

Matrimandir

February 2009

It is 10 a.m. at the Matrimandir office. A group of 70 visitors waits seated on granite benches overlooking the oval of the Matrimandir gardens. They have checked their bags, cameras and cell phones at the booking office, receiving numbered tokens so they may collect their belongings when they return in just over an hour. It will be the very first visit inside the Inner Chamber for all of these people. They have been already to the Auroville Visitors Center, have become somewhat acquainted with the aims and ideals of Auroville and have made a reservation to visit to the building itself.



Visitors inspecting the model of Matrimandir in the main information hall at the Visitors Center

This is the way it is, for the moment, for those wishing to see inside, to sit in the Chamber for the first time, to concentrate here in the very center of Auroville. Some, perhaps most, will never return, but some of these faces will be seen here again, and for a few, their lives will be indelibly marked by the moment of silence in the Chamber, by the experience they have here in the atmosphere of Matrimandir, with one or two individuals eventually joining the adventure to dive into the life of this nascent global community.

But why take just these 70 new visitors inside each day? Why not 700 or more? To explore this question, one has to look at the situation that Auroville is in today with regard to visitors, and also to know what the Mother has said on the subject.

The flow of those wishing to view Matrimandir is increasing steadily. Recently, over the Christmas weekend, some 7,000 visitors came to the Auroville Visitors center in a single day, and most of them, after getting their 'Viewpoint' pass made the 12 minutes walk up the sloping, tree-covered path from the Visitors Center to the Viewpoint established some months ago on a rise of land just to the south of the Matrimandir gardens.

Every month there are 50,000 and more people coming to see the heart of Auroville, passing through its Visitors Center with its main information gallery, the Matrimandir information office, as well as three large Boutiques, a book store and a cafeteria. The supply of visitors to Auroville, both local and foreign seems to be endless.



Visitors looking at Matrimandir from the Viewpoint

Back at Matrimandir, the 10 a.m. first-timers group is called by the guide of the day, and the whole group moves off a few hundred meters to gather under the shade of two large neem trees. Standing there, some sitting on granite benches, they are introduced to the site. From there they can see the Banyan Tree, the Urn in the Amphitheater and the Matrimandir structure with the 20 acres of garden area surrounding it. The introduction goes on for 15 or 20 minutes and touches on a wide variety of aspects of the Matrimandir project – its origins, history, the decades of construction, the work still ahead, the meaning of it all. People fire questions, wanting to know everything from why Matrimandir looks like it does (a “golden golf ball”) to how best to concentrate inside, where does the funding come from and how to become an Aurovilian. We answer as well as we can, but the most important part of their visit is just ahead.

At 10.30 the group enters the building, puts on fresh white socks and is led up to the Chamber where everyone will sit in silence for 15 minutes. Those few minutes may be just another episode in a busy schedule of touring South India, or they may be the occasion of a life altering shift. For the most part, we will never know, and indeed it is not for us to know. We have been the builders of Matrimandir and now we are its guardians, the keepers of the gate. Some ask why those gates are not thrown open wider, now that the building is done. Why not let humanity stream in, and see this wonder from the inside?

To some extent, in a certain measure, we had tried this approach for a few years: for one hour each day anyone who wished to see was allowed to go inside. A long silent line of people, up to 2,000 on some days, walked up the spiral ramps of Matrimandir to glimpse, for just a few seconds, through the Chamber’s doors the white interior with the sun-ray playing softly on the transparent globe at its center. It was satisfying for many, frustrating for some (“so short a time!”) and life-changing for a few.

The experiment was discontinued after some time, and then, as the work inside the building accelerated towards completion, visits were suspended altogether for several months.

Upon reopening the Matrimandir's pristine white marble floors were finally exposed, its ramps had been fitted with clear glass parapets, the delicate salmon pink panels of the inner skin curved down to the marble benches of the first level. And soon the ramp was fitted with its soft white woollen carpet. The beautiful interior had become very clean and very quiet. Long lines of people coming in to "see" now seemed quite out of place and no longer a realistic option.



First time visitors listen to an introductory talk before entering Matrimandir

But how are we to decide on this matter of the visitors? The Mother's few conversations on the topic have long served as the basis for our visitors' reception policy. In January of 1970, while describing her vision of the Inner Chamber, she said: "...it will be a place for concentration. Not everyone will be allowed in; there will be a time of the week or the day (I don't know) when visitors will be allowed to come, but anyway without mixture. There will be a fixed hour or day to show the visitors, and the rest of the time only for those who are... serious - serious, sincere, who truly want to learn to concentrate." This has been the main criterion: the need for separate timings for those who just wish to see, and those who seriously and sincerely want an inner concentration in the Chamber.

Immediately the question arises: "Who of us is qualified to decide which visitors are sincere, or serious, and which aren't?" And so we have evolved and experimented with several different systems over the years, to find ways to allow people sort themselves out naturally, the serious from the casual. It is a challenging experience and it is surely difficult to satisfy everybody.

The Mother also said, "...there will be certain conditions to meet before one is allowed to [enter] the temple....It will have to be a bit initiatory: not quite 'like that', not just anyhow." (10 Jan 1970) "The first condition," she said, was "to ask"— and based on this comment, the current booking system has evolved. This in itself is a difficult job to organize and handle, for our phone lines almost melt with the frequency of incoming calls during the booking hours!

Like everything else at Matrimandir, the process has been and is evolving according to the need of the day. We always try to strike an appropriate balance between openness to the incoming flow and ensuring that Matrimandir is properly maintained and is used for silent concentration as the Mother intended. For the moment, a way has been found to open Matrimandir to the world, and at the same time to respect the Peace at the center of Auroville.

Late Arrival

For those of you who have been following the growth of Matrimandir over the last years you might be interested to know that a long missing piece of the construction puzzle has suddenly fallen in place. The ramps, as you will have seen reported here, have for some time been fitted with their curved parapets made of clear panels of glass. These panels,

however, were not the original set that we began with. That set was imported and sent to Kolkata for bending at a large glass factory. Soon after the work had begun, the factory was closed due to labour problems, following which all attempts to remove the glass and to continue the work at another factory were unsuccessful. Eventually we had to begin again with new glass at a recently opened factory near Chennai. As this factory was sited much closer to Auroville, the big advantage was that the work was much easier to follow and to keep a close eye on. The job was quite satisfactorily concluded and the work on the ramp was completed. We all but gave up hope of ever seeing the Kolkata glass again, as that factory had been locked out and shut down for 10 years!

But to our surprise, changing conditions there had recently freed up the long lost glass and on January 24th it arrived at Matrimandir, mostly unused, packed in a large lorry.

It had to be unloaded by hand due to way it had been loaded and the nature of the lorry, and the process took most of the day for a large team, but by late afternoon the job was over. Now we are searching for some way to use, or sell, the 41 sheets of 12 mm clear glass, measuring 3.2 m by 2 m, so as to recover some of the expense



Unloading the glass

incurred many years ago. If any of our readers have an idea of how best to use or dispose of these glass panels, we encourage you to give us your suggestions.

Once again, a reminder of the new timings for visits to the Chamber and the booking schedule:

Please note the new timings for visits to the Chamber:

Bookings	: 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. daily
Concentration	: 9:30 to 10:30 a.m. daily
First-time visits	: 10:00 to 11:00 a.m. daily

Just a small note regarding bookings. The number for bookings is (0413) 262-2268. As you can gather from this month's report, this is a very busy period here and so we recommend that you make your booking several days in advance in order to avoid disappointment. This applies as well to those of you who want to make your booking by email (mmconcentration@auroville.org.in). Please allow us time to get back to you in case there is no space open on the day you wish to visit. There will likely be some adjustments in the timings during the period around the Mother's and Auroville's birthdays. Details will be given by the person who takes your booking. We hope to see many of you here this month!

Address for donations and correspondence:

(Please make your cheque, money order or DD payable to 'Matrimandir')

MATRIMANDIR – AUROVILLE 605101 – TAMIL NADU – INDIA

Bookings: Tel (+91) (0413) 262-2268; accounts: 262-2228

Email: matrimandir@auroville.org.in