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Restoring Tranquebar



Renovations in Tranquebar. From left: The renovated Bungalow on the Beach, the Danish Fort 'Dansborg', the not yet restored post office building and the Governor's Bungalow (meanwhile restored)

In the early years of Auroville, all the energy of its inhabitants went into establishing a foothold on this laterite plain. Today, however, more and more Aurovilians are going out and sharing the skills and experience they have accumulated here with the rest of India. One example is the Adyar Poonga project which brought together many Aurovilians to restore a degraded estuary in Chennai [see *Auroville Today* January, 2011, no. 259]. Another example is the restoration of Tranquebar, now called Tharangambadi, a small town on the Tamil Nadu coast about 120 km south of Pondicherry. Its name means "place of the singing waves".

Tranquebar was founded by the Danish East India Company in 1620. In 1846, after 225 years of Danish rule, the colony was sold to the British. Tranquebar was then still a busy port but it lost its importance when, in 1861, a railway line was opened to Nagapattinam and commerce slowed down. The town fell into a dormant state, and its historic part went into a steady decline with traditional heritage buildings being modified beyond recognition or falling into disrepair.

This situation started to change when, in 2002, the Neemrana group of hotels, which had bought a bungalow on the seaside, asked Auroville architects Ajit and Ratna to renovate it. It became *The Bungalow on the Beach*, a five star heritage hotel.

But the major change came after 26 December 2004, when the tsunami struck. It killed nearly 800 people and flattened the adjoining fishing village north of Tranquebar. In its aftermath, a number of NGOs stepped in to provide disaster-relief. One of them was the Danish Bestseller Fund, which was also interested in restoring a number of old Danish heritage buildings. It contacted the Pondicherry branch of INTACH (Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage). As Ajit is the local INTACH coordinator, this led to more and more Aurovilians becoming involved in restoring and beautifying this historic town.

Much of the initial work has now been completed. In this issue we present the work that has been done, to showcase what can be achieved when people work together to restore life and beauty to a place which was in decline.



Top: Front view of the restored Bungalow on the Beach; renovated houses in Goldsmith Street; the restored Governor's Bungalow.

“We got involved with Tranquebar in 2002 when Francis Wacziarg, the owner of the Neemrana Group of hotels, asked Ratna and me if we would be interested to renovate a building in Tranquebar,” says Ajit. “The building was a former Danish private property which the British, after making Tranquebar the headquarters of a British collectorate, had bought to use it as their Collector’s Residence. In its day it was a grand building, but when we first saw it, it was in an advanced state of disrepair. Large parts of the verandah had collapsed and the roof of the first-floor verandah had been dismantled. We decided to restore the building on the basis of the policy of ‘least intervention with the original structure’, using traditional materials and old construction techniques like the ‘Madras terrace method’.”

The work was almost completed when, on December 26, 2004, the tsunami struck. Fortunately, not much damage was done and *The Bungalow on the Beach*, as it was then called, was inaugurated in March 2005. Just before it was finished, Francis had bought another property nearby the old Danish Gate to Tranquebar. *The Gatehouse* became the second restoration project for Ajit and Ratna and their colleague Mr. Das, a senior engineer and former Aurovillian, who has a lot of experience in restoration work.

Though the tsunami did not damage *The Bungalow on the Beach*, it devastated other parts of Tranquebar. Ajit takes up the story. “One day, a Danish gentleman, Mr. Torkil Dantzer, turned up at the INTACH office in Pondicherry. He is the managing director of the Danish Bestseller Fund which came to bring relief to Tranquebar. He visited us because he had heard that INTACH restored old buildings and wanted to see if parts of the former Danish colony could be restored by us. Unlike the other organizations involved in tsunami relief who only wanted to build houses and provide food and boats, the Bestseller Fund also wanted to protect the heritage. He told us that the Danes had been trying to do something about Tranquebar’s heritage for a long time. Almost everybody in Denmark knows that they had once had a colony there and that now it was falling apart. So this was a wonderful opportunity to do something. INTACH was happy to help them.”

INTACH began by making an inventory of all the heritage houses in the old town. Meanwhile, Bestseller purchased five small vernacular Tamil houses on Goldsmith Street to house their development activities, all of which were in a state of total disrepair. “The owners were quite happy to sell them because they had been traumatized by the tsunami and no longer wanted to live so close to the sea,” says Ajit. “INTACH’s next task was to restore these little houses. This was particularly exciting work for us, because not only is the restoration of small houses as challenging as big ones, but also because small Tamil houses are almost never restored. We were able to bring them back to their former glory.”

“But I felt they shouldn’t just become offices. There should be some activity there which would draw people in and allow them to appreciate the buildings. I suggested we could have a craft center there and that Auroville’s Upasana Design Studio could be involved as there was already an ongoing collaboration between the two, starting with a gifts project in 2005 [see *AV Today* #239, January 2009]. Both Bestseller and Upasana agreed, so now two of these houses form the Tranquebar Crafts Resource Centre, two are used as INTACH offices and one became a guesthouse. This project was completed in October 2008.”

continued on page 3

- Bestseller Fund helps turning Tharangambadi into a model heritage town
- Restoring Tranquebar

pages 2 – 3

- Taking care of the greenwork
- The Crafts Resource Centre
- Developing the food sector
- Managing Tranquebar’s trash

pages 4 – 5

- Auroville has a new library
- On architects and architecture students in India and Auroville
- Volunteers in Auroville

pages 6 – 7

- Auroville population stagnates
- Passings: Huta and Anna Maria
- Is there a future for small wind generators in Auroville?

pages 7 – 8

Bestseller Fund helps turning Tharangambadi into a model heritage town

Torkil Dantzer is the Managing Director of the Bestseller Fund, a Danish charitable organization which was established in 1995. The Fund is associated with Bestseller, a Danish family-owned clothing company. Since 2005, the Fund has been active in the town of Tharangambadi, formally known as Tranquebar.

Auroville Today: What are the activities of the Bestseller Fund?

Torkil: For the first few years after the Bestseller Fund was founded, it supported Danish cultural activities and the renovation of old buildings in Denmark. In later years, as the Bestseller Company grew and developed a network of international contacts, it began working outside Denmark. We started helping groups from the poorest levels of society in India and China, two countries where the Bestseller Company has become very active. Though not directly related to the Company's activities, the Bestseller Fund became a means to give something back to these developing societies.



Torkil

Why did Bestseller Fund get involved in Tranquebar?

Denmark has a small colonial history. Tranquebar was one of three colonies Denmark had in India in the 17th and 18th centuries. Danish East India included the Nicobar Islands (Ny Danmark), Serampore (also Frederiksnagore) in Bengal, and Tranquebar in Tamil Nadu, which it acquired in 1619 from the Nayak of Thanjavur. In 1845 Tranquebar, together with the other colonies in India, was sold to the British East India Company.

Nowadays all Danes know about Tranquebar. It is something like a Shangri La – though perhaps many Danes would have a problem finding the place on a map. In the last decades, Danish historians, architects and well-wishers have visited the dilapidated and impoverished town and have come up with proposals for renovation of the old buildings and improvement of the inhabitants' living conditions. But apart from the partial renovation of the Dansborg Fort, the citadel of the old Danish trading post, by the Tamil Nadu State Archaeological Department in collaboration with the Tranquebar Association in 2002, nothing much happened. Tranquebar remained enclosed in a time capsule.

This dormant state was broken by the tsunami of December 2004. It brought an influx of funds from many relief organisations amongst which was Bestseller Fund.

The work in Tranquebar

We found that the best way to help the people was through the Indian Saint Joseph Development Trust, an organisation working at the grassroots level for the weaker sections of society. It runs Children and Women and Community Development Programmes.

But contrary to the other relief organisations, we also wanted to get involved in heritage protection. We contacted INTACH (the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage) Pondicherry and met with Auroville architects Ajit and Ratna, who were already working in Tranquebar on the restoration of *The Bungalow on the Beach* and *The Gatehouse*.

One of our first actions was to buy five small destroyed houses in the Goldsmith Street, which INTACH, under guidance of Ajit and Ratna, then renovated in the original Tamil style. We also started work on building a new sea promenade. The original road along the coast had been swallowed by the sea and the Indian government had built a new sea-wall of huge boulders right on top of the sunken road. We were afraid that the area would be overrun by new concrete houses which would have changed the character of the town. We managed to acquire all the lands along the coast. Some lands were then laid out as a public park, which was designed by Auroville, another Aurovilian; and the other lands were used for the sea promenade. Today everyone can walk along the sea and visit the park.

Another ambitious project was the renovation of the former Danish Governor's

residence, a building from the 18th century, which was close to collapsing. This building is owned by the Tamil Nadu Government. Negotiations to restore it were unsuccessful for quite some time, until in 2009 it was agreed that INTACH could restore the building with finance provided through the Danish National Museum. Danish architects got involved to decide how best to renovate it in accordance with its historical past, while the Bestseller Fund served as the intermediate between the Danish and Indian parties.

In cooperation with the Ministries of Tourism of the Central and Tamil Nadu Governments we also began the first phase of streetscape restorations – the Parade Ground and Goldsmith Street are now fitted with new underground electricity cabling, stone paving, street lighting and with trees from Auroville nurseries.

So Bestseller Fund's focus is mainly on heritage conservation?

Not only. We are also working to improve the income possibilities of the local population. The economic development of Tranquebar is not easy – agriculture and fisheries yield meagre results and have been in crisis for many years. But with all the heritage work being done, we expect an increase of tourists, which will benefit the population by providing income and job opportunities. We will also be helping owners of heritage buildings to renovate their buildings. We will pay 50% of the costs of the heritage restoration works, if the owner also contributes 50%. The first interested parties have already come forward and we expect that in a not too distant future many house owners will offer 'heritage home-stays'.

Our perspective is holistic; we are trying to include the whole town and its surroundings in the planning. Our vision is to help realize a socially and environmentally sustainable transformation of Tranquebar into a model heritage town which will be managed by the local population. For in future, they will have to take responsibility for maintaining and further developing Tranquebar.

How was your personal experience doing this work?

The process of the involvement of the Bestseller Fund in Tranquebar has been very complicated, and I do not think that I will ever do such a project again. But it has given unexpected rewards to me personally, apart from the satisfaction of seeing a derelict town being renovated and people's living standards improved. For I came into contact with Auroville and with many Aurovilians without whose help the restoration of Tranquebar could never have succeeded. Auroville has grown on me. It was very rewarding that, in 2010, I was accepted as 'Friend of Auroville'.

In conversation with Carel

Bestseller Fund recently published the book *If Waves could Sing: Tranquebar in past and present* by Rune Clausen.



The buildings on the frontpage before restoration: the former Collector's residence, the Goldsmith street and the Governors' Bungalow.



One of the finest public urban spaces in Tamil Nadu: the Parade Ground with left the restored Governor's Bungalow and The Bungalow on the Beach, and right, the entrance to Fort Dansborg. Computer simulation by INTACH



The old Danish entrance gate to Tranquebar



Front views of the Gatehouse before and after restoration. View of the swimming pool in its former backyard.



Model of the old town of Tranquebar, carved by Aurovilian Murthy in a granite rock, on display at the sea walk.



Front view of Nayak House before and after restoration and of its interior.



Fort Dansborg

Restoring Tranquebar

continued from page 1

It was a good beginning, but at some point INTACH and Bestseller Fund felt that saving the heritage of Tranquebar was not enough. They also wanted to make the place clean and beautiful. One of INTACH's colleagues had been involved in running a solid waste management project in Pondicherry for two years as part of the Asia Urbs Programme, so he was called in to develop a similar project in Tranquebar. Then Auroville, an Aurovilian with experience of garden design, came in and created what has become a small public park. Meanwhile Walter of Auroville's Shakti Nursery had started work on planting a small forest to the south of the town. All these projects were funded by Bestseller.

Later, with the help of a grant from the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India under their Destination and Infrastructure Development Scheme, it was decided to put energy into urban landscaping. This included creating a pleasant square for pedestrians on the old Parade Ground next to the fort – the square will be ringed with trees provided by Walter – the resurfacing of Goldsmith Street with cobbles and creating a sea walk from Goldsmith Street to the Parade Ground.

The biggest restoration challenge, however, had not yet been tackled. At one time the former Danish Governor's Bungalow, now owned by the Tamil Nadu Tourism Department, had been one of the most imposing buildings in Tranquebar fronting the Parade Ground, but now it was in a terrible state. For many years, there had been discussions about what to do with it. Francis Wacziarg had wanted to run it as a hotel and the Danish Government had agreed to pay for its basic restoration but this idea didn't take off as the Tamil Nadu State Archaeological Department felt it should become a cultural centre for the people. The government commissioned the Tamil Nadu chapter of INTACH to make a feasibility study.

Meanwhile, the Danish Government had withdrawn its offer to fund the restoration. Then funding suddenly became available through the National Museum of Denmark. At that point, the Tamil Nadu Government handed over the project to the INTACH group already working in Tranquebar, specifying it should become a cultural centre. The work began in June, 2009.

"Actually, when we first saw the building we were very excited because it was such a challenge," remembers Ajit. "We had never encountered a building in worse condition – the walls of one room had collapsed and 12 foot trees were growing out of the roof! – but we felt it could be done because you can reverse almost anything provided you have an understanding client and a free hand. And here we had complete freedom to do whatever was needed and, for the first time ever, someone who would cover all the expenses."

"We had a lot of design discussions with the Danes and INTACH Chennai and the Tamil Nadu Government people before we began. The Danes didn't feel it looked any longer like a Danish Governor's bungalow because of the front colonnade pillars that were round below and square above and the first floor tiled roof hall that was added after the Danes left. However, in good restoration practice one has to respect different historical phases in a building. Finally, we agreed to modify the pillars and not rebuild the eastern part of the collapsed first floor structure. We made pillars all the way around and we set back the big sweeping tiled roof so that the front of the building is more imposing, as it used to be in the past."

"As far as possible we reuse the original materials," says Das. "One reason for this is that the quality of materials available today is not what it was. For example, today's bricks are not nearly as strong as the ones used in the original building. Even the wood quality has gone down. We use old teak as much as possible, but sometimes we have to buy new. Old teak came from trees which were 70-90 years old whereas now the trees are felled as soon as it is commercially attractive, and this has an impact on their strength. So here and there we have had to install twin teak beams whereas a single one would have been strong enough in the past. But, essentially, we try to preserve as much as possible the spirit and form of the original. We've been helped in this by finding masons who still have the knowledge of the old techniques, like the making of Madras terrace roofs."

On November 12, the near-completion of the renovation was celebrated with a visit of the Danish Ambassador to India together with representatives of the National Museum of Denmark and of Bestseller. The building is scheduled to be inaugurated in January by the Tamil Nadu Minister of Tourism. The event will be followed by a week-long Festival of Tamil Nadu. "Then we want the local people to come in and use it," says Ajit. "There will be a reception hall

where information about Tranquebar and other local tourist places will be displayed and a room which shows how the building was restored and an exhibition on the history and architecture of the town. There will also be a small boutique selling local products, a small reading room and children's library and, on the first floor, a hall where films can be shown. Aurovilian Marc is also going to manage a beautiful coffee shop there which will overlook the parade ground.

The other work which is ongoing is the restoration of the Van Theylingen House in King Street. This building was bought by Bestseller who plans to use it for a women's self-help organization.

"The whole Tranquebar project has been a learning curve for us," says Ajit. "With the restoration of *The Bungalow on the Beach* and the small houses we took certain things further we had learned while restoring the *Hotel de L'Orient* and a street with Tamil heritage houses in Pondicherry. Now, with the *Governor's Bungalow*, we are extending our knowledge even more. But, basically, restoration is not difficult if you know how to approach it in the right way. You have to find out how a building was originally built, what has been changed to the detriment of that, and then you need to know how to undo that and repair it in a sensitive way. Sometimes you need expert help, but generally it's a matter of common sense. The main thing is to work in a spirit of humility and learning."

"For the future, we would also like to improve the town's water supply in cooperation with the Tamil Nadu Government and Bestseller and we're also thinking of a decentralized sewage system. And then we should like to set up a matching grant scheme which helps house owners repair and restore their traditional houses."

Clearly, a huge amount of energy and goodwill has already been invested in the Tranquebar project. How have the townspeople responded? "When you come as an outsider to a new place you are looked upon with suspicion and that was no different here," says Das. "However, we made a mistake in not having enough interaction with the local population from the beginning. Both Ajit and I are doers rather than communicators and the man who headed the INTACH team on site in the early days lacked social interaction skills. This led to a lot of misunderstandings and soon all kind of rumours were circulating. One was that the Danes were returning and they were going to throw out all the present inhabitants! Another was that INTACH was behind an amendment of the 'Ancient Monuments and Remains Act' which the Central Government passed at the time. We had nothing to do with it, but still we came in for a lot of flak and there were even demonstrations in front of our office, telling us to leave."

"Fortunately, we managed to defuse the situation and we have now appointed a link person to liaise with the local people. Now the attitude of the townspeople is much more positive. They see the benefits we are bringing and they are beginning to realize the value of heritage preservation. But we have still not succeeded in our long-term plan of establishing a committee of the townspeople which will run this project in the future. The problem is that Tranquebar is made up of different communities – a Hindu community which constitutes about 85% of the population, a Muslim community of around 7% and the balance which is Christian – which in the past have tended to stick to themselves and not being involved with anything considered the area of other communities."

"The Tamil Nadu government is very happy with what's happening here," adds Ajit, "because they see the quality of the work and it has all been happening with private funding. Now the Central Government has also given funds under their Tourist Destination Scheme for infrastructure development."

Does this mean Ajit and Das envisage Tranquebar becoming another tourist attraction, like Mahabalipuram? "The idea is not to make Tranquebar only a tourist site but to preserve its heritage and improve the quality of life for its inhabitants. We would like the entire historic town to be given a special status and the local people to manage it under the town panchayat and this will automatically promote tourism and local economy," says Das.

"Most people who come here", adds Ajit, "say, 'Wow, what a place!' It has a very special atmosphere and that's what we want to preserve. The almost completed Parade Ground landscaping with trees and cast iron street lamps has become a wonderful public space exclusively for pedestrians – the local people and visitors alike will enjoy this. As the trees planted by Walter grow, this plaza will become better and better – one of the finest public urban spaces in Tamil Nadu!"

Alan and Carel

Taking care of the greenwork



Creating a public park

Bestseller wanted a coastal park in Tranquebar which would be open to the public. Aurovevi, an Aurovillian with experience in garden and landscape design, was asked to plan it and plant it out. Aurovevi began planning the park in 2007 but couldn't begin planting until the landscaping had been completed. As the park is right by the sea, there were some particular challenges involved. As water is an issue in Tranquebar, Aurovevi had planned a low water use park, but Bestseller wanted to include some tropical plants requiring more water, so she had to find a compromise.

It was not easy to find plants and shrubs for such a special environment. With every monsoon the increased wind and salt spray would kill some of the plants, which then have to be replaced. To solve the problem, it was agreed to plant a Casuarina buffer along the coast which offers the needed protection. As an experiment, also Andaman species of coconuts and mangrove trees are being planted along the sea promenade and the park, to see if they can



Planting Auroville trees along the perimeter of the Parade Ground

Planting beach forests, streets and the Parade Ground perimeters

Walter from Auroville's community Shakti got involved with Tranquebar after the tsunami. His first project was to plant, at the request of Bestseller, a beach forest south of the fort as coastal protection. "It was not an easy proposition because these are really special conditions: beach plantation is always very tricky. For example, the area here gets flooded every year with brackish water and we also have to cope with the salt in the sea air. So, firstly, I created shelter belts of casuarinas and inside I planted species which will grow well under these conditions: Pongamia, Work Trees (Acacia auriculiformis), Hibiscus deviatius, Cordia etc."

Walter and his team started planting this forest three years ago and now some of the trees are 3-4 metres high. This year they expect to plant another 2,000 trees here and

View of the park (top) and of one of the many cosy gazebos (below)



grow in close proximity to the sea. They will offer some greenery and shade to strolling tourists.

The park, with its trees, shrubs, walkways, stepping stones and a small garden houses, was inaugurated this November. A local team is being trained to maintain the park.

Alan

The Tranquebar Crafts Resource Centre

Project leader Mandakini talks about its origins, functioning and challenges.

At the end of the Goldsmith street stand a line of renovated Tamil houses, two of which serve as the Tranquebar Cultural Resource Centre or TCRC as it is simply known. A shiny brass plaque announces its presence – bearing the colourful logo with motifs of the 'singing waves', the town's gate, the gopuram of the Masilamani Nathar temple and the ubiquitous kolam.

"The TCRC is a space dedicated to all the c's – culture, crafts, cuisine and communication!" says Mandakini, its Project Manager, with a twinkle in her eye. She explains that the idea for the TCRC came three years after the tsunami, when INTACH began the restoration work on the buildings brought by Bestseller. "Ajit recommended that Bestseller talk to Uma of Auroville's unit Upasana to see if any intervention could be done in the craft sector. This would make for a more holistic development, while simultaneously helping the people of

go to Tranquebar and that is it – it takes you 'home'. The place was special! I just knew that I had to be part of the project though I'd no clue what was going on. But I was so inspired and I was so happy to be connected to Uma and to Auroville." Mandakini joined the Tranquebar project a week later.

"Upasana's craft development model focuses on four components – development of skills, leadership training, enterprise development, and linking to local markets. So the question arose how to bring these concepts to the artisans of Tranquebar and how to balance the new with the old – the design intervention coming from outside with what was already existing so as to best meet the market potential outside."

Workshops were conducted around these six crafts bringing designers from outside. "The interaction between the artisans and designers was very positive," says Mandakini. "Designers were inspired to work side by side with the artisans. The artisans enjoyed the attention and got exposed on what else could be done with their medium. It became a great space to express creativity, and some new products got developed."

However the project did not take off as expected. Only three of the six crafts picked up on the new ideas. "In general, the artisans were often not interested since continuing would mean working in groups," explains Mandakini. "Most were satisfied doing things the way they were used to. The ambition of these artisans was not so much to pursue new ideas or to go and get orders for large quantities – they were comfortable in their own secure areas, happy to work with what they knew well, and participate in the small exhibitions around the area."

With this new reality, the team had to rethink its strategy. Mandakini reflects: "Many times we go into a community with our own ideas about what it needs. But every community's need is not really what we think they need. To be able to tune your own project to the way the community wants to grow is the challenge and Upasana has been very open to that. At Tranquebar, there was nothing that we needed to prove – we've just wanted a more 'hap-



Making terracotta bead jewellery

Tranquebar." This led to the opening of the Tranquebar Crafts Resource Centre in December 2009 as a space dedicated to promoting traditional crafts, where artisans could have exchanges with designers coming from outside, and a place where they could display their own wares and products.

Upasana had got involved in Tranquebar in 2008, when it conducted a survey to determine the predominant modes of livelihood in and around Tranquebar. After fishing, the second most common mode of livelihood was crafts, and it mostly involved women. "Twenty-nine crafts were identified," says Mandakini. "Upasana then selected six traditional crafts – palm basketry, terracotta work, coconut shell craft, bamboo basketry, sea shell craft and woodwork – for possible design intervention and further development."

It was at this point that Mandakini joined the project. An alumnus of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, Mandakini was looking to do something different with her life. "It was by chance that I was introduced to Uma who invited me to come along with her to Tranquebar."

The little seaside village cast an immediate spell over Mandakini. "You



Basket weaving with palm fronds

people feel that they belong to a particular place, and that they are proud of it."

The team concluded that the best way to sustain the model would be to support the artisan's basic infrastructure needs. "All the women work from home, so if we can make their work easier, we are helping them tremendously. For example, one of the women makes jewellery out of coconut shells. We got her a buffing machine to polish the shells and this improved her production and product quality."

Developing Tranquebar's public image.

Apart from creating the TCRC, Upasana has also been active in unfolding Tranquebar's public image. A Tranquebar logo was developed, which is now used in all its communication. Auroville cineaste Basile created a 7-minute documentary on the town of Tranquebar and its history. A children's animated movie on Tranquebar's past and present (in Tamil and English) was created by Aurovillians Tina and Emanuele. Upasana has also been active in designing a website (www.tranquebar.in), and publishing a coffee table book on Tranquebar's heritage buildings and a book on Tranquebar's history and present challenges.

"Simultaneously we saw that something intangible was happening at the workshops. The unanimous feedback from the participants was that they enjoyed the relaxed and informal setting. At TCRC, unlike other at trainings, they were able to laugh and interact with each other and even bring their children along. So TCRC came to be seen as a place where they could come together, and it helped forge an identity



Buffing coconut shells to a high polish

that they 'belong' to Tranquebar." This pushed the TCRC into playing a role that extended beyond crafts and into culture.

"When it became clear that craft is good but it is not enough, we decided to do something to encourage other local talent," says Mandakini. The TCRC decided to host a cultural event in which everyone, children and adults, could participate. "We organized different kinds of competitions from singing, to dancing, to drawing, to Kolam making, cooking, and sports for the youth! Simultaneously we promoted crafts through stalls selling TCRC artisans' products." This has now become an annual event.

"It happens in late January, around India's Republic Day holiday," adds Mandakini. "The event draws people, both local and from outside, and this has done a lot to foster the sense of community and pride in being associated with Tranquebar." Many Aurovillians too participate in this venture, like Saraswati and Anna who have offered several terracotta workshops.

Marc (of Coffee Ideas) is another Aurovillian deeply involved with TCRC, this time through food. "Besides promoting crafts, TCRC also runs a small café offering a fine selection of coffees and crêpes," says Mandakini. "And it was Marc who trained our in-house chef, Geetha." Marc was also responsible for training twelve local women who will soon be capable of running their own businesses. "It is an entrepreneurial venture to promote local cuisine," continues Mandakini. "Our team felt that 'local food' deserves due importance and every household has the expertise. So we organized a cooking contest under four categories. The winners were offered a chance to train with Marc who helped them in perfecting some forty traditional recipes! TCRC will be involved in helping them for a year until they get established."

Today, after almost four years of involvement, Upasana is actively thinking about its exit strategy. Mandakini explains: "We want the TCRC and the entire Tranquebar project to become independent in due time and have an income-generating activity to ensure the maintenance of the building and the continuation of the work. Evidently, the tourist industry should become a main source of income and we hope that the TCRC will promote the development of home-stays and expand its present work. We will guide the process carefully. However, the link with Auroville will always remain."

Priya Sundaravalli

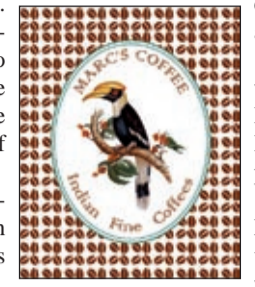
Developing the food sector

Coffee Marc first became involved with Tranquebar six years ago when he designed the kitchen for *The Bungalow on the Beach* and also blended two unique coffees for the hotel: 'King's Blend' and 'Queen's Blend', named after the two main streets of the old town. Two years ago, when Uma and others were developing the Craft Centre, he felt it was also time to develop the food sector in Tranquebar to provide local skills and employment opportunities to the new people – he could see that the restoration of Tranquebar would attract many more visitors.

Some local women were trained in food processing, cooking and hospitality, and they began offering tea, coffee and snacks at the Crafts Centre, making it into something of a social hub. As the aim is to strengthen the local economy, wherever possible they use locally-grown food and locally-made cooking utensils like terracotta pots.

The next project was the Peter Anker café (named after the last Danish Governor of Tranquebar) which opened in November. This coffee shop, situated on top of the Governor's Bungalow, has a marvellous view of the Parade Ground, the Fort and the sea. The café will serve not only fine coffee but also continental snacks, "which will include, of course, Danish pastries: we want to provide a Danish experience." The local people don't have skills in preparing food like this, so Marc

started cooking sessions where chefs from other parts of India and abroad came in and worked with the local women. "We had a great time. One chef came from Nice to share his knowledge and learn about South Indian cooking. Now, one night a week in his restaurant in France, he has a 'Tranquebar evening' when he cooks South Indian food. It's all about building bridges..."



Talking of local food, another project is to turn the old post office behind the Governor's Bungalow into a restaurant which will prove local Indian food, like thalis and dosas, at reasonable prices to locals and visitors.

The other Tranquebar project which occupies Marc concerns the mobile carts from which street vendors sell snacks and drinks. As Marc points out, these carts are often shabby and poorly maintained,

so he has designed a smart new model for the Parade Ground in Tranquebar. "The idea is to provide micro-financing to local people so they can purchase these carts and make a living selling food or craft items. Rishi from Auroville's alternative energy unit, Sunlit Future, is providing LED lanterns with a light battery to go with the carts as most activity takes place in the evenings, when everybody comes to the Parade Ground. I'm very excited by this pilot project to encourage local entrepreneurship because the Tranquebar project is not only about restoring old buildings and improving the infrastructure: it's also about providing alternative employment for the local people."

Alan

Managing Tranquebar's trash

Imagine an Indian bus stand without trash. Imagine streets lined with trees and lampposts instead of being littered with plastic. Imagine a city where the air does not smell like burning garbage. That place exists. It's Tranquebar.

"Why is this place so clean?" asked the Secretary, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, when he visited Tranquebar to check on INTACH's application for funds for urban landscaping under the Government's 'Destination Development Scheme'. Why indeed. It wasn't always like this; like any other Indian town, the streets of Tranquebar too were once littered with waste.

"Bestseller and INTACH decided that beautification of the city included managing its solid waste," says Thambusamy, who is in charge of the solid waste management project that started in August 2007. "During the first six months of the project we did a massive cleaning of the city, collecting all the garbage. We also cleaned the water reservoirs." Once the place sparkled, INTACH and Bestseller wanted to keep it that way. They funded the programme, helping it grow. The programme subsequently expanded beyond Tranquebar to include five nearby villages.

The work begins at dawn when teams of nearly two dozen women collect waste from each house. The households have already separated their garbage into two distinct buckets. The women empty the garbage into their rickshaws, ensuring it is properly separated. By afternoon they have reached 625 houses and collected over 52 kilograms of sellable waste.

The waste is then taken to a composting centre, constructed with government funding, where six additional workers transform it into biocompost, vermicompost [a method using earthworms to transform organic waste into a nutrient-rich fertilizer], vermiwash [a liquid byproduct of vermicompost that is used as bio-pesticide spray and as a growth promoter] and sellable waste. The sellable waste goes to 'junk dealers' who sell it to recycling companies. The biocompost, made with cow dung and a combination of naturally existing and useful micro-organisms (EM solution), is sold for Rs 4 per kg to big companies who use it in their gardens. The vermicompost is of a higher quality and goes for Rs 10 per kg. The vermiwash, Rs 20 per bottle, also has a local market, thanks in a large part to smart business practices. "At first we gave the vermiwash to our workers for free," says Thambusamy. "But it became very popular and now people start paying for it. We sell lots."

The organic matter that cannot be recycled is burned. "This



Women waste collectors start their work with their rickshaw

is one of our biggest challenges," Thambusamy says. "We need a small landfill. And we need people to better segregate their waste so there is less we can't use." For better segregation would make the solid waste management program more affordable. "We want to make it completely financially sustainable, but it isn't yet," says Thambusamy. "In the first two years all costs were covered from donations and government funding. Since then, the operation is funded 25 percent through compost sales, 25 percent through the sale of recyclable materials, and 50 percent through user fees. In Tranquebar, the fee is covered by Bestseller, but each household in the other villages pays Rs.20 per month. If the waste was properly segregated, we could increase our income from compost and recyclable goods to cover 70 percent of our expenses."

This points to the need for education. "In the beginning it was extremely difficult to get people to understand and act," Thambusamy recalls. "Earlier, every house would burn its waste." Support from panchayat leaders helped significantly, as well as better communication and interaction with the villagers. "We knocked on the door of every household, and continue to do so every other day. We try to teach them how to make their own compost by simply burying their chicken or fish bones. We also plan to teach them the benefits of using cloth instead of plastic carry bags."

Education is also used to beat the competition. "People have the habit – the tradition – of giving their plastic to the onion or salt dealers that come by, in exchange for onions or salts. People now are sometimes asking us what they are getting from us giving us their waste. We try to explain that it is better in the larger picture."

It's catching on. "The people are happy!" says Thambusamy. "The outside fishermen communities are happy to pay and participate. It is a little different in Tranquebar, as it

has such a varied population mix: Hindus, Muslims, and Christians. The Muslims tend to go abroad to work, the Hindus are masons and workers, and the Christians are often teachers and service providers. Then the different groups point at each other saying 'You all can afford it but we can't.'"

That the programme is a success is shown from the interest expressed by panchayat leaders from other villages who have asked if the programme couldn't come to their villages as well. "People from all over India come to Tranquebar to learn about the programme, and we do exhibitions across the country," says Thambusamy. "But the moment of triumph came when Tranquebar won an award from Delhi for the 'Best Civic Management of a Tourist Destination in India' in the green practices category."

Catherine

