

**Recovering
the voice of women
in the villages
and in Auroville**

FINAL REPORT

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BACKGROUND OF THE PRESENT PROJECT

HISTORICAL CIRCUMSTANCES

It is now thirty years after the birth of Auroville, which has steadily grown and blossomed -- *by the vision and grace of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother*-- and through the pioneering work of those seekers of the sixties and those that followed them. Young generations that have set forth to discover, learn and put into practise all the elements they have needed for the construction of a new social model for the world. And today we have reached a point where further conceptualisation and renewed organisation are essential to the direction of our future -- and how we may better continue and build on the co-operative and inspired work to create this 'city of the new dawn'.

The construction of Auroville has brought and continues to bring a wide variety of experiences to each one of its participants and at many different levels. And all the research and experimentation -- from failures to triumphs -- have laid down a substantial body of empirical work that provides us with a ready source of knowledge. This rich resource enables us to design and shape new paths of experience in our journey together. Where each in our own ways, through both our inner and outer research and development, may hope to reach the common goal.

WORK EXPERIENCE IN AUROVILLE

Because of our engagement in the work of conscious personal evolution and the necessity to lay down the foundation stone for human unity, we started exploring the possibility of the development of human resources through educational processes based on the framework of our yoga of work.

As one example of our work in Auroville, that is related with the Tamil youth from the neighbouring village, the Life Education Centre (as a project of Village Action Group) was created as a school of non-formal education directed towards the so-called 'drop-out' population between 15 and 25 years old. The intention being to help this group who would otherwise be deprived of an education.

Life Education Centre is a place where the daily life of the students and their accumulated experiences is itself the raw material used to explore, awaken and finally to educate the youth and prepare them for their future.

Our methodology and philosophy uses a broad and flexible framework, adapted to the situation as we are experiencing it. We call our pedagogy "Life Education" and

we apply it in most of our programmes. Its basic principles are:

1. 'Co-learning':

We see that in the learning situation, it is most enriching if all the parties are learning -- the so-called teachers as well as the students. In Auroville many of the teachers and resource people are foreigners or Indians raised in the cities. Consequently they have a lot to learn about the conditions of life and attitudes of those living in the villages. The experienced social workers on the staff have to learn to be flexible and co-operative in their development approach. The trainees (the students) are learning to see their villages -- and all that they had been taking for granted -- with fresh eyes. At the same time they are also learning to develop initiative and a positive attitude towards change. The groups of village women learn about the common problems they all face, to trust each other, and how to work together to improve not only their own but the community situation.

2. Near to Far:

To teach effectively, we start with what is familiar to the students, then move on to the new and the strange. The Life Education method begins by making the village itself the object of study. The skills of counting, calculating, observing, recording, charting and mapping are learned through examining specific data about the villages, which is then documented. Analysing the findings develops the skills of listening, of expression, comparison, generalising, objectifying and of using the imagination etc.

3. Learning by Doing:

Most people absorb new ideas best through experience. Demonstrations which involve the learners in the new skill -- actually conducting surveys, taking trips to meet other groups with similar experiences, all serve to open the minds of the learners and also to create a bond of mutual experience among themselves -- as well as with the teachers.

4. More than the Sum of the Parts:

A group is a whole which, when it is working harmoniously, has a much richer imagination and much more powerful means of expression and manifestation than any one person on her or his own. Slowly the group begins to notice the individual contributions of each of its members and to appreciate how *together* they know a lot more and can do a lot more. They learn how to enhance their co-operation for greater effectiveness. And then action for social improvement can take place.

5. The Snake Bites its Tail:

The interaction between the individual, the group and the community is mutually reinforcing. As the individuals grow in personal self-confidence and energy, and the group grows in trust and teamwork, they influence the community to become a better place in which to live, which in turn supports the fuller development of the individuals. People know this instinctively -- it is the basis of family. This method is about making this innate knowledge conscious.

6. The Spiral Path:

As the energies of the villages are redirected into self-regenerating rather than depleting cycles, the two-dimensional circle can rise into a three-dimensional spiral. On the basis of the increased abilities of the groups and group members to concentrate their attention, the topics of discussion and action, which at first are focused primarily on solving material level problems, can shift to reflection on some of the customs and habits which are fundamental to these problems. As this analysis deepens into self-reflection at both a group and personal level, higher consciousness emerges, a continuous ascending on the spiral of evolution. This is, of course, as true for the development worker as it is for the villagers.

After seven years of experience our centre has gained credibility among the villagers and the young women have come to enrol themselves as regular students. And now we feel confident to engage in exploring other social contexts.

REACTIVATING OUR LONG ASSOCIATION WITH UNESCO

During the visit of Anees Jung (an adviser to UNESCO) to our programmes in Village Action, we had the chance to exchange impressions about cultural factors, new inputs of society, the situation of the working women, heritage, new values and changing patterns and attitudes of the participants of The Auroville Experience.

At the end of this visit we envisaged the possibility of exploring women's groups, taking into account their personal lives and the cultural aspects. We also received a valuable contribution from Anees Jung based on the recent experience of Gloria Steiner who has developed a methodology for the empowerment of young women in America, as explained in her book: "Girls Speak Out".

Due to the results obtained through the experimentation in Life Education Centre, there has developed a confidence to reach out to other groups, as suggested by Anees. And we agreed to explore and create new ties with the beneficiaries with the objective so that they can become more actively involved in their own self-discovery and development.

The visit was crystallised in a Project named "**Recovering the voices of women**".

And it was presented to UNESCO by our project co-ordinator with the following highlights:

“This microscopic proposal combines work that has evolved over the course of six years with a new emphasis given by Anees Jung. This work is of critical importance to the world not only for humanitarian reasons, or because of the immense gains to be harvested by cultivating nearly half of the world’s population; but also because of the strong correlation between women’s empowerment / education and sustainable population trends. It is difficult to conceive how human civilisation will survive another hundred years with women living in subjugation”.

I. OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY:

1. Background and initial stage

In Life Education Centre we work with a flexible curriculum according to the individual needs of each of the students. We take the student / person as the first resource of knowledge. With this premise and with pedagogical help, we provide space for the beginning of the un-folding of what is inside each one and the learning process of sharing with others.

Life Education means for us the possibility to learn from our daily practice and to provide scope for change. Our process is a co-operative learning process of mutual development. While the personal exploration continues and parallel to it, the process of academic rehabilitation starts -- in order to give foundations for the learning of manual abilities and to develop emotional stability.

The work has been carried on in the villages as well as in class rooms -- to re-create and re-learn their heritage and to learn the social strategies for development.

Now we would like to try to apply our methodology to verify if it is possible to replicate it in other contexts with adult women.

We considered that, since Village Action has already been working with women in the villages, there was the possibility of exploring with them the events of their daily experience and to try and understand how their social experience has been shaped by culture.

So the objective of the exploratory study was formulated as follows;

“To provide a space for re-awakening the values in their own culture, traditions, beliefs, working practices, humanistic attitudes and gender experiences”.

1a. Target Population

The target population of this study will be from the following groups: the women of Life Education Centre, co-workers of Village Action, working women in Auroville units, Tamil teachers and women members of village clubs.

1b. Working Methodology

The practical way of applying this methodology is to gather the women together, create a space for their own voice and document what has been expressed and shared.

Using at a maximum their own mechanisms of participation, we will hold monthly meetings to explore such topics as: personal feelings, working experiences, culture,

beliefs, the status of women -- etc.

During our gatherings information will be shared and the energy of the meetings will be directed towards self-reflection, mutual support and the celebration of life.

We will study and organise the information obtained through these gatherings. And we will document their experiences in such a way that they can be easily returned to them. And with this we hope to make one step forward in the understanding of some of their beliefs, limitations and traditions as given factors of life, which have been unclear to -- yet unquestioned by them.

Selections for publication will be done with the consent of the participants.

2. Combining effort: external point of reference

After becoming familiar with the work and methodology used by Gloria Steiner working with young women across the United States, it was considered a valuable source of inspiration and helped us to clarify the ground work to be done in our Asian context due to the role played by culture in our case and also because women's issues have not yet reached our villages, while Steiner's work addresses women born of first generation struggling American Feminist women.

Because her work deals with a recent set of experiences in another continent and our work has been set in this continent, we should re-affirm one more time that: *Being a woman at any point on earth in this century is still an experience based on and reinforced by a particular concept of gender, which in turn has been generated by the specific group, culture or nation to which she may belong.*

The description of the workshops directed towards the young American women talks about the inner journey to find their true selves in order that they may achieve self-empowerment. From our own context -- in our own lexicon, we would say: *You yourself are the primary source of knowledge in which you will find the scope and possibility for change.* Again a universal principal to take up the inner search crosses cultural barriers, ages, nationalities and beliefs. And we have found this to be an imperative task to be promoted in order to reawaken the inner abilities and dormant potentialities to achieve self awareness and to give a personal perspective to life.

In synthesis, we agreed to pay special attention to the topic of women's issues as filtered by gender, culture, education and caste; and to find out how these categories affect their performances in work, the domestic sphere, family ties and personal feelings.

3. Final Formulation

1. General objective:

To provide a space for re-awakening the values within the context of the Tamil culture through its traditions, beliefs, working practices, humanistic attitudes and distinct gender experiences.

2. Specific objectives:

To recover the individual wisdom, intuition and inherited knowledge (of the topics announced in each of the women's gatherings), in order to reflect on the value system by which they live.

To bring out and recognise the inner strength each participant has. And to help them, if necessary, to understand that this is a pre-requisite to develop self esteem and confidence in their daily lives.

To explore the components of the gender experiences and their connections to the culture in order to understand the parameters of women's status.

To create in a group situation the support needed to achieve an atmosphere of mutual trust, respect, harmony, joy and freedom to be and express oneself.

To document their experiences, reflections and feelings and to give that back to them in a pedagogical way to continue the process of critical understanding, consciousness and the possibilities for improvement.

3. Educational objectives:

To create a space through the women's gatherings to start the modality of sharing experiences, discussions and reflections in order to learn from them.

To achieve the objective of self-discovery, we will provide a space for the articulation of their own lives to elucidate the elements that have been shaping their lives.

To create the space and the elements to recover the uniqueness of each woman's life and to understand how cultural practices have sometimes denied them that principle.

II. SCOPE OF THE STUDY

1. Female Population

Although our involvement and presence in the villages has been there all along, the partnership patterns between Auroville and the villagers have been evolving. The scope of our study of the female population of the villages is to learn about the women and get to know them in a qualitative form rather than as just statistics. Also it is equally important to consider any kind of influence that we will have -- whether consciously or unconsciously -- upon them.

In a sample of eleven villages with a combined total population of nearly twelve thousand members (11,711), of which around half (5,785) are women, more than 2,500 of whom are illiterate. And if we analysed more villages around Auroville we would undoubtedly find the situation to be more or less the same -- with a major portion of women still being illiterate.

If we look further, the majority of the employed women earn a monthly income of less than Rs. 500. From the economically active population of the women in those same 11 villages, the largest concentration of those who have jobs are employed in agriculture, construction, handicraft work, semi-skilled labour, domestic service and as casual labourers.

Our aim is to reach this population and to start making a better picture of them and to find ways of improving their situation. In the future perhaps we can talk about creating other sources of employment but also for that we will need to prepare them to be competent for such alternatives.

With these women's gatherings we hope to achieve a better understanding of their material conditions since this affects their outlook of life and their acquisition of resources.

The female population we want to work with will be:

Women from the villages who work in Auroville;

Women living in the villages who are involved in one way or another in developing their village with the help of Auroville;

Women from the villages being trained in Auroville to go back and work with programmes of development in their own villages;

Women from a village background who have grown up in Auroville but still maintain a very close contact with the socio/economic and cultural ambience of their family village.

The list of groups:

1. Life Education Centre
2. Development workers
3. Crèche teachers
4. Isaiambalam teachers

The women's clubs of the following villages:

5. Morattandi
6. Edyanchavadi
7. Annainagar
8. Aravindapuram
9. Rayapettai
10. Thurubai
11. Bommayapalayam-Kuppam
12. Bommapalayam-Main
13. Kazhuperumbakkam
14. Kalapet
15. Puthurai

Workers from the following units of Auroville:

16. Quiet Healing Centre
17. Solar Kitchen
18. Shraddanjali Workshop
19. Imagination Workshop
20. Gokulam Workshop

A selection will be made from these groups to participate first in the women's gatherings, where they will share their experiences and ideas, from which we will make the first documents. These will then be given back to them and another selection of groups will be made to serve as the control groups.

Some of the other groups will be trained to deliver later-on the documented information to the communities they work with or to educational institutions.

2. Documentation

As referred to at the beginning of this report, we have reached a crucial moment in the conceptualisation and organisation of our work. We are in the process of putting together all of the objective and subjective elements of our research -- the systematising and recording of our activities in and around Auroville. This is also a moment in our process which has benefited from our previous experiences -- previous contacts with the communities, the various works in the area and especially the credibility that our organisation and Auroville has developed with the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages.

The objective of the documentation is to be able to produce written accounts of the experiences, to disseminate the knowledge to others, to create pedagogical materials **in English and Tamil languages** and to start building up a resource centre space for tomorrow.

3. AUROVILLE

We believe that, as persons living in the city of Auroville, any effort done or directed towards the understanding and the practice of our charter is essential if we are to achieve the very purpose for which Auroville was created.

“...Auroville will be the place of unending education, of constant progress...”

The multiracial community we live in and our location in the heart of a Dravidian culture makes the process of learning, unlearning and recreating knowledge a real possibility for all of us. We will enhance our endeavours for constant progress if we truly engage ourselves in bringing our energies and light to add to and complement whatever already exists and what others may bring as well.

“...Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future...”

As temporary residents of this planet, as neighbours of the Tamil community and as part of the particular cultural setting we have come from, we are continually moving across bridges between the past and the future -- between our beliefs derived from past conditionings and our beliefs in a more meaningful future. The question rests in the “present”. Taking the present as the opportunity to attend to what is needed, to make bridges where and how circumstances suggest or offer -- to forge a link between the questions of today that are anchored in the past with answers for the here and now that may give solid foundations for the future.

“...It will be a site of material and spiritual researches for a living embodiment of an actual human unity...”

This project will give us the opportunity to explore the daily life of the population we are addressing. And in an indirect way, we will be creating and nurturing the contacts and codes for a better understanding between us and the possibilities for greater mutual co-operation.

And although it is not our objective to measure the cultural symbiosis of all of us within the periphery of Auroville and the neighbouring villages, it is intended as a beginning for a clearer understanding of the differences and common points amongst us.

4. UNESCO

Auroville is an experiment supported and recognised by UNESCO, which stands for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation. This is most fortunate for us in Auroville of course, in that we can say we have -- in our own little way -- already brought so many people together from so many different nations, involving them in quite a wide variety of educational, scientific and cultural endeavours. And the long-standing association and affinity between us should instil our work together with a similar spirit and enthusiasm.

III. METHODOLOGY

1. Limitations

1a. Educational Limitations

The educational level of the population we are going to work with is a low one, almost all of them have an average of two or three years of primary school at the most. The majority of them do not have access to a full formal education and the older women are basically illiterate.

Nowadays there are methodologies to reach the so-called illiterate. But they do not seem to be particularly effective in improving their level of conceptualisation. At this stage in the gathering of our information we will rely on the oral transmission of the participants, that will tend to be more of a descriptive rather than of an analytical nature.

The fact that there will be differences in educational levels within a group will probably not always help to create the best “participation” of all the members of the group.

The lack of formal schooling and the particular lack of education and information on women’s issues may create a barrier when these issues are raised, due to an almost automatic response of rejection. In other words: “I don’t like what I don’t know!” So this topic has to be treated carefully and with appropriate sensitivity, when it is raised during the gatherings with the women. This will be a learning experience for us all.

Also, because the village women do not have experience in educational gatherings, they are likely to have little or no spontaneity to talk. So this too will have to be worked out together during the gatherings themselves.

And because of the lack of exposure to events so different from their daily activities, there may well be a considerable lack of self confidence and low self esteem, which will make the interaction all that more difficult.

1b. Language Barrier

The language is a barrier in the conduct of the gatherings in that there will not be the same confidence there is when all parties to the discussions fully dominate each other’s language or way of speaking.

One of the persons that will be conducting the gatherings is a native Tamil speaker, while the other is not. This will create the regrettable necessity of using simultaneous translation on many occasions, which does nothing for the fluidity of conversation.

Though the fact that the two persons who will be directing the gatherings, collecting the information and handling the group are from backgrounds very different from the women being interviewed, can be taken as an advantage. This is because, as

outsiders they will likely be able to better observe practices that are very different from their own and to look at events more objectively.

The differences in the Tamil language among the women due to their different levels of education, castes or that they come from different regions can also be an obstacle to fully understanding the meaning of what has been said.

1c. Cultural Limitations

As in any other culture there are some social behavioural regulations that are created by some, observed by others, perpetuated by the practice itself and nowadays questioned by younger generations or other persons with critical judgement or by foreigners to the group.

First:

Secrecy about what happens in one's own life, nothing can be told and if it is, a social ostracism is applied.

Second:

Anonymity is a counterpart of secrecy where people do not like to reveal themselves or say who has said what.

Third:

Women should not talk to anyone outside the home about their private lives.

Forth:

The desire to please makes it very difficult sometimes to receive correct or truthful replies.

Fifth:

The lack of trust among women can make it difficult for any real sharing and caring in a group situation.

Six:

The fear to speak in public can be a hindrance to disclose their experiences.

1d. Time Aspect

The gatherings with women will be organised as a "day in one's life". Because the modality of work is new for some of them, the time required for warming the group up (breaking the ice) may reduce the time for sharing.

The climatic conditions can be considered in our case as negative factors. Since heavy rains can cut access to certain villages, or else may signify the onset of the sowing season causing the women who work in agriculture to not be available. From another angle the same climatic factors of rains frequently affects the electricity supply sometimes continuously for weeks on end, making it impossible to process the material collected in the field work.

If any unexpected accident occurs in the village, some women may not answer the call to the gathering which can upset the whole timetable of the programme.

Nonetheless the project should be able to be completed within the six months allotted, always providing there are not too many inconveniences caused by bad weather, accidents or a lack of punctuality by too many of the participants.

1e. Infrastructure Aspect

The project is an exercise composed of many specialised steps needed to achieve the initial objectives. A working team with such special skills is required and a reliable infrastructure is needed to meet the schedule of activities.

A sufficient degree of dedication is needed from the team members in order to finish the job within the six-month period. It is hoped that all the team members will capture the “spirit” of the project so as make it flow smoothly and harmoniously.

The conduct of the meetings and gatherings will require multilingual personnel with experience in-group dynamics.

Both the collective and individual interviews with the women will require personnel with experience in the formulation of questions.

The transcription of the tapes will require an educated person, who is both fluent in Tamil and English. And familiar with the different dialects of the villagers and experienced in social activities or fieldwork.

The creation of the material needs a creative writer sensitive to the social issues in the context of the Tamil culture.

The art work of the project will require one or a number of artists able to capture the spirit of the project and the Tamil customs.

The organisation of the material as a pedagogical exercise will require a person with skills in the areas of local culture, education, social issues, group dynamics etc.

The layout and design work will require a bilingual expert in the field.

The printing of the final versions of the material will require a printing team with a full time availability.

Since this project is a new and complex experience, we will have to try our best to form a team as we go along. We are aware that any “unfulfilled requirement” will take away excellence from the final product and it will show in the meeting of deadlines.

2. Collection of the Information

2a. Collective Interviews

The developing of the questions for the interviews will always take into account the different nature of each group: its occupations, activities in Auroville, related activities with Auroville that take place in the villages, age, caste and the length of time that the group has been known to us.

We will explore and share with them their ideas, practices and attitudes relating to:

- Womanhood,
- Daily activities,
- Culture,
- Spiritual beliefs and practices,
- Gender experience in work,
- Nutrition and health
- Social institutions like marriage, etc.

The questions will be applied in a very general form and, depending on the attitudes of the participants, we may decide to go deeper into certain topics.

During the gatherings there will be both directive and open questions depending upon the nature of the topic.

If the sharing provokes moments of crisis or excitement there will be collective counselling and analysis of the situation. It is expected to be in these moments when the learning process should be emphasised.

2b. Mechanics of the collection

All the information will be taped during the sessions. We will be very attentive to the initiatives of the women so as to allow the flow of the group even if we have to sacrifice our recording.

Translation will be provided for the English speakers and for the group of women.

We will make the final purpose of the exercise clear to the women and obtain their permission to work with the material. This is in order to create a proper feeling of trust and establish the freedom to share.

If it is needed with any group, two or more sessions may take place at the beginning stage.

IV. FINDINGS

1. Initial Stage

In the initial stage we were immersed in the gatherings with the women. We were relating to these women on topics they were not at all used to and we were trying out our skills and the methodology of collective interviews and the group dynamics as the meetings went along. At this moment we felt that we were witnessing their processes and we felt overwhelmed by the facts we heard from them. But as researchers, we must wait while we process all the material and process the experience within ourselves in order to be able to assess and plan the next step of the delivery to the communities.

1.a Participation of Women and Population

The groups met so far have ranged from very young women, who were students of a vocational centre in Auroville - the Life Education Centre – and who now for the last couple of years have been on their “own” and are no longer students – to slightly older women of between 20-35 years of age working as crèche staff with Village Action, school teachers of Isaiambalam School, development workers of Village Action, individual village women who have opted to join the spiritual community of Auroville and the majority of the women’s clubs members from the surrounding villages and to some women much older between 50-60 years of age, but who are still active members of the women’s clubs (sangams). Although some groups were homogenous in terms of the ages of the members, those that were heterogeneous provided a stronger and more vibrant exchange of ideas and opinions on cultural practices. The older women definitely brought life to the discussions when they would compare their own days of youth with the present days of that of their children or grandchildren.

The collected information involved 129 local Tamil women, whose voices were recorded in 16 gatherings, belonging to the following communities:

- Irumbai
- Puthurai
- Puthurai Colony
- Pattanur
- Apperampattu
- Kalapet
- Isaiambalam
- Bommayapalayam main, teachers
- Kuilayapalayam, teachers
- Morattandi, Life Education Centre
- Kottakarai, Life Education Centre
- Auroville, Development Workers
- Muthialpet, Individual Interview
- Kuilayapalayam/Auroville, Individual Interview
- Alankuppam/Auroville, Individual Interview

1b. Topics

The methodology of our work, as we have described it above, was to gather together women and to share with them in such a way that the ambience would generate the confidence to share what we call: “*Tell me about ---*”.

After carefully studying the groups and our parameters we decided to chose the following headings for the sharing and collection of information:

“Tell us about:

The unfolding of a full day’s work
The culture behind our saris – the layers of beliefs, taboos and coloured patterns
You are what you eat
The never-ending dowry story
Slow pace of women as office bearers in their *sangams*
The unheard voices of children through their teachers
Kolams and the puzzle of my life
The community as my mirror – Who developed whom.
What have you learnt from us and what you are doing now
Hand and shoulder to work together
Tell me what does your mother do?
The relationship with your gods and temples
The decoration of the homes
Yesterday, today and tomorrow

2. Description of the collected information and our perceptions on it

Our contribution in every meeting has been, “to give them all the elements of a professional support group and trying to explain how the puzzle of life works”.

In these instances we took the “problematic areas” and examined each of them from different perspectives and asked for their opinions, suggestions and solutions.

The reactions varied from being open to learn a new way to total rejection of the subject matter. In some cases the women themselves received the orders of the elders not to speak about a particular issue or circumstance.

On the other hand, in some cases the level of understanding of life and its present evolution was as rich as in any auditorium filled with a very well educated audience. We noticed that knowledge for them definitely has been captured by oral information and what was particularly interesting was the trust they showed towards their own children that they would learn from them.

Our commitment to them was to give them back their recorded voices, along with new elements for them to open up further discussions, to share all this with other

members of their communities and to plan other activities for the near future.

Our role has been as witnesses and helpers to these women so that, through sharing with them, they began to know each other better, gain more confidence, see themselves as teachers with knowledge to impart, understand better what separates them, the underlying elements in their values and beliefs, the cultural function of control patterns, the worn-out patterns of communication, the emotional states in them, the aggression in their fears, taboos of authority, etc.

Our job in these cases has been to show them the urgency of getting to know themselves. So that they might escape the limitations imposed upon them, to understand why they play the roles of victims in their own context, to understand the meaning of social control and to encourage the creation of a space where they may find a way to express themselves.

In these situations we have deliberately chosen particular topics and used our discretion in addressing and emphasising different issues with the different groups, knowing a little more of their social and religious background, location, etc. A few times, what we had planned for did not happen, but we felt that the process that they were going through was very important and significant for them, so we didn't interrupt it abruptly, and we used this in our discussions.

We are so grateful to all these women who have come together to share with us their journeys. To speak with such frankness, humour, strong beliefs, honesty and sincerity. And for the single purpose that, whatever information they gave, could be shared amongst themselves. But not only within their own group nor even within their village, district, state or province, but on the distant scale of crossing lands and seas, where other people and women like them (or indeed very different to them) might read, enjoy, and relate to their experiences. This has been what has inspired them. That from their own small, tiny individual level, their little contribution could have such a far-reaching impact on the lives of other fellow beings on this planet.

At this moment, after accompanying them on their journeys, after witnessing their histories, after gathering all the information, our next question was a puzzle. What to do with all this information? Perhaps we would have to play with the puzzle. And after we learned how to play with it, we might be able to visualise what images would come out of it. This then is the framework we have decided to use for our documentation and the means of delivering it back to the community will be through a jigsaw-puzzle game.

V. ORGANISATION OF THE MATERIAL

During the first stage of the project we created the space for sharing their experiences and recording them as a source of further work.

1. What Happens Now?

- Our assumption that from our first meeting we would be able to prepare the ambience, release any collective tension and be open to sharing all the experiences, proved far too ambitious!
- The “gatherings of the women” as a learning practice seems to be very much related to their material conditions. In a meeting the two parts have both something to offer and to gain with concrete objectives as for example, a social project or saving scheme. In some cases, the announced topic for our meetings was somehow not tangible for them. The fact that we were planning to celebrate life, know each other and share experiences was never before part of their experiences. This factor proved a set back for our work.
- We discovered that, because of so many endogenous marriages in the villages, the family ties tended to get very extended and would convert the entire village into one big family. We observed that among our participants that was often the case and due to family disagreements, problems, unresolved grievances, they were not able to share or in some cases the sharing of personal feelings and experiences became a public issue.
- We also learned that these women could not choose to go and be members of another women’s club because each club represents a particular population in a particular place. This is a typical example of how the social structure of the village, the institutional practices and organisational traditions tied women to the family and community.
- We also learned that the cultural restriction on sharing their personal lives is too strong. To disclose details involving other members of the family is absolutely unacceptable. It is almost like being naked in front of others. This was also a setback in some cases.
- When the group was composed of women of different generations, we observed that from time to time there were enough elements for disagreements to erupt, resulting in open and aggressive discussions.
- We frequently came across attitudes of resignation and indifference that the women would express over our exercise.
- We repeatedly experienced the message: “Of what use will this exercise be when we do not have any hope?”
- We also experienced that the notion of “producing material out of the experiences” was very appealing for them, because the written word for them

signified something so important but far beyond their normal expectations.

- We experienced the huge amount of pain and desperation suffered by these women. And the group often became more of a space for a cathartic experience. But afterwards the women were unable to visualise what they could do. After all was said and done they still had to go home!
- We learned that, in some cases they saw the roots of their limitations, problems and agreed that the sharing was a good opportunity for learning. But afterwards the mechanisms for change do not yet exist.
- It was very clear for us that the younger women were lacking the knowledge of the older generation. Although they are more educated now, they are simply in the hands of the media and fashion. This can be both an advantage and a disadvantage, which can be explored and worked on with them in the future.
- As a general feeling was in the air, like the sensation that “someone is listening to us”, and as a result of the explanation of the value of their participation they felt good that “they could be teachers for one day and perhaps be helpful to other women one day.”
- The fact that these women were not used to working in small groups or following group techniques, made them spontaneous but disorganized speakers, often forgetting the questions. The material obtained (the equivalent of 300 pages of transcription) was in many cases repetitive due to the similar problems shared by women. In some cases they only wanted to express what their problem was and the rest was not even considered.
- The characteristic of the information was their own life with the corresponding perceptions and beliefs.
- And sometimes the information was incomplete, insufficient or with prejudices. We understand that this is what they believe. And in the light of what they believe, all the reasons mentioned above guided us to look at the material, organize it by topics and highlight their role.
- The topics will be presented in booklet forms and they will be used as information that can illustrate one’s knowledge.
- Also the booklets will have a pedagogical explanation to be used in work situations to be discussed and to generate learning processes.

2. How to Read this Material?

The result of the gatherings is that they started recognising that they are their own source of knowledge. For us to listen and share is helping enormously to understand deep levels of their consciousness and also we must admit that the content of their accounts was, in a way, a **permanent echo of their wounds** speaking for themselves and we also understood how **their existence is braided** with the

cultural values in such a way that they have very little space for themselves.

The reason why we wanted to do this - what we observed is the blind culture, the voice of the divided pair - male and female in patriarchy, the ignorance of some, inferiority of others in the caste system and the violence against the weak - especially the women and children.

We assume that we are having the material of; one day's journey in the "life of women". If we put all the texts together we can create a very pathetic picture of their reality.

Information was collected on 26 audiocassettes, transcribed from Tamil to English in most cases, and vice-versa in the rest. This transcribed material was translated into English or Tamil, as the case maybe.

All the material will be framed in the description of
one day's journey in your life,
with it we will attempt:
to connect internally the pieces of the journey aiming to bring unknown possibilities, meanings, alternatives and
more than any thing else
to unlearn or learn while disclosing the information of our material.

The material was organised in the following topics;

Dowry and Marriage
Every day activities
Rituals at home
Life histories
Native Gods
Temples
Kolam
Sarees
Teachers
Leadership
Mother in law
Life Education
Gender question
Community work
Social cooperation
Work Experiences

While we work the topics content in "one day journey" we will keep in mind the following questions;

where the action is taking place,
who is performing the action,
what are you doing,
what is the benefit?
who is benefiting from it?
why do you perform the action?,

OUR OBJECTIVE IS TO FACILITATE THE READER TO ANSWER those questions and to discuss the implications and the internal connections embodied in them.

If this exercise is achieved, it will help a lot to start learning how reality of social beliefs, practices, emotions, spirituality and politics is organised.

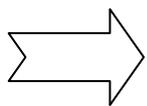
3. Procedure Used to Write the Booklets

- The material was read
- The information was organised by topics in such a way that the anonymity is maintained
- The characters were created in such a way that they will take us through a journey of 15 days (the equivalent of the booklets) and serve as wise women with the possibility of embodying all possible human stages of the mind. Paati represents the older generation and Iruchammal represents the child of today. Some other characters have joined this journey on the way, representing the other generations.
- Our input was mainly in playing the character role and articulating pieces of information from the recorded information given by women.
- The information given by women has been maintained as pure as possible thereby avoiding any of our value judgement. In some cases there may exist contradictions from our point of view but it is nevertheless their belief and their truth.
- We have been taking references to add to complement some pieces of information, in most cases we contact resources persons or secondary resources. But this will not replace the information the women have given but only supplement it.

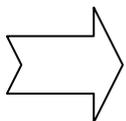
The Name of the booklets represent a title given according to popular knowledge and the content will be referred to one of the aspects mention already:

<u>Chezhiur</u> corresponds to the description of	⇒	Native Gods
<u>Kolampet</u> corresponds to the art of making	⇒	Kolams
<u>Life Insurance?</u> corresponds to the practice of	⇒	Dowry
<u>Temples</u> corresponds to the religious practices of	⇒	Pilgrimage
<u>Auropondy</u> corresponds to rituals practices of	⇒	Working women
<u>Letters</u> corresponds to counselling for	⇒	womens problems
<u>Giving a helping hand ...</u> represents the help and guidance of	⇒	NGOs
<u>Then and Now</u> represents the result of	⇒	Life Education
<u>Mother in Law</u> represents the Institution	⇔	Marriage and joint families
<u>We reap what we sow</u> represents the past and solutions for	⇒	Social cooperation
<u>Sarees</u> represents the	⇒	Draping of the culture
<u>She only does</u> contains all the daily activities on	⇒	domestic sphere
<u>What is it to be a</u> correspond to the reality of the	⇒	gender question
<u>Still waters run deep</u> corresponds to the activities done by women	⇒	in Community Work
<u>Correcting the Grammar of my life</u> corresponds to the	⇒	experience of Teachers.

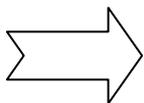
4. Pedagogic Objectives



The material can be read as individual stories to bring knowledge to the reader and it will be presented as a collection of short stories.



The material can also be used as a source for discussion and further research, if it is conducted with participation of the group that is receiving the information.



Each booklet will have a pedagogical technique to be deliver and pedagogical objectives to reach as a learning process. As follows:

- Native gods

Story telling

Oral Communication – the importance of it; to transmit values and traditions; to develop imagination of people and ability to speak

Develop in the people the art of story – telling by making them tell stories; we will

develop small simple questionnaires to ask the questions to them to see if they remember, as a learning tool.

- Kolam

Story telling

Mental level focusing on memory: ability to develop memory; conceptually to put pieces together to obtain the totality; Medium: Jigsaw puzzle and oral communication through story telling;

- Dowry

Drama

Possibility of composing or producing a drama – booklets on any theme; and acting it out; to convey a message.

- Temples

Story-telling

Communication and oral transmission of knowledge ; develop skills of memory through question and answer sessions.

- Rituals at Home

Communication through media – radio interviews and participation on the line

Dissemination of knowledge, participation and the aim being sharing of opinions

- Life stories

Counselling- through letters

Comparative opinions about problems; art of letter writing.
Discussion about problem-solving technique

- Sarees

Cartoon / comic strips

Story told from the point of view of the costume.
To develop the skill of drawing and imagination

- Domestic labour

Drama

Possibility of composing, acting or producing a drama to convey a message.

- Mother-in-law

Drama

To improve the skill of transmitting the message to the audience

- Work-experience of teachers

Story and discussion

To be able to follow dynamics for discussion and to develop the ability to listen

- Leaders

Discussion of a topic

To learn how to discuss, to analyse and to convey different opinions

- Reap and sow/
&
- NGO"s and their action

Case studies

To study an example or case and to learn to evaluate possibilities

- Life Education Centre

Discussion

To learn how to share and discuss one topic collectively

- To be a woman

Analysis of an article

To learn how to read materials and give opinions about the content.

SUMMARY OF THE PRESENT SITUATION/ DECEMBER 98

The state of the project at present is in the process of printing the material in Tamil and English language. Also we are preparing the Pedagogical Manual to use the material when giving it to the communities and groups. For returning the material we are selecting different groups to experiment the exercise.

We are working under time constraint due to the deficiencies in infrastructure, but also due to the extension of the project from our part from the initial commitment of writing one book to preparing a set of 15 booklets to disseminate information in and around Auroville.

VI. PRESENTATION OF THE MATERIAL TO THE COMMUNITY

1. FUNCTION OF THE BOOKLETS, PROTAGONISTS, CONTENTS

The material we are presenting as a final product has two functions:

- 1. It is a source of information for anyone interested in knowing some cultural, social, religious aspects, social practices and personal experiences of a group of women in the south of India in the area of Tamil Nadu.**
- 2. It is also a series of materials that can be read, acted out, discussed, coloured, played as a puzzle or simply observed in a group situation for educational purposes.**

The stories are taking place in the frame of a “one day journey” of any woman.

WHO is going to introduce us onto those journeys?

two protagonists

- **a grandmother named Paati**
- **and her granddaughter named Iruchammal**

The characters were created in such a way that they will take us through a journey of 15 days (the stories of the booklets) and serve as wise women with the possibility of embodying all possible levels of the human mind. Paati represents the older generation and Iruchammal represents the child of today. Some other characters have joined this journey on the way, representing the other generations.

The story begins like this:

Paati and Iruchammal will take us to visit their family's native gods in Chezhiur. Later on we will go to a drama in which we will learn about marriage through dowry while revealing the role of the mother-in-law in this whole picture.

On another day we will hear a beautiful story about a village called Kolampet and we will learn how to make a kolam, and in the art of making we will enjoy all about two beautiful friends Silkita and Sarita telling us about the secrets that each pleat of a saree keeps throughout its life.

We will sort through some letters written by some suffering souls reaching out for consolation. Another morning fresh and early we will tune in to a wonderful radio programme to listen some virtuous women discussing the contradictions that the modern women have to face.

After some days we will go to visit some temples and on the way Paati will meet a group of girls and will exchange some ideas with them about learning from life.

Another day in the late afternoon very tired they go back home and have a long discussion about women after reading an interview in a magazine.

Next day Paati is very upset about the situation of women and the prejudices she keeps hearing about women that she decides to go and find out for herself what women are doing around the villages, at home and in the schools as women teachers. She feels that only after she accomplishes these visits will she then have peace of mind and will understand how things are.

One afternoon when Paati is resting at home she receives a visitor and they exchange views about the past, present and future only through building up ties between people. And after this interesting discussion, we will accompany Paati to visit a group of social workers who are working together within the communities.

After enjoying the journey with Paati and Iruchammal we will follow some steps to try to answer the wheres, whens, hows and whys of each event, what they are and who takes part of them. After carrying out these steps of questions and answers as fully as possible, we hope to discover the connections between people, places, reasons, interests and their knowledge. With this simple exercise we expect to sharpen our consciousness and to step forward from a naive state to a critical state of consciousness.

2. WAYS OF USING THE MATERIAL OF EACH BOOKLET

The content of the stories of each booklet have been a source of inspiration and a spring board to deepen and to reach out for new avenues.

We want to present this material as a catalyst in such a way that the stories can be enjoyed, looked at, played, coloured, acted out, analyzed, etc.

3. MODALITIES

1. Either **read** the booklet or **act out** the script of the drama or engage in a **discussion**

2. Also **apply to each booklet the questions** of:

WHERE IS THE ACTION TAKING PLACE?
WHAT IS THE ACTION BEING PERFORMED?
WHAT IS EXPECTED FROM THE ACTION?
WHO IS BENEFITING FROM THE ACTION?
HOW IS THE ACTION PERFORMED?
WHY IS THE ACTION PERFORMED?

TABLE FOR PRACTICE

To start practicing let us read the following situations that took place in Paati's journey and try to answer the questions of the hows and whys, etc.

WHAT, WHO Action, Person	WHAT Are You Asking for?	WHAT Are you receiving?	WHO Is Benefiting?
prays	Grace	Help	needed person
draws	salutation to the son and Lakshmi	beauty, protection health, wealth	society, family
weaves	work, creation, draping, beauty, fashion	money, wrap the temple of the body	doer-buyer
offers	take care of them	Satisfaction, protection	devotee
given value	access to marriage	Inclusion into a family	bride-groom
to protect	resources, human labour, respect	control roles, unconditional child	family institution
calls to God(ess)	bring heaven to earth	fulfill one's stages in life	family
lives for others	to be within the limits given by others	denial self-existence, unhappiness	patriarchy
recollection exp.	solutions, help, love, guidance, unburden	advise, support, attention, care	sufferer
Domestic Work	work for the maintenance of family/labour	no recognition, criticisms	family, society
reaching out	helping others, caring for the needs of society	self assertiveness, satisfaction	Indiv/ community
teaching	to know how to behave in future life	learn from life's grammar/rules	teacher-student
social linkages	ask and connect resources for well-being	Awakening the possibility of work	personal/ community

3. PLAY THE JIGSAW PUZZLE AND: say a word, make a comment, tell your story around the theme and ask a question .

4. COLOURING ACTIVITY SHEET AND: colour in the picture, bring it into life, make your story around the characters, draw in any thing else that you need for your story.

5. APPLY THE FOLLOWING QUESTIONS for comprehension or for discussion:

The following questions have to be applied for each booklet and those with a **D** can be used for discussion:

BOOKLET I

Chezhiur (native gods)

Technique: Story telling

Oral Communication – its importance to transmit values and traditions to develop imagination in people and their ability to speak.

Develop in people the art of story telling by organizing them to tell stories.

We will develop small and simple questionnaires to see how much they can remember.

- How is the dedication of the 9 days of Navaratri divided?
- **D** How well do you know the Gods and Goddesses? Tell about your Kolu.
- How many children did Paati's parents have?
- Why wouldn't the quintuplets stop crying just after they were born?
- **D** During your life, when is a horoscope necessary? Does the horoscope give reliable information about your life and you future? Who makes the most reliable horoscopes?
- **D** How do you choose your children's names?
- What is the importance of Kula Deivam (native god)
- **D** Describe the festival (pooja) for your Kula Deivam.
- Why are ears pierced and why heads tonsured?
- **D** Does saying and/or hearing **OM** have any meaning to you?
- How are Vishnu, Rama and Krishna related to each other?

BOOKLET II

Life Insurance? (Dowry)

Technique: Story telling

Possibility of composing or producing a drama – booklets on any theme; and acting it out; to convey a message.

- At around what age does a woman usually get married?
- Why does the groom tie a yellow thread around his bride's neck?
- Which relatives is a woman often encouraged to marry? Why?
- Can a woman choose her own husband?
- **D** Should a woman be able to choose her own husband?
- What happens when a woman wants to marry outside the family?
- What is dowry? What was dowry?

- How does dowry affect poor families, especially those with several girls?
- **D** How does this affect the view of a family on having daughters?
- What are the negative effects which may be caused by a brother having the duty of marrying and negotiating the dowry of his sisters?
- **D** How is an unmarried woman viewed by her society?
- **D** Is it possible to have a good marriage without dowry?
- **D** Is it possible for the dowry to serve a good purpose?

BOOKLET III

Mother-in-law (marriage and joint families)

Technique: Drama

To improve the skill of transmitting the message to the audience

- **D** Upon marriage, it is said that the bride becomes part of her husband's family. Tell us the details of this great change in your life.
- **D** Is it wrong for a woman to help her parents at times after she is married?
- **D** What is the key to success to live happily with your in-laws?
- **D** What is the key to success in maintaining good relations between both sets of in-laws, the husband's and the wife's?
- Why did Iruchammal's friend Mallika offer a pooja at Ilankaliamman Koil?
- What does Iruchammal say about her as yet unknown, future in-laws, that makes Paati scold her?
- **D** Why will many suffering daughters-in-law become demanding, unpleasant mothers-in-law in later years? What have they forgotten?
- What are the two possible fates that await all brides?
- What are some of the supposed wrongdoings that Athai accuses her daughter-in-law of?
- **D** How can a daughter-in-law defend herself against such a cruel mother-in-law as Athai?
- Why does Veppama know so much about life's blessings and sorrows?
- How did the Panchayat help the miserable daughter-in-law?
- **D** In your village, is the Panchayat a good counsel to bring family problems to?
- What is Veppama's solution to mother-in-law vs. daughter-in-law conflicts?
- What is the best attitude for the husband cum son to take according to Veppama?
- **D** If the reputation of a mother-in-law to-be is fearful, how could the newly-wed help smooth the entrance of the bride into her new home and family?
- How does "give and take" best describe Veppama's maths problem?

BOOKLET IV

Kolampet (Kolams)

Technique: Story telling

Mental level focusing on memory: ability to develop memory; creativity, mathematical patterns, the ability to put pieces together to obtain the totality; Medium: oral communication through story telling.

- Why would a woman make a small kolam?
- Why do only women make kolams?
- **D** Are you pleased and honoured to draw the kolam everyday, or is it a chore that you could do without?
- On what occasion would large, colourful kolams be made?
- Why is the Kolam drawn before sunrise?
- Why do woman then sweep away the cow dung?
- What was the purpose behind using rice and ragi powder with which to draw the kolams?
- **D** In their daily routines, where and how do woman show respect for nature and living things?
- What type of kolam is drawn on the harvest festival of Pongal?
- What kolam is drawn for New Years?
- During Krishna Jayanthi what is drawn for a kolam?
- What will happen if there is no kolam in front of a house?
- **D** Can you draw kolams from memory or do you need a book to guide you?
- Besides being a symbol of decoration, what is the other meaning behind the kolam?
- How and where is the kolam employed for a guest?
- **D** What are the differences between kolams drawn in the city and those drawn in the villages?
- **D** Wouldn't it be convenient if you could paint a permanent kolam?
- At what times is the kolam not drawn?
- What is done about the kolam in front of your house when you take a trip for several days?

BOOKLET V

Sarees (Saris)

Technique: Cartoon / comic strips

Story told from the point of view of the costume. To develop the skill of drawing and imagination

- Who are talking together?
- What are the materials the saris are made of?
- Which is stronger, cotton or silk?
- Why is Vanitha's sari so old?
- **D** Years ago, why could a village woman show her ankles from beneath her sari.
- **D** Nowadays, silk saris are given much more often than in the previous generations. Why?
- Nowadays during mourning, what appearance does the whole family present to the community?
- What are two unique customs that can be seen at Brahmin wedding ceremonies?
- Describe one other style of sari different from the one worn in the villages of Tamil Nadu.
- In the future, what might happen to the sari?
- **D** These cartoons sometimes talk about the way things were vs. the way things are now. Tell about one of these changes that you have some feeling about.
- **D** Have you any saris to pass on to your daughters

BOOKLET VI

Temples (Pilgrimage)

Technique: Story-telling

Communication and oral transmission of knowledge ; develop skills of memory through question and answer sessions.

- Why was Mallika crying so bitterly?
- What did Mallika intend to do about her life of suffering?
- What did Iruchammal say to help Mallika see that life must be lived?
- **D** Can suicide be a solution to life's problems?
- How did Mallika's faith help her in her distress?
- **D** Do you often hear of any suicides of suffering village women?
- Why couldn't Mallika visit the famous temples at Madurai, etc. for the past 5 years?
- Why is Balaji (Venkateswara) a rich god?
- How did Ganesha win the Divine mango?
- **D** What part do Ganesha and Muruga play in your life?
- Before she met Shiva, why was Meenakshi such a successful warrior?
- Why is it that villagers are able to observe the annual religious ceremonies and rituals of only their native gods?
- **D** How do you feel about village pilgrimages to such important temples as Ayappa temple at Sabarimalai. Are such pilgrimages a burden, a blessing or both?

- **D** What does your menstruation time mean to you. At that time, do you feel that you are impure?
- If a man dies during a pilgrimage, how is he cremated even though far from home?
- **D** Do you enjoy movies that tell about the gods?
- **D** Can God ever become angry with us? If so, when?
- **D** Is there a temple, the visiting of which, really warms your heart and satisfies your soul?

BOOKLET VII

Auropondy (Rituals at Home)

Technique: Communication through media – radio interviews and participation on the line

Dissemination of knowledge, participation and the aim being sharing of opinions

- **D** Is the husband the source of a family's blessings? Does he stand as an interface between God and the wife?
- Do radio commercials help you when you go shopping?
- Are you able to clean your house every Friday?
- **D** How do you manage to perform daily, weekly household rituals when you are working?
- **D** Are your children involved in rituals, poojas, etc.? Do you think that they will continue to observe religious functions as adults?
- **D** What differences are there between the religious practices of the Pundy ladies in this broadcast and your own?
- **D** Which poojas, rituals etc. have the greatest meaning for you?
- **D** Do you feel that you have enough time to properly perform the rituals and poojas that you wish to observe?
- Who in the family or community cooperates with you to perform religious functions?
- Why do holidays falling on a religious day of observance give a devout woman a feeling of peace?
- **D** How does the pace of modern life interfere with a proper religious life?
- What are some religious practices that solely involve the woman?
- How do the stars, or the moon's phases determine religious practice.
- When do you fast? Why must you do so?

BOOKLET VIII

...Then and Now... (Life Education)

Technique: Discussion

To learn how to share and discuss one topic collectively.

- Who was taking part in this conversation?
- What is to share about life stories?
- What are the main problems the women of the story were facing?
- Which problem affected you most?
- With which problem do you identify?
- **D** Why girls are not allow to finish school?
- What do girls do when they stop school?
- **D** Why are young women kept at home?
- **D** Is your school a place you like?
- **D** If not what changes would you advice?

BOOKLET IX

What is to be a woman? (gender issues)

Technique: Analysis of an article

To learn how to read materials and give opinions about the content.

- **D** Why is “adjustment” the curse of a woman’s life?
- Why are good looks insufficient to judge a woman’s worth as wife, mother, and daughter-in-law?
- Compare Iruchammal’s and Paati’s attitudes towards current fashions.
- **D** Paati is proud of women’s cultural role. What has that role been?
- What is the argument between Paati and her daughter Revathi about the work women do (agricultural labour vs. salaried work)?
- **D** If you earn money, don’t you have the right to decide how it is to be spent?
- **D** How does Paati feel about growing food vs. earning a salary as the rightful, proper work of women?

To be a woman...

- Why would women want their husbands to bear a child at least once in their lives?
- **D** Yet some women are cruel to other women as well. Why?
- What is the beauty and wonder of a woman’s inner needs?
- **D** Iruchammal feels that women are treated as children. Do you agree or disagree?

A woman has to be.....

- How is the house space divided between the men and the women?
- **D** In Pondy, many women, young and old, can be seen walking the streets shopping, etc. Why can't village women walk at least around their own villages?
- **D** Women are often the captives of other people's opinions. How does this increase their suffering? How can they free themselves from this captivity?

She is meant....

- How is Iruchammal's thinking different from her mother's?
- What is Paati's warning to her grandchild?
- **D** How does Paati's warning reflect the idea of women's captivity?
- **D** What kind of man do you think Iruchammal wants to marry?

If I start telling....

- How has Paati's faith helped her bear life's trials and tribulations?
- **D** Is your life self-directed or God-directed? What about "karma"?
- What is Revathi's formula for a successful life as a woman?
- Why does Iruchammal feel that fighting for what you want is sometimes necessary?
- **D** What is your opinion?

A woman is like a bird....

- **D** Who are the women of the magazine whom Paati seems so tired of?(annoyed and irritated)
- Iruchammal compares "to offer your life" vs. "someone makes a sacrifice out of you." What does she mean?

BOOKLET X

Letters ('her'stories)

Technique: Counselling through letters

Comparative opinions about problems; art of letter writing.

Discussion about problem-solving technique

1. My dear Akka: (communal clashes)

- What incited the bad feeling between the two communities?
- How extensive was the violence resulting from the clashes?
- How did the children show the trauma from the violence at anganwadi after it reopened?
- Why did one child become dumb?
- **D** What are the root-causes of such ill feeling between communities?

- **D** Are there ways to convince the members of the communities to live together co-operatively?

Dear Brave Teacher,

Due to the monsoon rains, some letters were drenched, and in order to dry them out, the post office took the liberty of removing the letters from their envelopes in order to dry them. Most of the envelopes had become unsealed anyway. However, due to carelessness, some letters became separated from their envelopes, and we now have the job of determining which letter belongs to which envelope. In your case, the delivery address was obliterated, so we are returning the letter you wrote, and must ask you to send it again. Forgive our carelessness and please pardon the delay.

However, while performing the above task, it was necessary to read your letter for clues to identity. After reading your letter, my heart was greatly moved by your plight. I then felt compelled to give my own advice you, my fellow human being, on your sad situation. I can only hope that among my words there may be some useful thoughts. Please forgive this anonymous intrusion into your affairs.

May God be with you.

How we Indians can live together in peace, love and harmony under the Caste System is to great a problem for me to consider. But, you as a teacher may have a chance to alleviate the hostilities of the System in your own small way. After reading your description of the communal strife and its violence, I have nothing but praise for you and your colleagues at the kindergarten. Please continue to do all in your power to bring the young children of different castes together as playmates, so that in the future, friendship and co-operation may result.

May I suggest that you perhaps could induce better relations between the hostile groups by planning activities or projects for improvement of the school that would involve parent participation. Don't force cross-Caste participation, but let all concerned see what cooperative effort can bring. There are many projects possible, own use for vegetables and flowers. Let all the children celebrate religious festivals as equals. Dear teacher, please use your fertile imagination and conceive of more ideas to encourage human unity to occur.

With best hopes,
An anonymous friend

2. My dear Brother: (rebellious girl)

- In this letter, what disturbs the old parents?
- Why does Selvam think that Kalaivani is so rebellious now?
- What solution to his daughter's rebelliousness is the father considering?
- **D** Do you sympathise with Kalaivani or not?
- **D** Can exorcising help get rid of undesirable spirits?

Dear Selvam,

Your letter has been wrongly delivered to me. I realised it only after I started reading your letter, my heart was greatly moved by your plight. I then felt compelled to give my own advice to you, my fellow human being, on your sad situation. I can only hope that among my words there may be some useful thoughts. Please forgive this anonymous intrusion into your affairs.

May I suggest that your self-willed daughter was simply born with that character. We all have a Dharma, and we must live according to it. Why must you think that a woman is not a woman unless she is obedient and docile? So, either you and her husband give her her lead and let her do what she wants, or all of you will continue to suffer. What I am telling you is that you must take the woman as she is.

But to keep living in the hell you all have created for yourselves is also unthinkable. Let us think constructively. Encourage her to run things. Certainly in her own home, but how about encouraging her to be active outside the house for some activity where her dominant personality would be a plus. Does she have a head for business or rather for social work? Let her make decisions and act upon them. Then praise her or constructively criticise her. Let her know that you and the rest of the family are now on her side and truly understand her. Let her know that you all think she is OK.

With best hopes,
An anonymous friend

3. Dear Sister Anita: (abused daughter)

- What is Iswari's great problem?
- Why won't she marry?
- **D** Is marriage a good way to get away from domineering parents?
- Why did her brother-in-law marry another woman?
- **D** Iswari wrote to a Roman Catholic nun for advice. Would you ever think of turning to the Christian Church for help in time of personal difficulties?

Dear Iswari,

Due to the monsoon rains, some letters were drenched, and in order to dry them out, the post office took the liberty of removing the letters from their envelopes in order to dry them. Most of the envelopes had become unsealed anyway. However, due to carelessness, some letters became separated from their envelopes, and we now have the job of determining which letter belongs to which

envelope. In your case, the delivery address was obliterated, so we are returning the letter you wrote, and must ask you to send it again. Forgive our carelessness and please pardon the delay.

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May God be with you.

I am not a Christian, but I can't help feeling that the Christian are messages of love such as 'Turn the other cheek,' or 'Love your neighbour,' the best messages for you. Perhaps Sister Anita will give you the same path of action. You must think that before your mother resented you, when you were small, she must have loved you. Perhaps you can remind her of that by playing affectionately with neighbourhood pre-schoolers and talking about that daily. Try and draw your mother lovingly into some plan or project for the house or the village. Above all, never talk back, but always show her a smiling face and agreement so that she is faced only with a cloud of love. Make that love genuine. Although it will be difficult, conquer your own feelings of resentment. She is your mother, and brought you into this world. Think with love in your heart, how wonderful it would be for mother and daughter to live together lovingly. Then always devise ways to draw her closer to you. Perhaps the village priest and other friends could help you with ideas. Strive for her love. It may ease the pain you both are suffering.

With best hopes,
An anonymous friend

4. My dear respected teacher: (unable to marry)

- Why hasn't Selvi married yet?
- How did Selvi get the dowry she needed for marriage?
- What happened to her dowry?
- **D** Doesn't a woman have any rights of possession!?
- How does Selvi's sister-in-law hurt Selvi?
- **D** Have you any solutions for Selvi's difficulties?

Dear Selvi,

The rains had removed the address written by ink on your inland and this letter was wrongly delivered. However I realised this only after reading it and I ask you for excuses. After reading your letter, my heart was greatly moved by your plight. I then

felt compelled to give my own advice to you, my fellow human being, on your sad situation. I can only hope that among my words there may be some useful thoughts. Please forgive this anonymous intrusion into your affairs.

It is clear that you have several problems afflicting you at the same time. Each of them has boxed you in, and you are like a beaten dog in a cage. It seems that only death is your escape. But that is impossible. You, too, are entitled to as good a life as you can make for yourself. Therefore, I strongly suggest that you run away from your home. Yes, even from your aging parents.

You said that you have pain in your chest. Use that as an excuse. Say that you wish to go for treatment to a famous hospital. No doubt, your doctor at the local hospital could recommend some place. But this is a deception. Actually, go to employment agencies, NGOs that help women or similar government agencies and seek employment.

If telling your family that you're leaving is too difficult, why not leave a note and then run away. Do not give them a chance to dissuade you or even force you to stay. Of course, you must save money for this breaking away. Let your best friend hold your savings as your brother could force you to surrender them.

The teacher to whom you're writing might help you to relocate. Or perhaps you and your trusted friend could think of a better scheme, but, my dear Selvi, there is no doubt that you must escape from the hell you are living in so that, for better or worse, you can live your own life. You have done your share. Feel no guilt. Go bravely.

With best hopes,

5. My dearest little brother: (bad marriage)

- What happened to the younger brother during his time in Kashmir?
- Why hasn't the sister's life been a good one?
- What was she forced to do in order to support her husband's family?
- What is her one remaining ambition?
- **D** How can a woman in such a situation alleviate the cruel life she must lead?
- **D** Is it best to be docile and take whatever life gives as necessary to your karma?

PLEASE REPLY!!!!

6. My dear Anna: (bad mother-in-law)

- How did Rukmani's mother-in-law react to the visit of Rukmani's akka?
- In spite of the visit, what preparations had Rukmani made, showing she was a good wife and daughter-in-law?
- Why does Rukmani now refuse to eat at home?
- **D** Can a wife expect support from her husband in disputes with her in-laws?
- **D** How would you handle a disagreeable and domineering mother-in-law?

PLEASE REPLY!!!!

BOOKLET XI

Still waters run deep (Leaders)

Technique: Discussion of a topic

To learn how to discuss, to analyse and to convey different opinions

- Why is Paati so disturbed?
- Explain what Iruchammal means when she says, “We believe things and we blindly ...believe without thinking if it is right or wrong, proper or not.
- **D** What is “the mental prison” that handicaps women?
- What do village women do in order to get together?
- **D** What about your village? What are the women there doing to make village life better?
- **D** Is there any cooperation from the men or from the panchayat?
- **D** Can you go out of your home freely and talk to people or are you restricted?
- Who can help women learn about agencies (both government and NGO) that might help them?
- How can NGOs help women’ associations?
- What are the three jobs most village women have day in and day out?
- **D** Are not village women as captive as the goats or cattle they keep?
- How do village men restrict the activities of their womenfolk?
- **D** How could a meeting place for women make the village a better place to live?
- What are some projects women have undertaken to make their village a better place to live?
- **D** What about working with the women of neighbouring villages? What could be accomplished? What are the obstacles preventing such cooperation?
- **D** What important task does Paati believe female teachers have to make the village’s future brighter?

BOOKLET XII

She Only Does... (Domestic labour)

Technique: Drama

Possibility of composing, acting or producing a drama to convey a message.

Introduction: Here are 11 village women, who briefly describe the pattern of their

daily existence in the village. Look at each of their lives again carefully and let us discuss some points.

- Choose the descriptions that more or less fit you, and then choose those that are different from your life.
- Which, if any, of these patterns is an absolutely intolerable and unacceptable way of life. Are there any lives that you envy?
- How many of these life patterns tell of a problem with a husband who drinks, and how many speak of a co-operative husband.
- Do any of these patterns show a woman that is trying to improve the life of her family? Which patterns?
- What advice could you give to any of these women?

....most difficult....

- What is the root of most of the difficulties presented in this section?
- How could village life be changed so that the alcoholics could be encouraged to stop drinking?
- What new activities could be started in the village that would give the men a purpose to their lives so that excessive drinking would be recognised as the self destructive thing it is?
- Does beating solve behaviour problems?

Children's advice

- What do you think of the ideas of Chorus and Marikozhundo, which is to teach children to help with the household chores so that as adults they will be prepared to co-operate at home?
- What is the wisdom of the elephant-pig story?
- How did Poongodi's grandchildren show their understanding of the idea of "family"?
- What do you think is the counterbalance against the destructive influence of the media and influences outside of the village mentioned by Malathi?
- Why did Tilagam praise her son?
- When Punita speaks against "...trimming them like a garden plant", what harm do you think this "trimming" does to children as they mature?

BOOKLET XIII

Correcting the Grammar of my life (Work-experience of teachers) *Technique: Story and discussion*

To be able to follow dynamics for discussion and to develop the ability to listen

- Why does Paati want to talk to women teachers?
- What does Paati mean by “the grammar of life”?
- How is the teacher often able to forget her own problems?
- For many teachers, how has working in the crèche improved their capabilities and broadened their points of view?
- **D** What part of your personality, capabilities, hidden talents, etc could be developed and/or improved?
- **D** Many of the teachers learnt to express their views clearly while teaching. Is it good for women to express their views clearly even at home?
- What good habits do the teachers instill in the children?
- When the village communities fought, what role did the teachers play to ease the trauma and aggressive feelings of the children?
- What are some ways that the teachers’ lives changed by becoming teachers?
- Why is peace at home important for the raising of children?
- **D** Is there sometimes a good reason(s) for violence between members of a family?
- What is Paati’s solution for ending fights and violence at home?

BOOKLET XIV

We reap what we sow...(past, present and future)

Technique: Case studies

To study an example or case and to learn to evaluate possibilities

- Why has Kasturi just come to find Paati?
- What has Paati been trying to verify?
- In spite of her village’s great needs, what essential human element does Kasturi’s village lack?
- **D** Does your village suffer from the same lack of spirit and co-operation?
- What is Kasturi’s view of her village’s past eating habits vs. its present ones?
- **D** Have similar changes taken place in your village according to the elders?
- Again comparing the past vs. the present, what has happened to the stature and status of women in Kasturi’s village?
- **D** Have similar changes taken place in your village according to the elders?
- What modern factors have caused changes in the lives and work of the men of Kasturi’s village?
- **D** Again, have similar changes taken place in your village according to the elders?
- What is the cause of bodily aches and pains according to Kasturi?
- **D** How well is your family nourished? Can your family eat much of the food items Kasturi mentions?

- Why is Paati's suggestion for improving nutrition in the village rejected by Kasturi?
- What problems arise during the rainy season in Kasturi's village?
- What aggravates these and the other problems she mentions?
- **D** What does Kasturi believe would happen to the village's problems if there were more unity?
- **D** Let us discuss Paati's wonderful advice to Kasturi.
- The relation most women have to the village they live in after marriage is different from that of the men. What is this different relation? How about you?
- **D** What are some of the causes preventing trust between villagers?
- **D** Paati advises the women of Kasturi's village to rectify their mistakes. What are these mistakes?
- **D** Describe the women who are working to help communities.
- Describe the two faces of the coin by which human relations can be improved.
- **D** What are the ill-effects of hatred?

BOOKLET XV

...Giving a helping hand and a shoulder.... (social work in the villages)

Technique: Collective interviews and discussions

Comparative opinions about problems and how to solve them; achievements of women to serve society and work for their self empowerment.

- What feeling do all of the women have for flowers?
- Why have the two women come to Rani's village?
- What is the unique nature of the leadership of Rani's group?
- **D** What problems arise in any group because of egotism. How does the concept of leadership described by Rani avoid these problems?
- **D** When Kasturi says, "...it's time to wake up and work...", what has happened inside her heart?
- Over the years of working with the community workers what change has occurred within her?
- **D** Why might Rani's relatives oppose what she is doing as a community worker?
- **D** Let us discuss the common values that Radika and Karpagam have found in women. What are they?
- Who are the slave masters of women? What effect can this slavery have on a woman?
- **D** According to Sarala, there is a "double standard" in Indian society and culture which discriminates against women. Give some examples from your own lives of this "double standard".

- At what time do women's restrictions begin?
- **D** Why at that time?
- What is Deivanai's dilemma?
- For Padma, where does betterment of village women's plight lie?
- **D** Why did Radika cry at the birth of her first niece, but feel happy at the birth of the niece?
- **D** Think about "blind faith" vs. "knowledge gained" and let's discuss why Karpagam feels that now she can stand on her own feet.
- **D** Can you respect Sarala's very independent point of view?
- How does Poorani feel about dowry?
- **D** How is "diffidence" a problem in a woman's development of her personality.
- What do the community workers share with the women they are helping as a means of helping them?
- How do the community workers use their own problems at home as a tool in their work?
- **D** Let us discuss the point Lakshmi Paati feels that she got straight, analysing and examining the restrictions on women.

SUMMARY OF THE PRESENT SITUATION / JANUARY 99

At present we have finished the Progress Report of our project. In terms of the printing the English material is completed while the Tamil version is in progress and the delivery to the groups and community is taking place. The media and publicity is being contacted and we are awaiting their response.

VII. NEW AVENUES

Before handing over the material we will train the development workers of Village Action to use the material and they would be able to use and spread it. So when the material is given back to the communities - the persons who shared their lives with us as well as new groups, the development workers themselves would be able to handle the material as pedagogic tools.

We will be working with control groups from the villages, Auroville and schools for Tamil children from the villages as well as schools for children in Auroville whose mother tongue is not Tamil.

VIII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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We would like to gratefully acknowledge the use of some pictures pertaining to Hindu Gods and Goddesses from the above mentioned books.

IX. PHOTOGRAPHIC MATERIAL

- 1. WOMEN'S GROUPS AND COORDINATORS OF THE PROJECTS**
- 2. WELCOME TO LIFE EDUCATION CENTRE**
- 3. EDUCATIONAL AND TRAINING ACTIVITIES**
- 4. THREE GENERATIONS OF WOMEN**
- 5. RECORDING THEIR VOICES**
- 6. SHARING EXPERIENCES**

- 7. WOMEN SPEAK**
- 8. EVERYDAY LIFE**
- 9. FEEDING OUR BODIES AND SOULS**
- 10. WITNESSES TO THE COLLECTIVE SPIRIT**
- 11. PLANNING AND DOING**
- 12. PREPARING THE FOUNDATION FOR TOMMORROW**
- 13. LEARNING THE GRAMMAR OF LIFE**
- 14. LEARNING THE SACRED PATTERNS**
- 15. COMBINING THE SACRED PATTERNS**
- 16. FRONT AND BACK OF THE SACRED PATTERNS**

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MANUAL

COLOURING ACTIVITY SHEET

JIGSAW PUZZLE