

Matrimandir

February 2020



The completed stone garden in the Garden of the Unexpected

A full day at Matrimandir

In the predawn hours the Matrimandir sits in a field of silence, glowing softly in a golden hue, lit by spot lights shining upwards from the 12 petals around it.

The January night air is cool and still. Two members of the night watch team, ever-present throughout the nights at Matrimandir, look up to the bright stars and then to the east, watching for the first rays of dawn.

Music drifts through the air from the temples in villages surrounding Auroville, just a kilometer or two away. It is Pongal season in Tamil Nadu, – the harvest festival time, – the faint notes are lively, happy, and celebratory.

By 5.30 am the site begins to waken. The night watch team stretches and smiles as the dawn glow begins to shine from the east. Two more Aurovilians arrive to open the Matrimandir. Everyone is bundled in

sweaters and scarves as the night temperature has dipped close to a chilly 20 degrees Celsius. A handful of Aurovilians come regularly at this early morning hour to go the Inner Chamber for concentration.

An early morning team of volunteer pathway cleaners arrives to sweep and tidy up around the building as the day begins to pick up pace. A multitude of birds call out their varied morning songs from the trees scattered across the site. A white winged heron is silent, standing by a pool, watching attentively the human activity in the dawn hours.

By 7.45 am the action gets into full swing. Volunteer gardeners have arrived to begin their daily activity tending to the needs of the gardens. Some move out into the gardens with spray machines to spray organic nutrients and pest control mixtures onto the shrubs. Some gather grass clippings and cow dung in wheel

barrows to mulch and compost young trees. Pots of newly planted seeds in the small nursery established near the office need watering. At 8 am a stream of employees arrives at the second gate, on the eastern side of the site. About eighty people arrive for work, driving motorbikes, cycling or walking in. They park their vehicles in sheds near the gate. A few have walked several kilometers from their villages to attend their daily work at Matrimandir. But most come on up to date motorbikes which are their proud means of transport these days.

Each team of workers moves to one of the workshops and store rooms which are gathered on the eastern side of the main garden oval. The metal workers go off to their machine filled workshop, and the stone cutters, plumbers, carpenters and the large gardens building and maintenance teams go to theirs. The stock room opens to issue tools and materials for the day's work. Anything from nuts and bolts, to laundry soap, to crow bars to a ride-on grass mowing machine are distributed. The tractor and bobcat drivers start their vehicles, according to the job, – then all the teams move out to take up the tasks of the day.

On the western side of the site the movement is different, – for here is the reception point for the groups of people who have booked to visit and concentrate in the interior of Matrimandir. First, at 8 am, come volunteers who work in different Auroville units and have only this time to experience the Inner Chamber. Then, by 8.45, Aurovilians with their relatives and close friends form a group to enter the building. The group will have about 30 minutes in the Chamber, – to be silent, to offer themselves and to receive.

In a very organized succession come the other visitors groups, starting with those who come on a regular basis. Next come the first timers, who receive a special short introduction to the Matrimandir, then come those staying at Auroville guesthouses. In this busy time of the year up to five such groups visit the Chamber each morning. In the reception office a team of Aurovilians receives the visitors' bags and cell phones, storing them in cubicles giving numbered tokens in return. Colored passes for the rooms in the twelve petals are distributed to those who wish to sit there too. Others are busy on phones and computers taking bookings for more visitors for the days to come. It is a bee hive of quietly coordinated activity inside the access office. By 11.30 am this activity draws to a close as the opening of Matrimandir to visitors is over for the morning.

All this while, another team of volunteer Aurovilians, up to 20 people at a time, is present within the Matrimandir, stationed at different points within the building in order to maintain the groups in silence and ensure orderly conduct. Meanwhile, in the workshop area, the laundry section is also in full swing, with five or six washing machines in constant action. Hundreds of white socks used each day by the visitors as well as cushion covers, mats and a varied collection of cleaning cloths are cleaned and dried. Volunteers sort and fold socks and attend to the humming washing machines.

Once the morning opening for visitors is over, the Aurovilian cleaning team comes back in the afternoon to give a thorough vacuuming to the carpets, polishing the marble walls and the glass handrails in the building and in the twelve petals. It is well organized, meticulous and quite inspiring to see the attention each gives to carrying out his or her particular job. Teams of plumbers, electricians or scaffolding builders may also be called in to attend to special needs within Matrimandir.

As far as maintaining the Matrimandir building is concerned, the final phase of the day comes with the arrival of our team of volunteers who go up to the roof of Matrimandir wearing their safety harnesses and carrying cleaning gear. They anchor climbing ropes and then rappel down the outer surface of Matrimandir wiping and polishing the golden discs as they descend. It is a delight to watch, as they reach with their brooms and cloths, swinging down from disc to disc. Sometimes they even work completely upside down to reach a particular spot on the outer surface of the building. They have two ropes, one for the normal descent, and a second one for safety. Only after a long session of training in rope climbing and safety techniques are new members permitted to go up to clean the structure in this way. These days, this team is composed entirely of athletic volunteer women!

Throughout the day several other teams are busy with a multitude of tasks that help to maintain the Matrimandir site and carry forward the development of new projects. Aurovilian coordinators work with each team to see to the details and facilitate the interaction between the different groups.

At 10 am, a bell rings out over the site and all move to the spots where the catering section will deliver tea and biscuits.

For decades, tea time at the Matrimandir has been a focal point for the teams to meet and catch up on their lives. The first rough tea room was under a simple keel roof, which has been upgraded and moved several times in the last 49 years as the work of building the Matrimandir and its gardens has developed more and more. The overall work area is very large, including sixty three acres of the main site and extending to the nearby eight acre plant Nursery. The Nursery celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, – having been in existence even longer than the Matrimandir!

One aspect of the tea time is to coordinate the work of the day: “Does the petal maintenance team need

help from the scaffolding team? Can the gardens building team please bring some loads of sieved leaf compost from the compost section to fill areas being prepared in the new Garden of the Unexpected? The team laying down the 100 meter stretch of new cobble stone road around the gardens needs more masons to complete the work, can these be hired? There is a pesky leak in the new pond in the gardens, please get the masons and plumbers on the job to fix it!” On and on the hundred details of the daily work are organized.

A more centralized planning and looking ahead is always under way by the team responsible for more formally managing the site on a day today basis.



Building the new pond in the Garden of the Unexpected

One particular focus for this management team is the international design call, now well underway, to select the most appropriate designs for the next four of the main gardens being built around Matrimandir: Light, Life, Power and Wealth. Ninety-five teams from around the world had responded to the call. By the deadline for first concept submission on December 12th, thirty-five designs had been submitted. After

a first review by our technical team these had been filtered down to fewer than twenty.

Interaction is constantly underway with our panel of six experts from around the world who are reviewing the design proposals. An Aurovilian public panel is looking at the proposals, too. The spirit of design creation being shown is varied, coming from a wide

range of participants, from students of design to professional garden design teams. Detailed final proposals will come in by the end of the summer and then, through a combined evaluation by the expert panel and the Aurovilian public panel a final design choice will be made for each garden.

Another focus of planning is the rainwater harvesting channel which will surround the gardens oval, and the large test pond which will collect the gathered runoff waters. A second hand earth excavator stands on site, ready to begin the digging work. By next monsoon the channel and reservoir will be dug and lined! This will be an experiment, to see how much water can be gathered, to see how long it will take to fill up the deep reservoir, and then to utilize this water in the best way possible. Rainwater harvesting has become a critical factor all over India as the ground water table drops lower and lower each year and awareness grows about the need to conserve this most valuable resource.

And then there is the attention needed on the side of funding. We have to keep in mind that the maintenance of Matrimandir costs about 20 lakhs each month. On top of this more funds are needed for development of the new projects which are underway. Maintaining the flow of information about the needs to the donor base and to new donors who may wish to support Matrimandir is an important activity. A dedicated team takes care of correspondence, the receipt of offerings and the detailed financial accounting for all that is received and spent on the site.

We have mentioned the daily flow of employees coming to the site from the eastern gate and flow of visitors coming in from the west to go to the Inner Chamber, but there is another daily flow to the site: it is via the southern access. At this point there is a constant flow of day visitors and tourists to the public View Point located beyond the southern border of the gardens oval. Some 800,000 people per year come

to the View Point, having walked one kilometer along a shaded path from the Auroville Visitors Center. Guides, watchmen, gardeners and cleaners are needed on this southern side of the site to receive this constant flow in an organized way. Facilities are provided so each can see the Matrimandir, read information panels, and sit quietly under a tree if they wish to absorb the sight and atmosphere of Matrimandir.

By dusk the View Point closes. The employees who had arrived at 8 am have gone home. Only watchmen remain at the various gates, present all 24 hours.

In the hours before dusk, Aurovilians quietly visit and walk in the gardens or sit by one of the pools and fountains of the site. Children explore the multitude of pebble areas and small cascades. Adults may choose to concentrate in the petal rooms or the Inner Chamber.

The Aurovilian evening watch arrives at 8 pm to begin their vigil around the gardens. The Inner Chamber closes at 9 pm and the last Aurovilian visitors walk along lighted stone pathways of the gardens as they leave to go home. By 9.30 pm the Aurovilian night watch team arrives to take over from the evening shift, – biscuits and a thermos of hot tea are kept waiting for them. They move out over the site with their torches to be present all night to make sure that all is well around the Matrimandir.

As the silence of night falls, the team moves from the amphitheater to the petals and then through the gardens: the night calls of owls greet them from the banyan tree... the buzz of crickets comes from all around. It is a very special time of day, – to be here alone with the Matrimandir, face to face with its silence and its mystery. Over head in a wide dome arches the magnificence of bright stars and, if one is watchful, one may see a shooting star arc across the sky and have the chance to make a silent magical wish...

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Important information on sending your offerings: Contributions to Matrimandir are exempt under sec. 80G of the Indian Income Tax Act. You can send us by post your offering by DD/Cheque payable to "Matrimandir". You may also give your offering in cash/cheque/DD at the Matrimandir Office during your visit for meditation.

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