

Progress in Auroville

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Matrimandir Office

The office space in the group of temporary workshop and storeroom building near the Matrimandir has housed a variety of occupants and functions over the years. However, as none of its past is particularly interesting or has much connection with what is happening there now, perhaps it's best to go on to the present.

Beginning several months ago, workers at Matrimandir felt the need for a weekly meeting in order to co ordinate the work, discuss problems relative to the work as a whole, introduce new ideas, etc. Around the same time there was a growing feeling among people in other parts of Auroville that there needed to be a central location for the Envelope group meetings, the Co-op meetings, the visa work, the Auroville Review, the guard and secretarial work, all of which is often overlapping. It felt right that this centralization effort should actually happen at the Center so it was suggested that the two spacious rooms at Matrimandir be used for this together with the weekly Matrimandir meetings.

Several people began coming regularly to repair and refinish woodwork and windows, clean, paint and wax, more office furniture was collected and some secretarial work begun, though the permanent moving in awaits completion of the remodeling. One of the functions of the office will be to provide reception and information for visitors to the Matrimandir area and to be a place rather than an individual where people can write for information. It is hoped that funds can be collected to reinstall the telephone (a disproportionately expensive convenience in India) both for the sake of efficiency and for emergencies. So far, about eight people have offered to spend several mornings or afternoons a week in the office so that someone will always be on hand for reception and messages. As soon as the schedule is more settled the new Messenger Service will also be coordinated through the Office.

Unity Resources and Land Service

Unity Resources came into being in late spring of this year, spurred by the impetus of Hexiad, a group in Boston interested in funding communications between the three communities of Auroville, Findhorn and Arcosanti. Located above the kitchen in the building called Unity near the Matrimandir, it is a central access point for many Aurovilians. The aim of Unity Resources is to be, simply, a resource center for Auroville, a place where meaningful information can be received, collated, and disseminated. Towards this end the work has concentrated in the following areas:

A library is being built up of books, magazines and pamphlets of practical concern to Auroville largely in the field of appropriate technology. Subject areas include agriculture, energy, construction, land use, art, architecture and city planning, health, resource guides, catalogues and materials for India, and groups and communities. In the area of information dissemination, Unity houses the new mimeograph machine and typewriter purchased recently with a donation from Hexiad. The Auroville Notes, Auroville's internal newspaper, is put together at the office and run off every other Saturday on the mimeo machine. Progress is also printed here and shared with Aurovilians through the Notes. Written entirely in Tamil, it will be focused primarily on work in India in the fields of appropriate technology and rural development, and which we hope will become a channel for meaningful exchange of information with individuals and groups throughout the country. Individual correspondence has been generated with a number of groups abroad including New Alchemists, the Agri – Silviculture Institute, Green Deserts and others as well as Findhorn and Arcosanti. Hexiad has been helping from Boston to make contacts with people such as the World watch Institute in Washington. A filing and reference system has been organized in collaboration with the new Matrimandir Office to coordinate these contacts and make the resulting information accessible to all within Auroville.

Sharing the working space with Unity Resources is an aspect of Land Service where people have come together to develop comprehensive environmental development plans, work schedule, proposals, budgets, etc. Maps and other resource materials are available enhanced by sharing the space with the fast-growing resource library. Also, Land Service has become a reference point for various government officials such as the District Forest Officer, Soil Conservation Department, Panchayat Unions, etc. It is flexible, developing entity that can be formed according to participation and need.

HANDICRAFTS

Aurocreations

Aurocreations, the spearhead of Auroville's handicrafts work, began in 1970 as an effort on the part of Lisa, a young Dutch woman, to give much needed training and employment to village women in and around Pondicherry. Though her own interest and training was in art, (She had never done handwork such as embroidery before), she soon saw that Tamil women had a natural ability for needlework. She began designing circular mandala patches, which are still a popular item today, and the women filled in the designs with embroidery. Working up to this time with virtually no financial resources, she then received a small order for the mandalas which made possible the first expansion of the work and their first donation to the Matrimandir.

In 1971 she took a house in Pondicherry large enough to provide space for further development and storage of materials. More and more women began coming for

training in stitching, creative designing and drawing, and they gradually developed a sense of perfection and an appreciation for a different and more subtle use of color than that to which they were accustomed. More Aurovilians became involved and it was during this time that Mother gave the name Aurocreations. As the artistic expression continued to unfold with the women showing a surprising aptitude for design, the idea came to make clothing as a way to demonstrate their creativity. However, it soon became a viable means for expansion and all profits were split between self-development and support for other projects and services in Auroville. As a result of a constant flow of visitors from abroad, export evolved naturally and in 1976 the name Aurosarjan (meaning Aurocreations in Sanskrit), was adopted for export purposes.

Simultaneously, art classes were held in the training center for the Tamil women, visitors, Ashramites and Aurovilians, and this flow of people and creativity stimulated new directions in the handicrafts work. In addition, but only for the Tamil women, a competition was held twice a year. A theme was chosen such as a kolam or Indian mythological figure and each one was free to express this theme through her own imagination and skill in embroidery. Judging was done by other Tamil employees; the winning pieces are still kept for exhibit and the others sold with the profit going directly to the women.

Over the years Aurocreations grew to involve nearly five hundred women, about four hundred of whom take work to their homes, since many young girls and married women are not allowed to leave the house and take a job. Many Aurovilians and visitors also participate for differing lengths of time. Experience and support were always offered to newcomers and new projects in handicrafts. As more handicraft units grew up in Auroville, marketing was shared, both locally and in export, and closer collaboration evolved between Aurocreations and Fraternity, the largest handicrafts center in Auroville. In 1978, in response to a growing need for more coordination between all Auroville's handicraft units, an umbrella trust was established called Artisana Trust. Benefits of the trust include greater efficiency in marketing and provision of raw materials, aid in legal matters concerning export and business and recognition by the government of Auroville's work in the area of rural development through the training and employment of Tamilians from local villages. Plans for the future include new workshops, studios and sales outlets in Auroville.

FRATERNITY

Late in the fall of 1972, Brian and Sally, an American couple, met with Palit, a Bengali living in Aspiration, to discuss ways of realizing his idea for establishing a cultural interchange with the local village and providing employment to its inhabitants. They decided to establish a handicraft center and on February 2, 1973. Fraternity was founded across the road from Kuyilpalayam behind a grove of ancient tamarind trees. A large keet and bamboo workshop was quickly erected to

accommodate the first work in weaving, crochet and grass tablemats. The number of Tamil villagers involved quickly grew from ten to thirty, a kindergarten was added for their children, and several new Aurovilians joined the work bringing ideas and skills to develop new projects such as floor mats, tailoring, glow balls (paper lanterns), and hammocks. With all this happening under one roof the need for expansion became apparent and in mid 1963, with funds from the German FAQ, they were able to construct four modern workshops and a new kindergarten. A well and pump were also provided for use by both Fraternity and the village. This was their first really adequate water supply and was especially appreciated by those in the community who had been planting trees and gardens on the barren land. The move to the new buildings made it possible for a Belgian man to bring his woodworking shop to Fraternity from Aspiration, more villagers were employed and new looms were added to the weaving unit.

Upto this time products had been sold exclusively in the local shops but towards the end of 1974 the first export order was received for a large number of woven cotton bedspreads. During 1975 exports grew dramatically, especially as a result of a contact made by Brian with the English firm of Oxfam. Sally's yearlong stay in Findhorn established contacts between the two communities and a friend from Findhorn later joined Fraternity to set up a candle-making unit. Towards the end of the year the first export license was granted by the government and regular orders began coming in from Ashram and Auroville centers around the world.

Since the beginning a number of Aurovilians and visitors had participated in Fraternity for varying periods of time and in various aspects of the work. Early in 1976 several more permanent members joined, - Roswitha and Valdemar from Germany, who initially took up the care of the garden, and the first Tamils to join as Aurovilians. The latter included John, who shares some of the administrative responsibilities, his brother Stephen, who joined the weaving section, and Ramesh, a graphic artist. As sales continued to expand several new workshops, an office, a showroom and a community kitchen were added and Lotus, a retail sales outlet was established in Pondicherry for all Auroville handicrafts. About a year later Roswitha began seriously developing the tailoring section and Valdemar began organizing a pottery, called Pour Fleur, for making flower pots, cujas (water jugs) of all sizes, and special creations such as temple horse figures. These items are not produced for profit but as a service to Auroville.

On the first of January 1979, Fraternity joined Artisana Trust. During the year other new developments included the reconstruction of the original keet and bamboo workshop to provide space for a second woodworking unit and construction of new workshops for crochet, mats and pottery.

In September 1973 Auroville found itself pushed out of the nest financially and a concentrated search began for ways to develop self-sufficiency both in long term projects such as food production and more immediately beneficial ways. It was this crisis that brought Janet, (who had come to Auroville from Canada in 1968), into handicrafts work, she went to Aurocreations where she received a supply of thread, a five-minute lesson in crochet which she had never tried before, and a lot of encouragement. During the next year she went regularly into one of the villages not far from where she lives near the center, taught 20-25 women to crochet simple halter tops to be sold in Pondicherry, and gave art classes to their children. About a year later someone gave her a crocheted lampshade to see if it could be copied and she began working up various designs using cane rings as a solid form for the crochet. As a result of a modest donation in early 1975 from friends in Canada, she was able to construct a simple workshop near her house which afforded a more controlled environment than was possible in the village and the women began coming there to work. In September of the same year samples were taken to Germany by another Aurovilian resulting in the first large export order and a possibility for expansion. From that time, due to gradually growing exports, she has been able to hire and train many women though she has found that the lampshades, more than other kinds of crochet work, demand a skill and degree of perfection which puts a natural limit on the number of women she can work with effectively. She has now about six women working daily in a new, simple but attractive studio with up to six other women taking work to their homes.

Based on her own experience, Janet is convinced that handicrafts, even on a small, individual scale, can contribute in a very large measure to Auroville's growing self-sufficiency. She has many creative ideas for new designs and products which she is willing to share with others and offers her studio as a training center both for Tamil women and Aurovilians.

Harmony

The story of Harmony contains several circumstances which in the material sense appear as failures, but perhaps an understanding of their experience may be of value to others.

In 1973, Gerhardt, who had been doing designing work with Aurocreations in Pondicherry, came in contact with America living in the new community of Kottakarai who had an interest in silk screening. Together with other Aurovilians, one of whom provided funds for the construction of a workshop, they had took on their first printing order from Auropress in Aspiration. With this seemingly auspicious start they went on confidently printing Kolam cards on homemade paper, (a Kolam is a traditional Indian design having a particular meaning or symbolism), but further orders were not forthcoming. Finally, with shelves overflowing Gerhardt went to Germany to search for an export market. He came back with an order, -- but not for Kolam cards! Quickly, he and his wife Bobby constructed a tailoring workshop complete with sewing machines, tailors and

helpers, with funds provided this time by Gerhardt, and worked hard to complete the large orders for men's cotton shirts. But again, the single order proved a dead end as far as export was concerned and though they continued selling locally this was not successful enough to offset the running expenses and reluctantly they closed the workshop. Through their contacts with the tailors and helpers they had come to appreciate the seriously inadequate conditions existing in the nearby villages, especially in the harijan (untouchable) colonies. As they were searching another product that would create both employment for the villagers and support the Auroville they were joined by Andre, who had the ideas for making incense. While Andre set up a workshop, (again funded privately by Gerhardt), Gerhardt and Bobby went to the U.S. to try to establish export contacts and returned with sufficiently large order. A few small orders followed, then stopped, and for the third time they found themselves with the project dependent on local sales for survival. In order to reach a potentially large market and also with the idea for a permanent exhibit of all Auroville and Ashram handicrafts, they opened a boutique in the main department store in Madras. But overhead is very high, tourist season very short, and this project, as with all the others, is being kept afloat only through Gerhardt's personal finances. Without an upswing in the next few months the shop will have to close.

During this time Gerhardt and Bobby have supported the building of schools in two neighboring villages, each attended by 80 children from the harijan colonies. The children are given a light meal and the two employed Tamil teachers are instructed in English and teaching methods by Ivar, an Aurovilian living in the greenbelt community of Discipline. It has always been hoped that the handicrafts would eventually take over support of this work.

Kottakarai Pottery

With a donation from America the first workshop and kiln were built in Kottakarai in 1975. Constructed in Japanese style, its simplicity, attention to detail and situation in the center of the grove of Casuarinas gives one the feeling of stepping into a transported corner of Japan. Initially it succeeded in producing colored, unglazed beads for jewelry and decoration for lampshades and a few specially designed earthenware pots. But pottery, especially here in India, is far from being a ready-made business and requires many months or years of research into clay types, firing temperatures and glazes. As there was neither funds nor people-power to carry the work further the pottery was unused for some time.

With the arrival at the beginning of 1979 of Raina, a young Indian girl from Culcutta who had studied pottery in Delhi, energy was put into the reopening of the workshop. Now three to four Aurovilians are working with the help of the Golden Bridge pottery in Pondicherry. Funds have come for the construction of a wood-fired kiln for salt-glazing and for the improvement of the workshop. Their plan is to

produce beautiful houseware, a much needed item here, as well as beads, special pots, etc. for use in Auroville and also for sale.

Santosham

Santhosam began in March 1976 when Valeried, who had come months before from England, began to realize the importance of Auroville's effort towards self-sufficiency. She began designing clothing, beginning with a few simple styles which were made by local tailors and decorated with embroidery by one village woman working in her home. During the first year she gradually developed several new styles and began using only cross-stitch for the handwork. With financial help from the Auroville Association in California she was able to build a small workshop for the four village women who were then coming daily. As the women developed more skill in embroidery, more delicate cross-stitch designs were introduced and some of the women learned to do fine crochet work which is used for yokes and edging.

Working in collaboration with Aurocreations, Santosham developed export contacts abroad, especially in France, but the workshop remained about the same in size. This year, however, it was felt to expand to include four more women and a tailor. This step was not only to increase production but to expand the potential of the village women, to offer them a wider possibility of expression and the opportunity to learn useful skills through contact with Auroville. For Auroville too, these working relationships offer many opportunities for a deeper understanding and appreciation of the Tamil culture and way of life.

Douceur

The name Douceur is most often associated with the attractive and carefully tailored clothes found in several boutiques in Pondicherry, but Douceur is also a partially self-sufficient community near Aspiration, with fruit trees, agricultural areas, chickens and two cows. When it began with three Aurovilians in May 1976, it was first a kindergarten and then an informal school which included older children as well. As a result of their contact with the children they began making puppets and this gradually evolved into the creation of clothing. Though some export orders came through Aurocreations, most of their items were shown locally and as sales increased they were able to expand the workshop while contributing at the same time to the community. As the growth of the handicraft workshop began to demand more and more time and energy it became impossible to maintain the high quality of their products and keep up the work in agriculture, gardening and with the animals. Therefore, they decided to cut back production to a controllable limit so that their products would again reflect their aspiration for perfection.

Encens d'Auroville

In November 1976, using an available space in the Fraternity, five Aurovilians began working to develop a new incense that would be superior to commercially available products both in fragrance and in the manner of presentation. Although one of them had some pharmaceutical experience, none knew anything about perfumes or incense-making and everything had to be discovered by trial and error. As soon as possible they began selling the new incense in local shops using the profits for further experimentation in both incense and scented candles. But it was not until the last months of 1978 that they felt they had solved the major problems and reached a level of quality acceptable as a minimum standard and a base for further refinement. They then moved to an empty building in Aspiration, reduced the number of paid workers as more Aurovilians became involved and concentrated on developing the business aspects of the work. They feel strongly that products made here are a representation of Auroville itself and as such should always reflect our highest aspirations. The products are constantly being improved and much energy has gone into new ways of packaging and displaying the incense and candles, the packaging often evolving into useful and beautiful handicraft items in themselves. An attractive handcrafted wooden holder is distributed to retailers for displaying the incense packets in their shops and the packets themselves are made from handmade paper decorated with a new design printed by silk screen in Aspiration. Finely crafted rosewood boxes are also made and sold containing incense packets, one new design having a brass incense holder in the lid. Beautifully hand-stitched leather bags, (again sold containing incense packets), have been so well received that they have begun creating new styles specifically designed as purses.

At present, profits which go to the community through Artisana Trust are generated mostly from exports to Europe. Encens would like to develop more contacts in India and America. The seven regular Aurovilians who are sometimes joined by others from the community feel that they have now achieved a good balance with the twenty paid workers who do the incense rolling and some of the carpentry. Though they have always given primary consideration to quality they now feel in a position to grow without sacrificing this aspiration for perfection beauty.

Bellaure Crafts

Another of the small-is-beautiful handicraft projects is Bellaure Crafts which makes uniquely ornamented leather items. It was begun by Dee, who learned leather work in Australia during a visit there in 1976, and when she returned to Auroville near the end of that year set up a small workshop in the bottom of her towering keet and bamboo house, (or as she puts it, -- the house is in the workshop). Beginning with one Tamil boy who soon displayed an exceptional natural ability and an especially affable personality as well, she began experimenting with different types of dyes and polishes and learning how to handle the Indian leather which is rougher and less uniform in shape than the leather she had used in Australia. Although the bags, wallets and other items have always sold in local shops as fast as they were made, it has only been in the past few months that Dee feels finally satisfied with the quality of the finishing. She now has a very harmonious group of five boys who assemble

the articles and are learning to do painting, dying and some carving of the designs. Most important, and Dee includes herself in this, they are all developing a more acute sense of detail and perfection. Other Aurovilians help with the accounts and occasionally with designing but most of the designs are Dee's creations, usually highly ornamented symbolic themes, often using figures from Indian mythology. The originality of the work makes each piece unique, no two are exactly alike.

Dee was one of the founding members of Artisana Trust.

Varuna

A wish for comfortable and beautiful shoes, here where the local offering is usually limited to rubber thongs and plastic variations, inspired a couple of young women to begin experimenting during the last months of 1978 using crepe soles and crocheted tops. Aware that other Aurovilians would also be interested in an alternative to Indian "chappals" the work was soon taken up seriously, first with four people and finally by an Australian couple working in their house with one Tamil woman. Using either leather or crepe soles, the tops are crocheted in a variety of colors and in any of four basic styles. They have experimented with different types of material for the crochet, dying it themselves, but commercial dyes have not proved satisfactory and they are still searching for alternatives.

During the past month several new possibilities have opened up. One which is perhaps the most important to future development is a small workshop. They have hired a cobbler with some basic experience who can be trained to do their special type of work and he has already shown a talent for copying their designs. As a result they are now offering sandal repair as a service to all. They have also hired a second Tamil woman for crochet and have been joined by another Aurovilian who helps with bookkeeping. New directions in creativity involve the very recent discovery of coldwater, colorfast batik dyes and the beginning of a new line of imaginative designs for children.