

... It is not a question of individual troublemakers, it is a question of a more fundamental principle; and the durable peace sought for will, on the contrary, be severely undermined by the convenient elimination of a few.

The image of unruliness and indiscipline which now seems to stigmatize Auroville is not, as the SAS would have you believe, a sign of a general looseness and degeneracy. The very labours and works that have already managed to manifest in a semi-desert testify to the concentration, commitment and self-discipline of Auroville’s inhabitants. The unruliness expressed is clearly a demonstration of Auroville’s unwillingness to be

ruled by the SAS, nothing more.

Ironically, it is not that the Auroville residents wish to seize control of the project for themselves; it is that they wish to liberate it from any exclusive control, as exhibited by the SAS, which contradicts the spirit of the Charter on which Auroville was conceived. Let Auroville be held in trust “for humanity as a whole” as the Charter states. Let the Government be instrumental in seeing that a trust be created which takes Auroville and its assets out of the control of any exclusive agent, so that Auroville may be free to evolve responsibly towards its true Dharma...

And so it went, the story that turned through that mad and marvellous and wholly unexpected sequence of events as 1977 came to an end... An end that saw the appearance of the first issue of a new journal – the *Auroville Review* – which I launched with Pierre LG.

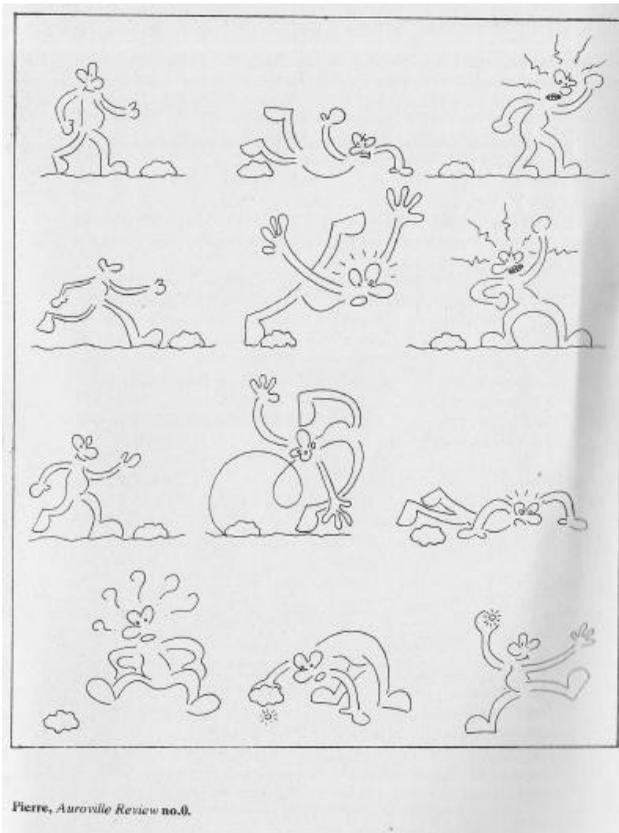
On the crest of the New year I moved to *Aspiration*, that Community of New World trouble-makers.

Frederick, occasionally joined by Shyama, spent much of that early '78 freezing in Delhi while I looked after their kids. I needed that respite from the literary and legal duels. For a month I didn't want to see that serpentine syllable SAS or a government memo or a legal brief. The only briefs I was willing to handle were Auroville's diapers. I needed so much just to be with kids and trees, inhaling the simple Auroville: the Auroville that was always there, just behind, quietly growing beneath the clashing waves. Yet how easy it was to get lost in the fierce foam of surface turmoil.

But here, right in the midst of it all, there was still this simple Auroville that aspired to manifest the Mother's Dream – to manifest an Auroville of peace, harmony, unity... where the discords of men could resolve in the process of working together in common cause.

After all, Her Dream was so clear, Her Invitation to all of good will so simple. And yet, as soon as She left her body, left us orphaned, look at what happened? This ogre in our humanity came out from behind its spiritual mask, claiming Auroville as its private property and doing everything possible to destroy Her Experiment, abort this new world seeking to be born. Yet why was this creature in us so pained by the touch of beauty and light, so threatened by such a noble Adventure of Consciousness? And what is this perverse attraction in us to destroy the very things we most deeply seek?... willing to reduce our dreams to vanities... or worse, to nightmares... Willing to destroy Auroville if they can't own and control it themselves.

Yes, what is this thing in us – in our laws, our governments, our systems – that needed to destroy the very thing that every child in us knows is true?... This thing in us in love with its own death?



And while these dark thoughts eclipsed the sun; and while I had my hands full of Auroville's diapers; and while Renu galloped bareback across the fields; and while the trees grew; and while the Aurovilians sweated in their thousand tasks: planting, constructing, carving, sewing, cooking, welding, singing, playing, adjusting, readjusting... Frederick was in Delhi going through the non-stop motions of trying to seek a status that could help protect Auroville without compromising it. It was like trying to thread a needle with a rope.

But on the 21st of February 1978, the day of the Mother's Centenary, a trust was registered in New Delhi called "Auromitra" – Friends of Auroville Research Foundation. Its four founding trustees – J.R.D.

Tata, industrialist; Bijoy Singh Nahar, Member of Parliament; Kireet Joshi, educationist; and Satprem, writer – had been willing to place their names, commitments and credibility behind Auroville, not only as a project of global relevance but one whose impact was crucial to the urgencies of rural India. Since the Auroville Society, it was the first legally recognized body to challenge SAS's exclusive domination of Auroville.

And though they tried, the SAS could not touch Auromitra.

There was a crack in the fortress, a door opened for other bodies and agencies to sponsor the works in Auroville despite the Chairman's legal blockade. For the first object in Auromitra's Trust Deed clearly defined its purpose as: "To organize, sponsor, promote, undertake, establish or conduct scientific research for the advancement of knowledge, relevant particularly to rural, educational and community development, and without prejudice to the generality of the said premises, to cooperate with the Community of Auroville as a living laboratory for applying, testing, or evaluating the said research."

But though Auromitra had broken the symbolic deadlock, providing an alternative to the sacrosanct SAS, the SAS still held the tax-exemptions for Auroville and the land title, severely hampering Auromitra's unrestricted possibilities to assist Auroville in its development.

On the 24th of February, as the fruits were ripening on the trees that had been once again leased out from under us, heading towards the April-May harvest, we formulated another one of our assorted petitions to the Government... this one signed by more than 240 Aurovilians concerned with the future of the land. When would this macabre cycle, this seasonal insanity end? And where was that Trust for the Earth that we needed so much? where was that Trust?...

On April 8th, the last massive concretings for the roof of the Matrimandir's inner chamber were completed. Seven years after the first excavations had begun, the superstructure and the 24 meter dodecagonal room it supported had become a material fact. The spiralling tubular steel ramps that the workshop had been welding and assembling for more than eighteen months would be in place by early '79.

A calendar of alternating light and shadow, light and shadow. No release. The wheel... a new life. We need a new life. So much. The Wheel. No release. A new world. Why can't they let it be? The ego, A new world. So much. Why can't we let it be? The wheel. Gravity. Let go. Resist. The ego. Trust. Let go. Let go...

11. swadharma

On the Western periphery of the Auroville Township site stands a hollow complex of raw bone-grey buildings – phantoms in concrete brooding over the palmyra-stroked landscape like some mammoth impenetrable monolith out of time. These dark dormant structures were meant to be the Cultural Pavilions of *Bharat Nivas* – the House of India. But instead, abandoned since 1974, they had in recent months become the last outpost of the SAS in Auroville.

The halls that had been offered to a great and once-powerful queen among nations had become the stronghold of a dark lord. A future usurped by the past.

For years, we would pass these massive, wind-swept ruins, wondering when they would warm and come alive, flowing with the Shakti of India. Two distinct forms lay amidst the unfinished foundations and pillars strewn here and there behind the barbed wire fence: One, a round cavernous structure which played like a flute in the wind; the other, a towering, angular auditorium whose roof arched heavenward like a spear. It was here in the basement of this oblique immensity that the SAS had cached itself.

None of our previous appeals to the Government had served to dislodge them. And somehow, on a deeper level where the symbols are transparent, the presence and possession of this *Bharat Nivas* – this House of India – by that Force of Exclusion, represented the resistance that sought to prevent the inner bond between India and Auroville, that sought to block the true relationship between the two who shared a common Ground.

For it was not by coincidence that Auroville was in India. What other country on this criss-crossed earth could have offered her Motherland to support such a vast and incomprehensible experiment – an experiment which sought to synthesize a living

unity from the most contradictory ingredients which inhabit this planet: a true and undiluted sampling of all of humanity and its teeming cultural diversity. An unabridged world in miniature in this land of India whose ancient Sanskrit name is *Bharat*, meaning “wideness”.

It was this story, this secret key between Auroville and India, that lay locked here, buried in the vault of Bharat Nivas.

Frederick among us had always been one of the most sensitive to the unfulfilled role that Auroville and India had to play together. He had been one of the earliest involved with getting grants for programs related directly to the neighbouring Tamil villages in the area. And when he returned from his last trip to Delhi, he had crossed a point of no return. The hypocrisy that possessed Bharat Nivas – the House of India in Auroville – was no longer bearable.

And he was not alone.

In early April, a number of informal meetings and discussions took place at Auroson’s Home to see how to make a first true gesture in Bharat Nivas – to see how to bring some life into it, awaken some spark, some forgotten memory of the India it was meant to house and express... rousing it from the spell that had subverted it.

Fred, along with some of the Tamil Aurovilians, began organizing for a ten-day cultural program to begin on the 14th of April – the Tamil New Year – with a *Nadashwaram* music recital followed by a painting workshop/competition open to all the local villages. It was a first attempt for Aurovilians and villagers to share a cultural experience together in Bharat Nivas.

And despite the tense atmosphere which vibrated from the presence of the SAS right under whose nose we were pulling this off, despite their grimace which reverberated through the wide empty halls, setting everything slightly off balance, slightly ill-at-ease, we came with our tractor trailer and began setting up the round chamber

with panels to display the paintings... cleaning up the long abandoned vacant interior, trying to kindle a first calorie of life.

The SAS, of course, responded warmly by disconnecting the water and electricity supply. But those we could brush off. It was their unforeseen and totally out-of-the proportion escalation that we could not.

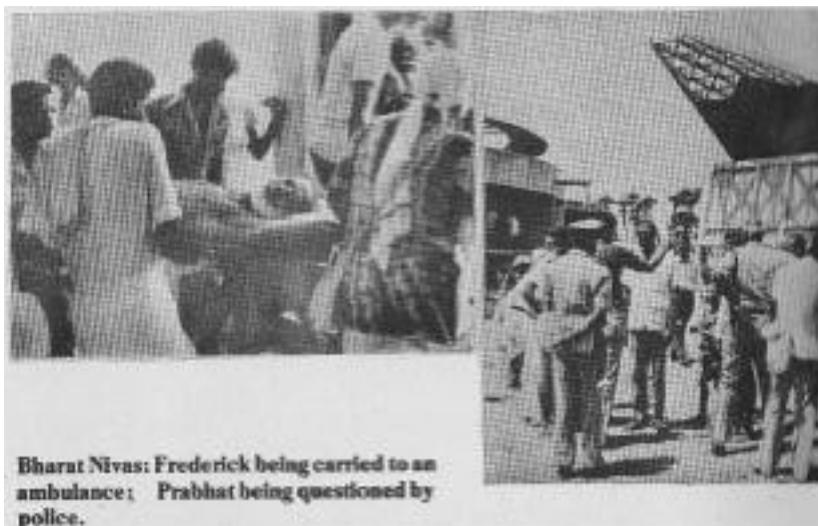
Early on the 17th morning, three days into the program which had begun to thaw Bharat Nivas, drawing hundreds of village children and adults together with their distant kin in Auroville, the SAS – no longer able to tolerate our brazen disregard for their last stronghold – unleashed their storm-troopers...

...Without warning, sending their busload full of agents and employees to block the entrance to Bharat Nivas, effectively cutting off Frederick who was inside with Auroson and Janine, a young French girl who had come to help set up the arrangements for the day. The act had been well-planned. For more than fifty heavies from the villages, who we later found out had each been paid Rs. 25 over the weekend to do their dirty work, met the bus at the gate to Bharat Nivas. They were well-armed with casuarina poles and clubs. Most of them were stationed at the gate while a group of them were instructed to accompany the SAS members among them – which included Prabhat Poddar, Nava's nephew – to the round building where Frederick and his son were alone.

When Frederick heard them coming, he sent Auroson off with Janine for help. But help would arrive too late.

And when we finally arrived an hour later, only able to pass through their mob at the gate after the police sub-inspector arrived, we found Frederick lying unconscious in a pool of blood, brutally beaten about the head and face. And in that vivid, un-retouched image, within that surreal theatre-in-the-round strewn with broken panels and torn children's paintings, Prabhat Poddar, as if nothing

had happened, was casually tape-measuring the floor on which Fred lay, as if he had been there to engineer something else.



Bharat Nivas: Frederick being carried to an ambulance; Prabhat being questioned by police.

When we carried Fred out on a stretcher while awaiting the ambulance, I sat beside him and took notes. It took a whole day – long after he had been stitched in the General Hospital where he was kept for observation – for me to piece together all the disjointed elements in the story... to find out all the grim details of two other Aurovilians who had come from the Nursery in response to Janine's call for help, entering the Bharat Nivas compound from the north in an attempt to rescue Frederick, but instead falling victim themselves to the casuarina clubs of the SAS.

This was what Bharat Nivas, the House of India, was sheltering.

And despite these detailed reports that were sent to all levels of the Government, and despite the eyewitness accounts of high-ranking police and local district officials who had arrived on the scene before Frederick was taken to the hospital, and despite a ten-day hunger strike by some Aurovilians who felt they had to do something to express their utter frustration, and despite a speech

given in the Parliament in New Delhi on the 26th of April denouncing the atrocities that occurred in Bharat Nivas, *nothing was done. Nothing changed.* And the SAS bus still carries on its back-door business in Bharat Nivas – “their” property – where we Auroville residents are the trespassers.

We are such impotent human beings, surrounded by our impotent institutions to protect us with our impotent laws. We are governed by our fears which freeze us, render us unable to act, unable to express the least initiative, the least creative movement which would courageously seek to change a grain in our fossilized order. We are governed by that in us which does not let go, which has no trust in a future it cannot predict and control – a cowardice only concerned with maintaining the bankrupt stability of the past. Law and order, we call it. We are a race which does not know how to live, a race governed by our own death.

And it was this which Auroville challenged, again and again. For it sought to act according to another law, a truer law, a simpler self-evident law which had no “legal” precedent. But because it wasn’t in the books, baptized in writing – even if the Truth was transparently staring us all in the face – these Men of Law had to look the other way. For it wasn’t *authorized*.

Alors, the built-in protection mechanism of the past to block the future, prevent change, prevent something else... Something *new* which is by definition *unauthorized*.

Our logic, so sophisticated, even computerized, was so illogical, so absurd, based on a false premise we never questioned. It was the Great Unmentionable. For to ask that Question was the Sacrilege: the Cardinal Sin which hid behind the curtains, afraid to see our pitiful impotence in the mirror...

...To see that our laws had ceased to live, to progress with life, to correspond with the changes that our civilization was now faced

with: Laws that, instead of serving as instruments to protect our freedoms and our progress, had become our prisons... applied blindly in all cases to preserve the mythic *status quo*, effectively embalming us in our own laws.

Yet in India, the True India, beneath the crusted mass of superimposed rules and laws, beneath the plethora of bureaucratic dictum and decrees burying her true nature, beneath the servitudes of caste and priesthood which ritualized life and pauperized the spirit – there lies another understanding of law, an Eternal Law, *Sanatana Dharma*: A law spontaneous and free. A law unimposed yet which is the very self-expression, self-nature of the conscious being: his *Swadharma*.

It was this *Swadharma* – this conscious, self-responsible, self-determined principle of becoming, this living process where we begin to participate consciously in our own evolution – that India's Rishis foresaw in the Vedas, that Auroville sought now... Willing to risk it all to find this truer Law of a New World: This unprecedented Law that freed us to be true to ourselves, freed us to take responsibility for our lives... no longer imprisoned in a constricting web of mental constructions, no longer governed by ego-driven codes, no longer living in a world fractured through a mental prism, ruled by division and the false precedent that *we are not one*.

Yes, this was Auroville's crime: Daring to live by a new New Code, uncodified and uncodifiable.

"O Flame", the Rig Veda declares, "*your force has become conscious; you have discovered the One Light for the many.*"

12. a story for the future

As I begin this last chapter of a book which began on December 19th, 1978 – the same day Indira Gandhi was arrested... As I begin this last chapter with Iran still convulsing from its cataclysm and Viet Nam invaded by China... As I begin these last paragraphs which could never be conclusive with all that remains to be seen and lived... I pray that this might be the end of a very old story and the bridge to a new one. A Story for the Future.

For this present Auroville year – and all the years since Her passing on November 17th, 1973 – have seen an escalation of conflict, betrayal, distrust. And yet, through the shocks and labour pains, we witnessed the births and breakthroughs as well: the forests and children growing; the *Pours Tous* Foodstore and collective meetings emerging; the Community taking responsibility, learning to endure; the Auroville Co-operative forming as a first co-ordinating body within the Auroville system, serving as a trustworthy focal point for collective functions and projects, as well as serving as a first representative body to speak in the name of the resident Community as a whole. And then, of course, there was the Matrimandir rising through the impossibility of it all.

As we move through these first months of 1979, approaching the completion of Auroville's eleventh year and the beginning of its twelfth, we continue to persevere through the uncertainty of it all... facing the obstacles and resistances none of us could have foreseen or imagined. For as you read these lines and the chapters that preceded it, could you believe this actually happened?...

But the Story is still not finished. Not so long as we continue to persevere. Not so long as we go on writing the next line and the next... Staying true to a Script that is rewriting us in the process.

*O Sun-Word, thou shalt raise the earth-soul to Light
And bring down God into the lives of men. (from Sri Aurobindo's
Savitri)*

21 February, 1979
Auroville

a simple proposal: a trust for the earth

In this moment – in the face of all that denies and resists in our humanity, all that doubts in us and our world blindly driven to divide and destroy – can we make a gesture for our children and our future? A simple unprecedented gesture of Trust?

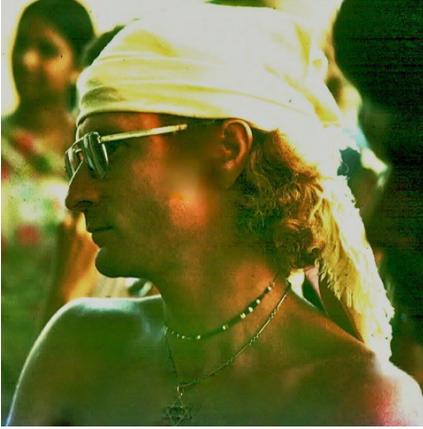
Auroville aspires to be a beginning point to build this Trust for the Earth. For as its Charter states in its first line: *Auroville belongs nobody in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole.*

In this light:

- Let Auroville be declared a Trust for the Earth: A Sanctuary, freed from the mercantile motives that exploit our planet.
- Let all funds and assets dedicated for the creation and realisation of this Sanctuary be held in Trust for Humanity as a Whole, freed from all proprietary claims of ownership and possession.
- Let a unique Trust document be created to facilitate and focalize the free flow of such funds and material in order to set free this possibility: liberating a point of Earth as a conscious offering from the Earth to the Earth.
- Let India – which welcomed the Auroville Experiment on its soil – and the United Nations – which supported its vision through UNESCO – give their sanctions, extend their goodwill, fulfill their truer destinies, consciously participating in this next step in human evolution.
- Let Humanity fulfill its truer Dharma as a species, setting forth a new model for human relations and the inter-relationship between natural ecosystems, human-designed habitats and economies.
- Let this Trust for the Earth be. Let Auroville be. Let a New World be.

28 February, 1979

About the Author



The author began his journey of self-discovery in the 1960s, engaging in the Civil Rights and Anti-Vietnam War movements. At the same time, he began his inner quest, studying East-West spiritual practices in San Francisco where he discovered the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother through Dr. Haridas Chaudhuri. Pursuing the path that opened, he left the States at the end

of the 1960s, hitch-hiking from London to India to meet the Mother. Following that meeting, She accepted him into the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, then a year later into Auroville, giving him the name Savitra. His AV adventure began in Aspiration Community as a teacher in Auroville's first school. As his AV experience continued to expand and grow more integrated, he began to document the story of Auroville's emergence.

On August 14, 1971, he received the following message from the Mother: "Remain in the true consciousness and return to America to do good work for me there, with my love and blessings, Mirra". Entrusted with this liaison role, he began periodic trips to the States to bridge-build collaborations. His visits led to pioneering support and foundation grants that helped jump-start AV's afforestation program. They also built relationships and gained endorsements from universities, research institutes, town-planning visionaries and world-respected figures such as



anthropologist Margaret Mead, Esalen co-founder Michael Murphy, environmental pioneers David Brower and Huey Johnson... all of which raised Auroville's credibility through the 1970s and 80s. After returning to reside in the States in 1990, he continued to stay true to Her message, authoring well-respected books such as *An Evolutionary Agenda for the Third Millennium*, developing personal alliances with Jean Houston, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Matthew Fox et al, as well as with social-environmental activist organizations.