

Rock n' roll golf

The first thing that springs to mind when you think of Auroville is probably not golf. But three times a week a couple of hard-core addicts get out their golf clubs and hack their way round an improvised golf course on fields behind Edaiyanchavady village. Actually 'hack' is unfair. Sasha and Suryan display a great deal of skill in negotiating the *mulus*, date palms, cows and numerous other natural hazards which characterize the area where they play.



The distinction between fairway and rough is not always clear

Their enthusiasm is unmistakable. So what gets them out here in almost all weathers?

"It's something about the closeness to nature," says Sacha. "Sometimes when I'm playing I'll stop, look around, and realize what a gift it is to be here in this natural environment with all this beauty around. We see wonderful sunsets here. Then again, for me golf can be a very spiritual game. It's about getting a small ball from here to there and the only person in the way is yourself. It's all about stilling the mind and focussing on the moment. So I'm sure it's a sport that The Mother would have been into!"

Suryan admits that at first he thought golf was

an elitist as well as environmentally-unfriendly sport. "But then I read Michael Murphy's *Golf in the Kingdom*, which is basically Sri Aurobindo's philosophy presented through golf, and I saw that golf had a spiritual dimension. It's a kind of yoga because you have to control your emotions and basically rise above them to get to the right place in yourself. It's about getting away from wanting to play well and being 100% present to what you're doing."

Both of them learned to play on conventional golf courses: Sacha up in Kodaikanal, Suryan in England. When they returned to Auroville they began knocking balls around with a few friends.

"We started at the Eucalyptus Grove," remembers Sacha. "We made a hole in the cricket pitch nearby because that was the only flat area, but then we got into an argument with the Tamil guys who played there. So then we went to a small field behind Aurodam where we dug a few holes and put up a few flags. Later, we found another place at Irumbai. Then, by chance, we found this place right next to it which is heaven because there is grass and a number of reasonably flat spots. We had to clear some of the scrub and level the greens but now it's quite playable."

"Actually it was even better a few months back," adds Suryan. "But then Auroville went and ploughed up some of the land. Still, we have nine holes. The longest is over 300 metres so we can use all the clubs."

St. Andrews, of course, it is not. In fact, it takes a very trained eye to discern a golf course among the scrub. "We've got a lot of natural hazards like cows, goats and thorn bushes," admits Sacha. "Sometimes a cow comes by and stands in one of our holes and we had a mad cow that used to chase

us. And, because it's a bit wild, we must have lost at least a hundred balls. I call it rock n' roll golf."

"The course is constantly changing," adds Suryan. "It rained not so long ago so now the ground is softer and we can start measuring out our shots. But when it hasn't rained for some time, it gets very hard and the balls roll much further and bounce all over the place. Then it's more difficult to motivate yourself."

Par for the nine holes is 31 (four par fours, and five par threes). The present record is two over par, a considerable achievement under

these conditions. Do they have any special rules?

"Our basic rule is that if you land on the fairway you can move your ball two club lengths if it has an unplayable lie – which happens quite often – and you can tee it up on a nice tuft of grass," says Suryan. "You're also allowed to chip on the green and to move your ball if the ground is too uneven or the hole is obscured by something like cow dung. And we have one Out of Bounds, the fruit orchard."

"We also used to give putts if you got within a metre of the hole, but today we actually make them," adds Sacha. "This course really improves your short game!"

How do the local villagers view this mysterious rite?

"We don't see many people here – it's very quiet, except for the occasional drinking party who don't bother us," says Sacha. "But we're friends with the guy who has the fruit orchard. He and his wife are very nice people. They help us find our balls and we buy them presents once in a while."

Aurovilians, of course, are dreamers. So what is their dream for the future of golf in Auroville?

"This area is not very suitable for farming or building because it is low-lying and gets very wet in the monsoon," Suryan points out. "My idea would be to have a golf course of a high standard but also to preserve the beautiful surrounding wetland area that it might have been, hosting a far more diverse array of indigenous wildlife had agriculture and development not claimed it. It could then also serve as a park for people to enjoy."

"The thing about golf is that it can be played and enjoyed by people of all ages and abilities," says Sacha. "I envisage a driving range where you



Now where is that ball?

can practice, as well as a mini golf course and a chip-and-putt course. Add in a little café and it would be a great place for people to socialize."

The area where they play is located in the Green Belt but is partly village land. Realistically, do they see Auroville buying up additional land at 40 lakhs an acre so they can turn it into a full-fledged golf course?

"It could be a viable business," muses Suryan. "You could build a clubhouse, construct a water-catchment area, even a high-end hotel, and people from outside would pay to play here. And there's another thing. Golf is not an ecological sport: conventional golf courses break up natural habitats and need a lot of water and pesticides. India is developing fast and there will be a demand for more and more courses. So if we could construct a natural, an ecological golf course – and Auroville already has a lot of knowledge in this area – this could be a prototype that could be adopted elsewhere and Aurovilians could earn consultancy fees." He pauses. "But I would never expect Auroville to buy up this land for a golf course because there are so many other priorities. The biggest hope would be that an outside donor would buy 10-15 acres in this area and give us stewardship of it. At the moment everything's very organic; if it wants to happen, it will."

From an interview by Alan



Suryan (left) and Sacha after the match

AUROVILLE HISTORY

Mother's entry process

Shyam Sunder Jhunjunwala joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1964. In 1971, The Mother appointed him as her liaison with Auroville, in which function he also presented to Her the names of those who wanted to join Auroville for Her decision. Here he speaks about that early entry process.

"In the beginning the work was not so complicated. Each person who wanted to come to Auroville was interviewed by a group of four: Monsieur André, Mother's son; Roger Anger, Mother's architect; Navajata Poddar, the secretary of the Sri Aurobindo Society; and myself. We would ask the applicant to fill in a form which contained the usual questions plus the question, 'What brought you to Auroville?' That, in fact, was the main question. Because at the time quite a few people would apply without knowing much about Auroville; they were impressed by the name and the popularity.

We tried to find out if the person was really interested in the ideal, or was coming 'just like that'. We

would also look into the applicant's financial position; if the applicant could maintain him or herself, and whether he or she could contribute to the building of Auroville or to the building of a house for her or himself. But there were no hard and fast rules. Generally the interview would take 15 minutes. Sometimes it was longer, and even much longer when a candidate started lecturing us on what Auroville should be. That could be very tiresome! (laughter).

Another issue was to what extent an applicant was familiar with the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. We all felt they should be, and if they were not, that they should become familiar. For otherwise, what brings them to Auroville? I remember there was a person who tried to examine Sri Aurobindo and

Mother in his own light, but there was neither devotion nor consecration to the cause. We felt the person did not belong.

In the beginning of Auroville, Mother used to receive many letters from people who wanted to join Auroville to retire there. Usually she would reply that Auroville was not a place for retirement. So I would inform such people, in a very gentle way, that Auroville was not suitable to their requirements. But there was no iron rule.

Then, with a passport-size photo and our comments, the form would go to The Mother. I brought it, because it was too clumsy that all the four 'wise men' (laughter) would go and see Mother on that topic. Then Mother would decide. Initially, She would ask me what the opinion of each of us was. Later, Mother would only ask my views, and then give Her decision. Mother judged each case on its own merits. Generally, Her decisions were in accordance with what I had proposed. But that was not an absolute rule.

For example, there was a case where Mother was slightly less approving. But I found the fellow to

be all right and I told Her that. She agreed to admit him. Then one day he suddenly ran away. When I informed Mother about it, She said; 'You see Shyam, sometimes I am also right.' (laughter).

At the time there were many constraints: financial constraints, housing constraints, you mention it. For once we had admitted someone, we had to take the responsibility of providing food and lodging. We had also a reporting system in place to find out what the man was doing, how he was behaving. We would get reports from the person as well as from the community. This, factually, constituted a probationary period of one year. And that probationary period could be extended if we felt it was necessary, or we could stop the period mid-way.

We would discuss the issues with the person and then either we would extend the period or we would say 'No sir, you have to leave.' In such cases there would be usually a hue and cry. If the person was insistent he or she would send letters to Mother. Sometimes Mother relented. But all decisions were ultimately Hers.

After November 1973, when Mother had left her body, the work became more difficult. By that time the whole thing had fallen on me because Roger was often in France, Navajata was generally out on tour, and Monsieur André would only attend to work when he came back from France. (laughter). So I tried my best to go within, pray to Mother and find if someone should be admitted or not.

When the problems between Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Society came to the front, my work effectively ceased. The entry process then came into the hands of the Aurovilians themselves."

From an interview with Jaya and Jyothiprem, February 2010.

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Some of Shyam Sunder's notes on his interaction with The Mother on Auroville have been published in the chapter *Mother steers Auroville in his book Down Memory Lane, published by Sri Aurobindo's Action, 1996.*

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