LITTLE BY LITTLE: THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOOLING IN AUROVILLE: 1966-1980

PART I

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THE EVOLUTION OF SCHOOLING IN

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

When I was asked to write the history of the schools in Auroville my first response was “Oh, no. I don’t want to spend my time sorting through old papers, and anyway, I am terrible with dates and numbers, as my friends will readily tell you.” However, as I thought about it more, I realized that most of the “history” of Auroville's schools is probably not in old reports and dusty archives but in the minds and memories of people still living, and most of them still in Auroville. The thought of collecting stories from these people, many of whom I already knew, was very appealing, and I immediately started injecting questions like these into my conversation, “What was it like down there at Aspiration when you were growing up? Did you ever go to school in Centre Field? When did you come to Auroville? When did you first start teaching in Auroville? What were the schools like then?” Later, these questions formed the basis for more traditional interviews with a tape recorder, interviews which were transcribed and will be quoted here at length.

Once I was hooked on the drama of the story, told with the voices and from the perceptions of many different people, I was ready for the “dusty old documents” and discovered then how wrong I had been about both their condition and their relevance. The SAIIER archive fills one glass-doored cupboard in a small unwindowed room in the bowels of Bharat Nivas. With a firm but kindly touch, General Tewari presides over the Archives, working in a small reception room, assisted by several young Tamils who put materials on microfiche, do the photocopying, and perform other services. In the SAIIER cupboard, there are six shelves and on each shelf there is a neat pile of boxes and some loose paper bound files: the raw material for a history of the educational experiments in Auroville. The papers are roughly sorted by year and type, and contain everything from utopian treatises to samples of children’s work.

With the help of an able young research assistant, Daniel, I went through all of the back issues of Auroville Today, which provided a priceless, though not unbiased view, through on-the-spot reports for various school activities and some very useful five or ten year summaries of events preceding the year of publication. There were some copies of earlier newsletters and reviews which yielded helpful information and I drew heavily on the chapters in The Dawning of Auroville, in which Bill Sullivan reproduced critical passages from various sources to describe the educational experiments and conflicting views on the period in Auroville’s history when Auroville separated from the Sri Aurobindo Society, the time of “the troubles”.

One of my best finds was a daily journal, kept by Norman Dowsett from December 15, 1970 to August 1972. Dowsett was a classic chronicler, each entry only a few lines but written precisely and about practical issues-who came, who went, pressing problems, directions from Mother, lists of children and problems with transport - particularly problems with transport! The files, I discovered, were just people’s stories written down, another set of time and person bounded perceptions to put with the oral histories as a way to add dimension and complexity to what was already emerging as a complex and multidimensional series of moving pictures.

I am indebted to all the people who have allowed me to tell their stories here but most particularly in this first section to Shraddhavan, who has been the ideal “informant” for an ethnographic researcher, personal but objective, capable of sketching the large picture but grounding it with anecdotes and details: the best of storytellers. A large part of the first chapter, which chronicles the early years in Aspiration, comes in Shraddhavan’s own words, or has been suggested and augmented from interviews, earlier writing, and conversations via email. There were many fascinating mini-stories, which I did not have space to include. I hope she will publish the whole story herself. Any inaccuracies, in facts, chronology, names, places or perceptions, are not the fault of her memory but of my translation.

In some ways this history is a collage, a pastische, or perhaps a movie, made up, as movies are, of individual stills, but run together so rapidly that they simulate motion and become “moving pictures”. This story is composed primarily of small stories, like scenes, with speakers who have not been dubbed in. The actors speak in their own voices, and from their own observations. I have tried throughout to let them speak for themselves, and by splicing the stories together to create a picture of what schooling was like in the early days of Auroville. I have followed the Auroville tradition of identifying speakers only by their first names. You will find a list of all the people we interviewed in the appendix. You will also find there a time line and a list of references.

One difficulty that emerged as soon as I began looking for material on education is that “education” means different things to different people, and in Auroville, “a place of unending education” the emphasis on education as well as the ambiguity about what is meant by “education” is everywhere. For instance, I was quite excited to hear that there was a film entitled “Education in Auroville” made in the ‘70s and made arrangements to see it - not an easy task, as the film is on 8-millimeter tape and the film service had to find a projector to give me a special showing. I assumed the film would show classrooms and children at work. Imagine my chagrin at realizing that for the film makers, and perhaps for most of the Aurovilians of that time, ”education” did indeed mean “life”-all of life- and not schooling in any specific way. I think in the whole film there was only one shot of children in what might be thought of as a class-like situation. Clearly, I was not going to learn about schools in Auroville from this film.

For some in Auroville at the time, as this history shows, schooling was actually antithetical to education. To others then, and most Aurovilians now, schooling is one aspect of education, but only one. Mark Twain managed to get a laugh by saying, “I never let schooling interfere with my education”, but for Auroville this is not a laughing matter. Education is life in an intentional community dedicated to working together toward a higher consciousness. No part of the day is any more or any less important than any other. To make clear the distinction I have not called this a history of education in Auroville but rather a history of schools. A history of education in Auroville would be a much more ambitious project; it would have to be about Auroville in its entirety.

My second hesitation in attempting to write a history of Auroville’s schools was fear of presumption. Who am I to be telling the people of Auroville what to think about their schools? But when the project was reconceptualized as oral history, I realized that the history would come out of the stories, whether told to me or reported in the documentation. My role was to listen, read, sort, organize, and write up. There is, of course, no such thing as an unbiased researcher, and undoubtedly some of my particular perceptions guided the hand that did the sorting, but when there are different interpretations of a given event I have tried to give both sides a hearing.

It will be obvious that I have also, occasionally, stepped out of the role of passive reporter and shared my perceptions of what happened and why, based on 13 years of acquaintance with the schools of Auroville and fifty years (!) of work in education. There is some value, I hope, in the eyes and ears of a sympathetic but necessarily more distanced perspective. If my perspective is either too distanced or not distanced enough, if, in short I have it wrong” I hope my readers will not hesitate to set me right.

What you hold in your hands is only the first part of a more ambitious project: the whole story of the evolution of Auroville’s schools from 1966 to 2006: forty years of experimentation and forty years of growth. Think of this as a first draft for the final book, a work in progress. In the next rendition, errors will be corrected and other views, other stories added. Please! Send me all your suggestions, corrections, and more stories. Always more stories!

History is important - very important. As has been famously said, how can we escape repeating the mistakes of the past if we do not know what they are? How do we avoid reinventing the wheel? If history is important as a guide to the future we need historians, but we also need readers of history. It is not the experiences in themselves which teach, it is what we make of these experiences. Mother said an unexamined life is a miserable (or joyless) life; an unexamined experience is a wasted experience. Human beings do repeat the mistakes of the past, in our individual lives and in our collective lives, over and over again, because we don’t reflect upon them. We need to learn to recognize mistakes as the raw material for learning. We need to listen to our critics and consider alternative points of view. We need to listen to ourselves, and what we are really saying, as it might

be perceived by someone else. We need to try again, to do the same thing in a different way. Even a considered conclusion may be a wrong conclusion, but the way out of this dilemma is not to give up but to add the new information, which comes from the next mistake, and to rethink the problem again. And again. To think and think again: reflection, consideration, action, reflection, reconsideration, action, a spiral of reflection. I hope that this short history will encourage reflection on the evolution of Auroville's schools and may contribute to their continuing evolution.

The history of schooling in Auroville is a history of aspirations, failures, small steps forward, further experiments, small steps backward, a refining and maturing of aspirations, some forward leaps, some backward plunges. It isn't smooth, and it isn't complete, but when was progress ever smooth, and when does progress ever end? It is a history of evolving and growing consciousness, part of the story of a community growing up.

The title of this monograph, "Little by Little: the Evolution of Schooling in Auroville" comes from a story itself. I thought at first to use something Johnny said when Daniel and I went out to Fertile to interview him in the winter of 2004. He was sitting on the ground, sharpening a tool with a small grinder's wheel and in the course of the conversation he said, "Auroville is a wonderful arena for education." I liked the metaphor of the arena: a stage with side shows-surely an appropriate metaphor for Johnny- a stage on which many scenes are acted out simultaneously, some leading to others, some certainly with elements of the circus, some deeply serious, even tragic, and some with a few stunning solo performances.

However, a story from Varadharajan suggested another title, which seems equally apt. In this interview, Daniel and I visited with Varadharajan and Shyamala in Promesse, and Varadharajan told us the story of how Mother directed him to work in Auroville. In 1966 they made their first trip to the region to bring the vision of Auroville to the villagers, and to help them in any way they could. I have reprinted his story here just as he told it to us.

"Those days, from Aspiration we used to go to the Mother sometimes. So, when I went there one of those days … , Mother told me personally. She said … I wrote my question (How shall we work with them?) and sent it to her, and she answered. She was sitting like that (he indicated with his hands how Mother was sitting in her chair and how they were on the floor at her feet*), and that day it so happened that I was sitting very near her. Four or five other people were there. 'Ah,' she said, 'your question' - she spoke to me in English - 'you see, the best way is by education. To educate them not by words and speeches, but by … Then she said, 'It is by education', and she paused for 10 or 15 seconds, - all these thoughts were in my mind...? What is education?... Then she said, 'It is not by preaching but by example', and she said something very significant: 'If you can make them mix with your life and your work and they get the influence of your way of being, your way of understanding, then little by little they will change.' And sitting there she leaned down and she came very near my ear: 'Little by little they will change', so she whispered into my ear. 'And when they become curious and ask questions, then it is time to answer and tell them what you know,' and then she smiled so beautifully. I consider it as a sort of initiation for me, because she gave a great program for me, that is, first to educate myself - how can I give something, if I don't have anything to give? - so that is the first, to educate myself and my way of being and understanding. … from her own words in my ear, and also she gave me a great comfort, because she said 'little by little'. That means I should be very, very, very patient. And she took for that little bit such a long time … (I thought) I should always be smiling.*

So that is my backdoor into education. It is education that is a sort of lifelong education we have to give, not only to children, but to all the people from kindergarten up, to all the people depending on my availability, time, and as the situation develops. There is no fixed schedule. If somebody is there my whole interaction is how to give something of Auroville to them."

At a later date, when Varadharajan and Shyamala were feeling discouraged by the size of the task they had undertaken they went to her again and She said, *"You are only thirty people, you can't do as you would like. You have to do what is required at this time, and when you are 2000, 4000, 6000 you can do whatever you want."*

She might have said again, "little by little there will be change."

Varadharajan and Shyamala have been giving from Auroville for almost forty years. Their service to the villagers starts in 1966 and is described in the first chapter, until the story is picked up by Shraddhavan and others, but Varadharajan and Shyamala are always there in the background, sharing their lives and their examples with the local people and some of their activities will come to the fore again in later chapters.

As I began to read, talk and think about the schools in Auroville, beginning with the first efforts in Aspiration in 1970, and continuing through my more than a decade of personal acquaintance with not one but ten to twelve different schools it seemed to me that not only have the schools in Auroville evolved from tentative and sometimes chaotic beginnings, but "little by little" they have evolved into models for contemporary schooling. The work has not always been conducted with a smile, though certainly with perseverance. The progress, as this history illustrates, has never been smooth or easy, nor is it finished. Schooling in Auroville continues to change and to evolve: little by little.

CHAPTER II: SCHOOLING IN ASPIRATION, 1966-1976

"Go to Auroville and Start a School"

Our story begins with Varadharajan and Shyamala, the first people to come as emissaries to Auroville. Auroville was a vision barely beginning to reveal itself in 1966 when Mother told them to go to Auroville and work with the villagers. In our interview Varadharajan said that he intended to do a term of voluntary service and that, as a person from Tamil Nadu, he wanted to be able to explain the idea of Auroville to the local people. "My whole interaction with the villagers was to give something of Auroville to them, to know from them what we have to learn. It is a two-way process."

In 1966 Auroville was a dusty plain sprinkled with small impoverished villages. "The women had to carry water from three kilometers away, the children were unkempt, with hair like a saddhu's. The villagers were children themselves, hardly knowing how to live.", according to Shymala. There were a few cows, and an occasional chicken scratching in the dirt around the huts. The main crops were ragi, ground nuts and kumbhu, scratched from a parched or flooded earth. You could look straight out from Aspiration to the sea, with only a few palm trees to provide shade from the sun. Meenakshi said, "It was one of the most poverty-stricken areas in India with the highest illiteracy rate and it was a pocket of leprosy."

"I thought I had arrived on the moon", said Miriam, who came to Auroville in September, 1971 with her father, Tomas. She was nine years old. "*There was just the red parched sand and a few palm trees and a scattering of huts which looked rather cute. Nothing else, maybe a few cows. It was just dry heat, day after day, until it started to rain, and it rained and rained. The dust and dirt turned to red, slushy mud. We used to swim in the gorge. Later, I used to swim in the old construction holes."*

Getting back and forth between Auroville and Pondicherry could be difficult, particularly during the monsoons. The roads were rough, dirt tracks for the most part. In the dry summer heat they could be swept by wind into clouds of red dust. During the monsoon they were water channels and mud holes. After the rains they were rutted and perilous. Roads washed out, vehicles often got stuck or had to be re-routed, and cars were always breaking down.

Many of the first settlers turned at once to work on restoring the land. Joss, for example, came to Auroville in the late '60s from Australia where he had been studying law and philosophy at the University.

"I was drafted for the Vietnam war and I'd been raised as a Quaker so I had to leave. I began homesteading in Pitchandikulum, which at that time was just part of the arid desert. It was too hot and there was nothing here. We realized that if we wanted to survive we would have to plant some trees. But we couldn't plant just any trees - most wouldn't have survived either. I didn't know anything about planting but I learned from the farmers here, and from just trying things."

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Joss and others tell the story of how Aurovilians restored the land to health in the 2004 video "Towards a Sustainable Future." The dry, cracked earth so poignantly captured in the opening scenes from that video provided the setting for the first schools in Auroville.

At that time anyone who wished to become a part of the new township had to be approved by the Mother. Varadharajan said, *"You could send Mother a photograph, and Mother would say 'Yes! Yes'. To my knowledge, nobody was rejected. Everybody used to think that to participate in Auroville was something great. There was a lot of support for Auroville from some of the 'elders' in the Ashram too."* Some of these newcomers, personally approved by Mother went directly to Auroville but others remained in Pondicherry until huts and other services could be provided for them.

Of the villagers, Shyamala said, "The first need was cleanliness and taking care of the physical." There was a primary school in the village but the basic need was for food, and, of course, there were no government subsidies. With the help of Auroville and a Christian organization, Varadharajan and Shyamala managed to provide wheat and milk powder to about 100 children, and to pregnant and nursing mothers. The newly formed Auroville Health Service tended to some of their medical needs. The villagers were apprehensive about these strange new people, many of them white, who were trickling into their area, but they slowly gained confidence in the good intentions of the foreign settlers, and to judge them by the examples which they set, as Mother had hoped. "Education is not only academic education", said Varadharajan, "there is another kind of education in cultural fusion." In addition to material services, Auroville brought hope, a larger vision and cultural fusion to the local villagers.

Meanwhile, efforts were beginning to open a school for Tamil and Auroville children in Aspiration, and here Shraddhavan enters the movie. Shraddhavan has told the story of those early school days in several places: in an interview with Alan for an article in Auroville Today in June 1990, in an interview with me in 2004, in an essay she wrote for Agenda d'Auroville, and in a discussion Janet taped for Sally, and a few others involved in the early schooling experiments in Aspiration. These accounts combine to make a moving story of the first brave attempts to create a truly Aurovilian school, with teachers who had no experience and almost no resources. What they did have was an extraordinary commitment to their understanding of the ideal of Auroville, and specifically to implementing that vision for the children of Auroville. In less than six years they created a thriving school and school community for approximately 150 children from a huge variety of racial, class, cultural and language differences, with a coherent, "Auroville" curriculum. They first school opened in a hastily converted keet shed and within a few years they created a campus complete with a kitchen, dining room, the Last School building, smaller buildings for other activities, and two hostels for boarding children. The following account is largely in Shraddhavan's own words, drawn from these sources, and supplemented by entries from Norman Dowsett's journal, as well as with stories from Miriam, Joss, Meenakshi and others. All the direct quotations in this chapter are from Shraddhavan unless otherwise noted.

Shraddhavan describes herself as a young anarchist in 1969, living in London, and searching for a way to create a better society, when she stumbled upon a series of talks on Sri Aurobindo. She became deeply drawn to Sri Aurobindo's ideas and felt called by Mother to go to Auroville. She arrived in Pondicherry in November, 1971.

As was the practice at the time, she filled in a form and sent it to Mother. When Roger heard that she came from a family of teachers (had done some work with children) - though she had never been interested in teaching herself - he arranged a meeting with Mother. "Mother is pressing us to start a school in Auroville. Perhaps you can help us." He took her to see the Mother the next morning and, when she left the room in a daze, ran after her to say, "Mother has agreed. Go to Auroville and start a school." She had been in India less than a week. (AVT # 18)

Now Shraddhavan picks up the story.

"I was relieved to find that a school was already functioning in Aspiration, run by Rod and Ursula, in one of the round thatched huts which still stands on the grounds of Maroma. The business of 'starting a school' was done from Pondy, with very little consultation, and Norman Dowsett of SAICE (Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education) was put in charge of the school." She was number 54 on the register for Auroville.
"In Aspiration during the November holidays, a large keet structure which had been used as a workshop was hurriedly prepared and on December 16, 1971, Andre M, Mother's son, came to cut

the ribbon and give the Mother's directions for the inauguration of Aspiration school, among them: 'A sincere will to know and to progress' and a list of the languages to be studied: Tamil (as the local language); English as the international language; simplified Sanskrit to replace Hindi as the language of India; and French."

"The emphasis on languages was appropriate: The next morning at 8:00 the bus disgorged the first students. We had almost no equipment, perhaps ten totally inexperienced teachers, and thirty-five children - and most of us couldn't understand a word they were saying." (Shraddhavan in Auroville Today, June 1990)

On the first day of school the only furniture available was a few of the beds issued one each to new Aurovilians. If you sat on the floor these could be used as tables. They also had some huge sheets of beautiful handmade paper donated by the Ashram Factory and a lot of scissors. For the rest, the children and the teachers used found materials: a pile of bricks became a boat, sand became a village. Working together on drawing, painting, simple games and excursions helped the children and teachers to build a common vocabulary.

The children came from a variety of European countries, and different parts of India. From the beginning the Aspiration school was comprised of children who came down from Pondicherry, supplemented by an increasing number of children living in Aspiration. Most of the Auroville children - Martha, Raphael, Renu, Tady (Erisa), Hero and others had been attending the Equals-One (=1) school in Pondicherry, but stopped when the school in Aspiration opened.

Learning By Doing 1972 – 1973

By January 1972 there were 44 children and 5 full time teachers according to Norman Dowsett's journal. The early days were chaotic, and the whole of the first year - up to October 1971 - was spent establishing communication, "in whatever way we could devise to hold the children's attention. The moment we lost it they would rush off into the landscape - and often enough we would heave a sigh of relief, confident that they would be back at lunch time." (Shraddhavan '03)

Mother had appointed Norman Dowsett as director, to oversee the school in Auroville, but he only came about once a week "to give a pep talk and then disappeared. The direction was minimal." Because he seldom came and did not stay for any length of time, the teachers felt that he did not really understand their situation, a theme which was to be repeated on a larger scale a few years later when Aurovilians grew restive under the rule of the Society. Dowsett himself realized that he should come more often. In the spring of 1971 he wrote, "I should spend more time there but this I find increasingly difficult as the transport situation worsens."

Nearly half the entries in Norman Dowsett's journal for 1970-72 are about the bus and the difficulties of getting to Auroville. "Only the big bus is available ... the big bus is broken down ... The bus is late ... the children and teachers have to walk through sand and mud..." All the small cars and one big bus are now out of order.... went to Aspiration with the doctor's jeep. The roads are very eroded because of the construction of the last three days..." In addition to the big blue bus there was a jeep and a lorry, but all were equally unreliable. As Shraddhavan exclaimed, "Oh, the bus troubles! You can't imagine the difficulties we had to face!"

In spite of the difficulties with the bus it became the vital link for the whole community between the widely dispersed settlements of Auroville. Mopeds and motor bikes were yet to appear, and even cycling could be difficult to impossible under some conditions. To get back and forth from Pondicherry or to go from one emerging community to another the bus which traveled between them on a regular basis was a life line of connection. In the morning the bus picked up the children at the Auroville Dining Room in Pondicherry, went out the Jipmer Road, picked up children from Promesse, then from Auro- Orchard, and others along the way. In the afternoon the bus plied its way back through these communities, knitting them together.

In 1972 Roger persuaded Mother to put Yvonne Artad in charge and to give Norman Dowsett another job. Yvonne was more popular with the teachers in Auroville - her pep talks were apparently more inspiring - and the influence of Equals-One, where she was working, grew stronger. However, Yvonne

also came irregularly, and her difficulties with transportation were aggravated by the fact that bus was under Norman Dowsett's control.

The entries in Norman Dowsett's journal for 1971-72 fall roughly into three categories: the problems with the bus; the problems with management and teacher issues; and factual information related to the number of children on the roster and special events. The following entries will give a sense of the scope of his concerns and activities.

12/71 - 1/'72: 14 students alighted and Tibetans (8). clocks, pillows, mats, buildings, dental checkup, hair, uniforms (for sports) (Note: presumably matters to attend to.)

29/4/71 Saw Roger at the State House and discussed the plans and models for the two new school buildings. We decided that the three pyramid school model would best suit the purposes of a secondary area and agreed upon where the furniture and fittings would be best located. (Note: Again that there seems to be no invitation to the people actually running the school to participate in these discussions.)

5/1/72 List of students living in Aspiration (39)

20/1/72 First meeting for discussions about starting a preschool for village children.

28/7/72 Preschool inaugurated.

25/7/72 List of school bus passengers includes 12 Tibetans, 1 lama, 15 other students and 4 teachers. The bus also carried volunteers: 15 passes were issued. The bus goes to Aurogarage, Promesse, Udavi, Auroson's, Centre Field.

Included also was this disturbing entry in 1971.

"There are those in Aspiration who are hostile to the school. On Darshan Day all the furniture in the school was overturned and drawings torn off the walls. The new shelves for books were torn down."

Shraddhavan thinks that it was never clear whether the damage was caused by members of the community or by people from the village.

In addition to the bus problems, Dowsett and the teachers themselves, were concerned about the unresolved tensions between freedom and authority, to lead the children or to follow their lead?
He writes: "Should school be held for a whole day or a half day? Should the teachers or the children decide?" And later, "The teachers are finding it almost impossible to reconcile discipline with freedom". And finally, "Teachers come and go. Some fade out, some new ones appear. The teacher's problem is becoming acute. The safety margin is also stretched to the limit." (Dowsett 1971-'72)

The teachers' dilemmas were mirrored in the growing tensions within Auroville. To what degree should children - or adults - be answerable to an external authority and to what degree should they be left to follow their own leadings? The teachers struggled with the tension between freedom and discipline, order and disorder, their vision and the practical realities, as do all beginning teachers, and all those who wish to change the existing structure for something which they believe will be better.

For the most part the teachers were left to invent a school consistent with their interpretation of the principles of Sri Aurobindo, and responsive to the directions from Mother, but were severely limited by the physical conditions of the land, the buildings, and the lack of available resources. The teachers were also limited by their own lack of teaching experience, by the fact that teachers "came and went" and by their unresolved philosophical differences over the meaning of terms like "free progress" and "a new order". It was as though they had a vision of what they hoped for but didn't know how to get there. Shraddhavan says now that although Mother told them what to do: "Start a school." She didn't tell them how to do it, and they didn't think to ask her. They had an undisciplined, multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-linguistic crew of children under their care, and increasing tensions within the community. Most of their difficulties were to be expected - growing pains inevitable when a group of people unfamiliar with each other and unfamiliar with teaching, attempt a totally new venture with high

expectations. Gradually they learned from their own experiences and from the children. Gradually the teachers and children learned how to communicate with each other. Gradually chaos turned into a climate of cooperation, mutual understanding and a more comfortable alignment between the ideals and the reality.

The evolution toward a well-organized school was greatly assisted, Shraddhavan said, by the arrival in April, 1972, of Shanti Shah, who moved to Auroville from Pondicherry after a stint with Equals-1 (=1). She was a highly experienced and gifted educator, and an administrative genius. Her presence allowed the school to take on a coherent existence, and its eventual collapse was due largely to the fact that she was obliged to withdraw after November, 1976.

When school reopened in December 1972, after the holidays, many school buildings, including the kitchen, had been badly damaged by a cyclone. Shraddhavan remembers this as one of the best times. The school was open only in the mornings, from 8:00 to 11:30 "For once we were not constantly over stretched. We had time to prepare, time to maintain the environment, and the energy to establish a very concentrated learning atmosphere in the few hours the children were with us."

The teachers began to meet the bus every morning, drawing the children in first for concentration, then into a program which included the languages Mother had designated: French, English, Tamil and Sanskrit. There were sports every afternoon. The kids began to cooperate.

The younger children were with Thomas and Mirielle; the older children with Shraddhavan and Lydie, an "elderly" French lady, and other teachers who came out from the Ashram. ("She seemed elderly to us, Shraddhavan said, but we were all under thirty. She was probably 45!")

"By the end of '72 and the beginning of '73 there was a clear structure. We had assembly at the beginning of the day, lunch in the new dining room, and sports at the end of the day. We spoke French in the dining room, and English in the rest of the school except in the kindergarten, which was also French medium. There was an attempt to teach everyone some Sanskrit and a little Tamil.

A great help in stabilizing and establishing a home-like atmosphere emanated from the kitchen and dining room built up by Alain and Eliane Monnier in the "Jardin des Enfants". They managed to provide, on a large scale, the atmosphere of a caring French family. ...instead of the enamel plates and low tables normal in other Auroville kitchens in those days, the delicious food was served on polished wooden tables, with white earthenware crockery and glasses to drink from...a wonderful civilizing influence... We had the best of bourgeois French culture, with rules about behavior, about being polite, and about helping."

In a little over a year the school in Auroville had changed from a rough keet hut with only a few beds for furniture, a young and inexperienced teaching staff and a chaotic collection of children speaking several different languages into a functioning school with pleasant buildings, an established curriculum, a coherent student body, and a more cohesive staff led by an excellent administrator and educational leader.

"Very Special Souls, Those Tibetans"

A word about the Tibetan children who came to Auroville on the bus in the second year is in order. They were living in a hostel in Pondicherry next to the carpet factory, and apparently had no families. They had been taken away from their families when they were very young, and they lived in "*unappealing conditions in Pondicherry. They created havoc on the bus. They got on fighting, got off fighting and they were still fighting when we put them back on the bus in the afternoon. Only when all of us were totally exhausted were they able to quiet down and attempt to study. Mother said that we should take them, and there was an understanding that a lama would come with them to interpret but in the beginning no lama came."* (Shraddhavan '03) In the interview with Sally, Shraddhavan elaborated on Mother's directions. A Tibetan student had suggested that if some of the Tibetan children living in India could come and grow up in Auroville "they would manifest the Tibetan Pavilion." Both Mother and the Dalai Lama liked this idea so the Tibetan Government actually approved a quota of thirty Tibetan children for Auroville. Ten came in the beginning, some came and went, but the maximum was never more than twelve. When people in Auroville offered to take them in as foster children, Mother said no, because they were sent to represent Tibet, and their culture, and must stay

together, preferably in a boarding situation where they could all live together. “It was on that occasion that she said, ‘The only unity worth having is the Divine Unity.’”

Norman Dowsett's journal confirms these accounts. *“The Tibetans are causing some difficulty because:*
1) None of them speak any English. It was stated on their application forms that some of them could.
2) The lama does not accompany them as he contracted with Katak. I told the lama that unless someone is with them who speaks Tibetan all the time we would have to reorganize the whole aspect of the Tibetan program.” (Dowsett, 1972)

“Eventually the children were accompanied by two lamas in orange robes, but the children remained "quite unmanageable". They were 5 to 12. There was Tashi, and little Lobsang. We were distressed by their circumstances and asked Mother if we could take them as foster children but she said there was to be no assimilation, we must just provide for them. In spite of the constant fighting they had a sweetness; they were very special souls, those Tibetans."

A hostel for the Tibetan children was built in Auroville, near to where the dental clinic now stands, which opened toward the end of 1973. The lamas were expected to stay with the children but when they realized that the children were settled in Auroville they were recalled to Dharamsala and Shraddhavan was left in charge. It was totally unexpected.

“We were told they were all orphans but after the conflict, when the school was dismantled, they mostly disappeared, parents coming out of nowhere to spirit them away - that was in 1978 - when they heard the school was closed. Rod and Anita had been looking after them. They had a whole year without school in the refugee camp and then went to military school. Some tried to stay in Auroville, but Tashi, who is a nurse now, is the only one of the twelve children who returned.” (Shraddhavan ‘03)

Consolidation and Growth: 1973-1975

Although the Tibetan children were a distinct and important component of the early Auroville school, by 1973 there were more than 150 students, “consisting of three roughly equal groups from very different backgrounds: one third of western origin, one third local Tamil children, and one third whose parents were from other parts of India, and mainly middle class. ...these children split up into small ‘compatibility groups’ - defined by their capacity to work together and usually under the guidance of one or sometimes two adults.”

There were two types of teachers. Some teachers led the compatibility groups, which were like class groups, and some looked after the specialty areas such as the library. The groups had a “home room” but also moved from work area to work area. Shanti had helped established a number of work areas in various localities where children could go for different activities. Each learning center was set up and managed by one teacher. The centers were distributed over the area from Protection to the Mango Grove (now La Ferme) to the beach. Whole group activities were provided by the early morning assembly and concentration, and eating together for lunch in the “lovely new dining room”. The last hour in the afternoon was devoted to sports. There was a sports ground, where the afternoon activities took place, which was begun by Eckhardt, a German gymnast, but completed by Ananda Reddy, assisted by Savitra. It is interesting to note that these three elements: concentration, a self-contained class of some kind, and sports, occurring at roughly the same time in the schedule, are common to all Auroville schools now.

“At some point, perhaps in 1973, we decided it would be better to have the school administered by a small group of teachers on site. It was almost impossible for Yvonne to get to Auroville but inspired by Yvonne’s idea that the whole of Auroville is a school we tried to organize a program whereby each student would have a place to work and learn in the community. We had a main lesson for two hours in the morning and then the children went out to work and learn in the community, helping with one of the craft production units, or in the kitchens, or on the farms." (Shraddhavan ’03)

The teachers tried to find places where people would be willing to work with the children over a period of several months, such as Utility; Far Beach, where Gerhard was building a wooden sailing boat by hand; Toujours Mieux, the workshop in Aspiration; also the block-making unit there, as well as Auro-

Garage, and the bakery in Aspiration. Miriam remembers working with a weaver at this time. These placements worked well when one of the teachers could go with the students, and when there was someone in the workplace to oversee and assist them. But with roads hardly worthy of the name, no telephones or other means of communication, in short, no effective infrastructure, every venture was fraught with potential problems.

“It was an organizational nightmare, and was abandoned within a year. In those days distances were great between different parts of Auroville and the children had either to walk or cycle. They'd get way out to the edge of the Greenbelt, discover the farmer they were working with wasn't there because he had to take his cow to the vet, and then the next time they were reluctant to go.”

In 1974 there were two boarding houses in Aspiration, the hostel for Tibetan children, and another for Tamil children from Kuilapalayam, run by Jean and Gordon Korstange, American Peace Corps volunteers who had recently come to Auroville. These children stayed in the hostel, attended school in Aspiration, but maintained close contact with their families in the village.

"At the height of the school in ’75 there were activities all day. We had the elements of an integral curriculum: concentration, Sanskrit, mother’s music, healthy food and sports” - and the sandboxes.

Sandboxes

The sandboxes, known also as “The World Game” was a unique aspect of the curriculum at Aspiration, and was reintroduced into the Auroville curriculum at Transition by Jossy in 1999. Jossy prefers to refer to this activity as sandplay, but for the time being I will retain the western term “sandbox”, which seems to me a better way to indicate the difference between free play in the sand and a focused and deliberate “game”, in a set place, at a set time, with a specific collection of materials and a watcher/listener/recorder present.

Miriam, who remembers the sandboxes at Aspiration with affection, says they were simply long rectangular boxes filled with sand. “We worked with them maybe twice a week - just the box with sand in a room with shelves full of interesting things. A teacher would draw what we’d done but not interfere in any way, and then ask whether there was anything we wanted to say. I always piled everything in the center and then made walls around it, circular walls, and walls around walls. We went when we wanted and it was very helpful. “ (Miriam ‘04)

The World Game was brought to Auroville in the early days by an eccentric Jungian psychiatrist, Austin Delaney, who had been working with them at Equals-One. He and his wife lived “in a keet castle at Aurobeach, near what is now Quiet,” according to Johnny.

The sandboxes at Aspiration were housed in keet sheds, where Austin also had stored thousands of little objects which could be used to create scenes and small dramas in the sandbox. After a child completed a sandbox the teacher drew a picture of the scene and invited, but did not require the child to talk about it. Making a sandbox in the first place was always voluntary. At one point every child made a sandbox every day, and when the Aspiration School was closed for repairs after the cyclone in 1972, there were school activities for the children in the morning but in the afternoon they worked with the sand boxes, and then, “they really took off.” At a time when there was no common language, the sandbox was a form of self-expression and communication which, like drawing or pantomime, did not require words.

In describing the sandbox activities, Shraddhavan said, “One way to meet the individual needs of the students was through the sand boxes. We were all the time trying to look at the individual needs of each child. It is amazing what children said through their boxes. They were very helpful in difficult situations.”

"We believed each child has a psychic being and if it comes to the front it takes education out of our hands and helps them to keep in contact with their true self - so a child can follow the leading of his or her psychic being. This view was in conflict with parents who wanted all the traditional activities for their children at different stages of development.”

When the school in Aspiration closed, the boxes went to Thomas' house in Certitude where the younger children continued to come for painting, storytelling and work with the sandboxes. The idea was that, in addition to helping children release their emotions constructively, the sandbox would also be good for reading and writing: to make, to tell, to write. Later, when most of the school experiments moved to Centre Field in 1980, the sandboxes disappeared, but reappeared later, first at Mirramukhti and then at Transition.

In an article in Ritam, published in the winter of 2005, Jossy describes her work with the sandboxes at Transition now.

"Sand play is actually just what its name implies; it is playing with sand. It is a tool to getting to the imagination and allowing it to become creativity. It is a wonderful instrument, which helps create a link between body and psyche, matter and spirit. Our hands act as a mediator between inner images and their expression in the outer world: hence the sand tray. It fosters sensitivity to inner images, a condition of relatedness to the inner world, and its concreteness helps create a state of absorption and relaxed concentration. It is a way of objectifying, in the form of symbols, the energy of the unconscious and is very close to the method of active imagination developed by Carl Jung." (Ritam, February 2005)

The rectangular box represents the limitations of the world, but the variety of miniatures, people from all times and cultures, animals, houses and castles, trees and flowers, as well as craft materials enable the children to create any world they can imagine within the limitations of the box. The basic equipment for sand play is a rectangular tray, 28" x 19" and 3 inches deep, half filled with sand. The inside of the tray is painted blue so that when an area is exposed it suggests water. Real water may also be used. The children can make whatever they want with these simple materials, lingering over one box for an hour, or making several boxes one after the other. There are no specific instructions, and no distractions to interfere with their concentration.

One valuable feature of the sandbox for a multicultural society like Auroville is that once within the world of the box the children are free to use or ignore the symbols of the culture they know and to create their own. The sandbox world "*is a symbolic expression of the quest for consciousness that is the first and essential drive for human beings.*" (Jossy, '05)

Then, as now, the sandbox has the capacity to be a therapeutic tool for the children. It can also be used as an academic tool, encouraging the children to express themselves, first through sand play and later through telling, acting and writing. In most cases there is no direct connection but feelings and thoughts released by protected free play in the sandbox can encourage a freer expression in other mediums. Any growth in consciousness will lead to further growth in other domains. The sandbox can be an integral part of an integral education.

Trees and Buildings: The Landscape Changes

Everywhere in Auroville people had been planting trees. The trees at Aspiration were young, but well tended, and in a tropical climate everything grows fast. Faster even than the trees, new buildings were sprouting up: keet huts and capsules for new arrivals, concrete and wooden buildings for the school and the community. Villagers and Aurovilians, working side by side, learned new agricultural and conservation practices from each other and by experimenting began to improve the land within and around Auroville.

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Aurora, who grew up in Aspiration, drew a picture in a Human Development workshop recently of the way she remembers Aspiration when she was about ten. The picture shows a scattering of small keet huts, a playground and sports field, buildings which may be Last School and the Pyramids, children playing in the sand, children fighting, dogs, horses, and in the distance, the sea.

One of those huts may be the building where Rod and Ursula were running a small school before Shraddhavan came to Aspiration. Another may be the building in which the Aspiration school opened, the "ramshackle old building", a keet roofed workshop, and another may be the Jardin des Enfants. Some may be the learning centers Shanti initiated. Perhaps beyond the perimeter of the drawing are the two hostels for boarding children, or the play schools for village children.

Early in 1971, Roger had begun working on plans for a building to be known as Last School which was inaugurated by the Dalai Lama in August 1971, and opened for use in October '71. Shortly after this Roger asked Mother to name the schools, as he had the promise of support for seven buildings from the Indian government. These, Shraddhavan says, are the names Mother gave to the schools.

Last School (that was a little joke of Mother's) for children of development at any age.
After School I - resource centers
After School II - environments open to anyone, or
After school to be by itself, like a learning center.
After School III - undefined
Super school - undefined
No School - unending education. There was to be assisted learning for the higher faculties, but in principle children would be free to go anywhere and would be welcomed. They would be learning 24 hours a day.

These days Aspiration is a large community of keet roofed structures and many fine architectural experiments. The Last School Campus has a variety of school buildings and a few dwellings. The trees have grown so thick and high you can no longer see the sea.

Closing the School in Aspiration: 1976

By the end of 1975 there were perhaps 150 children from the ages of 6 to 19 in the school. The school seemed to be thriving and the teachers were beginning to feel confident and settled enough to be able to make a large change. And then the civil war flared up. It was difficult to get teachers to come down to Auroville or to get children to come to school. In the fallout from the conflict the schools closed. Last School became a neglected building. Shanti left.

"We felt we had let the children down. The labs were destroyed and some time later, in 1978, there was a bonfire at Last School to burn books 'representative of the old order.' Whole libraries had been donated and a particularly fine collection of art books. The civil war had many tragic consequences." (Shraddhavan '03)

In the 1990 interview with Shraddhavan, Alan asked her what she would like to say in conclusion, and she replied, *"I spent six years of my life working with the children in Aspiration. We had maximum diversity and all were on an equal footing. We tried to meet all needs equally. There was such a responsiveness in the children and no possibility of pressure."* (Auroville Today, 1990)

In the next chapter we will describe what happened during the "educational hiatus" (as it was named by Auroville Today), after the school and boarding components closed and until the new educational experiments started in Centre Field in 1980.

CHAPTER III: THE EDUCATIONAL HIATUS: 1976-1980

"In 1976, Aspiration school closed, and for almost eight years there was no organized structure for education in Auroville. This was welcomed by some. 'School as such is dead in Auroville, and so much the better,' stated the Auroville Review in 1978, reflecting a feeling that something more and closer to the spirit of Auroville's purpose needed to emerge. But others were concerned by the educational hiatus, and a number of small centres evolved - Ivar's school in Kottakarai, Meenakshi's "after hours" school for Tamil youth and workers, Croquette's school in Douceur which later moved to the Centre Field, and Johnny's incomparably offbeat and inspirational happenings at Fertile. But the older teenagers, in particular, were deprived of stimulation at a critical stage, and a number of them began to seek further education elsewhere in India and abroad.." (Auroville Today, June 1990)

The state of schooling in Auroville after Aspiration school closed is outlined simply in the summary above from the June 1990 issue of "Auroville Today". In this chapter the nature of the conflict which closed the schools and the story of the eight years between the time the school in Aspiration closed, and a school opened officially at Centre Field will be told again in the voices of those who lived, worked or studied in these "small centres" and others. It was actually a time when the outreach schools as I have been calling them, the schools operated under the auspices or influence of Auroville

for the Tamil village children grew in strength, purpose and programming. The influence of Auroville on the surrounding region increased considerably because of these efforts. In addition, many of the Tamil leaders in Auroville and in the surrounding areas were educated in these experimental schools. Unfortunately the children of Auroville fared less well. In the absence of an official Auroville school, some parents began teaching their own children and others in their homes, many people contributed their services by tutoring in a given subject, languages in particular. But a number of parents either sent their teenage children out to school or went back to their native countries so that the children could get an education.

The Troubles, The Conflict, The Civil War

By whatever name, the period from approximately 1972 until the time of the Auroville Resolution in 1979 was a troubled time for Auroville. Although there had been simmering resentments against the Sri Aurobindo Society, trouble did not break out into the open until Mother left her body in 1973. Mother had established "The Sri Aurobindo Society" or SAS to handle the legal affairs associated with the new township. The Society bought lands for Auroville, distributed food and other supplies, handled the money for building in Auroville, and was, in general, responsible for all financial and procurement services. Mother appointed Sri Navajata as director. Navajata lived in Pondicherry and many thought he had little understanding of Auroville. The following description comes from a mimeographed paper published by The Auroville Information and Communications Service in August 1977.

"Shri Navajata, who was not a resident Aurovilian, continued to spend monies allocated for Auroville according to his own set of priorities rather than according to the real priorities as experienced by Aurovilians. They likewise felt frustrated by the image that Shri Navajata was presenting of Auroville through publications and personal appearances throughout India and abroad which conveyed, on one hand, a false sense of structural completion and on the other hand, his own personal view of Auroville's meaning which he had never experienced."

Aurovilians became increasingly restive under the direction of the non-resident "outsiders " and with what seemed to be unfair or arbitrary decisions on the part of those in charge in Pondicherry. Shraddhavan, for instance, described the difficulties with "the bus" when Norman Dowsett was in charge, and of the ways in which he could use the problems with transportation to make it difficult for his successor, Yvonne, to come out to Auroville. In a similar way, Navajata could make it very difficult for certain people to get in or out of Auroville. Navajata was replaced as the director of Auroville in 1973 but what Aurovilians considered harassment and misrepresentation continued. They also felt that monies allocated for Auroville land development and other purposes were allocated inappropriately or even misused.

Like many colonies in world history, the "colonists" were at first grateful for the mother country, but as they "grew up" and become more self-sufficient they also looked for more independence. In a sense history recapitulates the human experience. At birth we are dependent upon our parents for everything, our very existence and subsistence, but as we grow older we want to do more and more for ourselves, and in adolescence we want to shake off our parents entirely and to make our own decisions. Partly because of the communication difficulties between Pondicherry and Auroville, partly because of the inherent difference in perception and experience between those on the ground and those in the office, as it were, and partly because of an increasing sense of autonomy, Aurovilians began to rely more and more on themselves, less and less on the Society, and as Mother's life drew to an end she had less direct involvement with the daily affairs in Auroville.

Another factor, which contributed to the restlessness in Auroville, may have been the kind of people who were attracted to the vision of Auroville in the first place. They tended to be young and of a pioneering nature, resistant to external authority. It was the '60s, a time when the winds of change were blowin' around the world, as Bob Dylan reminded us. The first settlers were, for the most part, young, well-educated - though not perhaps for the work ahead of them,- and highly idealistic. They came intentionally, inspired by the teachings of Sri Aurobindo, or to realize the Mother's vision of human unity, and to build a model society. Since they were working and living on abused soil in one of the most poverty ridden regions of Tamil Nadu this meant in reality a great deal of hard physical work, improvisation, adjustment, and collaboration. Every day they were making practical and theoretical decisions on the spot. It is not surprising that they found decisions unacceptable when

made by people with little or no personal, hands-on connection to the daily struggles – and achievements - with the city they were building.

At the breakup point most Aurovilians wanted to become independent of the Society, but a few remained "neutral", not so much in support of the Society as in the conviction that since Mother had set up this arrangement her wishes should be followed. The conflict, then, was waged on two fronts: Aurovilians against the society and those who saw themselves as the true Aurovilians against the neutrals.

The Aurovilians tried to register as a separate trust in 1975 in order to receive and manage their own funds. In retaliation, the Society stopped all financial assistance to Auroville, tried to deny visas and to deport foreign nationals.

Open conflict erupted. The Society hired village thugs to attack some Aurovilians; two people were deported. Following an armed attack in 1977, the government of India intervened and sent a committee to investigate.

The Society retaliated: *"All the land, equipment, etc. in Auroville are the properties of the SAS... The Charter of Auroville is a spiritual declaration. It is inappropriate to quote from the Charter in a legal document..."* (Sullivan, 1994)

"Faced now with a court injunction, with deportations, with the jailing of Aurovilians on false charges initiated by the Society and with non-availability of funds through the legitimate channel, the Auroville community appealed to the government of India for protection of the charter of Auroville and its residents. And internally, a radical effort was made to reduce expenditures, to pool the financial resources that remained and to channel energies towards the collective organization and maintenance of Auroville." (From Auroville: The First Nine Years, 1978)

As the statement above indicates, funds were cut or withheld which made it very difficult for the community. In the first years money flowed into Auroville from supporters, or was channeled through Mother. Now that flow of assistance ended abruptly. With help from numerous friends abroad, Pour Tous continued to provide food supplies but there was little money for development and necessary services. The conflict was technically resolved at the higher administrative levels by a Supreme Court decision in 1980 that led to an act of Parliament in 1988: "establishing the Auroville Foundation to guarantee that Auroville and all its assets 'belong to humanity'. All those who lived in Auroville during this period were affected in some way by the conflict." (Sullivan, 1994)

Since "education" was always seen as a large part of the Auroville mission, the schools became the focus of many of the conflicts. When violence threatened, Pondicherry parents were reluctant to send their children to Auroville; teachers were also reluctant to come down to Auroville from Pondicherry. Some Aurovilians rejected the idea of formal schooling altogether and were hostile to the school. Although in the fall of 1975 Shraddhavan has described the school as finally well-settled and stable enough to begin implementing a new approach, by the spring of 1976 the school had closed.

This was one of the moments in Auroville's history when the distinction between education and schooling became critical. For some people formal education, as represented by "schools", undermined the goal of "education as all of life". They also felt that through schools children were being indoctrinated with the ideas of the old order, which were inimitable to the new order, represented by their vision of Auroville. While some saw education and schooling as irrevocably opposed, others believed that schooling was subsumed under education, a contribution to the evolution of the new city, but only a piece of the whole.

"What is education in Auroville? We don't know, because it is life itself. It is there, at each moment, with the children, the adults, the nature, the work, everywhere. It is the contact, the true contact by which we learn how to be and how to give. It is our need, which calls the circumstances to learn this or that. It is concrete." Keya, writing in the "Auroville Review" (September 1978), as quoted in The Dawning of Auroville.

For some, like Shraddhavan, the conflicts and particularly the closing were not only bewildering but also painful. A tragedy in fact. Some Aurovilians, teachers and students at the time, still regret the abandonment of community schooling, some still suffer from the anger and rejection they experienced during those years. In an informal interview, Miriam, who was classified as one of the neutrals, shared with me her memories of that time.

"We were always hungry. We lived on bread, semolina and ragi porridge. My father was one of the neutrals. People told me that if I refused to talk with my father I could be reinstated, but I wouldn't do that. I was 12 or 13 by then. The schools were closed. I wanted to go on studying, but both the English teacher and the French teacher said they couldn't work with me anymore. I liked them both and that hurt me very much. I could only study with other people who were ostracized. I wanted to study languages mostly, and I did intensive gymnastics every day, for one hour in the morning and two hours at night.
There was a woman called Dawn, who had been running a guesthouse in Ami. When she decided to go back to California she left her house to us children. There were 12 of us, both boys and girls in the house, but the boys wouldn't do any of the cleaning and just left their dishes in the sink so we told them to leave.

There was never enough to eat. They sent food to the house in Ami for breakfast and lunch, but not for me. If there were ten in the house they would send nine eggs. The others shared with me but there was never very much for anyone. The dinners were the worst. We were supposed to eat in one of the communal kitchens but I was always excluded. Sometimes I went to Johnny's school even though the kids were too young for me. Really I just went for the food. Johnny said that he would never refuse to feed a child. When I was 17 my mother came from Germany to take care of me. I was in really bad shape and suffering from malnutrition."(Miriam '04)

Later Miriam worked with Simone at the kindergarten in Centre Field and is now the head of the team at the Centre Kindergarten.

However, for others in Auroville the closing of the school was a triumph. A year after the closing of the school an editorial in the spring 1997 issue of the "Auroville Review" presents their view.

"For several years, the Auroville library located in Last School (Aspiration) found itself more and more stuffed with hundreds of unread books sent from all over the world (sometimes at great expense) or brought by Aurovilians themselves. It had begun to resemble a refuse bin rather than a library.

Concerned with this malaise, Aspiration generated a collective movement, and those in charge of the library recognized the need for a purge; that is to say, they had sorted out the books which seemed most interesting and most read, selling the remainder for the price of the paper. About 4000 volumes remain out of the original 8000. It is interesting to note that the most affected categories were: philosophy, sociology, and religion; these three subjects were consciously weeded out. We no longer feel in our life the need of philosophies and theories: we are here to realize.

One February evening, we had a large bonfire next to Last School (mostly kindled by old brochures and magazines ...a gesture whose meaning was to finish with the culture of the old world and to bring a lighter sense to the role of the library: now we find comics, science fiction, certain novels, books of art, science and technology, as well as those of Sri Aurobindo and Mother (minus those of certain disciples) that remain."
(Editorial, Auroville Review, (Spring, 1978**)**

A Marvelous Arena for Educational Experiments
Of course, schooling didn't come to a complete halt. Here and there individual teachers went on doing what they could, offering classes in their homes, taking the children with them to their work. As Rod Hemsell wrote in the Auroville Review for 1981: *"During the course of 1977-80 diverse educational environments developed in many different locations in Auroville for the youngest members of the community. Wherever numerous children live, parents and friends have provided special places of play and study so that groups of children can be together while still associating closely with their home environments and activities.* (Rod Hemsell, "A Learning Society," Auroville Review 1978)

The early efforts to work with village children in Kottakarai, Kuilapalayam, Promesse and Edyanchavadi continued, growing in most cases stronger, more extensive and increasing in attendance. Within Auroville, small informal school-like experiments arose, primarily around a parent or group of parents looking for some form of schooling for their children. In the forest, Johnny began teaching his sons and a few others who joined him there. Croquette was teaching his own children in Douceur and soon other children were also there. Some individuals were tutoring children in languages, or gymnastics, and many sports programs continued. But the factions also continued. There are stories of children being asked to leave these little schools because their parents were on another side in the conflict, and of teachers refusing to teach the children of "neutrals" like Miriam. Some parents sent their children to the French Lycee in Pondy; some parents actually left Auroville and returned to the west so that their children might be educated as they thought appropriate.

Baba, the son of Croquette, was interviewed for the 1990 retrospective issue of "Auroville Today". His story provides a good view of what was happening for some of the children who were still living in Aspiration with their parents. He was 15 at the time of the interview and studying at the French Lycee in Pondicherry.

Baba was brought to Auroville on his first birthday. *"I was one of the very few of my generation to have had a kind of education from the beginning. All that thanks to my parents. They went against the current of that time which was "no education. Freedom and fun for our kids." I liked freedom and fun but I also had an education. For many years my father was teaching us in our small school in Douceur. When I was around eight or nine my father moved to Center School. We stayed there for two about two years and then moved to Transition School. After two years in Transition I went to Last School in Aspiration."* After two years at Last School Baba went on to the Lycee and the rest of the interview is about the problems he faced in moving between his "home town" and his "study town."

Johnny's Unschool

No description of schooling in Auroville would be complete without attention to Johnny's "Incomparably Offbeat and Inspirational Happenings at 'Fertile' ". It is amusing to note that in Rod Hemsell's descriptions of the small educational ventures which occurred in Auroville during "the hiatus", whatever Johnny was doing was not described as school.

This story within a story is put together from notes Daniel and I made when we interviewed Johnny at Fertile in the winter of 2004, from reports in Auroville Today, and from allusions other people have made to Johnny's "happenings" and his influence, which rumbles on even today.

Johnny began by telling us he came to India "for refuge". His wife came first, and they hoped to repair their relationship in Auroville, though later she left and he remained. At that time there was an "Entry Group" for Auroville in Pondicherry, who said they could use Johnny's help with building in Pondy, which he didn't want to do, but, finally, he was accepted by the Mother directly and went to Auroville.

For about six years Johnny was part of a construction crew, building keet huts and capsules in Aspiration. Then he went fishing with Krishna, a man from Morocco. Krishna was huge, aloof, black and dashing. He had a degree in fishing from Paris University, and they fished from a catamaran.

In the early '70's, Johnny went out to the area now called Fertile to start a small farm and reforestation project. It was, he says, reminiscent of the Wild West.

"*You staked out a claim and started to work it. The idea, which originated with Namas and Boris, was to build a temporary camp, plant as many trees as possible in an area as large as possible, or plant until you reached water, leave a watchman there and move on. Shyamsundar was our agent in Pondicherry. We had to fight to get a pump, bullock carts, and a busload of Ashramites to do the planting. We had thirty acres planted that expanded to fifty; we kept 5 acres for farm land. There was an abundance of money at that time, because Mother was distributing money for Auroville herself."* (Auroville Today, June 1990)

Johnny's kids and some others, Jesse, Jonas, Luc, Chali, Laurel, etc. were going back and forth to Equals One but it was a long trip. In 1975 he looked for a school for his son Jonas. "I was very down on conventional education, but Jonas said you have to get me prepared for Kodai." So Johnny sat

down with Jonas and one of his friends, Isaac, every day, and asked them to write a detailed journal of what they had done during the day.

"They had a large book with lined and unlined pages and they had to write a full account. Then 'this Japanese guy' came to teach basic math skills. Eventually, more kids came, some of them with exceptional talents, until we had about 12 children. They all decided to build their own classroom including desks, blackboard, the whole thing."

The classroom had a plastered geodesic dome. A device they invented with a hexagonal glass crystal, and a lens that created a rainbow measured time.

Other teachers began to come forward. "Auroville is a wonderful resource; there are so many people with interesting experiences ... We had a routine for awhile: a piece of creative writing until tea, then physics, science, English, horse insemination... "

They had school for two to three hours every day, but the rest of the time they worked in the forest, invented things, and messed around. I am using "messing around" here in the sense intended by Kenneth Grahame in The Wind in the Willows when he has Ratty say to Mole, "Believe me, my young friend, there is nothing - absolutely nothing - half so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats." At this point I hope my readers will bear with me while I step out of the role of story re-teller to make some observations of my own.

There is a whole school of educational thought, to which I belong, that believes there is nothing in this world quite so much worth doing as simply messing about in boats. Or messing around in the woods, or in the kitchen, or the workshop, or the dance floor, or even the classroom, although it takes an unusual teacher to make messing around productive without destroying its special quality.
(Note: For examples of classrooms where "messing about" is intentionally manifested in the curriculum see Starting From Scratch by Steven Levy, or many of the essays in The Open Classroom Reader, both books available in the Teachers' Access Library at Transition.)

"Messing around" in this sense implies the deep contentment and concentration which comes when one is fully responsible for one's own work or learning, engaged in solving a problem with questions of one's own making, and responsible for finding one's own solutions. It means learning, which is self-initiated, self-directed, leads from the known to the unknown, is it's own motivation and yields its own multiple rewards as felt by the mind and heart of the learner. It means being intensely serious, but unhurried and playful - essential elements for creativity - and for the development of independent thinkers and doers. It is one manifestation of Sri Aurobindo's principles in action.

Johnny himself uses the word "mess" in the following quotation, and although I would not go so far as he does in assuming all children at any age will be able to create order out of chaos I do firmly believe in the value of many and appropriate opportunities for all children to mess about in "safe" situations, i.e. those appropriate to their age, interests and stage of development.

"The small child has such a wide and generalized sense of order that it enjoys chaos, and, given a free enough rein, can turn a chaotic situation, like sand piles, to its own creative advantage, like a castle. There is a powerful internal order that can handle extremely disorderly environments. For the small child all is in order. It is not hampered by the educated concept of "a mess." (Johnny, "Instances of True Education", Auroville International U.K. News, 1979)

But, back to the story of successful no-schooling in the forest. Johnny and the students organized full moon trips, and raced bullock carts on the beach. "If you do something all night the kids are no longer restless. There were no discipline problems because everything was their idea." We wanted to do an overland trip to China but it didn't come off. We were rather separated from the troubles at Aspiration out there in the forest." (Auroville Today, June 1990)They were separated, too, by the fullness of their own self-created worlds.

In the next act of this drama Johnny will reappear as a teacher at the Pyramids, on the Last School campus, invited by Sanjeev and Deepti to lead a subsidiary school for "creative expression" which he described as "a wacky old school where we did whatever occurred to us". He will resurface a decade

later as the moving force behind the Youth Center. The plays and full moon walks continue. Messing around is still in the script for Auroville's wonderful arena.

The Early Outreach Schools

The first efforts of Auroville towards care and guidance for children were directed toward the children of Kuilapalayam when Varadharajan and Shyamala began providing food, guidelines for nutrition and cleanliness, and healthy activities for the children in the late '60's. Other outreach efforts began formally and informally in the villages surrounding Auroville within a few years. By 1974, the Auroshika incense factory and Udavi, the school for worker's children were operating in Edyanchavadi. In 1976 Meenakshi arrived under the auspices of the Tamil Rural Development Fund to begin offering programs in Kottakarai. I have included here some early and personal accounts, different scenes for the movie, from the people who worked with these programs and the children who participated in them. We'll begin with Shankar, a rowdy urchin from Kuilapalayam, by his own account.

"Aspiration was a playground for the whole village. Varadharajan and Shanti were in charge. They encouraged us to play there and they gave us snacks, and when Mother left her body they took us all to the Ashram. One of the first things I remember is going out to Johnny's in the Greenbelt with my father in the bullock cart. It was a long way out, and very barren but Johnny was a good friend. However, relations with other Aurovilians were not so good. Me and the other children were sent out with the goats and we would cut the farmer's fences to let the goats through. Then the farmers would chase us with sticks, throw stones at us, and beat us sometimes when they caught us. Charlie chased us all over the landscape. We were a bunch of naked rowdies.

For a while I went to Pitchandikulum where Joss was running a school for about 20 village children. I went there for two years starting when I was six; I remember we had lemon grass tea with palm jaggery. When I was eight or nine I was sent to the Kalapet School. I'd stay in Auroville until 12:00 and then go to "normal jail", which was what we called the Government School. When the school in Pitchandikulum closed our contacts with Auroville were just through the ammas, or the gardeners, or when delivering milk."

For some time now, Shankar has been an Aurovilian himself, living and working on the Last School campus, and he has two little boys who are not rowdy at all.

Auroshika/Udavi

Auroshika, one of the early outreach schools near Auroville, opened in 1972. "I want to change this whole region.", Mother said to her disciple, Nata. She asked him to do something for Edyanchavadi, a village near Auroville," (Auroville Today, 1999.No.126.) Edyanchavadi was one of the poorest villages in the region at the time and so the incense factory known as Auroshika Agarbathies opened, to provide employment for villagers and income to support a school. "We must follow them up," Mother said, "As long as it is done with selflessness and for the purposes it is meant I shall put my Force behind it." The first initiative was to set up a small clinic and dispensary, the next to open a crèche. Mother gave the name "Udavi" to the school, a name that means "help". As the first children grew older, successive grades were added. Management of the Auroshika School was taken over by two Aurovilians, Nata and Maggi.

Mangai, who now operates a small kindergarten and women's group in Nellikupam, is an illustration of how beautifully Mother's intentions have been realized. This is Mangai's story.
"I was three years old, very small and very sick when they first opened the school. Other people were suspicious of this new place, run by these foreigners, but my mother took me to the dispensary anyway. I was two years old. I had a big stomach, way out in front of me," she indicates this with her arms, "a runny nose, and I had worms, and eye problems. She took me to the dispensary and they

gave me medicines, and the doctor said, 'We are going to start a school and I will write in your daughter's name.' I was the first student! Slowly the worms went away and my stomach came in and I began to get healthy. There were about eight or ten of us children at first. Our mothers had to come to school and stay with us the whole time we were there. After the crèche I went to LKG and then UKG, and finally all the way up. They gave us good snacks, and nice little frocks with a pretty flower pattern but no sleeves.

Every week we got checked for lice. We sat in a line and each one picked the lice out of the head of the one in front, and then they gave us medicine to put in our hair, and we had to leave it there. We combed our hair at school and got baths and brushed our teeth every day and got medical checkups and immunizations too. Another girl and I had to do special exercises for our eyes and sometimes they took us to the hospital in Pondy for eye checkups. One thing I particularly remember is the weight checkups. There was a big hook in the roof and we had to be lifted up to get weighed from it and I cried every time.

By the time I got to first standard there was a beautiful new building, and new uniforms. This uniform was a tight blouse like a sari blouse and a skirt you could tie at the waist, and it left the stomach bare. Some people didn't like the bare stomach so later on we got another uniform, which was just a dress that ties at the side. In the new building we had real desks, with lift up tops, and we kept our uniform on one side when we went home, and we put our other clothes there after we got to school and had our bath. We got measured for a sports dress, too, and those were stitched and tailored for us at school.

There were different rooms in the new building for eating, sleeping, games and classes. We had good meals: curd rice, tomato rice, and lemon rice…. Later we got milk, bread, ragi, eggs, and sprouts. We were at school every day from 8:00 until after sports – 4:00 or 5:00. It was like a home for us.

Nata used to come for his birthday and he would hide presents for us in the garden and whatever you found you could keep. It was a like a treasure hunt. He was always playing with us. When Anuben came on Saturdays to teach dance she had an empty basket and we used to all line up to give her flowers to put in the basket. We were all the time running around trying to fix the flowers so they would be pretty for her.

The classes were the play way method and we had sports every day. Our parents had to pay two rupees a month. Yes, it was all in English. Helga taught us gymnastics; she had a wonderful big thing to bounce on.

Another thing I remember was Popo showing movies. Popo would come down about once a month in his old jeep, at about 6:00, when it begins to get dark, and all the kids would run out to see him, villagers too. He showed us movies in the school and once a month he showed a movie on a big wall in the village.

When I was about ten there were no more classes at Udavi but they took us to the government school in Koot Road, and they still looked after us until 6th or 7th standard. We still had immunizations and tutoring if we needed it – whatever we needed."

After she finished the 10th standard at Koot Road, Mangai worked for a time as an amma in Auroville, then did accounting for Joy Handicrafts at Aurelec, married, moved to Pondicherry, and had two children. She returned to Auroville to teach, first at New Creation and then at Isai Amalgam in the '90s. She had already picked up a good deal from working as an amma at Transition and teaching at New Creation, and from tutoring children in her own home. At Isaiambalam she learned new approaches from Lisa, and later, under Subash, she learned new teaching strategies with the other teachers, and she was also part of a training program at Rishi Valley. Now, Mangai is returning the gifts she received from Auroville by operating a kindergarten for almost 50 children in a very poor village in Nellikuppam, outside of Cuddalore. In addition to the school, where children enjoy a playful and educational morning and a good noon day meal she manages an afternoon workshop for about seventy village women making handbags to sell. There are also two sewing machines and a tailoring teacher for young women who wish to learn a trade. As for Mangai herself, she has now completed an M.A. and an M. Phil in history.

There are other people living in Auroville who remember the opening years at Udavi with affection, among them Kripa, one of three Auroville children who came to Udavi after the schools in Aspiration closed: Kripa, her sister, Kali, and Nevi, the daughter of Popo and Helga.

Udavi, or Auroshika, as it was at the time, was the first school experience for Kripa, who was three, and her sister, Kali. They were the only non-Tamil children in the school and naturally they soon became playmates and friends with many of the village children. The school was far from where they lived in Sharnga and Kripa remembers that it was a long walk in the hot sun. She also remembers collecting velvet spiders and creating homes for the spiders in their school slate boxes with the other children.
"I have happy memories of that place. Of course they used to beat the kids - slapping them on the hands or the knuckles with a ruler, standing them in a corner, things like that - but we got special treatment. The other thing was that our parents didn't allow them to vaccinate us. I remember my mother coming down and insisting that we should not be vaccinated." These would be the same immunizations that Mangai remembers so vividly.

Udavi, the Gentillesse Udavi School, flourished in the early years, providing for the health, education and welfare of Edyanchavadi children, gradually adding buildings and classes and increasing its ring of influence. Later the school went through some rough times brought on by labour disputes with the incense factory workers and their union. It closed for a time, and then reopened in 1999, but that is a story to be told in the next section of this history.

Ilaignarkal

When Meenakshi came to Auroville in 1976 under the auspices of the Tamil Aid Fund there were few programs for village children other than the informal play school opportunities around Kuilapalayam, Promesse and the beginning efforts at Udavi. With characteristic energy she began activating the women and youth groups listed on paper by the Panchayat but not actually functioning. She ran three to four day leadership training camps for between thirty and forty people at a time. In these camps they had an opportunity to live together, strengthen their relationship, learn more about Auroville and build a network for mutual support and improvement.

Meenakshi was already known as a Tamil scholar and writer when she arrived, and she had the support of the Panchayats, but the villagers were astonished to see a woman in a position of leadership, living and working with the students, and her example was an inspiration for the students, particularly the women students.

In her description of the villagers at that time, Meenakshi echoes the observations of Varadharajan and Shyamala. "Things were very bad in the village, much worse than they are now. There was constant fighting; children were running loose, the environment, even the temple was neglected. I decided to do something about it myself. I started a day school and a lot of Tamil children who were already living in Auroville came. At the school we provided breakfast, sang songs together and taught basic reading and writing.

The Aspiration School was breaking up and the children were looking for teachers. The young workers wanted to learn more English, and Tamil, and so we became an evening school to cater to the needs of youth. I thought the Tamil youth could link Auroville to the village. The school was in an old building that Narad constructed out by the Matrimandir Nursery. I planted a Service tree as a symbol for the school and it is still there, 27 years later. This was our residence, office and school." (Meenakshi, '04)

The first students were all boys and many grew up to become leaders in Auroville and the surrounding villages. Later the school was extended to include girls, but that part of the story will be told in the next section.

In addition to Udavi and Ilaignarkal, by 1980 many people were offering programs for children and youth in the surrounding villages. Varadharajan and Shyamala began a crèche, kindergarten and night school in Promesse after they left Aspiration. Franca set up a small play school for village children behind the place where the Auroville Bakery now is in Kuilapalyam. In Kottakarai, Ivar began

a program, which later became Isaiambalam. By 1980, Auroville sponsored day schools, night schools, crèche and kindergarten programs were operating in most of the villages around Auroville. Characteristically, these centers provided nutritious snacks and guidance for good health, such as tooth brushing routines, hand washing, lice inspections, and referral for illnesses. They always included active sports, or activity programs and, in many instances, direct instruction in reading and writing, or other academic subjects. All the programs included the hallmark of an Auroville education: a short period of concentration, and often Mother's music or a prayer. The change in the whole region that Mother hoped for was coming, little by little.

Conclusion

Looking back over these first years in Auroville, chronicling the evolution of schools in Aspiration, and the surrounding villages, I am struck by how much happened so soon, so fast. To the early Aurovilians it must have seemed as though progress was slow and hard won, coming little by little, but from the vantage of almost forty years the growth and rate of change is astonishing. I am struck by the vitality, and diversity of these experiments, and by the unremitting commitment and enthusiasm of the early Aurovilians. Trees and flowers grew rapidly in this tropical climate, so also did population, buildings, communities and social services.

The power of Mother's vision, and her oversight in the early days is almost palpable. The thought, writing and example of Sri Aurobindo inspired what seems like superhuman energy and inexhaustible creativity. The early Aurovilians knew no separation between work and life, no separation between life and education. To be in Auroville was an avocation, and to be in Auroville was to be always learning.

"Mother told us what to do but not how to do it." Shraddhavan said, and that, I believe, is part of Mother's genius. She provided a vision, and the sense of possibility so powerful it has continued without her physical presence for nearly forty years, but she did not prescribe. Left to themselves to figure out "how to do it" Aurovilians accomplished small miracles with the land, the buildings, aid to the villagers, and even created a real school out of the chaos created by lack of resources, lack of experience, conflicting interpretations of the vision, and no common language or cultural expectations on the part of either children, parents or teachers. None of this could have been achieved without enormous effort - and without mistakes. Auroville is an experiment and implicit in the definition of an experiment is the notion of trying something new, noticing what works and what doesn't work, making changes, trying again. Experiments which affect people directly are much more painful for us than those on plants or soil but they are the way we learn - and grow. Some mistakes, taken as challenges, are an opportunity to make changes which benefit everyone. There is no shade; trees are planted. Children are unruly; practices change; a healthy school emerges.

Unfortunately, some mistakes lead to further mistakes. There were differences of opinion, differences which escalated into conflict. Sometimes it seemed as though the conflicts would endanger the entire concept of a city for human unity. Even today there is no consensus on the nature or quality of the "mistakes". But the experiment which was Auroville continued. Since this is history and not a novel we don't have to flip to the back of the book to discover what happened next: we are living it. Although the school in Aspiration faltered and closed in 1976, seedlings for other schools were already in the ground and small tentative moves to recreate schooling were already pushing up through the ground. By 1980, where Part I of this history ends, these modest efforts were beginning to crystallize into something more visible and more viable. There is plenty to eat in Auroville now, the entire township is green and burgeoning with people, ideas, experiments - and schools. Between 1980 and 2005 there have been eight to ten experimental schools in Auroville. There are at least six different schools now, serving different ages and needs, as well as four Auroville sponsored schools for village children, and hundreds of night schools, crèches, kindergartens, after school programs in the surrounding villages. How Auroville evolved from the closing of the first school to the present proliferation of schools will be related in Part II.

Finally I would like to repeat the invitation offered in the introduction. I urge anyone with a school story or school experience to share them with us, either as additions to Part I or as the raw material

for Part II, that we may better remember, understand and learn from all that has already transpired, that we may continue the upward evolution of schooling in Auroville and that we may create from these experiments something of value not only to Auroville but to the world.

“Auroville is a dream, a concept, a symbol. It is a symbol of a new way of life, a new way of perpetual education.”