Janet

Memories of Auroville

J ust Fearn was one of the very first people to settle in Auroville. In 1997, along with many others, she had decided to carry out a project with her husband for Newcomers which would tell them about the original settlers of Auroville. The plan was to divide Auroville’s his- tory into different eras and then inter- view those settlers according to their area of knowledge.

The first section would cover the years 1948 to 1972, when the mother was still in her physical body. Ten group conversations were held for this section, and the talks were videoed by Vladimir Yasensko and transcribed by Janet. However, for various reasons, some parts of this section were never published.

By 2017 the tales of the interviews had badly degraded, but Janet and Kati Holger decided to make the transcri- ptions of those stories into a book. Many settlers who were interviewed were published as a web book by PRISMA.

“There are obviously far more people out there who were not heard and were not, so the accounts presented offer their insight into the full story,” Janet says. “I hope this narrative of the life of Auroville’s pioneers will touch and inspire many of the readers.”

It’s a promise which is very largely fulfilled. While many of the stories may be familiar to a certain small circle of fam- iliar storytellers, there are many fasci- nating details which evolve, as if for the first time. It is hard to describe all the extraordinary high moments experi- enced by those early settlers. For example, the story of how Auroville began on a degraded platte, but when Janet remarks, “At that time Auroville was quite small and so full of promise. We had such an opportuni- ty that we felt we couldn’t go anywhere but forward,” it becomes a gateway to a new world.

Simplicity

Because there was so little of anything- thing, there were no choices to be made and no time to think about it, there was always something to do now and the next moment. I was working and that is all,” says Jean-Claude, “We worked,” says Liesbeth, “That was what we were doing, that was the first approach for every day to Europe or America.”

The lack of everything peo- ple believe we need to survive, created a new culture of honesty and directness.

“It had to do with something with being honest in the sense,” says Liesbeth, “Shradinghram of her first teaching expe- rience. “You really only had your per- sonal needs and no one was going to do that,” and that had to be absolutely hon- est with the surrounding circumstances. That gave an experience, a growing experience, and a certain trust was built up among all of us.”

People discovered a satisfaction, even a new identity in the simplest tasks. “ Basically we would be digging earth, gathering food for our head, and moving it from one place to the other,” remembers Lary of the first salt excavation. “For the first few days I felt I was doing something that I was not used to doing, even though I really wasn’t sure what it was all about. I feel somehow that the community we had established, that every- body throughout Auroville, with all our differences, was somehow involved in, and that the community we lived in and the physical level, was what was need- ed in the time to get Auroville spiritual- ly off the ground. Everything was done for me it was a very, very powerful exper- ience.”

“None of us realized what we were doing, it was a day-to-day thing. There was never any question of why, or what was going to happen, it was just doing it,” says Michael, another of those early Matriarchs.

In contrast, early settlers had ever experienced anything like this before. “Nobody knew anything about reafforestation, we just planted and we watered and by doing it,” says Jau.

Relation with the villages

The developing relationship with the villages is a fascinating story in itself. Many of the villagers were suspicious of the predominantly white-skinned newcomers. However, they were afraid that these velikars, I mean Westerners, might do some harm. They thought that the children or they may convert them to some other religion or take them to their country.

“We were coming here out of a somewhat middle class 60’s background, with no need to farm for our livelihood. We were two opposing cultures, totally on the economic level, as well as the cul- tural level,” remembers Francis. Not surprisingly, they sometimes had to confront each other.

“At that time, there were no fences between the mothers and fathers of the boats went to eat the young saplings, so the Aurovilians began to put up fences. "We were against it," they told us to conduct our experiment on this side of the fence, and you go on your child on the other side, you go there, you can do wages and whatever. And there’s a certain quite direct edge there that leads to kritis (arguments) at your throat, and all sorts of stuff.”

At the same time, Aurovilians even thought kids should be taught because they were doing dry-land farming like them, learning from them in the process. “The relationship was mostly about the relationship with the village, because there was just the village, and we all had accounts in the village tax office,” remembers Liesbeth. In those days, recalls Liesbeth, “We wanted to live close to villagers, for pro- tection”.

Mother’s influence

If there is one difference between Auroville and its union with Mother In some ways, there is a feeling of insincerity that such an overwhelming experience cannot be captured in words, or that people are not quite sure what they are ex- periencing. But for those who never met her, the few glimpses afforded her in this section are quite moving. “Glorious!” Perhaps, gives the strongest sense of her influence. “The contact with her was so overwhelming, and so full of hope, and so full of marvellous things, that all the rest was just an adventure.”

But what does come through well is her all-pervasive influence upon those early settlers, even those who hardly even knew her. “In those days people actu- ally were walking around saying, ‘Did you hear that Mother said that nature has contained the correct material transformation can happen?’ People were really excited about the spiritual objectives of St. Auroville, and of its place in this new- able place. This was the new world,” observes Liesbeth.

In this way, lies Lisebeth remembers that it was a joyful time because “Mother was always there, she was always there. She was hard, physically hard, to live and work here, but the people were happy, open, it was just a joyful time.”

Pierro remembers that whenever there was a major concreting at Manonkamandi, there would be a ritual to put things to be put in the construction. “That was the sort of thread there was. Actually usually Liesbeth felt like Mother was following the construction much more than the chief architect.”

Lessons for today

So is Memory of Auroville merely a trip down memory lane, an indulgence in nostalgia, or does it have something to say to us in the very dif- ferent world of today? I think it does.

One lesson seems to be that having a practical common objective can be a great unifier. “The crews worked completely from one day to the next,” says Lary’s early Matrimandir construction, “And that was a very beautiful thing, because we would be all seen of people, and it always seemed to work.”

Another thing we could consider emulating in the future is to allow the early settlers to open their arms to whoever wanted to participate in the work, regardless of their means. “In those days one could live in Auroville without any moneys. Those who had, took care of you. You just showed up in the kitchen and ate. There was no difficulty,” remembers Charly.

Piero, the only European qualified to supervise the Matrimandir construc- tion in the early days, also has some thoughts about guiding people which are still very valuable today. “I don’t think that you have to teach anyone. I don’t think actually the best is not to teach anybody, because if we start teaching, then there is a possibility that we even worse. It is better to let things hap- pen, and then slowly, guiding, watch- ing, and letting them discover what they can explain exactly the small steps that have to be done. It’s more effective, and then later people start to grasp the whole of the work.”

And he notes the “early heroism” of the old evacuators who worked simply on trust and faith, “dig- ging, digging this earth which would be moved to somewhere, but not knowing exactly where”. Perhaps the most valuable lesson of all, however, is described by Auster when she talks about the differing effect upon people of Mother’s passing. Some people found it very hard to deal with, she said, because they had lost their bearings. But for others who had already made the inner contact, “their growth was greatly accelerated. The inner movement was much faster, much stronger, and the help much greater.”

Janet, with the assistance of Kati and Pranav Kumar, has done a great service in providing us with these inspiring memories of a few of Auroville’s pioneers, which she hopes will touch and inspire others. And PRISMA is to be complimented for finally bringing them to a much larger audience.

Alan

The book is available online as a gift economy basis at https://www.memo- riesofauroville.com. A hard copy will be available for sale later in the year.