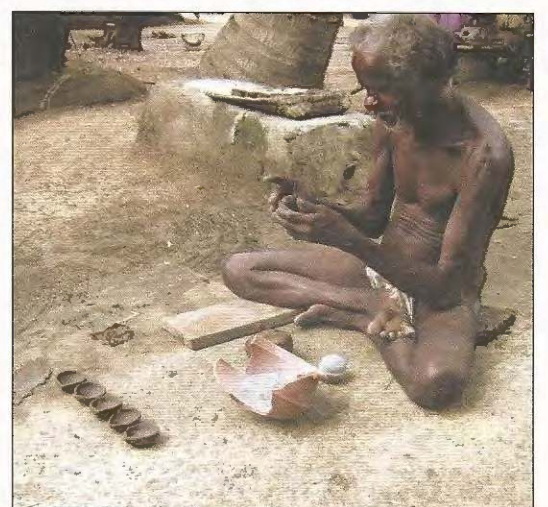
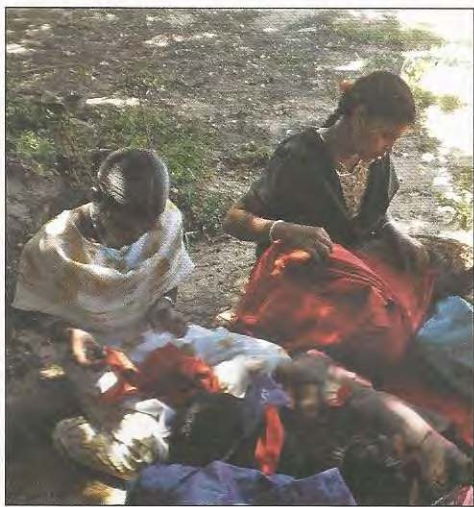


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Taking on the bioregion



The bioregion stretches from the rice fields near Gingee (photo top left) to the Coromandel coast. Statues of gods and goddesses (photo top middle) adorn sacred groves, the few spots where the original flora of this area still exist. A variety of small business activities are being introduced: spirulina production to make health drinks (photo top right); bag making under the Small Steps programme to battle polluting plastic bags (second row, left); a meeting of a women self-help group (second row, middle); promoting traditional crafts such as pottery (middle row, right); introducing women to earth-brick making (bottom row, left); traditional medicine preparation (bottom row, right).

Twelve Auroville units are collaborating on the biggest bioregional project which Auroville has ever undertaken. But this project, in turn, is dwarfed by the scale and ambition of another Auroville-designed project in which the Government of India has also shown interest.

What are these projects, and why is the Government of India, among others, keen that Auroville take up the development of the bioregion?

The Sustainable Enterprise Development in the Auroville Bioregion (SEDAB) project is a major rural development project being implemented by Auroville with funding from the Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India and the Government of Tamil Nadu. It began in June and will run for three years and its aim is to develop sustainable rural enterprises and employment opportunities for the population in two blocks of Vanur and Marakkanam. In all, it is estimated that more than 22,000 families who are classified as being below the poverty line in the two blocks will eventually benefit.

The major issues in this region include widespread poverty; lack of basic health facilities in the villages; the failure to empower women; poor returns from agriculture due to inefficient management practices and inadequate market returns; and lack of innovation in rural products and services. The larger picture is the unsustain-

able use of local resources and the failure to tap traditional knowledge which could provide a healthy environment and sustainable livelihoods.

Two Auroville outreach groups, the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) and Pitchandikulam Forest, have combined their considerable understanding of poverty in the bioregion to come up with a series of proposals that could address these issues. The programme, which involves twelve Auroville units sharing their skills and knowledge, focuses on providing training and support in natural resource-based livelihoods, eco-friendly cottage industry products and in building environmental and technical knowledge [see box on page 3].

Over the past two months, an efficient management team has been put together, involving people like Uma, Min, Gowri, Subbu and Alain B. Social and technical support is given by a large team of Aurovilians, which includes Moris, Ambu, Lavkamad, Gijs, Nick, Lourdes and Kathy. An office has been established at CSR. After 5 years

of meetings and planning, the project has now sprung into action, though with the usual teething problems which seem unavoidable with so many Aurovilians involved.

So what are the origins of a project like this? What motivates the individuals involved to do this work? In the case of Joss, one of the drafters and creators of the SEDAB project, the origins of a project like this go way back. "In the early 1970s, a few of us became fascinated by the question of what we should be growing here. So we started poking around places like Marakkanam and found the sacred groves and indigenous patches of forest and we realized that this is what should be planting. In the process, we were also discovering this bioregion and appreciating the beauty and the patterns and the wisdom that were still embedded in these rural communities, albeit in danger of being lost. For example, there were the healers who were using local herbs and plants."

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Revisioning the greenbelt

David and Achva Stein are planners who have worked intensively with Auroville environmentalists and planners over the past year. In August David made a public presentation of their draft of a Greenbelt Plan which challenges us to view the Auroville greenbelt in a new way.

Auroville Today: Many cities around the world have a greenbelt. What is the function of a greenbelt?

David Stein: There are several. It helps define the area of the city and prevents urban sprawl. It also provides environmental services such as water retention and water quality protection, air and climate modification, maintenance for the agriculture land and the provision of recreational opportunities.

What do you think are the most important functions of the Auroville greenbelt?

One of the main purposes behind this greenbelt is to ensure that the land continues the process of regeneration. Other functions of the Auroville greenbelt are to absorb water and become a demonstration site for water conservation measures. While it is dry here nine months of the year, the water that does fall during the monsoon is adequate for all your purposes, but only if it is properly managed.

The greenbelt does a good job of slowing water movement and percolating it into the aquifer where it is properly maintained, but a large part of that area is not properly managed yet. So Aurovilians have a huge job ahead of them in helping the non-Aurovilian owners within the greenbelt area to deal better with their land, for their own benefit. This experience also has to be shared throughout the bioregion. Auroville has the knowledge to help the rest of the bioregion learn how to do this. And that for me is the most important function of the Auroville greenbelt: it's helping the rest of the bioregion to survive well so it doesn't feel the need to come and take what Auroville has built up.

This is already happening as developers move in and buy land in the greenbelt area and unwanted constructions go up. Practically, how do you feel that Auroville should deal with developments in this area which are clearly not respecting the intention of the greenbelt?

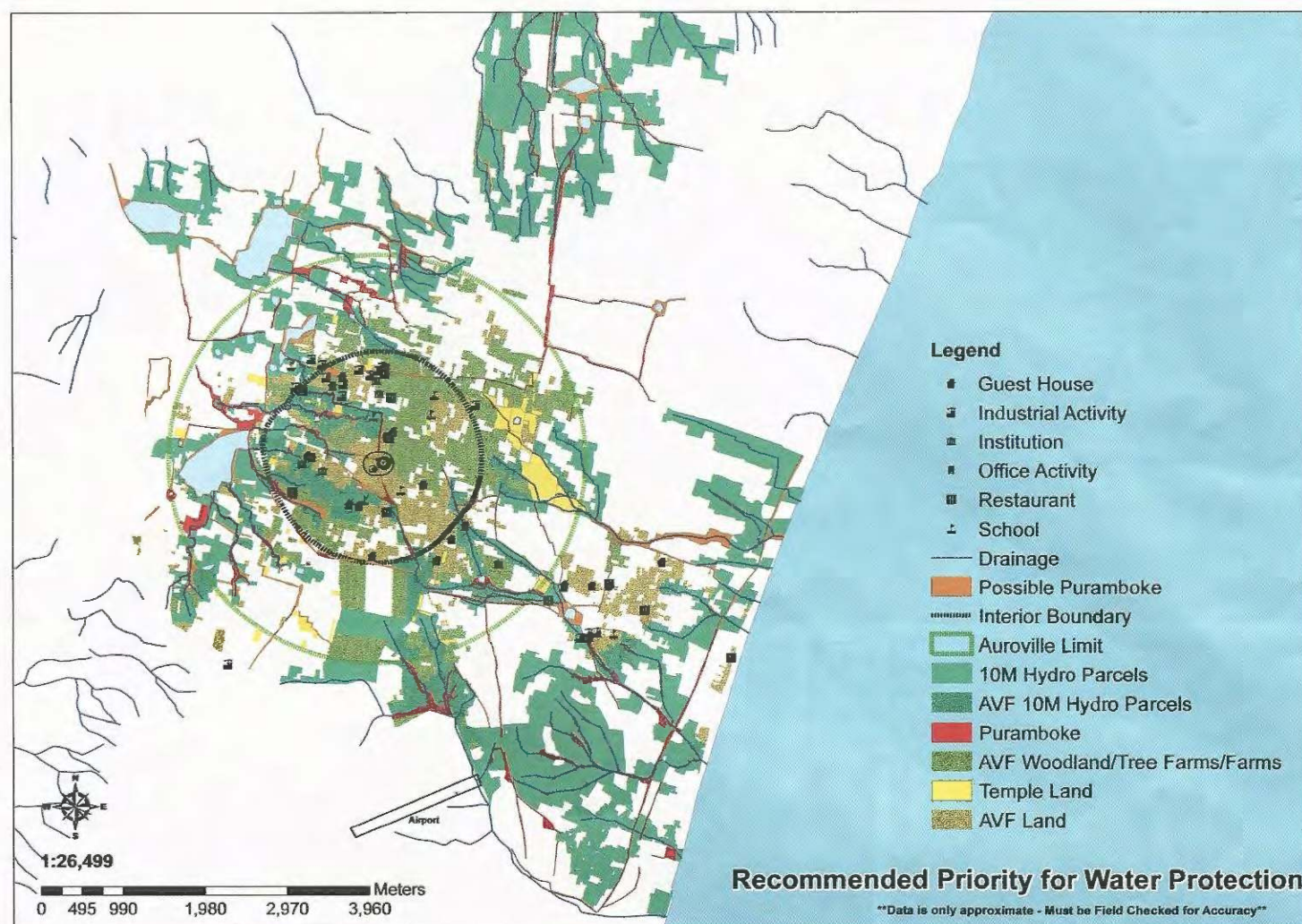
The obvious example is the college. It is out of scale, and inconsistent with the approach and the original intent of the greenbelt. But it is an educational institution, which is consistent with the purpose and can be maintained in the greenbelt. In this sense it fits in. I would say we need to help site educational functions correctly with as little disturbance as possible and bring in people from outside to learn what you are doing here in farming and forestry. In the case of the college, we should be helping it expand its curriculum to include environmental issues. In addition, we need to very carefully rehabilitate the grounds and control the transportation in and out of the site.

What about the developer who cuts all the trees, levels the land and plots it out for houses?

We are trying to bring a halt to this. The purpose of the Greenbelt Plan is twofold. One is to encompass all the things which I've already talked about; the other is to establish the legitimacy of land-use management. We are saying that the greenbelt is not the place for development. Under Indian law, in order to have a legitimate right to enforce a certain way of managing the land you need a plan which is backed up by technical and ecological knowledge and good sound planning experience. That's what we've tried to do. If Auroville accepts this Plan it will be presented to the Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry Governments and we will ask them to certify that this is the appropriate and legally sufficient plan for Auroville and to help enforce it.

But we try as much as possible to focus on the carrots rather than the stick. So, rather than telling people what they can't do, we prefer to show them ways they can use their land to increase its value without spoiling it.

On a broader, bioregional scale, we should be helping guide growth in places where it is appropriate – for example, along the highways and railway lines – and discourage it in areas where it is inappropriate, such as along the waterways and in areas where the fauna and flora are being regenerated. This is a very, very important task that Auroville should be working on in partnership with its neighbours in the bioregion.



What are the most important features of the Greenbelt Plan that you are putting forward?

The intention of the Plan is to ensure that the protection of natural resources, especially the hydrological system and environmental enhancement, will be the foundation of future decisions governing the Auroville greenbelt. The Plan aims to protect, enhance and maintain the ecological system in Auroville and the surrounding bioregion. It also aims to control and manage the extent of recreational activities, while recognizing the special relationship which exists between Auroville and the villages lying within the greenbelt.

Practically, this means, among other things, linking the various water bodies, canyons, gullies and drainage swales by interconnected, restored and properly maintained vegetative coverage, and extending the present network of bunding and check-dams. It means protecting existing woodlands and expanding the programmes for planting indigenous species in appropriate locations on both Aurovilian and non-Aurovilian land through using incentives. The Plan also envisages expanding an interconnected network of paths, trails and routes to promote educational and recreational opportunities in a way that preserves rather than damages this ecosystem.

We've also tried to prioritize which land which we think is the most important to acquire. Most importantly, it is land vital for the protection of water resources and for the maintenance and the integrity of existing woodlands. You need to strengthen existing conditions by filling in the gaps between existing Auroville-owned lands so that a complete system can be developed and maintained.

Another function is to demonstrate improved farming practices. You should prioritize land where soil quality is good or where it can be restored. Obviously, where there is good existing soil, it should not be covered with structures. In addition, there is a need to choose the type of crops which are best suited to grow here. Analysis will point to what needs to be grown within the greenbelt and what should be purchased from outside sources.

Your plan looks very different from the circular greenbelt surrounding the city which we see in Auroville brochures and in the Master Plan. For example, it extends beyond what we think of as the greenbelt and within the traditional greenbelt area you obviously don't think it necessary to acquire all the land. Why have you jettisoned the old concept?

There are many reasons for this. The most important point is that a greenbelt is a living entity,

an ecology system, not a design drawn on the map. Our feeling was that the circle is a symbolic statement but it does not indicate the location of the natural resources in this region. We had to show where the greenbelt is consistent with the real condition of the land.

We extended the greenbelt beyond the 'magic circle' because the protection of the watercourses strongly argues for further consolidation of large areas which Auroville already owns. We think the Auromodele/Djaima/Felicity area should be treated as part of the greenbelt. We also don't recommend trying to acquire all the land within the circle because it is neither realistic nor really necessary. It is important that the villages in the greenbelt have space in which to grow nicely yet remain relatively compact, but not choked. As neighbours you have a certain responsibility to help them grow and develop in a suitable, well-managed manner.

Another factor is that the traditional circle takes no account of existing landholdings and ownership. If the circle is traced on the ground it would divide every existing landholding. This would mean that the owner of even the smallest piece of land could be subject to different planning guidelines, one inside the greenbelt, one outside. This is unworkable.

How do you sell this Plan to those of our planners who think in terms of an ideal geometry, of circles and perfect curves?

I picked up one thing which stood out immediately in The Mother's teaching. Her major charge to Auroville was to think, not to follow blindly what someone else has said. We've learned a lot since the Galaxy Plan was put on paper. The idea of a particular form, of creating movement that is visible both on the land and from above, is a fine diagrammatic concept. Let's now add that level of thinking that's necessary to really make the concept work on the land. Roger's design for the Galaxy was a design of its time, and that was not a time when the environmental crisis was well understood. If we try to impose a rigid geometric structure on the land we will fail because Auroville will not be able to sustain such forced design over time. This is why we immediately addressed the circular boundary of the greenbelt. This change from geometrical design to ecologically-based form has become accepted practice now all over the world and should be implemented in Auroville as well.

In addition there is a need to re-define our aesthetic criteria. The extensive lawns around the Matrimandir may look great, but their demand on water resources is immense. We need to develop a new aesthetic which makes sense ecologically.

The one thing you kept stressing in your presentation is that Auroville's survival is bound up with the survival of the bioregion, and that this Plan is a cooperative venture; that we cannot execute it alone.

Exactly. For example, if the water project of which I'm saying the greenbelt is the first major piece in the bioregion planning process fails, the whole region will run out of water. Conversely, if Auroville has good water – through employing desalination, rain harvesting and improved water storage – while the rest of the bioregion is dry, the villagers will be coming here to demand their share. And there's no way you can refuse them.

Another reason we focus on the cooperative people side is that unfortunately Auroville is terribly undermanned for the work that has to be done. The Greenbelt Plan is an integral part of bioregional planning, and your bioregion comprises about 1500 square kilometres of land and about 400,000 people, so Aurovilians can't possibly do all the things that have to be done. More than that, you don't want to be seen as modern-day colonialists. This has to be a shared operation, and to succeed in this Auroville has to earn the trust and confidence of its neighbours. This is a very, very big challenge because, in spite of your outreach work, there are those who still view Auroville as being very self-centred and not an integral part of the place. We have to keep reminding ourselves that we have to work and think in much broader terms now: everything is connected to everything else. This is one of the first principles of ecology.

I don't know if you can succeed in this, but that's no reason not to try because if you can't do it here, the chances are nobody will do it anywhere else. We didn't put this Plan together thinking it would be easy to implement. We all need to make ourselves more exceptional human beings because ordinary humanity won't succeed in meeting challenges of this scale.

From an interview by Alan

David Stein was brought up in India: his father was an architect who designed many of the institutional buildings in New Delhi. David has worked on planning issues in many parts of the world. Among other projects, he has worked on the regional plan for Greater New Delhi, on transportation planning in New England and New York, and he put together the first regional plan for Southern California. Achva Benzinberg Stein is a professor of landscape architecture and urban design known for her expertise in semi-arid environments such as Auroville. She worked on various urban projects in India, Israel, China, the West and the East Coast of the US and Mexico.

Taking on the bioregion

continued from page 1

This led, among other things, to a tie up with the Foundation for the Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions (FRLHT), based in Bangalore, which funded some Aurovilians to explore the natural healing riches of our bioregion. "Some Aurovilians explored the botanical side, we documented the healers," says Joss. "But we didn't just document them; we put their knowledge into teaching materials so it could be fed back into the villages."

However, they were not just documenting the healers, they were also compiling biodiversity registers. "We were working in about 40 villages, documenting how the people grow their crops, build their houses, catch their fish, raise water, dig wells, grind grains etc. This became one of the most important sources of our knowledge of the bioregion and the more we learned, the more we appreciated the richness of the knowledge that is still there."

"At the same time, we discovered there is widespread rural poverty and an exodus of the brightest people from the countryside to the towns and this, among other considerations, motivated us to draw up the SEDAB project. However, instead of focussing only upon the usual approaches to poverty alleviation, we wondered how to honour this traditional wisdom and learning, and how it could be used to ensure that the land and the

year. Some of the women from the villages where AVAG works came to us and asked us to give them training, so they could set up beautician enterprises in the village. The wish of the women to look beautiful is great but, we asked ourselves, what can we do that is local? And can we bring sustainability into this? Then we realized that beauty brings in other values like cleanliness, hygiene etc. and we could highlight such values. At the same time, we decided to use herbs that are locally available to make herbal cosmetics and to educate these women about the cosmetics that are manufactured and sold in the shops. Tamil Nadu, for example, consumes the largest amount of fairness creams of all the states in India, and many of these creams contain carcinogenic chemicals. Moreover, the demand for these creams is based upon the prejudice that paler skins are more beautiful. So we have also asked a performing artist from Chennai who is an ambassador for the 'dark is beautiful' campaign to work with us in structuring the beauty training programme for us.

"So we are tying up this particular training with three other enterprises that are part of the SEDAB project. One is herbal cosmetic production, the second is 'ecofemme' – ecofriendly and reusable sanitary napkins – and, thirdly, we're building into this particular training an education component. We also

'wellness' enterprise described by Ram highlights another important aspect of sustainability – integration. Sustainable enterprises successfully integrate and interconnect many different elements to enhance creativity and make solutions more comprehensive. Does the SEDAB project do this? "No," says Joss. "SEDAB is basically enterprise development. The Integral Rural Development (IRD) project which stands behind SEDAB is the one which is totally holistic and includes everything. It's an innovative model of rural development capable of being replicated in other parts of India and beyond."

The Integral Rural Development Project

The IRD project is huge in every way. Covering 700 square kilometres of the bioregion and impacting a target population of 200,000 people, it is projected to cost almost 50 crores and extend over seven years. Designed to "bring about a transformation to a meaningful and sustainable future for the rural community," it sets out, among other things, to provide knowledge-based and IT-enabled services and to promote ethical governance in the villages to achieve sustainable livelihoods and education. The approach combines public-private partnerships, participatory planning and value-based change and focusses on six areas: education and livelihood, health, agriculture

The Sustainable Enterprise Development project

The enterprises development in the SEDAB project will broadly fall under the following categories:

Building environmental and technical knowledge in the bioregion:

- Environmental education linked to the local enterprises
- Sanitation, health and nutrition-linked enterprises
- Technical knowledge in emerging energy-efficiency areas.

Natural resource based livelihood:

- Compressed mud block production unit

- Spirulina production unit
- Bamboo-based product training
- Medicinal plant based drug and cosmetic production unit
- Snake venom extraction using local tribal knowledge

Eco-friendly products cottage industry:

- Cotton bag manufacturing centres
- Quilt bed-cover manufacturing centres
- Wastepaper-based products production units
- Reusable sanitary napkin manufacturing unit



PHOTO COURTESY: PITCHANDIKULAM FOREST

Inhabitants of the bioregion: girls playing in a village pond

communities living on it are healthy. Because the issues here are very physical. If the land is healthy, if the patterns are right, then these communities have more of a chance of survival, of being sustainable."

Sustainability

Here we touch upon this tricky term 'sustainable': tricky, because today 'sustainable' is used in many different contexts and for many different purposes. So what exactly do the drafters of the SEDAB project mean by it?

"For me, sustainability is very local," says Ram, one of the authors of the SEDAB project. "The more locally-based something is, the more sustainable it can be. But sustainability is also about values. One of the first things we did when preparing this project was to define our shared values, values like health, knowledge and self-fulfillment, and then ensure that they were embedded in each of the individual enterprise projects that constitute SEDAB."

"This, for me, is the biggest challenge in sustainability today – transferring relevant successful enterprise knowledge in which are embedded sustainable values."

But how? The example that he gives relates to the medicinal plant-based cosmetic production enterprise. "Many women in the villages are spending a lot of money on beauty aids. The rural Indian cosmetic industry is today estimated to be worth \$900 million and is growing at double digit figures each

call their workplaces 'wellness centres' rather than 'beauty parlours' because these village women will become community-based consultants on women's health, hygiene, and beauty as well."

Self-governance

For Joss, another crucial aspect of sustainability is self-governance, the ability of people to decide their own destiny. "We don't want to thrust some Auroville technologies or new age technologies on them. They have to decide which crops they want to grow, and what enterprises, industries, processes, they want in their area. If it doesn't come from them, it will not have the power to sustain itself. The communities in the bioregion must come to own the initiatives that we propose."

But many villages have lost the habit of sitting together to make collective decisions about their future. "If governance fails, all else fails. This is why we are working with people like Dr. V. Suresh, a lawyer and human rights activist, and his team who have set up a Barefoot Academy for Governance. They are working on bringing good governance and change management skills to several government departments, as well as community organizations, and on deepening democratic processes in all levels of society. They have agreed to partner with us on strengthening the community level governance institutions in the bioregion. Working with such people is inspirational."

The different components of the

and environment, energy, shelter and advanced technologies [see box]

Joss explains that the IRD project, which was worked out by Rod, Bhavana, himself and many others, was the original proposal. But when, three years ago, they took it to the Ministry of Rural Development (MRD) in Delhi for funding, "they liked the proposal. However, they found it to be too innovative and requested us to accommodate it in one of their existing schemes. That became the SEDAB project, which was approved a few months back. However, in the build-up to the approval of SEDAB several top officials visited Auroville and understood the deeper relevance of the larger IRD project. So today they are willing to consider the larger IRD proposal again."

Romantics?

The amount of experience, expertise and commitment which has gone into writing these proposals is huge and undeniable. Yet there are always sceptics who remain unconvinced. Their argument runs something like this. "You are basically a bunch of romantics who are locked into the past. You believe that the rural sector can be revived by leveraging traditional knowledge, when the reality is that the world has moved on. For example, today the solution to problems like food shortages lies not in organic farming and traditional practices, which is one aspect of projects like IRD, but in large-scale corporate agriculture and the use of technologies like GM."

Ram disagrees. "We are living in amazing times, as several recent events prove. Very recently a parliamentary committee report was released on GM, and they concluded, after two years of extensive investigation, that India can do without GM as it does not contribute to food security for India and only benefits the seed companies. As to organic farming, the Tamil Nadu Government is about to launch a major organic farming programme. In neighbouring Andhra Pradesh, 27% of all cultivated area in the state doesn't use chemical pesticides and the people who are promoting organic farming there are confident it will become 40% in the next two years."

"So the understandings of reality are changing. It's no longer just a small grassroots movement: the top people in government are now becoming involved. And these people are not romantics; they are very hard-headed. So I think we are reaching a tipping-point."

A new approach to rural development is badly needed

"Actually, the people responsible for rural development in the whole of India are desperate," says Joss, "and they need a new, innovative approach."

"In a recent meeting," says Ram, "the Minister of State for Rural Development, Shri Jairam Ramesh, even asked us to provide an alternative model of development that can work in this country. While discussing our proposal, he looked around the table at his colleagues. 'These people in Auroville don't have the money to do this,' he said, 'but they have something far more valuable. They have the knowledge. That's why I want Auroville to take on the bioregion.'"

"What he sees," explains Joss, "is that Auroville offers a harmonious approach to development which holistically links together the different activities – agriculture, housing, health, education and livelihood etc. The Government doesn't work like this: they work through different departments, with all the complications which ensue. But this is our strength: we don't have all the expertise but we have many of the pieces and we are good at bringing the right people together. That's why they have

asked us to resubmit the IRD project. As one of the former top Secretaries in the ministry put it, 'it would be criminal if we do not support this project'."

The Tamil Nadu Government, which is co-funding the SEDAB project, is also looking increasingly to Auroville for assistance in rural development and other areas. Recently, Auroville organized a workshop on product design and packaging for all the district level managers of rural products of the Tamil Nadu Women's Development Corporation. The State Government would also like Auroville to be involved in drawing up guidelines for their organic farming programme, and are looking at Auroville as one of the centres for organic farming training in the state. And a few weeks ago, the Pollution Control Board asked Auroville to run a campaign highlighting alternatives to plastic bags. Uma's Small Steps bag project, among others, has been instrumental in highlighting the need to come up with alternatives to plastic.

As for Auroville itself, "Whenever we have presented our ideas to the International Advisory Council and Governing Board, we get full understanding and support," says Joss. "After one such presentation, Dr. Karan Singh leaned across to me and said, 'This is what we've been waiting for'. It's similar to what we were told in Delhi. 'At last we see Auroville fulfilling its true role'." Joss admits, however, that there are still some Aurovilians who cannot understand why he and his team are working outside the 'magic circle' of the Auroville township.

It's an argument Joss finds hard to understand. "Those of us who have worked in the bioregion from the early days could never think of Auroville as an enclave. As David Stein put it recently, Auroville must learn to live and breathe and nurture the best of what is out there if it and the bioregion are to survive, to prosper. We now have a window of opportunity with both the Central and State Governments to bring back pride to the local communities, to assist them in taking control of their destiny and to plan for a truly sustainable and prosperous future. Are we ready to be part of this?"

From an interview by Alan

The Integral Rural Development project

The primary goal of this project is to develop a model which will provide for 1) socio-economic empowerment; 2) environmental safety; and 3) transformation of values of the village inhabitants of the bioregion which can be replicated throughout India.

The objectives of the project will be to develop a participatory approach for the rural population of the Kaliveli catchment bioregion, in order to empower the target beneficiaries to:

- a) identify and overcome local barriers to socio-economic development using a knowledge-based and participatory approach, with the help of sustainable technologies,

products and services as tools for social empowerment;

- b) use knowledge-based assets and skills to provide the long-term viability of the IRD model at the end of the programme duration;
- c) use process-oriented and participatory approaches for community building;
- d) adopt a replicable and sustainable modular structure for a knowledge-based approach to realizing change processes so that the development paradigm is based on universal needs for sustainable livelihood and universal human values; and
- e) promote the growth of ethics and best practice governance and morality throughout the programme.

Fundraising for Auroville

In September last year, the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly constituted a Resource Mobilization Group (RMG), appointed three long-term Aurovilians, Frederick, Hemant and Carel, as members, and charged them with raising funds for Auroville. How have they fared?

“We started aiming at ‘low-hanging fruits,’” says Hemant. “The large funding required by Auroville for building the city is only available with the central or state governments or with public sector undertakings which can make donations from their Corporate Social Responsibility programmes. So we began spending a lot of time in New Delhi visiting government ministries to find out to what extent they could help the development of Auroville.”

“The responses were positive,” adds Frederick. “It appears that the name and work of Auroville are well-known and are widely appreciated. Many ministry officials welcome projects from Auroville and gave detailed information on the way in which Auroville could apply under any of their schemes. The most promising was the response of the Ministry of Human Resource Development (HRD), Auroville’s nodal ministry. So far, it has been providing grants for the development of Auroville to the tune of about Rs 10 crores (US \$ 2.5 million) a year. They informed us that the new 5-year plan of the Government for the years 2012-2017 was being prepared, and that if we wanted to increase our allocation the application should be made immediately. They gave us three weeks.”

“There followed a period of frantic activity,” says Hemant. “The former Town Planning Development Council had only requested a 10% increase over last year’s budget, just sufficient to cover inflation. A lot of arguing was needed to convince them that the time was now or never. They expressed fears that Auroville would not be able to properly utilize any increase. We expressed our conviction that at their proposed rate, the development of Auroville would virtually stagnate. They finally agreed. The Working Committee then approved the increased budget request – we asked for a 500% increase – and Dr. Karan Singh, the Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, formally signed it. I was able to submit it to the HRD Ministry just in time – in fact, about one hour before the deadline. Since then, the matter is with the Ministry, which has meanwhile informed us that the Auroville budget will be increased, though not to the extent we asked for.”

Other Ministries

“We also visited other ministries,” says Carel. “A problem we encountered is that many ministries’ schemes aim at Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) and private institutions that need to be ‘empanelled’ by the Ministry. Auroville, being an Autonomous Government Organisation, usually falls outside the parameters of those schemes. But we encountered a lot of goodwill. Some officials waived the empanelment requirement for Auroville. They consider that the Auroville Foundation has been constituted by an Act of Indian Parliament and as such is of a higher order than a mere NGO. Others advised that Auroville pursue ‘empanelment’ in any case to prevent delays or rejection of a project proposal at the level of lower government officials. We are busy with this and have meanwhile submitted a large project to the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy for Auroville to become a ‘Solar City’. MNRE would fund this project up to Rs.2.5 Crores, 50% of the total project cost, provided Auroville is able to contribute Rs 2.5 crores as well. The project includes the preparation of a renewable energy master plan for the Auroville Township.”

Formal recognition as centre of repute

“A few ministries went a step further,” says Hemant. “They suggested that Auroville applies to be recognised as a ‘Centre of Excellence’ or an ‘Institute with a National Presence’. Such recognition would open a door for a steady, yearly funding for Auroville by that ministry. These applications are now being prepared. In discussions with other Aurovilians, we have been told that another ministry invited

Auroville to become a learning centre, a nodal agency for training in the areas of habitat, water management, energy, organic agriculture, environment and other related areas and to participate in development projects being implemented in the district of Villupuram. The Ministry would provide long-term funding for the establishment and the running of such a centre.”

Too few Auroville residents

“The problem is our capacity,” says Frederick. “Many Aurovilians welcome these projects and would love Auroville to work in these areas. But we lack the manpower, as the growth of Auroville has practically come to a standstill. In 2011, we registered a population increase of eight people, or less than 1%. In the years before, it was around 2.5%. The reason for this slow development is the lack of housing. Auroville urgently needs houses, not only for the Newcomers and Aurovilians, but also for the increasing number of volunteers, apprentices and trainees who want to come to Auroville for a limited period of time to get training in social work, renewable energy, alternative building technologies, forestation, organic agriculture, fashion, and so on. In 2011, Auroville hosted 565 students and 1,707 volunteers, many of whom are potential Aurovilians. These numbers will only increase. We are now

New Auroville Donation Gateway

Several years ago, the Reserve Bank of India decided that donations could no longer be transferred through the well-known Pay Pal channel. This affected many NGO’s in India, as well as Auroville, as making donations via the Internet became impossible.

For Auroville, this problem is now over. A new gateway has been created which allows donations for Auroville projects, schools and services, from India and abroad, to be channelled via the HDFC Bank to Auroville’s Unity Fund.

Enter the donation gateway via www.auroville.com/donations/ and follow the simple instructions. As the gateway runs via an Indian bank, all donors are asked to give their donation in Indian Rupees, for which a link to a currency converter is provided on the gateway page.

Donations made through this channel do not qualify for tax exemption. Foreigners who require a tax exemption are advised to route their donation to Auroville via the AVI Centre in their respective country. Indian citizens who require a tax exempt receipt under section 80G or section 35.1.ii or 35.1.iii are advised to make a donation by sending a cheque to Auroville Unity Fund, Town Hall, Auroville 605101, or by making a direct bank transfer to the Auroville Unity Fund, account number 10237876031, State Bank of India Auroville Township, IFS Code – SBIN0003160. Please specify the name of the project for which you want to make a donation. In case you need further information, contact us at donations@auroville.org.in

sure, but this number is beyond our capacity.”

The international scene.

“The great advantage of doing fundraising in India is that you don’t have to ‘explain’ Sri Aurobindo and The Mother or respond to suspicions that Auroville is a sect,” says Carel. “In India, they are national figures. But the minute you start fundraising in other countries you have to face this challenge. It was most

Foundation for World Education, whose board consists of members devoted to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, has been contributing to Auroville’s development for over 20 years. [see facing page] So has the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier, even though its board members relate more to Auroville’s material achievements than to its spiritual background. Also the Auroville International Centres are doing great work in raising funds for Auroville. [see for example AVToday # 265, August 2011] as do some of the Sri Aurobindo Centres all over the world. But most of these efforts, with a few exceptions, target the smaller projects which, on average are asking for less than US \$ 10,000. How to achieve funding for larger projects?

“In my opinion the devotees and Auroville supporters in the USA are doing what they can. You can’t really expect much more,” said a board member of the Foundation for World Education. “Attracting large funding will have to be thoroughly planned by those in Auroville who have the big picture in mind and you will have to approach corporations and research foundations as per their requirements to seek funding from them. The facts that Auroville has been recognized by UNESCO, is highly regarded by the Government of India should be made an advantage.”

The Auroville projects

The RMG is now taking steps to help write new projects and refine existing ones in collaboration with the project holders, so that funding them becomes attractive, not only for ministries of the Government of India, but also for Indian PSUs and foreign donors.

This aspect of Auroville’s fund raising work was discussed with board members of the Foundation for World Education and the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier. They interact with the Auroville Project Coordination Group (PCG) which functions as a filter in approving the smaller Auroville projects. The PCG’s work is much appreciated but, say board members of both organisations, a bit of a more pro-active approach will become necessary. “We do our utmost to reduce our own overheads so that we can contribute more to Auroville,” explained a board member of the FWE, “so we only expect Auroville to do the same.” They suggest that the PCG scrutinize more deeply the projects it submits on their relevance and the benefit for Auroville, check the cost structure of the projects to eliminate inessential elements, submit a project business plan where appropriate, develop a policy on what is to be done with assets bought by a project once the project is over, and check the results and accounts of the project. They also advise that Auroville publish its projects on the Auroville website so that donations can be made online, a work which is now in progress.

Following the visit to the USA, the Resource Mobilisation Group has now decided to enhance its work outside India. Active fundraising in the USA and in other countries, such as Abu Dhabi where a large number of Indian expatriates is living, is now in the planning.

The Resource Mobilisation Group



The Resource Mobilisation Team: from left Hemant, Carel and Frederick

proposing a special project to the HRD Ministry for the building of a ‘green’ campus of 300 new dwelling units to be made available to Newcomers and early Aurovilians for up to five or seven years.”

“Then, in January this year, Cyclone Thane struck,” says Hemant. “A special Cyclone Response Team was set up of which we were a part. Our work was to call on ministries, individuals within India and abroad and corporations for funds for dealing with this disaster. I think we have been pretty successful.” [See AVToday # 274, March 2012, for a report on the cyclone relief income and expenditure.]

Approaching PSUs

“Apart from the government, we have also been looking to see if funds or practical help could be made available by Public Sector Undertakings (PSUs) and private institutions under their Corporate Social Responsibility programmes,” says Frederick. “Under these programmes, these undertakings allocate part of their profits for social work, such as health care and education. We visited a few PSU’s, and their responses were positive. One large project has meanwhile been submitted. But they were also interested to benefit from Auroville’s expertise. One NGO asked us if we could give workshops on environment and sustainable management and quality of life to 4,000 of their employees. We can give these workshops, for

irreverently worded by an old friend of Auroville in New York City who casually observed that we Auroville fundraisers don’t have it easy. ‘You have that monkey on your back,’ he said. ‘Auroville’s underlying philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.’”

Carel visited the USA this summer to investigate fundraising possibilities. “We’d sent a letter to approximately 350 people in the USA who are aware of the work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and of Auroville, inviting their collaboration by helping us find donors for our projects or making donations directly. The letter had a 5% response. Some funding for small projects happened and we received the contact data of some large potential donor organisations unrelated to Auroville to whom we subsequently sent project proposals. It then appeared that the irreverent gentleman has a point. As a director of a foundation in New York observed, ‘We don’t relate to your background but we will concentrate on your achievements to see if they warrant funding by us.’”

“That’s a best-case scenario,” commented a former Aurovillian who now lives in Santa Fe. “Over the years, I have unsuccessfully been trying to raise interest in Auroville, only to see that the Americans are more interested in Buddhism and vegetarianism. Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, simply, are not ‘in.’”

Yet, Auroville cannot complain of lack of international financial support. The American

The Foundation for World Education

For more than 20 years the American Foundation for World Education (FWE) has been supporting Auroville. Auroville Today asked its president, Bhuvana Nandakumar, about the Foundation's work, experience and expectations.

Auroville Today: Can you say something about the members on the board of the FWE? We would like to know who they are, and what their motivation is for joining the board, and how much time they spend on the work for the FWE.

Bhuvana Nandakumar: There are eight of us on the board – John Schlorholtz, Paula Murphy, Gordon Korstange, Dakshina Vanzetti, Margo MacLeod, Heidi Watts, Jerry Schwarz (Treasurer) and myself (President). Jeanne Korstange is the Secretary. Some of these names will be familiar to many Aurovilians. Certainly Auroville is familiar to everyone on the board because of our constant direct and indirect interaction with Aurovilians both in India and in the U.S.

The board members come from diverse backgrounds although education seems to be a common thread amongst some of us. Both Heidi and Gordon continue to give a significant portion of their winter months to Auroville schools. Jerry Schwartz has several decades of experience in financial planning and is constantly inspiring us towards the conscious use of money power. I use my knowledge and experience of best practices in nonprofit management (in which I also have a degree) while working for the FWE board. Most importantly, all of us are connected to the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and consciously attempt to support Their work in every possible way.

How does the board make decisions given the wide distances in the US, and how often does the board meet face-to-face?

All eight of us live in eight different states and four different time zones which sometimes poses logistical problems. These logistics are even more complicated when one or more of us are travelling abroad!

The Board meets three times a year, once in a retreat and two times via conference calls. In addition, we have an active group blog and listserv that are private and used as tools to keep in touch with each other. It is important for us to constantly keep in touch via email and phone because of the great geographical separation between the members of the board.

In recent years, I have hosted the FWE's retreats at my home in order to limit the expenses. The idea is that the money saved this way allows for the funding of at least one more deserving project.

Jeanne, Jerry and I perhaps spend the most time interacting with each other and with project holders about the FWE work. We also have sub-committees within the board that help focus on specific tasks, like the Investment Committee.

The FWE's aims are helping education worldwide. Yet, the FWE has, over the years, dedicated a major part of its yearly donations to Auroville. What is the reason for this?

The name *Foundation for World Education* was chosen by the Founder of the FWE, Mrs. Eleanor Montgomery, in order to represent something more all-encompassing. In the 1950s she had asked the Mother, "What can I do to help?" and the Mother replied, "Return to America and raise funds for the school", referring to the Ashram school or *Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education*. In the beginning, Mrs. Montgomery raised funds for the Ashram school through friends and from her financier husband. In 1955, at the Mother's behest, a foundation was incorporated in New York City under the name "Sri Aurobindo International Center Foundation, Inc." with The Mother as president. This foundation raised money to provide for educational materials and sports equipment for the Ashram school.



The board of the Foundation for World Education. Back row left to right: Jerry Schwarz (Treasurer), John Schlorholtz, Margo MacLeod, Gordon Korstange. Front row left to right: Dakshina Vanzetti, Jeanne Korstange (Secretary), Paula Murphy, Bhuvana Nandakumar (President), Heidi Watts.

By 1974, Mrs. Montgomery had changed the name of the foundation into *Foundation for World Education* so that its work could embrace related activities and be more widely accessible. On Mrs. Montgomery's passing in 1983 she left her estate to the Foundation. The board spelt out guidelines for granting money to incorporated non-profit organizations to carry out the mission of supporting "the vision for a transformed world espoused by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother." Since then, the FWE has welcomed grant proposals from around the world that are in alignment with its vision. But it has been a commitment of the board members to support Auroville as the prime attempt at manifesting this vision. Every year, a majority of our funding requests come from projects within or somehow associated with Auroville.

How much, over the years, has the FWE donated?

I can't give you the numbers world wide, but I estimate that, over the years, more than a million dollars has gone to Auroville. The FWE has tried to support every aspect in Auroville – beginning with supporting the purchase of the crystal globe for the Matrimandir, the revolving loan fund for businesses, forestation work, Village Action, infrastructure for some of the schools, educational and art materials, summer

camp etc. One of my favourite projects is the long-standing Auroville-Antioch New England partnership spearheaded by Heidi Watts that brings teachers from Auroville to the United States and from the USA to Auroville in an exchange programme. I like to think of the FWE as an important player in the development of Auroville – both because of the work we do and have done and because we often fund projects that would never get funded otherwise.

Has this scale of donations impacted the original endowment?

No. Through careful (and I must say, conservative) stewardship, we have managed to maintain the endowment intact, in spite of the vagaries of the economy. We often use the analogy of a continuous stream, an abundant wellspring that will continue to support Their work for aeons to come.

In the early years of its existence, the FWE has made large contributions, while at present its donations as a rule do not exceed US \$ 3000 per project. What motivated this change?

The limit of \$ 3,000 is a recent one that the board decided on based on the fluctuating economic conditions in recent years and the desire to do the greatest good for the maximum number of people. The idea is also to be able to seed several small projects that each can have a big impact. Sometimes these have difficulty obtaining funds elsewhere because of their innovative nature or because they are smaller pieces of a bigger puzzle. This limit, however, is only a recommended limit and not set in stone.

Sometimes we agree to co-fund a project, as one cannot deny that the benefits of collaboration are great. We decide on a case-by-case basis if co-funding is essential or if we can fund the project partly without it.

The FWE, as a rule, only considers projects that have passed the Auroville Project Coordination Group (PCG). How is the experience of working with the PCG?

The PCG was created in Auroville to streamline proposal applications to funding organizations like the FWE and the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier. Since the PCG was established, the FWE has relied on the PCG to submit appropriate projects for consideration and to ensure that we get a report one year after a grant has been given in order to assess the impact of the project. The partnership has been valuable and quite beneficial on both sides.

Since I took over as President about five years ago, the quality of proposals submitted via the PCG as also the reports required by FWE improved over the years. But a couple of years ago, we found that the reports were beginning to look startlingly similar, perhaps because the PCG and the project holders were stretched with the increasing amount of work involved. We decided to shift towards a more active reporting rather than a passive "all went well, thank you for the funds" type of approach. We revamped the reporting format to include some qualitative questions that require the project holder to think about the project itself as a learning experience. So we now ask not only for what was successful about the project but also what was learnt from it. The idea is not to judge the project's success or failure but to learn from the experience and use that knowledge in considering future grants. We also hope it helps the project holder in planning future projects.

More recently, we also noticed that there is a dip in the quality of the projects we receive from Auroville. We are not sure what the reason for this is. Is the limitation to US \$3,000 a barrier? I plan to bring the limitation issue up for discussion at our annual board retreat in Fall this year.

As in any relationship, there are expectations and there is scope for improvement. We would definitely like to see more ground work done by the PCG on the projects presented for funding. In fact, this is, to my understanding, the *raison d'être* for this group. We also have FWE's own board members travelling to India every year. I hope we can work out a way in which their visits can also be utilized to further help the PCG in their work with the project holders.

There have been instances where the FWE has made direct donations to projects that have not passed the PCG, such as recently towards the microcredit fund for Village Action. What brought this about?

There have been a few instances where FWE has supported projects that have not passed through the PCG process. This has usually been because they have been brought to our attention by an individual board member who deemed it worthy of consideration or because the project came together after the (long) vetting process undertaken by the PCG was completed. There is quite a lead time between when the PCG sends out a request for proposals in Auroville and when the board of the Foundation meets to consider the grants.

The Foundation and members of the board as individuals have long been supporters of Village Action as a project. The mission of the FWE is to fund all types of projects that support the vision of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the Auroville Village Action Group is doing exactly this work at the village level. One cannot forget that education cannot be simply defined as schools. Health education, community education – these are also important and certainly fall within the objectives of the FWE.

How far does the board feel it can participate in Auroville's future development?

The board feels that the future development of Auroville is (and ought to be) in the hands of the residents of Auroville. As well-wishers, members of the FWE board and as individuals, we can and do support the Auroville community in every way we can – financially, with our knowledge and expertise that may benefit the community, and as advocates for Auroville in the outside world.

As President, I am constantly looking for ways to improve the Foundation's way of functioning as also its rapport with the community it serves. I welcome all feedback that would help us achieve our mission better. We also like to hear stories from the project holders because they serve both as motivation and inspiration for us.

Carel

for more information on the FWE, visit www.FoundationForWorldEducation.org

FWE Grant allocations 2011

Total Grants \$ 40,335

Auroville (via Projects Coordination Group)	\$	19,905
Auroville Archives	3,000	
Solid Waste Curriculum	3,000	
Saracon solar charging stations	2,477	
Auroville Radio	2,378	
Management, training and development	2,000	
AVI Ethiopia	2,000	
Bhavana Memorial / Village Action	2,000	
Botanical Garden	1,800	
Auroville Film Festival	1,250	
Awareness Through the Body	5,000	
Centre for Integral Education	3,025	
AUM Conference 2011 Scholarships	3,025	
Auro Mira Service Society	2,780	
Matri Karuna Vidyalaya, Delhi	2,000	
Sri Aurobindo Learning Centre solar curtains	1,114	
Teacher Workshops in Auroville	1,000	
Mickey's Fund Disbursements	606	
Matrimandir	368	
Matagiri	113	
Sri Aurobindo Centre of Boston	125	

Manifesting the Fountain in the Garden of Unity

When I arrived at the Matrimandir workshop to discuss with Jean P. the work on the fountain in the Garden of Unity, he was busy explaining to several Tamil workers the length and arrangement of various sections of stainless steel supports that needed to be cut to size. He double and then triple-checked that they understood how it should be done. I quipped, "You have already answered one of my questions – I was going to ask what was your biggest challenge in constructing the fountain, but I see it must be communication." He answered that no, communication is not the problem. Then he began telling me about several points of design regarding the Matrimandir about which there had been disagreement, for which various compromises had been made. "Is this a problem of communication?" he asked. I suggested it was a problem of disagreement. He answered that it was an issue of subscribing to a vision: if we subscribe to a vision, then we can realize it, we can find the way. Otherwise we will make many compromises and adjustments here and there. Once a student asked him, "What is more important, beauty or harmony?", Jean answered, "But is beauty not harmony?"

Indeed our discussion took some time before we came around to the fountain. Jean wanted me to understand the larger picture, the context in which it was being built. Roger was the architect, he had the vision, but then there was the next layer of people, such as Jean, who worked to implement this vision in a practical way. Jean said that he understood his role – he was not a designer, he was not a politician, he was not a manager of people – he was an engineer. Each person has their unique and indispensable role in the whole; his was to find the ways in which Roger's designs could be practically manifested as precisely as possible. There are many such people, at all levels. At the same time, this work is their sadhana, they progress by meeting the challenges it presents. Jean emphasized, "There is a big difference between creating something and manifesting something."



From the cascade located in the middle of a small amphitheatre, the water will flow into the pond in the Garden of Unity. The Banyan tree is seen behind.

But for Jean there is another layer of people involved in the manifestation – for everything that is done, everybody has his or her own opinion about it, they either like it or don't like it. From the workshop he pointed out across the undulating stretch of grass towards the Amphitheatre. "You see the white benches around the edge of the Amphitheatre? People say they like them or don't like them. I don't give a damn whether they like them or not. To disagree is to create division. Look at the design, the angles, how do you achieve that in stone to make a bench? That is what I am interested in."

Jean illustrated on a chalk board what happens when a drop of water falls on a flat surface of water: It first creates a depression, and then at the centre of the depression a droplet rises into the air. That is the vision that is reflected here in the Amphitheatre; the urn is like the rising droplet." He also explained the image expressed by the Matrimandir and the area around it. He

asked, "You know what is the most significant statement Mother said about the Matrimandir? 'The Matrimandir wants to be the symbol of the Divine's answer to man's aspiration for perfection.' The golden sphere emerges like a giant golden cell out of the earth, and as it rises like the sun at dawn, the earth trembles in waves rippling across the gardens."

The fountain in the Garden of Unity was designed by Roger. Its circular concrete pool, 0.8 meters deep, had been built early on, but Roger decided to utilize it for the fountain which he had earlier envisioned in a different location. "People say Roger was rigid, but it is not so, I have rarely seen somebody so flexible, but with the essence which the Mother revealed to him he was unshakable." Roger made a simple rough sketch of the fountain, and discussed the concept with Jean. Once during their conversations, Jean described an elaborate musical fountain he had seen in Melbourne, but Roger said perhaps something like

that could be done in the city, but not here. "For around the Matrimandir, Roger wanted a discrete beauty, he was often fighting with the designer in himself who tended towards a more elaborate style."

The pool, to be covered in Andhra granite, white-grey with dark spots, is 13 meters in diameter at the surface. The fountain will have 45 main jets and 216 'bubblers'. The central jet will shoot a stream of water 3.5 meters into the air. From the central jet radiate four arms, each with 11 jets, the height of their sprays descending in an elegant parabolic curve to 20 cm at the periphery. Between the four arms, the 216 'bubblers' will bubble the water about 20 cm. high, though this can be adjusted if required. Bordering the fountain is a small curved amphitheatre in red stone facing towards the Banyan and Matrimandir. Dividing this amphitheatre into two sections, a gentle cascade will flow down an angular granite channel descending from the back into the fountain below.

The engineering to pull this off, to manifest this vision, is Jean's province, his 'playground.' "The biggest engineering challenge here is to distribute the water pressure in the right concentrations to the various jets so that they perform as designed. I didn't know much about the flow of water, which is a complex field in itself, but an expert in this area showed up one day as if by accident! Often, someone with whom I am talking will suggest to me the solution for a problem I had been contemplating; and very often the solutions come when I sleep." The fountain will be elegant not only in appearance, but also in its engineering and construction – for example, in its specially designed and machined pipes, fittings and devices, and its economical use of materials.

So far, one of the four main sections of pipe-work has been completed and successfully tested. The construction of the remaining three sections is underway and the laying of the granite tiles over the concrete pool has begun. "I don't like to set a target date for completion, because things can happen, and this work is my joy and we strive for perfection, but we will complete the work as soon as possible."

Larry

EDUCATION

Garbology 101

On August 18, the WasteLess team made a public presentation of Garbology 101.

A thought-provoking video plays. A used, green, throw-away plastic bag flutters aimlessly on a street, as it drops from the hands of an unconscious user, making its listless journey to the unfortunate landfill where it will remain for centuries, slowly poisoning the environment. The voiceover tells us, "It takes less than 1 second to make a plastic bag, which is used for as little as 20 minutes, and it will take up to 1000 years to degrade!"

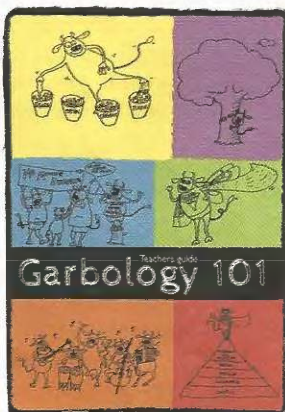
An estimated 5 lakh tonnes of waste is produced every day in India, some of it collected, most of it mixed, and the rest litters the environment. It makes one wonder how we as individuals could be more pro-active.

Changing one's behaviour from unconsciously doing something wrong to doing the right thing habitually is the first step in changing the way we deal with waste. It is crucial to ruminate over what happens to the pollutants we generate as a growing consumer-driven society; it is essential for all of us to understand the system, the journey of a product from the raw material stage to manufacture to use and finally to disposal; and to know it is pivotal to decide at which point we can intervene to catalyse a radical shift.

WasteLess knows. Inspired by the Litter Free Auroville movement, WasteLess is an initiative which is resolute about establishing a paradigm change in the way waste is managed in Auroville and beyond. The aim of the young and passionate Wasteless team is to create educational materials on waste – particularly for the young as they want to educate them at a very formative stage in their development – to inspire change in individual behaviour and to encourage thinking in cycles. To this end, they researched and brainstormed, as well as gathering data on best practices. They also approached three schools in Auroville and had focused group-discussions with teachers and students.

The results found their expression in a comprehensive tool-kit called *Garbology 101*. This kit will be part of the curriculum of Auroville and outreach schools. *Garbology 101* is interactive, educative, thought-provoking, progressively-learning, community-engaging, fun and serious all at once.

With a "not-so-thick" yet easy to use teacher's guide there are 101 innovative activities designed for an age-group between 6 and 12 years to encourage hands-on learning and multi-intelligence application.



The Garbology team: Chandrah, Ribhu, Mari, Vimal, Navleen. Not in photo: Muna from Germany

There are board games, memory cards, stories with animated pictures, research and analysis activities, quizzes, garbo squads (hand-outs which children can take to the people around and explain how waste needs better management), garbo-nidra (using the technique of yoga nidra meditation, the imagination activities of what an ideal world would look like), posters and stickers.

Part of the kit is printed using the latest

technology 'treeless paper', which is a polypropylene plastic (the same plastic which is used to make the safest baby bottles) and is 100% recyclable. This paper will not tear, can be washed as

well and increases the life of the materials thus creating less waste. *Garbology 101* will be a joy for parents and teachers...and children.

Mandakini

Garbology 101 outreach

To make Garbology 101 a success, WasteLess invites people to volunteer at WasteLess and to donate to help spread Garbology 101 in schools all over India.

WasteLess' next steps are to:

- o develop a kit curriculum suitable for public and private schools in India
- o conduct waste audits for units on request
- o continue spreading awareness about waste

Georges van Vrekhem

On the afternoon of August 31, well-known author and lecturer Georges Van Vrekhem left his body following a cardiac arrest. He was 77. Georges had been fighting coronary arterial disease for over 20 years.

Georges first came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1970, after having been a well-known poet and having had a successful career as playwright and artistic adviser of the Dutch Theatre Company of Ghent, in Flemish-speaking Belgium. The 'roots' of his writing, he said, produced their first shoots at 14 when he 'spontaneously' started writing poetry. This led in the late 1950s and 60s to the publication of three volumes of poetry and a number of poems in various magazines. He also wrote nine original plays, translated and adapted a number of plays of other authors and wrote essays and articles. His literary talents were acknowledged when he was awarded the 1965 Prize for Literature by the City of Ghent.

In that period Georges read a staggering amount of books in Dutch, German, French and English. One of the authors was Satprem whose *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness* ignited a spark. "This is what I had been looking for," he said afterwards. But it took some time for the spark to become a flame. Georges' reading, writing and theatre work were complemented by a regular immersion in the hustling nightlife of Ghent – he knew all the pubs, he said afterwards – to 'interact and discuss issues with the artistic society of Ghent'. Then, in 1970, after a brief stint as tour guide, this life ended when he moved to a small room in the Rue Suffren in Pondicherry and joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. As he later wrote in a poem, "One day I broke through an inner wall and found a fire within, and the power of that fire has gradually conjured me to another continent." The Mother gave him the name *Matiprasad* (meaning *Blessing of The Mother* or *Offering to The Mother*) which he however never used. He started teaching at the Ashram school and, because of his proficient language skills, also became one of the secretaries of the Sri Aurobindo Society, in charge with international relations for their project Auroville.

Yoka and I met him in 1976, during our first visit to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Georges had stopped working for the Society, had started practicing astrology and was translating Satprem's trilogy *The Mother* into Dutch. Could we find a publisher, he asked? But the publisher deemed the investment too risky. This led to the creation of Stichting Aurofonds, a Dutch Foundation that aims at supporting Auroville and at publishing books from and

on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother in Dutch and other languages. With the help of this foundation the trilogy was eventually published. Over the years, Stichting Aurofonds remained instrumental in helping to publish Georges' books.

In 1978, five years after the passing of The Mother, Georges packed all his belongings on a bullock cart, left the Ashram and joined Auroville, settling in a small hut in the Aspiration community and starting teaching at Last School. The times were hard; there were the fights with the Sri Aurobindo Society and *L'Agenda de Mère* (*Mother's Agenda*) had just started to appear. Initially enthusiastic, Georges aimed at translating all the 13 volumes of *L'Agenda* into Dutch. But after an extremely painful fall-out with Satprem this project was shelved, never to be taken up again. Instead, he translated Rajagopalachari's abbreviated version of the *Ramayana* into Dutch, which was followed by the *Mahabharata*.

In 1995, Georges began writing his own books. *Voorbij de Mens, Leven en Werk van Sri Aurobindo en De Moeder* was published in 1995; he then transliterated it into English as *Beyond Man, the Life and Work of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother*. It was published in India in 1997 and became a highly acclaimed seminal book. Amal Kiran (K.D. Sethna) judged it "among the best that have been written on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother." In this book Georges, for the first time, spoke about Sri Aurobindo and The Mother as the Two-in-One, the double-poled Avatar of the Supermind. That same year the publication of Georges' compilation of Mother's conversations translated into Dutch appeared. This compilation was later published by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram under the title *The Vision of The Mother*.

These books came at a high personal cost. In 1997, Georges suffered a heart attack, was admitted to JIPMER hospital in Pondicherry and later subjected to a coronary angiography in Belgium, in preparation for a heart operation. But the operation was cancelled when the angiography showed that a bypass would have no effect as a part of the left heart chamber had died. Realizing that his life would henceforth move at half-speed and that he could not fully depend on allopathic medicines, Georges taught himself homeopathy. He obtained a

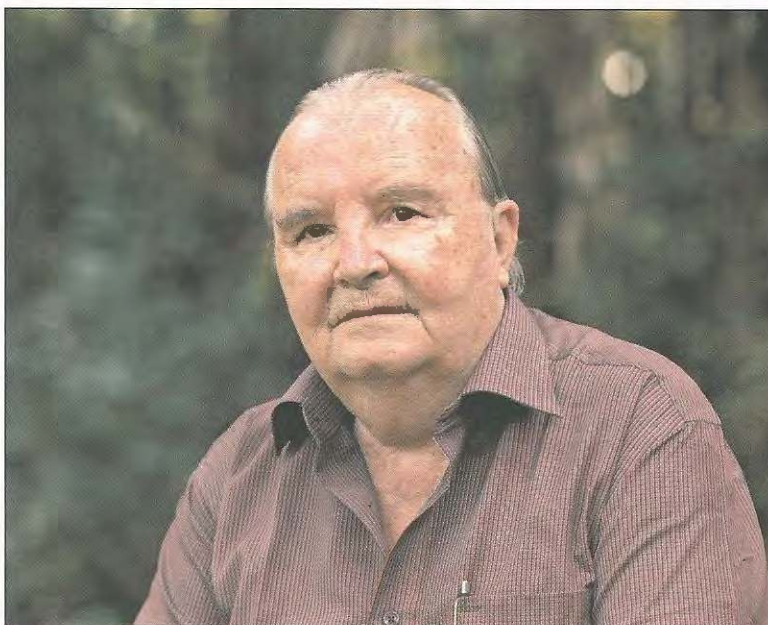


PHOTO COURTESY SERGEY STANOVYKH

more than a sigh of relief that Georges finally disposed of this collection when his book *Hitler and His God, the background to the Hitler phenomenon* was published in 2006.

Meanwhile, Georges' fame as author was spreading. Many of his books were translated and published in The Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain and Russia. In 2006, he was awarded the Sri Aurobindo Puraskar by the Government of Bengal. Increasingly, he was touring Europe and the USA giving lectures. The travel, he said later, was certainly not good for his health, even though he often experienced it as a prayer. In more recent years he only agreed

to give lectures in Auroville and through Skype. He continued writing about aspects of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's vision, such as the book *Evolution, Religion and the Unknown God*, (2011) where he described the various theories of evolution and the concepts of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. That same year saw the publication of his last book, *Preparing for the Miraculous*, containing the eleven lectures Georges had given in 2010-2011 at Auroville's Savitri Bhavan and Town Hall. In the last essay in this book Georges shared his conviction that the Two-in-One Sri Aurobindo and The Mother were, in fact, the Kalki Avatar who, in the Hindu tradition, will come at the end of the present *Kali Yuga*.

With Georges' passing, the Auroville community worldwide has lost a friend and one of the few exegetes of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's views. As Dakshina from the Lodi Ashram, USA, commented, "Georges was a pillar of Sri Aurobindo and Mother's work and legacy, leaving behind a wealth of books and transcribed talks that the world may better understand Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, their lives and vision and purpose, and what role we all who are called to this path of Integral Yoga share in the unfolding evolution we have taken birth to participate in. Though an all-consuming labour of love, this life-work was not easy and often took the form of a long battle, each book a hard-won victory over a host of opposing forces." He will be sorely missed.

Then, for a period of four years, Georges spent his time studying one of the most gruesome periods of human history, the Second World War. "This reading makes me sick," he used to complain. His motive: "Sri Aurobindo and The Mother had been speaking to their disciples about this War, about its occult significance, and about the asuric entity that possessed Hitler. Is there any historic material that collaborates Their views?" There was, plenty – in German, English, French, Dutch and Spanish. His bookshelves soon flowed over. But it was with

Carel

All of Georges' books and their translations are available on line at www.beyondman.org

Lunching with Georges: personal reminiscences

It was my last lunch date with Georges, just a week before he passed away. We were at Goodman's, a local restaurant that I had introduced him to. Georges favored the local village eateries over the more expensive, Westernized Aurovilian ones, and in the fifteen years or so of our friendship, in successive lunch dates, we had eaten our way at every joint past Pitchandikulam bridge down to the East Coast Road. Goodman quickly became a favorite with Georges – it was air-conditioned and equipped with a generator against the frequent and erratic power outages. And Georges with his heart ailment suffered from the heat, which was particularly harsh at mid-day. Besides Goodman did a good job of preparing his favorite meal – rice and chicken curry – which he washed down with coke.

I no longer recollect how our relationship evolved over regular lunch dates to a deeply caring and endearing friendship. I remember that shortly after I had moved to Auroville, Georges ask me to read a draft of his then forthcoming book (and in my opinion, his best) *Beyond Man*. Georges was just venturing into writing in English (as opposed to Dutch), and given my background in English literature, he wanted to know if he had an acceptable command over the language. It also helped that I was a newcomer and not likely to argue against his theories, for though Georges was highly original in his interpretations of Sri Aurobindo, he was also sensitive to criticism.

"You see, I am a nobody, a *vellakara*, [foreigner]" Georges would say. "I am an ugly fellow and a very unlikely candidate to be expounding on the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo. But the problem is that even today Aurobindonian scholars are stuck with the *Arya*, and to truly understand Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, one has to examine the entire corpus of their work. And bear in mind that many of their works were not published until

much later, in the seventies and beyond."

This was the first of Georges' many contributions to our understanding of Integral Yoga: His writing stemmed from the depths of his readings. He must have been one of the very few people to have read all of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's works in original (not in translation) from the *Arya* to the *Agenda* and to the later releases such as *The Record of Yoga*. The second gift he had, was a rare, if not unique, insight into and understanding of Western and Indian culture. He was widely read in Western philosophy and during the forty years of his life here he had immersed himself into Indian culture and its literature – particularly the epics.

In that memorable last lunch date I again reminded him of the above fact. With some sadness, which was uncharacteristic of him, he mentioned that he did not know why he had to waste so many years living a bohemian life in the theater world of Belgium, which was so alien from his current reality and the deeper meaning that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had opened him to. I reminded him that those must have been the years when he was reading and acquainting himself with the best of the Western writers. He brightened up at that memory and proceeded to relate stories from his life in Belgium. He peppered his recollections with certain experiences and dreams that had led him in 1970 to the Ashram, and then later, in 1978, in the birth-centenary of the Mother, to Auroville.

No topic was taboo during those lunch hours. We discussed sexuality and the value of relationships in Integral Yoga. We discussed the need for war: I railed to him when Bush went to war with Iraq in the flimsiest of excuses. Georges patiently heard me out and explained that wars were seldom about the purported causes, but about a swifter and deeper integration of human

kind. To him, American imperialism and consumerism as well as Islamic fundamentalism both had to be destroyed in the movement toward a new world. We discussed esoteric ideas, such as the meaning of the Auroville symbol or as to why the Mother was always seated to the left of Sri Aurobindo. I once expressed my inability to read *The Agenda*, for (as opposed to my love for the *Entretiens*) I could not relate to the Mother as she came across in Satprem's transcripts. Georges explained that the Mother was always responding to the consciousness of the person in front of her, and one of the book-projects that he wanted to work on was to provide a proper introduction to *The Agenda*. We talked about the changing mores in India, and again he wanted to write a booklet addressed to Indian youth. We chatted about fellow Aurovilians – while Georges occasionally complained that Aurovilians knew little about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, he held this experiment of Auroville in high esteem and commended Aurovilians for making that great leap toward the building of a new world. He knew that progress in the yoga depended on one's sincerity and openness and not on an intellectual understanding. It was to assert Auroville's importance and boost its self-esteem that he subtitled his last book *Preparing for the Miraculous 'Eleven Talks in Auroville'*, for he regarded those talks to be a gift from Auroville to the world.

As a writer and lecturer, Georges' greatest gift was his shining love for and devotion to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. It sometimes came blazingly through in his talks, and left his audience palpably touched. As a writer, decrying an overtly academic or objective stance, he openly said that he could only write from the perspective of a devotee for to do otherwise would be to "be schizophrenic and split myself into two."

As a person, Georges' greatest gift was that

he was a truly good human being. Unassuming by nature, compassionate and patient with the struggles of others, quick to laugh at his own foibles, with a ready sense of humor and an undisguised love for good food and the occasional glass of beer. The Mother once talked about two major movements in yoga: one renounces everything to focus only on the Divine; the other embraces everything in its search for the Divine – Georges and I both leaned toward the latter movement.

The help that I got from Georges was perspective: He had a remarkable gift of interpreting and contextualizing both personal problems in life as well as current events in the world in the larger context of Integral Yoga. If one looks back on one's life, one realizes that there have been only a handful of people who have truly helped in one's own evolutionary journey toward personal growth and development. Georges was definitely one of those beacons in my life.

Georges will sorely be missed in Auroville. As a few Aurovilians mentioned to me, in the days after his passing, that Georges was a fount of aspiration who imbued our collective effort with depth and meaning. His books will of course continue to live on. Indeed they have been given a new lease of life now that, with the help of Stichting Aurofonds and Robert Imhoff, one of his fans, they have been released as e-books. This was the last project he worked on: He had to re-read all his books – proofread and correct scanned versions – and essentially reviewed the work that he had done in his last decades as a scholar of Integral Yoga. He mentioned that afternoon at Goodman's that he was satisfied with his accomplishments and reminded me, how in his last *darshan*, the Mother had tapped him twice – Georges felt that by doing so the Mother had blessed both his life and the books he felt so compelled to write.

Bindu

Crusader in clay and canvas

In August, Henk van Putten's 'Art on Sunday' exhibited pottery and paintings of Adil Writer. An interview.

Auroville Today: Can you tell us a little about your life journey which led you here?

Adil: I grew up in Bombay and did my bachelor's degree in architecture there. Then I went to the US and did a master's degree in architecture, in urban design, after which I worked in San Francisco for a while as an architect. I didn't like that lifestyle enough to want to spend the rest of my life there, so I returned to my roots, to Bombay, where I worked as an architect for over ten years. Then I took a break to come to Pondicherry to study pottery.

In 1998 I came to Golden Bridge Pottery which is run by two wonderful Americans, my teachers Deborah Smith and Ray Meeker. During my two years at Golden Bridge, I got friendly with people in the Ashram and also with some potters in Auroville. This raised my comfort level to a point where I felt that this was where I wanted to set up my studio. I truly don't recall a spark of a moment when I decided that I was not returning to my life and job in Bombay and staying in Auroville.

So I joined Auroville in 2000. My studio is Mandala Pottery in Dana where I have two partners, Chinmayi from Germany and Anamika from Holland, and we have four people working with us. We like to stay small; it is very easy

to get too spread out as ceramics is on a huge high these days in India. Everybody wants to buy handmade pots. New and old clients are coming to us every week asking for new shapes, new forms, new colours. I travel the world and talk about this to people, who are amazed that is what is happening in India. Internationally, the misconception of ceramics in India is that we still make only elephants and horses, and low temperature terracotta work. I make it a point to correct this mindset by presenting contemporary Indian ceramics wherever and whenever I can.

Eighty percent of the work we do at Mandala is functional, mostly tableware, practical things you use in your daily life. We sell in the Auroville boutiques in Auroville and Pondy and also in many cities in India. We take export orders only if they don't require us to get too regimented; for the mass-produced look there are industries. People who want 'a twist' in their aesthetics come to us. Then, in our spare time, we do exhibition work, or 'studio pottery' as the world calls it, which includes architectural murals and site-specific installations. Today, one can't solely live off studio ceramics so we keep the production work going. I feel blessed that we are able to straddle both these worlds of clay, which we find enjoyable as well as fulfilling.

Can you talk about what you try to express in your art?

My recent solo exhibition at Henk's place in Petite Ferme was a bit of a rarity, because I normally show more clay work than paintings. Here it was the other around. I showed works which I had done in the past eight years. I paint in my atelier at home, mostly post 7 p.m. I guess this is how I unwind. Whereas architecture and ceramics came up later in life, I have been painting since I was three years old, accompanying my mom, who is also an artist, to her painting classes. Because I like to paint and I like to make pots, I am trying to come up with a language that combines the two mediums.

I am currently working on what I call the "Crusades Series" which is partly clay and partly canvas. I like it when people touch the panels, they being very tactile and experiential. In India people pay lakhs of rupees for a painting on canvas, but when you have something very beautiful in clay, they are not willing to shell out anything close to that price for it. I have an issue with that, because it creates and encourages a divide between art and craft; according to me, this distinction is nonsense, it's manmade. In Sanskrit, there is just one term, *kal*, which stands for both art and craft. It is also the same in Japanese culture. That is why I call it the crusade series – it is my crusade to bring the canvas and the clay together until one doesn't know the difference. As a concept it works very well too. People understand what I am trying to emphasize.

Some years ago the red dot first appeared in my work – a symbol, an icon



Crusades Series #1,2,3,4 (ceramic and acrylic on canvas)

that picks up on Indian spirituality, on the sacredness of the red, on the third eye. I use it on my pots as well as in my paintings. I try hard to make it look like the real *tika* that adorns the forehead of the Indian women. When someone sees this sort of mark in a pot they know it's mine! It's become my signature.

I often use text from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* in my work. I like it to be a little visually hazy; I don't want it to be "in your face"; it is a kind of decoration technique for me. I like text because of the free flow the scalpel gives me on soft clay, or the brush or the back of the brush gives me on acrylic on canvas. I also paint on canvases printed with photographic images of what I click myself, painting over them till there is hardly any remnant of the original image I started out with.

Can you say something about how someone like myself should approach a piece of abstract art?

I feel any medium of art has to touch you in one way or another. It doesn't have to be something that you can translate to something you already know; it has to work on a subconscious level, it should be something you don't know. Very often, people will say, this looks

like a face, or this looks like a flower. Sometimes it's okay to do that, because you connect with what you see in it; but if you let go of that preconceived idea you will see so much more in that work and it will be far more rewarding. And every day when you look at a work in a different light or even at a different time, you will see something new happening in it.

Mostly the canvas tells me what to do. I never sit down and say "Today I'm going to paint a picture that is angular with blue and green." On a particular day, given a certain time, given a certain atmosphere around me, even given what colors I have at my disposal, the painting just happens. The most I may say is that for the next three months I am going to work on one theme, but it is never something that is sketched out and translated onto canvas. I let the canvas and the paints and the brush do it for me. I like it to be free-flowing, not something that I've structured.

I have been here 12 years now, but I have never once felt "I am going to work today." I say, "I am going to my studio," which is a very different way of looking at it. It's not work as long as you like what you are doing. The minute that changes, it's time to move on, isn't it?

Larry

PHOTO COURTESY: ADIL



Adil at work in his studio

LETTER

"Contacting the evolving Auroville" - a response

In the August 2012 edition of Auroville Today you have published an interesting article by Alan with the title "Contacting the evolving Auroville". The article tries to deal with a "major unsolved tension in Auroville today" which the author describes as the opposition between the 'given' and the 'emerging'. The article invites the reader to be part of a collective call for Mother's guidance ("the call has to be absolutely sincere...") and a huge and concerted effort into making contact with the evolving reality of Auroville and of Mother.

The article misses an important element that is according to me the real cause of the "major unsolved tension". But let us first comment on the article's proposition.

Alan raises the following question: "Would she (the Mother), for example, want us to materialize the original Galaxy Plan in the minutest detail." This question does not arise because the

Galaxy Plan has no minute details and even the Master Plan that is based on it needs still to be detailed in the form of detailed development plans. The question is not rigidity versus flexibility or attachment to minute details versus connecting with the evolving Auroville.

The real challenge is the, indeed unsolved, tension field between on the one hand the attachment to the present Auroville (the greenery, the life style, the perceived absolute freedom, the dream house in a bungalow park, the long annual summer breaks, the 'we have settled down – do not disturb us' culture) and, on the other hand, the need to work for the evolving Auroville by planning and developing a city for 50,000 that will undoubtedly change the present familiar organically grown landscape. People who are perceived to be against the Galaxy Plan may in fact be against any plan in any shape or size that disturbs the present environment and some have even said

so. Those who believe that the Galaxy Plan is outdated have not yet proposed inspiring alternatives. But I am pretty sure that if they would do so, the same tension that exists today will be felt and then also every tree and every meter of road and familiar landscape will have to be "negotiated".

The issue is not flexibility versus rigidity but development versus stagnation, attachment to the present environment (physical and otherwise) versus creating space for a new and open environment so that another 48,000 aspiring residents can join the adventure of consciousness in a city setting. It is not attachment to the galaxy concept versus discovery of the evolving Auroville but attachment to the present versus a push for the future. It is settlement versus development and "community" versus city that is the root cause of the "major unresolved tension".

Therefore in addition to "contacting the evolving Auroville" as suggested by Alan, we

need to evolve pretty fast into a critical mass of people who actually want an evolving and developing Auroville with a great sense of urgency and detach ourselves from the present environment of settlements and "communities". (Even long term well-wishers of Auroville start increasingly perceiving Auroville as a privileged community enjoying the comforts of a resort.)

Let us indeed follow the Mother's inspiring examples of flexibility, plasticity and creativity and get going with the work of developing and building the city with a sense of urgency and solve the hundreds of problems that undoubtedly will be faced with a great sense of commitment and in a work environment of joy.

Implementing the evolving city of Auroville is the need of the hour. Or would we prefer to remain attached to our comfortable life in a small community while quoting the books?

Toine van Megen

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