

A Korean family in Auroville

“There are now twenty eight Koreans in Auroville and our numbers are slowly increasing,” says Haandl as she pours me a cup of green tea in her home in Grace community. Haandl and her husband, Padha, are both Aurovilian. They work at Matrimandir – she helps with cleaning and repairing the white socks, while he prepares compost for the Matrimandir gardens. They have a 13-year old son Yon Sung, who attends Transition School.

“Padha and I have always been interested in sustainable living and organic farming,” says Haandl. “For many years we tried to find a community in Korea where we could live and work. There are a few such places but they have strict rules and we were not attracted to them. Then a friend of ours who has been to Auroville told us about the place, and to us it sounded like ‘heaven on earth’. We became very excited and wanted to come as soon as possible.

“We first came to Auroville in June 1999, and were very impressed with the beauty, the spirit of fraternity, the spirituality, and especially the Matrimandir. However, nobody warned us about how hot it would be in July, and the heat took us by surprise. We also realized that we weren’t ready financially. So we went back to Korea to earn more money so that we could return.

“Organic farming didn’t pay much, so I went back to my job as pharmacist, and we both studied English and prepared ourselves for our exciting new life. During those years of working and saving back in Korea, we used to refer to Auroville as our ‘home town’ – that is what it always felt like to us.

“When we arrived, both Padha and I felt immediately connected to the Integral Yoga. The concept that the whole of life can be one’s yoga is a unique approach and by doing something with discipline everyday it becomes part of you. Every day I sat down to translate a page of Mother’s



Padha, Haandl and Yon Sung

Rays of Light into Korean – it became part of my *sadhana*. It took three years to complete, but it was a deep experience for me. If I did not know the correct meaning I would just stay quiet and hope Mother would give it to me – and usually She did. That book had a great impact on me; maybe in the future I will get it published so that other Koreans can read it.

“We both wanted to learn more about Mother and Sri Aurobindo. There is a book called *Living Within* which has been translated into Korean and that was a revelation for both of us. I also remember how thrilled we were in seeing the *The Auroville Experience* translated into Korean.

“Many Koreans feel a connection with India as Buddhism is one of the major religions in Korea, and many come to India on pilgrimages seeking the birthplace of their religion. The poet Rabindranath Tagore too had a special connection with Korea which he visited during his trip to Japan. He wrote: ‘Korea will be the lamp of Asia.’

“A group of Koreans in Auroville meet at each other’s houses once a month for a meditation followed by a dinner,” says Padha. “At these gatherings, every person donates 100 rupees to be put into an account for our future pavilion; that is a nice feeling.

“Food is an important part of our culture,” he explains. “Our way of life is still very traditional with grandparents often living with the family of their eldest son. Food is a daily way of coming together and sharing, so we give it a lot of importance.” Says Haandl, “When a friend comes from Korea they always bring bags of special Korean spices and delicacies for us. We find Indian food very spicy and European food rather heavy, so in the evenings we always cook our own food which is fresh and light. For example, we use chilli powder but it is both hot and sweet, quite different from the Indian. We also prepare many small individual dishes with particular tastes, and these are created with attention and love. We are also regularly offering some typical

Korean food at Pour Tous for Aurovilians – like *Kimchi*, which is a fermented and pickled side dish of vegetables. People seem to like it a lot.

“There are now at least 2,500 Koreans working in Chennai with companies like Hyundai, Samsung and LG. So there is now a large Korean food shop in Chennai where we can get what we need, but it is expensive. The Koreans from Chennai sometimes drive down to Auroville on weekends. In the beginning, they thought Auroville was a cult when they saw the pictures of Mother everywhere. Even my parents thought we were crazy when we first came to Auroville, but when my sister visited us, she loved it,” says Haandl.

“Aurovilians sometimes say that we do not mix enough with the other nationalities and in a way they are correct; but it is because of the language,” say Haandl and Padha. “It requires so much effort from us that we shy away.” They explain that spoken English is not easy for many Koreans. “When we went to school, we did not learn English

until we were 10 years old. Our teachers had no experience of the way English should be spoken so while our grammar and vocabulary was good, our pronunciation was terrible and we never had a chance to improve. Now it is different for the young generation as well-trained Americans are given work permits to teach English, and the situation has improved.”

“Regarding our own spoken English, we owe a lot to Jyotiprem, a Dutch Aurovilian who gives classes for us once a week in his house. At first we went to the Auroville Language Laboratory but the teachers were constantly changing, and that was not easy. But it was a great help for us as beginners and they encouraged us in our progress.

“Our son also faced this difficulty in the beginning. At first, he found school difficult to adjust to, but the teachers were very supportive and he quickly got over that phase. Last year, he wrote a book of poems called *The Marching Flowers* written in Korean and English and illustrated with his own drawings. He is also learning to play Western Classical music on the transverse flute with Dorothee, and he is proving to be quite artistic. For our son growing up in Auroville has been very special,” says Haandl.

“Living in Auroville, we are all able to find the hidden beauty within ourselves,” says Padha who also makes pen and ink paintings of flowers on rice paper. “Auroville stimulates us to improve ourselves and we consider ourselves very lucky to be here.”

I linger on as Haandl pours yet another cup of traditional Korean tea from a tiny glass teapot into ceramic bowls. The ritual is delicate and soothing and the tea fragrant and refreshing. We are sitting on cushions around a beautiful low wooden table. Outside I can hear the Tamil workers on their tea break drinking hot, strong, and sweet tea and I think to myself – ‘This is Auroville, where everyone exists in harmony together.’

Dianna

MATRIMANDIR

Night-watch at the Matrimandir

The Matrimandir team had the inspiration for two people – no couples please – to be a ‘living Presence on watch’ throughout the night in the Matrimandir grounds. As I had never been a ‘Presence on watch’ before, I felt somewhat honoured when Srimoyi rang up and asked me report at the Matrimandir gate by 9 pm. It is the hour I am usually brushing my teeth and heading in the direction of bed, but I arrived there with a rucksack packed with a bed roll, sheet cover, a flask of tea, bananas and biscuits, and of course, mosquito cream.

Srimoyi instructed my companion and me: “You are not guards, but it would be nice if you walked around now and then so any potential mischief-maker would be aware of your presence.” She said some ‘Presences’ sleep in the amphitheatre but we decided to bed down in one of the niches under one of the ramps by the marble lotus pond. Not a sensible choice, it later proved, as there was little ventilation and plenty of mosquitoes. There was even a very large black toad living close by.

Promptly at 9.15 p.m. all the lights went out before we had even unpacked our torches or applied the mosquito cream. Neither of us had remembered to bring a cell phone, but Srimoyi explained that in case of an emergency we could always use the phone in the office and we could call her any time of the night. The only emergency I could foresee was breaking an ankle on those treacherous amphitheatre steps as it was pitch dark, and both of us had ‘elderly’ eyes.

We began our patrol immediately at the amphitheatre, walking slowly around the edge several times and then sat listening to the sounds of the distant party music wafting over from the direction of Kalabumi. When that ended, the equally vital temple music from Kottakarai became audible. After a while, the humans tired of making noises, and everything became still. A deep black silence descended over the earth.

Moving around now felt like swimming through a dark sea, one with hidden currents and depths. The hollow of the amphitheatre seemed like a nest carved into the earth, and the urn like a guiding beacon for passing souls. We lay down on the red stones still pulsing with the day’s warmth and gazed up at the unfurled tropical night sky. How rarely we look at that brilliance which is above us every night of our lives, I thought. Some of the constellations looked vaguely familiar, yet their immensity was threatening. Just for a second as I allowed my mind to contemplate their magnificence, I had a huge metaphysical panic attack. “Maybe if we can name them we can tame them”, I thought, just as my companion broke the silence; “Must bring my star book next time.”

The Matrimandir glowed as molten gold, and then turned a golden

liquid, sparkling and flowing. It morphed into a living, twinkling being with a million shadows and reflections. Gigantic and unearthly, it looked as if it had alighted from the heavens it was as if the thousands of souls who had worked on it over the forty years were contained within it, beating with its golden pulse.

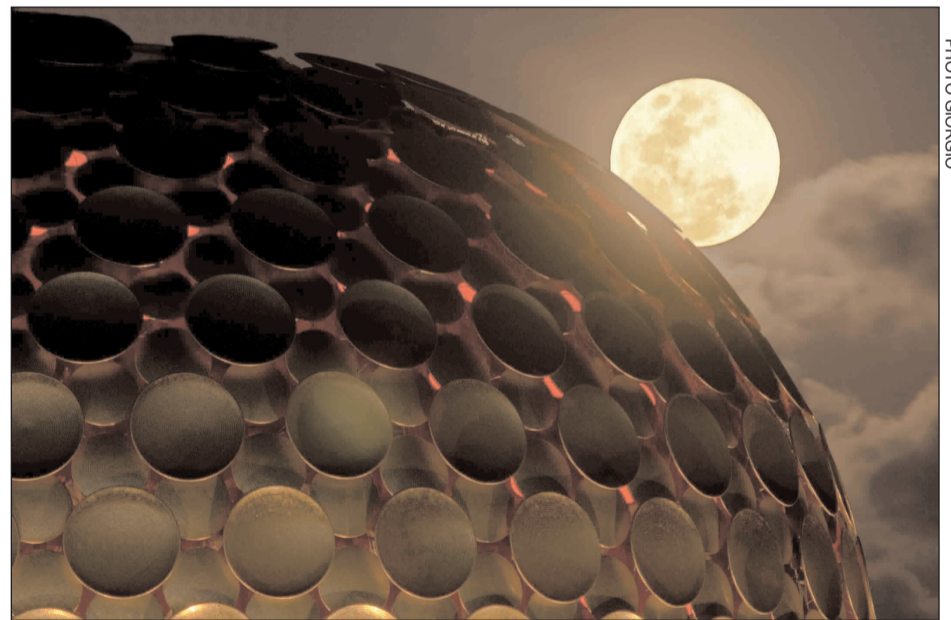
As I walked down the giant sweeps of the red sandstone petals they seemed to lead me down to ancient Egypt, down, down to the worlds of myth and fantasy, the world behind the daylight veil. It was a world of immense beauty, of perfect, bold proportions.

When I awoke from a half sleep during the night the enormous shimmering disks just above my head transported me to Mars, a future place of shining giant proportions. When I awoke another time I was in the purity of a Muslim painting with the luminous white glow of the lotus pool. The sense of space around the Matrimandir was limitless, alternating between being liberating and terrifying. That night I was taken through universes and across aeons of time.

But the body was weak and demanded sleep. I could hear Jesus admonishing his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane: “Could you not wait one hour with me?” I thought wistfully of the siesta I had missed during the day, and of how I should have and could have prepared myself, body and soul, for this unique occasion.

My companion and I had wedged ourselves into a small space under the Mahasaraswati ramp so we lay side by side throughout the night. She was someone I liked a lot but did not know well, yet we chatted easily like an old couple. Sometimes she slept while I walked around, then I slept and she would crawl quietly away. She had worn a flowing all-white dress, having read that mosquitoes are not attracted to white, and so when I opened an eye and saw her floating down the steps, I thought I was seeing a ghost.

It was a joy to spend time with someone without the daytime constraints of personalities. We were in a different medium of time and it ebbed and flowed and all we did was ride it. Oh, to live in that timeless zone always! “It was the hour before the Gods awake”... “A fathomless zero occupied the world”...



Matrimandir at night

I realized that I had never before had the feeling of having ‘all the time in the world’; the ‘time for myself’, all the clichés we live by. Here in the space and eternal darkness there was no sense of time, just a ‘deep Presence’, for want of a better word. There were no distractions of people, or books, or worn second-hand opinions. Everything was just as it was.

The nothingness threw one easily into a meditative state. Usually we associate the deepest darkest hours of the night with insomnia and foreboding terror. It was not like that at all. For a blessed moment here and there, I knew exactly where I was heading, exactly where I had come from, and that everything was in fact very, very well. There were glimpses, tiny flashes of awareness, that Matrimandir is the centre of the world; that everything happens from here. There is really no need to go anywhere else. I had read these things of course, and agreed with them, but to have access to that through experience, if only for a second, was life changing for me.

We both woke up at 6 a.m. stiff and bleary-eyed to a deep and jolly “good morning”, and saw Otto with his shock of white hair leaning over the wall. The day shift had arrived, and our ‘presence’ was no longer needed. We gathered up our strewn-about things, tidied up meticulously, and stumbled out through the red ramp into the glory of another Aurovilian dawn. My back ached and my bites itched, but I felt gloriously happy.

Dianna