

Castles in the canopy

The TreeHouseCommunity is an Auroville-based undertaking that consists of an international team of state-of-the-art treehouse constructors. They share their unique combination of skills, in harmony with nature, around the world.



Philipp, Kim and Ilango on the treehouse platform with Luke and Sathyaji in the tree

Young Aurovilian Philipp has always been an adamant ambassador of sustainability. He is routinely named "the dreamer" by his friends and colleagues. When he speaks of his passion, he radiates a joyful vision that inspires many. For many years, he was seeking to live in a way that respects the surrounding ecology, and was searching for a way to live with nature rather than destroy it by making way for housing projects. In his teens, inspired to find an alternative way to live with nature, he built a few treehouse platforms in the Youth Centre. From then on, he began experimenting more and researching further by building treehouses as living spaces. Born and growing up in Auroville, he then left in his twenties to travel the world in search of more like-minded people who care about the environment and who actively research sustainable living. His journey took him to Brazil where he lived in dense forests while continuing to research trees and the dwelling spaces they can provide. With each passing day, his dream of building castles in the canopies took on new dimensions and his passion soared to new heights.

Through his travels he slowly created a network of fellow treehouse constructors who together form an international community that goes beyond geography and is named the TreeHouseCommunity. It operates out of Auroville and has grown into a dynamic global network of people who both build and maintain treehouses around the world. So far, the TreeHouseCommunity has constructed living spaces in trees and alternative houses in Europe, India and Brazil. Some of their finest work can be seen in and around Auroville and in Chennai, Kodaikanal, and Mangalore.

Currently, he and his team of 10 passionate friends and colleagues live and work together in Auroville. At the moment, they are completing treehouse number 21 and starting number 22. "Besides what we do with treehouses, we also like to explore other things, like designing sky parks, zip lines, suspension bridges, log-swings, see-saws, and we also undertake wood art in the form of furniture," says Philipp. "We look into organic building styles for many things. Permaculture is also an important aspect of our work that we focus on below every treehouse we build because the roots

and the earth under the tree are just as much part of the tree as the visible stem and branches. 500 treehouses in the next ten years! That's my destiny," he says.

"The idea came up when I was in Brazil, and then I further developed it here in Auroville as well as during my travels in Germany. Admittedly, I don't usually plan the future as I like to live day by day, but I know that I really want to work with treehouses and to learn all that I possibly can in this adventure. I want to extend the playground across the whole ecosystem! All forests that allow people to live in them have majestic and sacred trees. Those trees can then house us beings who can also protect that forest. We want to build all over the world because each and every treehouse inspires others and ultimately will change people's mindset about living in trees. I saw that treehouses are oftentimes only considered as temporary and not as living spaces. We want to change that. It's all about the trees."

Luke, a volunteer who has been working with TreeHouseCommunity for one year, explains further: "We believe that treehouses and other kinds of sustainable or natural structures can help us re-evaluate the connection we have with our environment. Treehouses are often thought of as mystical places only seen in fairy-tales and not as the real living spaces which we are building. The driving force behind TreeHouseCommunity is a passion to influence a positive change in consciousness and lifestyle. Treehouses help people to reconnect with nature, either by just spending a little time in it on a holiday or retreat, or by actually living in it."

Treehouse Engineering

A large treehouse can add a few tons of material to a tree. This has to be carefully engineered in order to enable the tree to continue living and growing healthily. There are many design considerations. For example, the treehouse has to be

TreeHouse community waving from the canopy. From top to bottom, left to right: Mahindra, Philipp, Keya, Angeli, Luke, Virya, Noé, Muna, Satya, Ilango, Sebastian, Mojib, Mostaffa. Missing from the photo: Narayan, Kim, Julie, Shonah, Simon, Gabriel, Pedro, Christian, Robert, Raluca, Yogi and many more.

perfectly centered and built around the trunk of the tree to ensure that it doesn't have a toppling effect. Sometimes, steel cables have to be installed on upper branches in order to support certain areas of the treehouse so that not all the weight of the treehouse is on the lower branches.

Another essential aspect to consider is keeping the center of gravity of a treehouse as low as possible. Otherwise, this would mean the treehouse would sway in high winds. The first and largest branches that are available to work with become an important loading point for the treehouse. From there, a series of vertical and diagonal beams can be placed that lead to it. As the treehouse gains height, the upper structures can then be supported by the lower structures and the staircase post. For extra strength and stabilisation, one can also use steel cables as inter-tree connections. Noé, who was in Auroville since he was a toddler, and has returned from a year abroad in New Zealand has recently joined the team at TreeHouseCommunity. He explains that using lightweight material such as canvas is a way to ensure that the weight on the tree is minimised. "After a few years and after the tree has become more tolerant towards the extra weight, we can always replace the lightweight material with wood, which is of course much more beautiful and our favourite material," he says.

"Every section that we add to a treehouse changes the dynamic of how the house looks and fits in the tree," says Luke, "and like a never ending mosaic we add new pieces to the puzzle every day."

Inge van Alphen

For more information visit:
www.treehousecommunity.net



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Nari Shakti Puraskar - 2016 for Dr Nandita Shah

On International Women's Day, SHARAN founder and Aurovilian Dr. Nandita Shah received the Nari Shakti Puraskar 2016 from the President of India.

March 8, 2017. The Durbar Hall of Rashtrapati Bhavan, India's Presidential Palace, was filled with government officials, awardees and their friends. After a brief speech of Smt. Maneka Sanjay Gandhi, the Union Minister of Women and Child Development, the President of India, the honourable Shri Pranab Mukherjee, conferred the Nari Shakti Puraskar 2016 on 33 eminent women, organisations and institutions in recognition of their achievement in promoting positive change and being examples among women. Amongst them was Aurovilian Dr. Nandita Shah who received the award in recognition of her years of dedicated service to spread awareness about food as medicine and her work towards animal rights and the environment. After the ceremony, the awardees were congratulated by Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi for their pioneering achievements, both in their individual capacities and as torchbearers in their respective fields.

For Nandita, the award is a recognition of the work which she has been doing so passionately and for so long. "Everybody believes that they need medicine to get healed. It is really hard for people to grasp the concept that they can get well without medicine. But medicines have never cured diseases such as diabetes, hypertension or high blood pressure."

Nandita's philosophy is that every animal requires food that is natural to its anatomy and physiology, and it's the same with humans. More than eleven years ago she started SHARAN – Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature – which is spreading awareness about holistic health, how to lead an ecologically sustainable and compassionate lifestyle, and how to prevent and reverse lifestyle diseases through food and nutrition.

Through workshops and retreats, she has promoted a natural, organic, healthy and non-violent diet. "I am a medical doctor by profession, but at SHARAN we do not prescribe medicines or expensive supplements, nor recommend surgery that is not essential. We provide simple, scientific information about what to avoid and how to prepare healthy food. Everyone can learn to do this and so become their own doctor and lead a healthier and happier life."

SHARAN has several ways of communicating its message. The most experiential – and at about Rs 300,000 a person all-in, the most expensive – is a 21-day residential programme in SwaSwara, a five-

star resort in Gokarna in south Goa. In this retreat, healthy food patterns are reintroduced and the body is trained to no longer crave the food which is unhealthy. "Our team of doctors and professionals evaluate the medical records of a person before admission, and at the beginning and at the end lab tests are done. During the retreat delicious natural food is served, and the intake of medicines is reduced. People are taught which foods are healthy and which should be avoided, and how to prepare them. The results are 100%," says Nandita. "We have seen that lifestyle diseases such as diabetes and high blood pressure can be healed by simply changing the food patterns."

A second outreach of SHARAN is through its one-day seminars, which are conducted all over India. "Not everyone can afford our 21-day programme, either in time or money," says Nandita. "Our day programmes answer to that need. Here we reach very large numbers." Last but not least there is SHARAN's website www.sharan-India.org, which provides information and has publications including cooking books for free downloading. Nandita's book *Reversing Diabetes in 21 Days* will be published by Penguin and is scheduled for release by the end of the year.

The award, says Nandita, should serve as an impetus for her work. "Our dream is a diabetes-free India, but we are miles from that – even though we have already positively impacted the lives of over 20,000 people in India and abroad. In fact, the rest of the world is turning quicker in that direction than India, which is lagging behind. In the West, vegan and organic food restaurants are easy to find. In India they are still a rarity, even though the incidence of diabetes is on the rise." However, more institutions and individuals have started doing similar work, some of them trained by Nandita. "There is a website 'Freedom from Diabetes', which features the work of one of my trainees," she says. Nandita plans to invite highly placed Government officials to participate in a seminar. That, she feels, would really have an impact.

"Because my system is not main-stream, it is viewed with a bit of



The President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee honours Dr. Nandita Shah with the Nari Shakti Puraskar on March 8, 2017, International Women's Day. The award carries a cash prize of Rs 100,000.

scepticism," acknowledges Nandita. "And Auroville, sadly, is no exception. For more than nine years in a row, except for the last two years, I have been giving 'Peas vs Pills' workshops at the Quiet Healing Centre. But Aurovilians rarely participated – instead, the room was filled by enthusiastic guests." For the ease of work, SHARAN is not an Auroville unit. "SHARAN engages 35 people and I am the only Aurovilian," she says. "We have clients from all over India, and I didn't feel it was right to do this through Auroville." Nandita's other activity, Vegan Essence, is an Auroville unit which makes vegan cheeses and other vegan spreads. These are only available at the Auroville food outlets.

Nandita acknowledges that she would never have done what she has done if it were not for Auroville. "I have been coming to Auroville every year since 1985, and joined in 1999. Actually, I was 'told' to come. Auroville has a tremendous impact. I wouldn't have been able to shift my consciousness if I hadn't come to Auroville and I am forever grateful to Auroville for what I am doing. SHARAN got born from my experience here."

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GOVERNANCE

Auroville: E-mail savvy but not e-governance savvy

Bindu reflects on Auroville governance.

I inwardly groaned when I realized I had to apply for a fresh Indian passport. India has a notorious reputation for being a "bureaucracy-Raj" (bureaucratic Government), and I was not looking forward to the prospect of being indefinitely entangled in our national red-tape.

My jaw, proverbially speaking, fell open when I realized that, having submitted my application online and then presenting myself for an interview in Chennai, it took exactly 15 minutes for three officers to check and approve my documents, and within 24 hours, I had received a phone message saying that a new passport had been issued and would reach me in two days. (I concede there was a two-hour wait in a crowded office, but this could be explained by it being New Year's Eve.) The entire process made me realize that we are now in an e-age of governance, and in many government offices in India, e-governance has greatly expedited administrative processes. Such offices, I learned, had improved their efficiency due to successful private-public partnerships. A new initiative by the Ministry of Urban Development, called Smart Cities, envisions introducing e-governance in selected cities in India.

Contrast my experience with another administrative process in Auroville. Last year, Foodlink submitted an application to Auroville's Town Development Council (TDC) for a site to house a future building. The permission was given. This year, while submitting the application for the building, it turned out that nobody could find the actual site permission. The TDC secretary trawled through all her emails with increasingly sophisticated search strings, but drew a blank. Luckily, the architect had an e-copy, on the basis of which the TDC issued the requested building application. One hears similar stories of poor record-keeping and delayed processes in other key governing groups of Auroville.

Auroville working groups tend to blame delays on lack of human resources. But information technology is designed precisely to expedite such processes with minimal human resources. When I went for my passport application in Chennai, a trained secretary met me at my appointed time, cross-checked the data I had filled in online with the hard copy documents, scanned the documents she needed, and clicked and uploaded a mug-shot, all in less than 10 minutes. In Auroville, generally speaking, for every step of the process, one has to ask the

necessary group in person or by email for the guidelines. Sadly, for a community that once led India in being IT-connected, Auroville is now falling behind the curve in technology-assisted governance.

E-governance

E-governance can be defined as the application of information and communication technology to delivering government services as well as facilitating interactions of government-to-citizen, government-to-business and government-to-government. E-governance can greatly facilitate people's participation in governance, something that is valued in Auroville. At its full potential, e-governance can provide services to the citizens in an efficient and transparent manner, for it is supported by IT-enabled back-end operations and shared databases that allow governing groups to expedite their decision-making processes. For example, at present, when resolving an issue, the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) asks the concerned party or group via email to provide the necessary documentation, for example, an NOC, as it cannot go online to check if a NOC has been given or not.

We have aspects of e-governance in Auroville, such as the electronic transactions of Financial Services, the online library database that allows for easier follow-up with overdue books, and the use of email in our communication. But, as a community, we are not e-governance savvy. We are more email-savvy (of course, the degree of savviness or email literacy varies among individuals and across groups). Many of us have learnt to use email as a primary mode of communication (a decade ago, people were grumbling about having to deal with issues over email, preferring face-to-face meetings), and applications can be sent by email. But emails are a double-edged sword – they do not always provide efficiency as they are merely an extension of face-to-face discussions, and they can increase one's workload.

Being e-governance savvy implies having user-friendly online platforms that would allow Aurovilians to upload applications for starting a business unit, stewardship of an asset, or to avail a basic service. This online information would be accessible to all groups over a shared database, and thereby could facilitate their decision-making process. For example, instead of trawling through countless emails for a piece of information, one

would merely check the database. Shared online databases also allow for transparency and thereby can increase the citizens' trust in the governing groups.

E-governance also implies facilitating inter-group work through the use of IT-tools. Some online platforms such as Google Drive and other Google tools, Dropbox, Red Mine etc. are currently used by some groups, such as the Residents Assembly Service (RAS) and FAMC, in their work. Bluelight (an open-source software development unit in Auroville) and the Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) have also developed a prototype online database to share Geographical Information System (GIS) data, which will allow groups to review information about Auroville's immovable assets more easily.

The current FAMC is aware of the crucial need for structured, online, shared databases that can be easily synced and updated and plans to collaborate with two Auroville groups – ASyncto (which specializes in creating shared databases) and Aurostat for populating the databases with data and sharing it online. But we lag behind in offering online services to the public.

E-governance as a step in the evolution of organizations

Being e-governance savvy does not, of course, mean that we will reach the Mother's organisational ideal of replacing "the mental government of intelligence by the government of a spiritualized consciousness" (The Mother. The Mother's Agenda, Vol. 8, 1981: 454) If anything, e-governance or use of IT-enabled tools represents the logical efficiency of the mind.

But it would be a crucial mistake to assume that in our desire to act from a spiritualized consciousness, we can bypass the evolutionary step of a "mental government of intelligence." As Sri Aurobindo tells us, we can expedite the evolutionary process but not jump the evolutionary stages.

In order to do this, we need good governance of the rational mind and intelligence. I believe the way to do this is by embracing e-governance and use of IT-tools to at least bring about greater efficiency and transparency in our governance.

The Police State: The shadow side of IT-tools

Any article on e-governance would be incomplete without admitting that information

technology also potentially allows governments to conduct surveillance of their own citizens without their knowledge and to use, or rather misuse, personal data against individuals. In our age, the power and the reach of the United States Government in conducting mass surveillance has been exposed by the likes of whistle-blowers such as Julian Assange and Edward Snowden. The online website WikiLeaks, founded by Assange, regularly publishes leaked documents alleging government misconduct. Even in our small town, questions have been raised about who has access to the personal data of Aurovilians collected by the Residents' Service. And, in India, social activists protested when the Indian Government tried to enforce a bio-metric ID card, Aadhar, on its citizens. These activists allege that mass data collection and surveillance by a government is not so much about protecting its citizens as about allowing the government to stay in power. Use of IT-tools can be of immense help in better governance, but IT-tools can also pose risks to democratic governance.

But reflecting on this issue from the perspective of social evolution, I would opine that every evolutionary step has its hazards. How a society navigates the dangers of our current information era is a measure of its collective wisdom, or to be precise, the wisdom of the individuals who govern.

In *The Life Divine*, Sri Aurobindo discusses at length the dialectical relationship between the individual and society, recognizing the difficulty of achieving the evolutionary ideal of a perfect society where the society and the individual exist in unified harmony. As he puts it, a perfect society allows for the perfection of the individual while a perfect society "can exist only by the perfection of its individuals" (1972: 1051).

I am by no means suggesting that e-governance will allow for the emergence of this ideal evolutionary stage. For as Sri Aurobindo says, this evolutionary stage can only be achieved with the unfolding of a deeper knowledge within us that is both integral and unifying.

Bindu

Bindu serves as a member of the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC). Her views in this article are not representative of FAMC as a group.

Proposal for a solar energy plant

On the 3rd of March this year, Varuna presented their plans for a solar energy plant in a General Meeting (GM). *Auroville Today* reports on the meeting and looks at the wider issue of solar power in Auroville.

Human global energy use is 18 terawatts per year. That is 18 trillion watts. This looks like a huge amount of energy till you compare it to the amount of solar energy that is received by the earth every year, which is 173,000 terawatts. Clearly, we get more than enough energy to power all our drives.

Solar energy is not new in Auroville. Off-grid communities in the Green Belt have used solar panels for many years. Solar power received a big boost between 1997 and 2000, when a government scheme gave more than 80% subsidy for solar pumps. Many of the solar panels you see in Green Belt houses were bought during this period.

The second big spike in solar power usage in Auroville came during the 2011-13 power crisis in Tamil Nadu, when Aurovilians often had electricity for just four or five hours a day. Solar power was quite expensive in those days, but many residents saw the advantage of self-sufficiency. And then there was Cyclone Thane, which disrupted the power supply from the grid for 21 days while those with solar panels were not affected. More than 60 kilowatts (kW) of solar power was installed in the two months following the cyclone.

It wasn't only a series of unfortunate events which led us to use renewable energy. A 2009 draft of the Auroville Energy Vision states:

"In Auroville, energy will be consumed as a means to achieve a higher level of collective consciousness rather than for the fulfilment of personal desires and comforts. Auroville will be a township that consumes energy only from sustainable energy sources. To the extent that Auroville uses energy from non-sustainable sources for the building of the town, surplus sustainable energy shall be produced to compensate for such consumption. A change of consciousness and the transformation of matter are essential to achieve ultimate integral sustainability."

Aurovilians have always been deeply connected with renewable energy, especially solar power. We currently generate about 150 kW of solar power from the rooftops of individual residential buildings, mostly in the Green Belt. These solar systems are not interconnected. In recent years, the focus has shifted to grid-connected solar power systems set up on the rooftops of large buildings, such as the Town Hall, SAIER and Maroma.

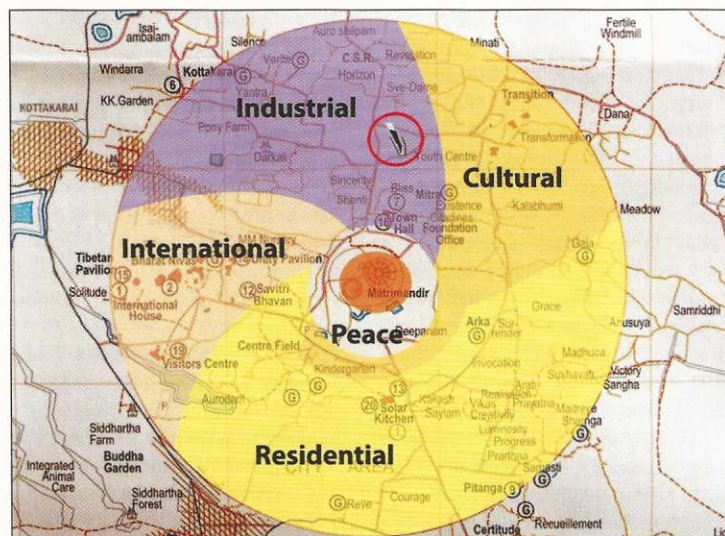
The advantage of these grid-connected systems is that they share the load. So, if SAIER generates surplus power, it is fed back into the Auroville grid and another building, which has a deficient power, can use this surplus. The installed capacity of grid-connected rooftop solar is already 150 kW. An additional capacity of about 350 kW can be installed on unused rooftops of large buildings, such as Bharat Nivas and Visitors Centre. Also, rooftop solar is an intrinsic part of most new housing projects, such as Sun Ship and Kalpana.

The entire Town Hall and Matrimandir area is now connected to the Auroville grid, which is an internal, Auroville-owned system, designed to make our electricity generation and distribution independent of the unreliable state system. This grid will expand till it covers all of the Master Plan area. An underground high-tension (HT) distribution ring will encircle the Auroville grid.

Moving to renewable energy

Moving to renewable energy, however, is not just a matter of setting up solar panels or windmills. Before we set up the infrastructure, we must look at our needs, think of ways in which we can conserve energy and identify the kinds of appliances that will use minimal energy.

Some of the criticism around Varuna's in-kind supply of electricity, with residents not paying for their energy consumption, is that it does not encourage consumers to take a hard look at these three



Location of the proposed solar power plant

aspects. Because electricity is "free," it is possible that consumers will not use energy in a conscious way. Also, paying for energy might generate financial resources for setting up our energy infrastructure.

Is wasteful use of energy a problem in Auroville? Varuna's data shows that growth in energy consumption has slowed down after the introduction of "free" electricity. However, it is hard to tell from just one bar graph if Aurovilians are more conscious users of energy now. Growth in consumption can be affected by many factors, including population growth, so we might need to look at that set of data in more detail. Ultimately, how much energy we consume has as much to do with our values as it has to do with availability and cost.

Varuna's proposal

Varuna's proposal for a solar power plant is one piece of the larger energy puzzle. Varuna has a plan to produce large amounts of solar energy, initially using on-ground solar panels. The panels will be set up in phases, with the first phase rated at 50 kilowatts (kW). The complete project will generate 560 kW of power.

The problem with on-ground systems is that there can be no trees to cast shadows on the solar panels. The original location of the project was thickly forested and the Forest Group, understandably, objected to cutting the trees. The Forest Group came back with two alternative locations – the Gaia Erisbee field and the Adventure sports ground.

Neither of these alternatives worked for Varuna, especially because these sites are not in the industrial sector, where The Mother had indicated that Auroville's power would be generated. Varuna has proposed a new location in the industrial sector, which minimises the impact on mature trees.

Location of the proposed solar power plant in the industrial sector

Straddling the Crown Road, the proposed location works well because it is close to the HT distribution ring, which is planned to follow the Crown Road. One of the most interesting points in Michael Bonke's presentation during the GM was the fact that the solar plant is being planned exactly where one of the Lines of Force is meant to be built. This means that the solar panels will be moved to the rooftop of the Line of Force when the building is completed. In effect, this is a rooftop solar plant waiting for the roof to be built.

There is one question that did not come up in the GM: when the Line of Force is under construction, what will happen to the solar pan-

els? Such a building is likely to take a few years to construct. So, the panels will have to be decommissioned or will have to be moved to a different location. Which means we will either lose a lot of power generation or we will have to find a large tract of barren land.

The biggest problem with solar power is that the sun does not always shine. So, Varuna's plan does not end with power generation, but extends to storage as well. The plan is to build a set of interconnected lakes at different altitudes [see *AVToday* February 2012, #271]. During the day, solar power would pump water from the lower lakes to one or more higher lakes. At night, the water would flow down from the higher lakes through turbines, generating electricity.

Although this might sound far-fetched, pumped-storage hydro-electricity, as it is technically called, is quite common. In fact, this method of power storage makes up 97% of all grid-level storage in the United States. Some of these pumped-storage facilities are massive, generating thousands of megawatts of electricity. This is a tried and tested technology.

In the Auroville context, the only question is the location and size of the lakes. Some of the lakes might have to be located outside the Master Plan area to get larger spaces and to give more height difference between the higher and lower lakes. The proposed Matrimandir lake may be a part of this interconnected system of lakes.

And what about the water that will be needed to fill the lakes? Varuna has an answer to this as well – in addition to rainwater harvesting, the water will come from a desalination plant. Work on the piping for the desalination plant is already going on [see *AVToday* December 2016, #329]. Work on the plant itself has not started.

Desalination is somewhat controversial, with the process needing a lot of energy and generating a lot of pollutants. According to Michael Bonke, the plant will run entirely on wind and solar power, and will not use any chemical cleaners. The waste product, highly saturated brine, will be deposited very far into the sea, reducing the impact on coastal ecosystems. Unfortunately, there are no long-term studies of the effect of dumping desalination waste into the sea. So, from an ecological perspective, desalination still has a few questions around it.

Some of the discussions about solar power in Auroville have been around the issue of ground-based systems versus rooftop solar. Large-scale plants that are set up on the ground obviously need large open spaces. Typically, these are set up in areas that are unsuitable for farming or forests. The advantage of ground-based systems is cost – with economies of scale, these large-scale plants are cheaper to set up. The proposed solar plant in the industrial sector is not particularly large, so there is no real cost advantage. Also, with the Varuna panels to be ultimately placed on the roof of a Line of Force, the ground versus rooftop debate is mostly meaningless.

The General Meeting

How effective was the GM? In view of the strong objections from the Forest Group, the GM was called to share the project and site details so that the community is better informed for giving feedback when the site application is published. Unfortunately, there was very little discussion of the site itself, the objections of the Forest Group and the alternative site proposals. In fact, there were only two members of the Forest Group present at the meeting.

The meeting also pointed to a fundamental question about decision making in Auroville. Should important technical decisions be left to a select group of technocrats? Or should every Aurovillian have a say in every decision, no matter how technical or complex? Like most questions in Auroville, the answer is far from clear.

Manas

MATRIMANDIR

Matrimandir Lake mini test ponds research completed

In February, the report on the mini tests ponds research project was released.

In September 2014, *Auroville Today* reported on the building of six mini test ponds to assess how best to build and waterproof the future Matrimandir Lake. In February this year, the report of the two-year research project was submitted to the Matrimandir executives.

The research was carried out under the supervision of a German technological institute, the LGA Nürnberg, and a Berlin-based Water-Construction Company headed by Harald Kraft.

The project had multiple targets. One was to study how best to build the lake and its embankment. Major techniques to build artificial lakes in India and abroad were studied to assess to what extent these could be used in Auroville taking the environmental and construction conditions into account. Of particular concern was if Auroville's relatively inexperienced construction team would be able to create such a water-body, with the technological equipment which is commonly used in South India.

A second target was to test various sealants over a period of two years. The aim was not only to find out which sealant is technically best, but also to evaluate how difficult the sourcing of the sealing material is, the ease of installing each sealant, how to rectify any construction mistakes, and which sealant is most cost-effective in terms of purchasing cost and long-term maintenance.

The sealants tested were natural clay from the Auroville surrounding area, compacted clay provided by a specialised company in Germany, 2 mm thick high density polyethylene (HDPE) foil manufactured by the German firm of Naue combined with geo-textile, and bentonite mats consisting of two layers of geofabric with bentonite – the swelling component of natural clay – in between.

The 'winner' in terms of sealing quality is compacted clay from Germany, closely followed by polyethylene foil and natural clay. Bentonite mats proved to be a failure. Also in terms of ease of installation, compacted

clay comes first, followed by natural local clay. Polyethylene foil and geo-textile required high vigilance and perfection and came last in the ease of laying.

But in terms of costs, compacted clay loses. The report uses the term 'exorbitant', as the costs include those of German clay, factory compacting, freight charges, import-duties and laying. The purchasing and maintenance costs of polyethylene foil are less, but only if no mistakes are made in the joining of the foils. For if a joint would open up and water would seep through, it would be extremely difficult to locate the mistake, maintenance would be very expensive.

Natural clay, here, is the clear winner. The purchasing price is the lowest of all tested sealants. It has the additional advantage that a hole in the sealant will be 'self-healing', because the seeping water will close a hole with sediments of clay in the course of time. This makes natural clay a very attractive solution.



But one of the problems of natural clay is the huge volume required – a layer of 40 cm thick has to be installed. To find such a quantity in a consistent and uniform quality is not easy. Other problems are there as well: it may be difficult to get permission to harvest the clay, and special permission is required to transport it to the construction site. If these problems can be solved, natural clay will be the best option. But if they are insurmountable, polyethylene foil combined with geo-textile would be the option of choice.

As a next step, a 10-metre deep test lake of 10% of the final lake area is planned to be built. This will show how the selected sealant behaves at this depth, if it expands or contracts and what happens when there is an earth movement. Sensors underneath the sealant will indicate if there is water seepage. As desalinated water is not yet available – the desalination plant is still in the planning phase – this test lake will have to be filled using ground and rainwater. The test will be over a period of one to two years.

Carel

Auroville, Findhorn and Arcosanti

In the late 1970s a young American, Peter Callaway, had a vision. He saw a globe of the world with three points of light radiating from it. He had no idea what it meant. But when he checked a map he discovered that the points of light corresponded geographically to the communities of Auroville in South India, Findhorn in Scotland and Arcosanti in Arizona.

When he discovered that all these communities shared a vision of a new world, he felt they would play a crucial role in planetary evolution. However, they were working in isolation from each other so he decided to link them by initiating projects. The Karass project funded the communities to make informational videos about themselves and to circulate them to each other. The Hexiad project allowed two members of each community to travel to the other communities and spend time working there.

Since then, quite a number of individuals have travelled between the communities. However, the linkages Peter dreamed of were never established at an institutional level.

One reason is that the communities are sometimes perceived as being very different from each other. In Auroville, for example, Findhorn has been stereotyped at times as "touchy-feely New Agey" while Arcosanti, if it is known at all, is sometimes dismissed as a failed utopian architectural project in the desert.

And there are major differences between the communities. Today, Arcosanti has a core community of only 70 people, Findhorn's population is around 400 while Auroville has 2,500 residents. Auroville is also far more culturally diverse than the

other two communities and there are profound differences in their core philosophies. Arcosanti is essentially an architectural experiment that seeks to promote a new form of urban living, Findhorn has a spiritual dimension but it tends to be rooted in a 'New' Christianity, most profoundly, Auroville's role is to hasten the evolution of a new humanity.

However, there are also striking similarities between the communities. They were all founded within eight years of each other in a particularly idealistic decade (Findhorn in 1962, Auroville in 1968, Arcosanti in 1970) and, unlike most of the other communities set up in those years, all have survived. All had charismatic founders who had a vision, albeit a rather different one, of a new world and all saw their communities as embryos or laboratories in which to explore new ways of being and living.

What is also interesting that all these communities are facing similar challenges today. These include issues of governance, of an ageing membership and of how to inspire youth to pour their energies into community. All three communities are now without their charismatic founders, so another challenge is how to interpret the original vision in the midst of a changing world and when few who knew the founder are still there.

Is it time for closer collaboration? Could we gain from what each community has achieved in its area of expertise? For example, Findhorn has done a great deal of work on group process and empowered leadership, something which both Arcosanti and Auroville are rather weak on, Arcosanti's experiments in dense urban living and ecological

design may hold clues for Auroville's urban development, and Auroville's multicultural setting and foundation in Integral Yoga may offer a way forward for the other communities to realise a deeper form of human unity.

In fact, between them these communities have over 150 years of experience and experimentation in areas like education, finance, sustainable construction, renewable energy, interpersonal relationships and the arts.

Interestingly, at the outset of the Karass and Hexiad projects some form of creative complementarity was anticipated. Here is an extract from an article in the summer, 1979 issue of *Collaboration*, the magazine of the Sri Aurobindo Association in the U.S.

If Arcosanti identifies itself with the physicality and goal of creating an urban container, then it may be one side of a triangle of physical-social-spiritual communities. Findhorn offers the emotional, social workings through its experiments in group process, family living and emphasis on human relationships. Auroville represents a transcultural undertaking which is oriented to spiritual matters. By networking these three communities, we support each other in that we recognize we are working for the same goals, though in different ways.

Recently, long-term members from both Findhorn and Arcosanti visited Auroville. We took the opportunity to explore with them the possibility of closer collaboration while inviting them to update us on their communities' present progress and challenges.

Alan

Findhorn

The Findhorn experiment began in a caravan park at Findhorn Bay on 17th November, 1962. Today, the Findhorn Foundation is one of the largest intentional communities in Britain and runs educational programmes for over 3,000 people a year. While it has no formal doctrine or creed, it attempts to apply spiritual values in daily life.

Michael and Gail Shaw started living at Findhorn in 1974. In 1979, they travelled to both Arcosanti and Auroville as representatives of Findhorn in the Hexiad project. They visit Auroville frequently.

Auroville Today: One of the intentions of the Hexiad project was to strengthen the links between the three communities. However, while there have been individual exchanges, it hasn't happened at the institutional level and there is still a feeling that the communities don't really know what to make of each other.

Michael: I agree. We need to get to know each other better.

How is Findhorn organized?

Michael: There are really two groups of Findhorn members. One is the staff of the Findhorn Foundation who maintain all the educational facilities and run the educational programmes, which are still a major source of income – and manage many of the other facilities. There are about 120 staff at present, and they constitute about a quarter of our population.

Then we have the larger community, some of whom live in the community while others live in the area (you have to be living within 50 miles of Findhorn to be a member).

Their organization is the New Findhorn Association (NFA). They do not receive a salary and many of them run their own businesses or organizations: there are about 43 organizations under the NFA.

What is the relationship between the larger community and the core Foundation members?

Michael: The larger community does not have the right to make policy decisions for the Foundation. There is an expectation that NFA businesses and organizations contribute financially or in kind to NFA and the Foundation. It is not much: I think it could be more, as is the expectation in Auroville.

How do you take major decisions?

Michael: It's somewhat different for the NFA and the Foundation. Major decisions for the Foundation are taken by the Trustees and by the Management Committee, who make their final decisions by 'attunement'. We may begin by examining

all the data and possibilities from a rational angle – like using the *Theory of Change* approach – but then we close the book on that, silence ourselves and go into a common inner space where we invoke the Angel of Findhorn and aspire to create the best outcome for all.

Sometimes we get a completely different answer through attunement to what had been indicated before in the rational mode, but we learn to trust decisions made in attunement.

The NFA is a little more democratic because the leaders of NFA are voted for by the membership. At present, policy decisions in NFA tend to be made using the *Sociocratic* process. This is more 'democratic' but, in my perception, far less efficient. Decisions that could have taken five minutes by attunement now take two hours!

So not all members of the Foundation would be consulted or involved in making major policy decisions?

Michael: No, the community has empowered the Trustees and Management Committee to do this. There are staff meetings, which everybody on staff is entitled to attend but these are for consultation. They are not decision-making meetings – that would be too chaotic.

In the past, we had something called a Council. To be a member you had to have been in the community for two years, to be committed to be a Council member for two years and promise to read all the papers. The Council had a process called *The Forum* as a means of reaching a certain consensus on an issue. But then it would still have to go to Management and the Trustees for attunement.

Gail: We have trends in governance: somebody will bring in something new and the whole community will try it for a time. The Forum was a trend, *Sociocracy* is a trend and there is this *Theory of Change*. We are at present in a "change process" where everything is up for review.

Are there certain things that have stood the test of time?

Gail: Yes, for many years we've used attunement and 'The Game'.

Michael: *The Planetary Game* is a large-scale version of the *Game of Transformation* involving many people and played around a life-sized Game path on the floor. It is a fun way to explore serious issues. They are often inspiring and give us a sense of where we, as a community, want to go next.

The Game has been around since the 1970s. Like attunement, people trust it because it works.

What is your entry process?

Michael: We have a one-year programme called LEAP – Living Essentials Apprentice Programme – for people who want to join the community, during

which they meet as a group, go through various induction processes and are encouraged to do workshops that provide insight in the way we do things. At the end of the year, they can apply for a staff position in the Foundation.

Our Spiritual and Personal Development Department (SPDD) will be involved in the final decision. They would take into account feedback from the focaliser and deputy-focaliser of the LEAP group to which the individual belonged, but the final decision would still be made through attunement.

During the year, LEAPs have 'supervision' sessions with somebody from SPDD. These sessions might deal with personal and interpersonal issues, but they would also explore their inner spiritual life.

Every member of Foundation staff also has supervision, and the big groups, like the Management Committee, have group supervision.

This sounds quite unlike the way we do things here. What can Auroville and Findhorn learn from each other?

Gail: We like to come here every winter because Auroville for us still has the 'buzz': there are very strong leaders here who are living the vision. In my view we have lost some of that by moving too much into things like sociocracy and democracy.

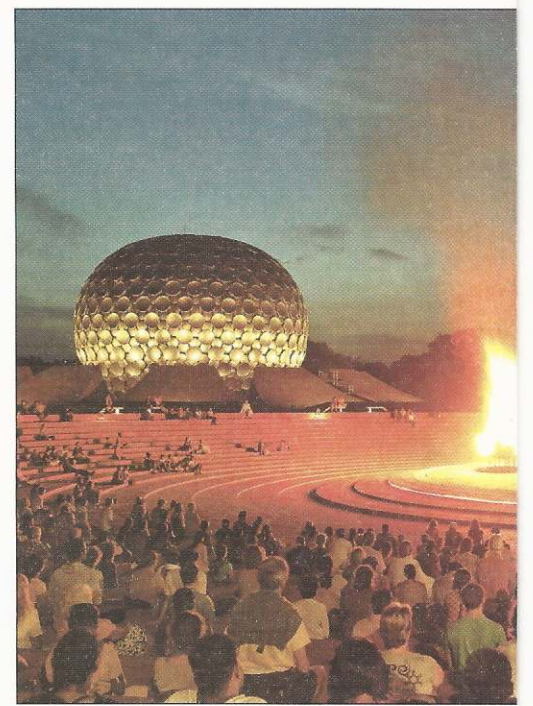
Michael: Findhorn is quite well managed at present but innovations are hard to implement. We have a strong balance sheet, but this is part of the problem because the current management does not want to push the boat out and take risks. In my view, we need to be adventurous if we are going to build a new society. Mind you, I have been involved in the finances for a long time and I don't know that I have been daring enough in that role.

What I think we should do now is borrow up to £1 million by leveraging our assets and set aside a fund for youth who wish to initiate sustainable projects, ideally with other communities, like Auroville or Tamera. There could be joint education and sustainable project programmes of six months, with three months spent in Auroville and three months in Findhorn then extended into the world. Working with refugees in camps and perhaps through Gaia Education and others is something that seems to have caught imaginations in Findhorn.

Michael: Auroville and Findhorn seem to be facing common challenges, so perhaps we can inspire each other to find solutions. For example, like Auroville we have an ageing population. Yet we haven't found a way to bring through enough young people who have fire in their bellies and are thoroughly enthralled by the Findhorn vision.

Gail: The youth at Findhorn are very active. They go to Calais to work in appalling conditions to help the refugees, or work with children in Macedonia. These exciting projects are somewhere else and not at Findhorn.

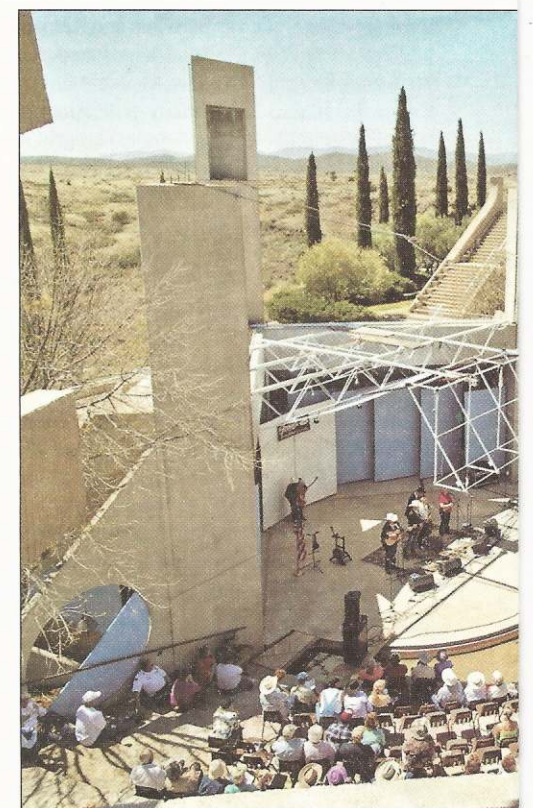
But wasn't it part of the original intention that



The Auroville bonfire



Community gather



Attending a con

people would come to Findhorn to be trained in certain skills and then take these out into the world?

Gail: Findhorn was always meant to be like an incubation chamber, a seeding ground. Many people did come to the Community for a few years to get trained and then went out to do projects elsewhere. However, I think it is important that the core of Findhorn remains strong and continues to be a source of inspiration. And for that we need to harness the energy of our young in our own communities as well as for projects elsewhere.

How would you propose to strengthen links between the communities?

Michael: One way of bringing Auroville and Findhorn closer together is to have a place here where Findhorn people can stay for short periods. Joss is keen on the idea and a small guesthouse is being built in Pitchandikulam with Findhorn's participation.

Arcosanti

megastructure, this concept is about separate nodes with common transportation.

But Arcosanti as a whole remains high density – some buildings are 10 storeys high in the latest design – to minimise the impact upon the environment. ‘Arcology’, the fusion of architecture with ecology, is one of Paulo’s core ideas.

Have Paolo’s ideas been influential in America and in the larger world?

David: There are many people in architecture and planning who have been influenced by Paolo’s ideas about sustainable design and who try to incorporate some aspect of his vision in their work.

Nadia: I work for an architect who is an alumni and is very much inspired by Soleri. He does a lot of green buildings and mixed-use projects. Another alumni has started a school of sustainable design and much of what he teaches comes straight from Paolo.

One perception which has hampered, perhaps, a closer collaboration with communities like Findhorn and Auroville, is that Arcosanti is not a spiritual community.

Nadia: A lot of people see it like that because Soleri was against organised religion, but when there were discussions about spirituality he would get really into it. When we had a visit from Debashish Banerji of the California Institute of Integral Studies, who is an authority on Sri Aurobindo, we organised a discussion between them about spiritual philosophy and they discovered they had a lot in common.

David: Paolo was influenced by Teilhard de Chardin and actually wrote a book called *The Bridge between Matter and Spirit is Matter becoming Spirit*. And he did talk very much about such things. However, he always said he did not want to be seen as a guru and that people should think for themselves.

He was very much for hands-on learning, for getting out of the classroom and working with matter. This was his yoga.

I didn’t recognise this at first. I always tell people that the only reason I could stay so long in Arcosanti was that I came to Auroville and learned about a whole other dimension to work, which is about bringing consciousness into matter.

Nadia: You can’t say that Paolo wasn’t spiritual. But I agree that this perception has hampered a closer relationship between the communities. These kinds of stereotypes need to be broken down.

The Findhorn people said they are finding it difficult to attract young energy while their core group, which is getting older, is becoming more concerned about maintaining the status quo rather than initiating new ventures. Does this sound familiar?

David: Very familiar! New people still come to Arcosanti because there are a lot of people out there looking for something different. They come with a light in their eyes but after a time they encounter the grey heads...

When I came to Arcosanti there was little bureaucracy, no policies, but now all that has changed. These things have their importance but they are also barriers for younger people who haven’t been part of developing them. The young crowd value things like inclusivity, transparency and accountability, which Arcosanti is weak on at present.

Nadia: We need these young people. In communities like ours, we have always struggled with communication and decision-making but these kids have different tools that bring a whole other level of communication and decision-making. I also find these young people much better at compromising than the older ones who are holding on to the power. There is a common consciousness among the young that might be able to push real change.

But perhaps the young are no longer so interested in community living?

David: The young today experience community through electronic connectivity so perhaps they don’t feel the need to go somewhere to take care of the land or experiment in building physical community.

Nadia: However, I think we will continue to attract those people who want something different out of life. What is interesting about Findhorn, Arcosanti and Auroville is that they are looking at things differently. There is a philosophy behind which says we need to be developing new kinds of

economy, new ways of living together, and which touches upon something that is higher than ourselves. Ultimately, we are all trying to do something that shifts consciousness. The hope is that, at one point, this will crystallise in something new.

What could Arcosanti and Auroville learn from each other?

Nadia: We’ve been pondering that a lot. Paolo wrote a lot about sustainability and about living in cities but it was usually tied to an architectural perspective. If you read *The Mother and Sri Aurobindo* the perspective, the beginning point, is clearly very different. This is why we have always been intrigued by the social architecture here and want to see if we can take something from it back to Arcosanti.

David: I think we can gain a lot from Auroville because you have been wrestling with similar issues to ours. For example, we were hoping to learn more in Auroville about more collaborative decision-making as I feel you’ve made more progress in this. At the very least, you are more transparent, you’re putting a lot of stuff out there and opening up on a lot of levels. That’s one reason we come here, because of all these examples of people trying to work together.

We would also like to see Arcosanti developing its industries so we can generate more income: funding is a huge issue for us as we get no government assistance. We can learn from what you’ve done about what works and what doesn’t. The book on the history of your economy is amazing: it is like a set of working drawings for designing a new economy.

We are also looking at developing Arcosanti International on the lines of Auroville International. We have alumni all over the world, so if we can develop centres in other countries, it will help us develop funding for specific projects.

Nadia: I think young people are very interested in the hands-on approach. I was happy to see the volunteers at Sacred Groves living on site and working on the buildings because this is the kind of thing that Soleri wanted.

I think our experience of running workshops where people live together while doing construction is one thing that Arcosanti could bring to Auroville.

How could the link between Arcosanti and Auroville be strengthened?

Nadia: We need educational programmes and ways of sharing our knowledge. This works really well when you have regular exchanges, individuals coming and going between the communities.

David: We could offer a scholarship for Aurovilians or people from Findhorn who want to attend our workshops and dedicate one of our living spaces for people who are visiting from these communities.

Nadia: I would like to see us developing something like an extended family in these communities, a network of friends within which we can share resources and experience.

You see it in terms of individual exchanges rather than institutional exchanges?

Nadia: I think both can happen.

David: I would propose inviting Aurovilians to be part of our Advisory Board or even to be on our Board of Trustees. Your knowledge would be so important to us.

In the early days, an Aurovillian offered to do a tree-planting programme in the desert around Arcosanti. Paulo said no, but imagine if it had happened and the desert had been greened: Arcosanti would be a very different place now. So this is the kind of knowledge which Arcosanti could use and you could help us with.

Arcosanti has developed the slowest of all three communities. Are you hopeful that it has a future?

David: Although it has a long way to go, Arcosanti remains an interesting experiment. The real question is, will it progress to become a living, breathing model of sustainable living or will it become a museum?

Ultimately, I still have faith in Arcosanti and in the young people who it continues to attract. Like Findhorn and Auroville, Arcosanti represents a new vision and a new way of living which the present world so badly needs.

From an interview by Alan

A reflection by Selvam, an Aurovillian who lived for one year in Findhorn and for three and half years in Arcosanti, is published on page 7.

Arcosanti is a projected experimental town in the desert in central Arizona, inspired by the ideas of the architect, Paolo Soleri (1919-2013). He wanted to demonstrate how urban conditions could be improved while minimizing the destructive impact on the earth. Construction began in 1970 but only about 5% of the project has been completed so far.

Recently, two members of Arcosanti were in Auroville. David joined Arcosanti in 1981 and is the member who has lived there the longest. Nadia, his wife, moved there in 1994. They are frequent visitors to Auroville.

The impression one gets is that Arcosanti was very much Paolo Soleri’s project. In fact, he has been described as a benevolent dictator.

David: True, Paolo always had the final say. In fact, I came to Arcosanti with an interest in studying how a society with an architecture as designed by Soleri would be making its decisions and how the politics would play out.

Nadia: Paolo had this really strong vision and he was from an age when collaboration was not quite the thing: he was the master and we were the students. Perhaps it is a little similar to the situation you had here with Roger Anger.

In some ways, this made decision-making easier but it was difficult to get people to stay because they felt they had too little say.

Paolo passed away in 2013. How are you taking decisions now?

David: Now, instead of one decision-maker we have four. Three of them worked with Paolo for many years and the fourth worked at Cosanti (Paolo’s home and studio in Phoenix eds.) and has an academic background. They constitute the Executive Board but they are also on the Management Operation Group.

We thought that now Paolo has gone there would be a more collaborative process involving those with seasoned experience. But this is not happening and our decision-making structure remains very hierarchical. The power is at the top, there is little transparency or accountability.

Why?

David: I think the people at the top feel that if they bring in too many people the focus will be lost. They say they want to carry on Soleri’s vision and don’t really trust others to do that.

Ever since I’ve been in Auroville and learned about your history, I am always comparing the stories. Our founder has just passed, so are we in the equivalent period that you were in post-1973? It is not as contentious as the problems you had with the Sri Aurobindo Society who were claiming ownership of the Auroville project but there are definitely some similarities there...

Nadia: None of our decision-makers are full-time residents, they have other interests elsewhere, so for them it is not a total commitment, whereas we are committed – we are raising our family there. This is another source of tension.

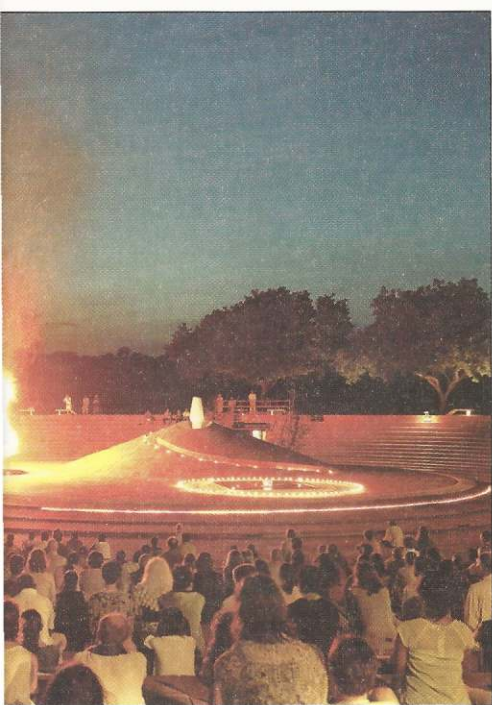
David: The interesting thing is that the people who are now in power were fighting before for co-operative decision-making and were not happy with Paolo making all the decisions. So I’m waiting to see if they will go for greater transparency, inclusivity and accountability – which I think are the next steps that should happen in Arcosanti.

Arcosanti is often viewed as simply an architectural project.

David: There’s a lot more involved than architecture. Soleri’s idea was to use architecture to change society. However, he said that while he was providing the instrument, the people living in his buildings had to find ways to play that instrument. So Arcosanti is as much about social architecture, the process of living together, making decisions etc., as it is about design and construction.

Will Paolo’s original designs continue to be followed at Arcosanti or is there talk of modifying them?

Nadia: One of our biggest challenges is how to continue Paolo’s vision. I think it will continue to evolve because this already happened during his lifetime. At one point, he designed a huge tower and very high-rise buildings but then he felt this meant losing the connection to the ground, so he changed it. His last design was for a “lean linear city”. Instead of thinking of the city as a huge



On August 15, 2016



ing at Findhorn



ert in Arcosanti

Gail: I think the Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) programme will help strengthen the links. We have been running this programme in Findhorn for 11 years and an EDE has just finished in Auroville at Pitchandikulam.

Michael: The best way to strengthen the links is for us to work together, which is why Findhorn Foundation College, Auroville Consulting and CSR are engaged with technology transferred from Heriot Watt University in Edinburgh. The project is industrial R & D and is called SCORRES (Smart Control of Rural Renewable Energy & Storage), funded by the UK Government to implement demand management of renewable energy in a section of Auroville near the Solar Kitchen and smart irrigation with solar energy in Buddha Garden.

It makes sense to combine our energies because Findhorn and Auroville have enormous experience and expertise in certain areas and we both share a vision of a new world.

In conversation with Alan

A life shaped through art

Marco joined Auroville 22 years ago. He reflects here on his many and varied activities, most of which are shaped by a love of the arts.

I started painting when I was growing up in Turin, Italy. My family situation was very modest, quite poor. My father was a train driver, and my mother worked at home. They were totally communist, so luckily I grew up without the baggage of being Catholic, which is almost compulsory in Italy – but even communism is a type of religion. It was quite a liberal background, but not artistic. My father was pushing me to become an engineer. It was not possible for me, so I went to art school. That was the time *Arte Povera* was happening, where you made art from what you found. Now it's called recycling. So I was going to the daily market to pick up cartons and tubes to make sculptures and so on. Then I went by chance – if there is such a thing in life as chance – to Turkey, and met people coming and going from India. So I went to India, and then everything changed in my life.

When I arrived in Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, something blew my mind. It was a totally new field and it was so rich and full of art that I wanted to soak it up. Watching *pujas* and talking with the boatmen on the Ganga about philosophy – that was incredible for me.

So I started to study the philosophy, Vedas, everything. My first book was by Sri Aurobindo – which I didn't understand at all.

India and antiques

I wanted to travel in India and understand more, and I felt that when you travel with a purpose, you enter into the tissue and the fabric of society. So I saw the possibility of buying and selling antiques, and I became one of the first dealers in Asiatic art and antiquities in the late 1960s. It just happened – often we take decisions that are not very conscious.

I was lucky enough to find fantastic pieces, and I started to connect with museum curators in Italy, and they guided me a bit, because they saw I had a good nose for buying the right things. One curator of the anthropology museum in Turin bought all my collections and opened the door for me to the biggest collectors of antique Asiatic art in the city. So I was quite lucky.

I had a second wife by then, Liliana, and we both had kids from previous relationships. She was in fashion, and was also a traveller with the same interests. So we were travelling in India, Indonesia and Pakistan, making up containers of furniture and antiques, and selling them in Italy. On each trip, we'd set aside 15 days to travel and gain knowledge. Liliana discovered Auroville through reading *Mother's Agenda*, and said 'Let's go'. I thought it was part of the Ashram, and I wasn't interested because I had been in a Zen monastery in Italy and I had entered deeply into Buddhism and had my own way of meditating. But when we arrived in Auroville, I understood, first, that it was not an ashram and, secondly, I was totally blown away by the nature. Then I started to understand the project of Auroville.

We'd passed our lives trying to work in a different way: I was a total anarchist, and had always tried to use my political understanding in my work and relations with people. Coming here, I was touched by the project on human unity, plus it was an adventure. Liliana and I realised we were in the same boat – we both wanted to come and be here. This was about 24 years ago.

In Italy we had a very big organisation: we had twenty people working with us in antiques and fashion, and we were doing big expositions in Europe. We struggled for a couple of years to find someone else to take over the business, but it was difficult because it was big money. So, after a couple of years of visiting Auroville and being excited about moving here, we sat together, and said, "Is the money from selling the business that important, or is what we want to do more important?" So we decided to give everything to the people working with us, and we went! In Pondy, we met Santo at the Auroville Boutique, and he helped us. He brought us to Sharnaga and said, "This is the right place for you." We stayed there for two years.

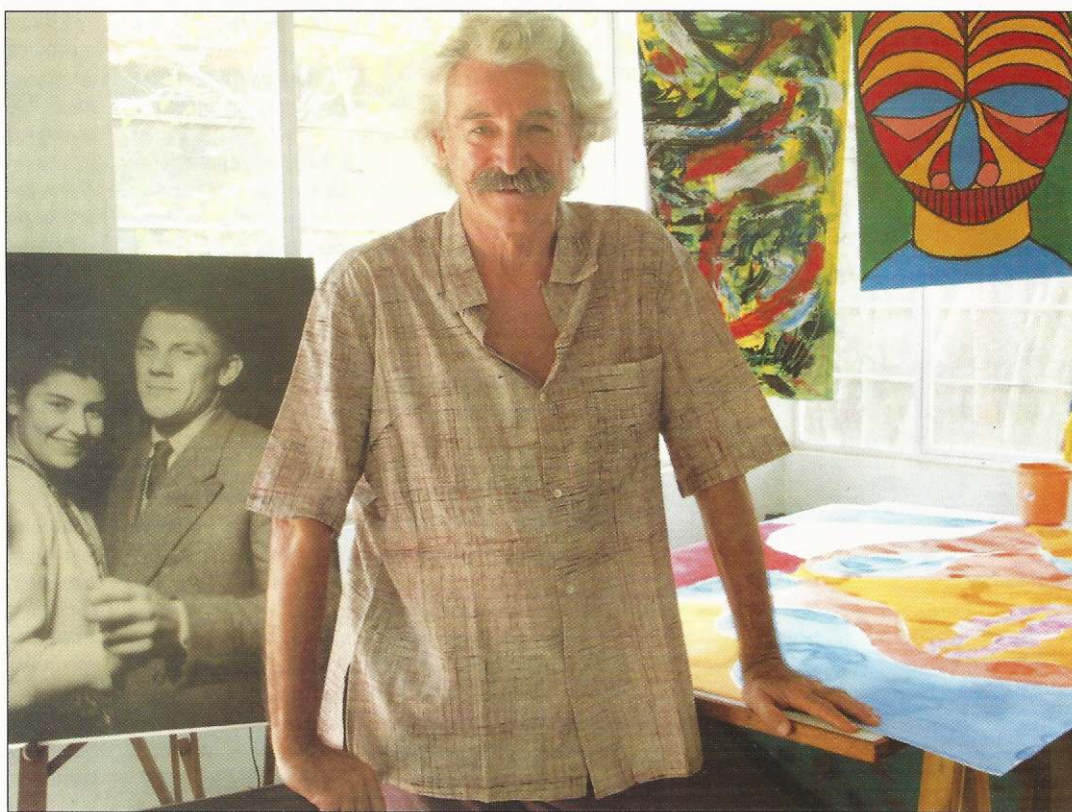
We didn't want to get into the housing story then. At that time, you couldn't become an Aurovillian if you bought a house – the exact opposite of now! We had a bit of a clash with the Entry Service, and so we did two years of being Newcomers. During that time, we taught art to children in New Creation School.

After a while, we realised that Auroville needed money, and that we knew how to do business, so we decided to go back into business but in a different way. We created the fashion and jewellery unit, Miniature. The name is not accidental. I wanted to remind my wife to keep the business small! So, I started doing jewellery again. Jewellery is connected with my spirit. Liliana does the fashion side of the business – she's the mother of it.

Stimulating the arts in Auroville

At one point, I started curating for Auroville artists who needed support. I was also doing installations and my own paintings. Then, about ten years ago, the new cinema was almost completed. I was inspired by the love affair with cinema that I'd shared with my grandparents as a kid, so I said, "I'll run the auditorium!" Since then, I've been running the Multi-Media Centre – Cinema Paradiso (MMC-CP) with Nina. Ramesh is there every night to oversee, and, along with other people, helps to curate films from different parts of the world.

In 2009, MMC/CP started the Auroville Film Festival as a platform for movies made by people in Auroville. This year will be its fifth edition. When it started, it was really Auroville-centric. Later, we realised we needed to include films from all over the world on the theme of human unity. But at that time no one was really making films about human unity! Now, after three festivals on that theme, people are starting



Marco in his studio

In 2010, a group of us started the Art Service to develop the arts in Auroville. There are four executives: me, Renu, Pushkar and Ramesh. Krishna is my partner in most of this work, and Miniature financially supports these activities.

The motivation to start the Art Service came from my exhausting experiences on the Auroville Council and the Working Committee. I was concerned that this city would be built by bureaucrats and politicians who don't have any artistic ideas. Society generally doesn't care about art, because art doesn't produce money, and there's an obsession with money. Art is seen as the salad that you put around the bureaucratic, political, economic aspect, to make it a bit nicer.

Yet art is so important and necessary when you're doing spiritual research, for example to discover the essence of beauty, and this is very important in building our city.

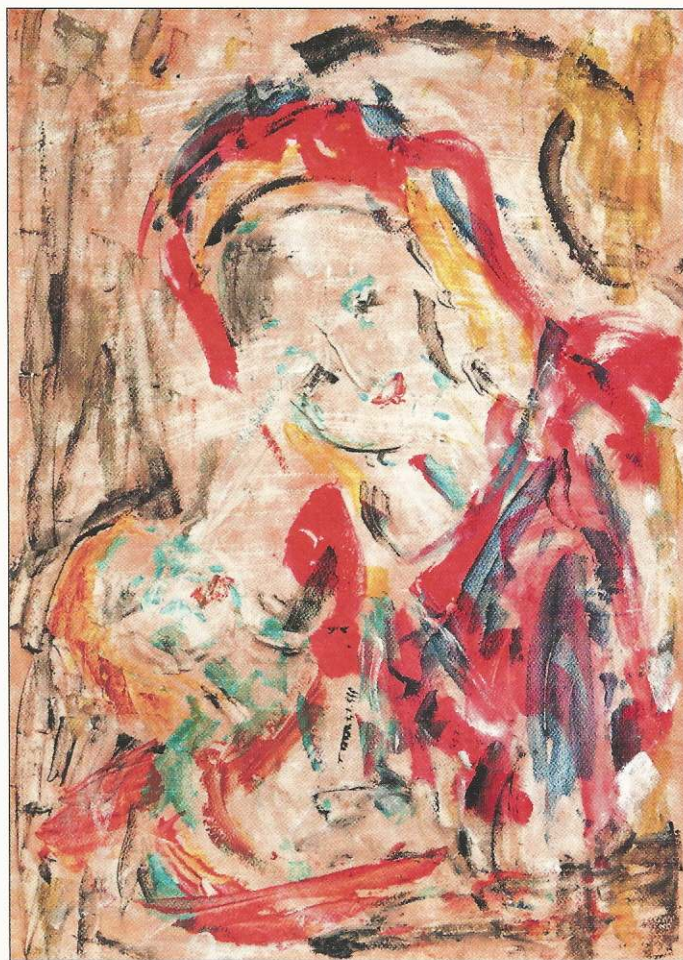
As part of the Art Services' activities, we publish MAGzAV magazine, which is informed by the question, "If we're going to express or create a new culture in Auroville, what is it?" Every edition has a different theme. The most recent edition focused on the 'elephant in the room', the problems we don't want to talk about. This issue was censored to a certain extent. It included an image that suggested an elephant was stuck in the Matrimandir. This was removed from copies sold at the Visitors Centre, apparently because of cultural sensitivities. But why are we so sensitive about critique and satire? I think we don't have the right to control anything – people, images, places. If you control, immediately you kill the point of being here in Auroville, which is to explore and find our way. I'm not looking for provocation. I'm looking for discussion.

Art always has to pose questions – across different fields, and also to question what we are doing here. Johnny staged a satirical play last week and hundreds of people went, so there's a role for satire in Auroville. What sort of community will we have if we can't do these things?

Personal art

In my first 20 years in Auroville, I had a couple of photo exhibitions, such as documentations of the Edyanchavady fire festival and of Italy. I was involved in so many things, I didn't exhibit my paintings. For example, we organized a big arts exhibition of Auroville artists in Delhi five years ago, and then another one in Chennai, and we got the chance to present a lot of Auroville artists there.

Then, at the last film festival, I did an installation of a boat. More recently, I organized the first exhibition of my own paintings, on the theme of 'mothers'. I had two mothers. My mother died when I was ten years old after years in the hospital, so it was very painful for her and for me. And then, luckily my father had a second



A painting from "The Mothers" by Marco

to think about it, and we have movies coming from all over the world. We also have relations with other film festivals. This year, I will present an Auroville film at Italy's oldest environmental film festival, *Cinemambiente*, and they will present their films at our film festival. It's a stimulating exchange.

One reflection the Film Festival group had was that we're constantly exposed to images, but how many of us know the power of the image? The media can change people's ideas through images – they are so important. So, Sasikant and Tom started to teach the children how to create images and films. One girl said, "After doing the workshop, now I see movies through different eyes."

wife who brought me up, and so I had a second mother and a second chance. So, for me, the mother aspect is important and I collect mother figures from every culture.

As an artist, I have only ever worked in abstract forms, never figuratively. Then suddenly something changed, and I painted a form of Kali, and then I started to paint mothers, using clashing bright colours that give a particular vibration.

For a recent group exhibition, Audrey wanted to feature six artists with different ideas about patterns, to present different ways of working. In Tai Chi, I always teach people to be careful of getting trapped in patterns. As human beings, a pattern means something that's comfortable for you but you need to stop to examine your fears. So I used this idea to paint seven pieces that were all completely different and this opened different ways of thinking and working for me. I like to stretch into new territory because life is very short.

Tai Chi

Tai Chi is another big part of my life related to my spiritual and philosophical research. I was in a Zen monastery when I was very young, and I learned breathing techniques, concentration and meditation, and that's something that's part of my daily routine. When we arrived in Auroville, we started to follow Mauna's teaching of the form of Tai Chi called *The Inner Way*, from master Vlady Stevanovitch. And then I went to France where I did intensive study with him for six hours a day.

After a few years, Mauna and others pushed me to teach, and I'm happy that they did because teaching is the best way to learn. I've been teaching Tai Chi for more than 15 years now and the more you go into it, the more you discover. I train between 200 and 400 people a year, and five or six have become teachers. It's a fantastic sense of satisfaction and it's nice to see people discovering that breathing will change their life.

Family and the future

My son and daughter visited Auroville a few times, and my daughter has been living here for six years. She is very happy. She is working with Liliana in Miniature and has two boys who are going to school. I'm very happy to have part of the family here. Liliana's son came several times, and now he's a Newcomer. Like many families in Auroville, we are a magnet to attract other family members to come.

I sing in the choir, and so do my daughter and grandson. At the last choir performance three generations of our family were singing – it's very touching, as I love to sing.

Auroville will continue to grow. And Auroville artists like me need to be confronted with art from the rest of the world, and to find solutions that are appropriate to Auroville. We can't just reflect what is happening in the rest of the world, with its concerns about money. There are a lot of possibilities here, it's always exciting.

Lesley

A personal 'Hexiad' experience

Selvam, an experienced graphic designer who has been managing director of a French outsourcing company and now works in the Entry Service, lived for one year in Findhorn and three and half years in Arcosanti. Here he shares his reflections.

When I arrived in Findhorn I panicked because of the culture shock. I was used to Westerners in Auroville but in Findhorn it was only Westerners: there was nobody from India and I felt so alone.

In one of my courses, somebody wanted to talk to trees. I thought, 'I'm not doing this. If anybody back home hears about this, they will really laugh at me.' But then the focaliser told me something that really changed me. He said if I didn't try it, I would never know what it is like.

So then I decided to take everything as a learning opportunity and I really learned a lot. I did many different things – the courses, permaculture, housecare. I spent a lot of time in the kitchen. Before I went there, I couldn't even make a cup of tea, but I learned many recipes and before I left I even helped focalise the most important meal of the week.

The two most important things I learned in Findhorn were, firstly, that I should not be afraid of doing any job because even the focalisers were scrubbing bathrooms. Secondly, I learned to trust my own thoughts. Before, I always listened to my parents and did what they wanted me to do. In Findhorn, I learned to think for myself and to have confidence in myself.

Before I left Findhorn, I found a book in the library about Findhorn, Auroville and Arcosanti. It was the first time I read about Arcosanti and I thought I would like to go there one day.

I got the chance one year later due to Bhavana, who I helped in preparing a fund-raising project for the U.S.

In Arcosanti, I spent the first five weeks in a workshop that introduced me to the community and its work. After that, I had to choose a particular area in which to work long term. I had some experience in graphic design – I had been doing this in Auroville's Future – but I had little experience of the architectural design programmes used in Arcosanti.

Nevertheless, I spoke to the director, Tomiaki Tamura, of the Arcosanti graphics studio. He gave me a draft of the annual workshop brochure and asked if I could design and lay it out in two days. I said yes, but then I discovered that they were using Macs and I had never used a Mac: all my training was on PCs.

That night I went to the library where there was a Mac and studied it. It was very different from a PC, but I managed to master it and submit the project in two days. The director was so pleased he made me his graphic project designer. By the time I left, I was taking care of the graphics section and all the Arcosanti websites.



My first visit lasted six months, then I returned for two and a half years. They wanted me to remain longer as I knew the whole computer set up and was also running the guest café, but I had to return to Auroville because my father, V.Rajamani, fell ill and subsequently passed away. Since then, I have not been back to Arcosanti.

In Arcosanti I learned many new skills in my field of graphic design from Tamura but also how to motivate myself and others: I learned how to do the necessary research to make things happen.

I also brought something of my Auroville experience to these communities. In Findhorn, I started teaching sports to the kids, while in Arcosanti I was one of the members of the community Council and I could share with them how we make community decisions in Auroville.

I think the different communities can learn from each other. While Arcosanti's design is unique, we can learn a lot from Soleri's work in architecture and ecological urban design. From Findhorn we can learn about how to run educational workshops where they have a lot of experience.

It's not that we don't have these things in Auroville but these other communities are much smaller, less diverse, so it is easier for them to make progress and to see what they have achieved. In Auroville, it can take longer to get results because we have such a mix of nationalities and backgrounds.

But the communities also have a lot in common. We have common challenges, like the fact that the older people don't want to give space to the young, but also common ideals. We are all working for a better planet' this is the core I see in all these communities.

For me, they are like one body of which Auroville is the heart.

In the past, I tried to strengthen the links through exchange schemes for their people who wanted to come here, but I didn't get any support from the Auroville community, even though these other communities have always been very generous in hosting Aurovilians.

Perhaps now is a good opportunity to revive the connection between us. Findhorn's initiative in funding a guesthouse that can be used by its members in Pitchandikulam is hopefully an important step in this direction.

Finally, I would like to thank my father, my uncle (V. Radhakrishnan) and Auroville, all of whom made it possible for me to travel abroad and experience these different communities.

From an interview by Alan

CAT OR DOG?

DOG: an Aurovilian's best friend

At this time of year, Aurovilians are slowly recovering from an avalanche of meetings, workshops, festivals, performances, inquisitive guests etc. Many Aurovilians took on too much, flitting like deranged butterflies from one event to the next, only to collapse in a heap during, or even on, the Birthday bonfire.

Glazed eyes, tottering gait, blurred speech, spasmodic gestures and sudden hysterical laughter are early symptoms of an Aurovilian suffering from Guest Season Burn-out Syndrome (GSBS). The symptoms are not always recognised by others, partly because they are often mistaken for a form of advanced *tapasya*. Typically, the sufferers are unaware of the condition. They are high on frenetic energy and want more and more of it until, one morning, they collide with the cold light of dawn.

After that, every year they vow never to make the same mistake again. And every year, just as inevitably, they get caught up once again in the infernal whirligig. As the wise old bard put it,

All this the world well knows'

yet none knows well

To shun the heaven that leads men to this hell.

But now, finally, help may be on the way. As an antidote to, among others, the frequent CAT (Create Auroville Together) meetings, DOG has slouched on to the scene.

DOG is an initiative of the Don't Overdo it Group, which is partly inspired by global 'slow' movements like slow food, slow living, slow change, slow fashion etc. Like these movements, it aims to slow down the pace of living so that life can be enjoyed, celebrated, rather than hurriedly traversed like a dull antechamber.

To this end, DOG has devised a series of exercises for Aurovilians suffering from or at risk of GSBS.

1) Hammock Habituation (HH). This is not a particularly difficult *asana*. It involves lying prone in a hammock for as long as possible. At first, GSBS sufferers can only manage a few minutes before they start twitching or accessing their cell phone. Which is why the second exercise is

2) Cell Phone Cold Turkey (CPCT). For many people, this is the equivalent to turning off life support. However, it is essential if the GSBS sufferer is to kick the habit. Begin by switching off the cell phone and ungluing its umbilical cord from your ear for a few minutes a day, then gradually work up to letting the phone grow cold for hours, or even days. In the early stages, a dummy phone can be given to sufferers to clutch and fiddle with.

3) Need To Know? (NTK). NTK is for compulsive meeting attendees. Before every meeting they are tempted to attend, they are required to ask themselves, "Do I really need to know this?" Don't worry. The Samridhi Seed Collection Sub-group (SSCS) will not be devastated if you do not attend their Annual General Meeting (AGM).

4) Health Mantra (HM). For those who are irresistibly drawn to attend workshops on health and healing, a simple mantra is provided. Repeat, "I am not as sick as I think I am" before considering signing up for cellular gymnastics or barometric brain massage.

Sufferers report that these simple exercises help mitigate GSBS. Encouraged by this, DOG's next project is to devise treatment for those who compulsively use abbreviations, initials and acronyms.

A

Sri Aurobindo and the Revolution of India

Luc Venet has written a new biography of Sri Aurobindo's life between 1893-1910.

This book is partly motivated by a process of personal discovery and partly by the Luc's perception that Sri Aurobindo is still largely unknown to the general public in India. This is particularly true of his vital contribution to the freedom struggle in early 20th century, which is why the book concentrates on the period from his return to India, in 1893, until his decision to leave British India and sail for Pondicherry in 1910.

It is a period of huge importance for India's struggle for freedom as well as for Sri Aurobindo's spiritual development. When Sri Aurobindo returns from England, India is firmly under the yoke of the British. There is no organized opposition to British rule for the only legalised political body, the Indian Congress, has no intention of disturbing the status quo. However, by the time Sri Aurobindo departs for Pondicherry, he has helped establish the concept of independence firmly in the Indian mind, and strategies like *swadeshi* and armed and passive resistance have been adopted, albeit with mixed results.

As Luc's biography makes clear, much of this radical transformation was due to a handful of Bengali activists. Sri Aurobindo was the intellectual leader, providing the movement with its programme and philosophy through speeches and numerous inspirational articles in the magazines that he edited.

The biography covers the main political events of these years – the struggles between the 'Moderates' and the 'Extremists' in Congress, Britain's 'divide and rule' policy regarding the Muslim minority, the Alipore bomb trial, Sri Aurobindo's Uttarpara speech, the British suppression of the opposition etc. It also covers the key events in Sri Aurobindo's *sadhana*. This begins with his experience of 'infinite oneness' on landing at Apollo Bundar, continues with his meeting with Lele and the achievement of silent mind and climaxes in his Alipore jail experiences, before he receives the *adeshas* that summon him first to Chandernagore and then to Pondicherry.

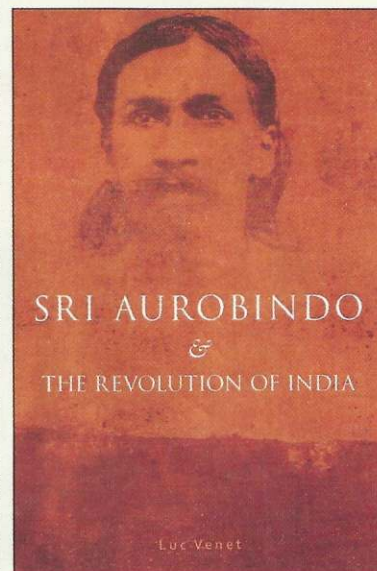
Luc's biography is outstanding in presenting extracts from the key articles and speeches through which Sri Aurobindo invigorated the Indian mind. Sri Aurobindo began by forensically analysing the effects of foreign rule, then redefined nationalism in spiritual terms: "The new nationalism is an attempt at a spiritual transformation of the 19th century Indian." Luc also succeeds very well in clarifying the nature of the spiritual turning points in Sri Aurobindo's yoga during this period and explaining how they influenced his subject's political activities.

Inevitably, comparison will be made with Peter Heeh's recent biography, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*, for while *The Lives* covers the whole of Sri Aurobindo's life, it also devotes a considerable amount of space to these years.

While both biographies cover the same material well and both are eminently, even compulsively, readable there are some differences. Whereas Peter patiently builds a picture out of an accumulation of details and facts, Luc sweeps us along from the very first page.

Luc, we feel, is fully engaged in the unfolding of events, confirmed by his statement, "I was discovering his story as I wrote it." And what concerns him more than the surface incidents is what lay behind: the foundational spiritual realisations that enabled Sri Aurobindo to act so effectively in the midst of the outer turmoil of those years.

Luc's Sri Aurobindo is pre-eminently the revolutionary whose speeches and articles are pervaded more and more by



his spiritual realisations. Peter devotes more space to his other activities, to the poet, playwright and philosopher of education and art.

While Peter preserves a certain distance, Luc is more clearly identified with his subject. As he explained later, "At first I was a Westerner, trying to understand Sri Aurobindo through the mind. But, at a certain point, his love for India penetrated me and I came to totally accept and identify with his experience."

Peter is fulsome in his acknowledgement of Sri Aurobindo's achievements during these years but, unlike Luc, he is also willing to ask questions. He wonders, for example, if Sri Aurobindo's "intransigence" at certain points in negotiations with the Moderates in Congress and his lack of practical political nous (as Sri Aurobindo himself acknowledged, Tilak was far more able in the rough and tumble of politics) may not have hindered the progress of his own party at times. More seriously, he wonders if Sri Aurobindo and the other leaders did not pay sufficient attention to the threat of religious communalism, the seeds of which were being planted in these years by the British Government for its own ends.

Both biographies are outstanding in clarifying the nature of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual and inclusive nationalism and in distinguishing his methods from Gandhi's, topics that continue to be misinterpreted by politicians and academics. Luc's biography also confronts another stereotype, which is that Sri Aurobindo's decision to remain in Pondicherry after 1910 represented some kind of 'betrayal' of the revolutionary movement for independence that he had initiated, a view shared even by Nehru.

Luc quotes Sri Aurobindo to the effect that he abandoned conventional politics only when he was sure that "the ultimate triumph of the movement I had initiated was sure without my personal action or presence". Of course, the real nature and scope of his subsequent 'political' work, work that assumed a global dimension, can only be fully appreciated when one understands, for example, his public stand in support of the Cripps' proposal as well as his spiritual activities during the Second World War.

Luc's biography is very readable and inspiring. It should bring Sri Aurobindo to a much larger audience and cause even fine historians like Ramachandra Guha (who did not see fit to include Sri Aurobindo in his *Makers of Modern India*) to reconsider the huge contribution made by Sri Aurobindo to the cause of India's freedom.

Alan

Sri Aurobindo and The Revolution of India by Luc Venet. Available from Amazon.in. Price in India Rs 1,317.

Neighbours learn more about each other

Recently, exchange visits took place between Auroville and the neighbouring village of Annainagar. Ain Contractor, a volunteer with Auroville Village Action, describes the event.



Women from Annainagar accompanied by Aurovilians working at Auroville Village Action and the Joy of Learning visiting the Matrimandir

More than 49 years ago Auroville was born to help achieve the Mother's dream of human unity' a dream that many in Auroville resonate with deeply. It is a vision that acts as a guiding light in today's world that is confronted with harsh borders of culture, caste, class, religion and gender. However, even in a place that 52 nationalities call home, human unity is not a dream that is easily achieved. It requires a constant struggle against preconceived notions, inherent prejudices and fears about people who look, speak and behave differently.

Many people from the villages in the bioregion have found employment in Auroville and many others have daily contact with an Auroville unit or household. However, language barriers have resulted in many Auroville residents knowing little about the living conditions and cultural systems of the villages. At the same time, some residents of the bioregion do not grasp the concept Auroville is based on. The resulting disconnect makes it challenging to undertake collaborations that will assist in facilitating co-evolution.

There are 50 Auroville units doing outreach work in the villages, one of which is the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG). Located at the edge of Auroville, it attempts to facilitate a free flow of communication between Aurovilians and their neighbours in the villages.

With this intention, the Joy of Learning team along with AVAG recently decided to organise a visit for a group of more than 50 Aurovilians, guests and volunteers to Annainagar, the Dalit settlement of Alankuppam, one of the villages on the periphery of Auroville.

In December, a bus full of Aurovilians followed by about ten others on bicycles made their way to Annainagar. As a Dalit settlement, Annainagar is even less used to visitors than the rest of Alankuppam village, which is why the residents were so excited about the visit. Drums were played along the road decorated with kolams as men, women and children from the village welcomed their guests, many of whom had never been in a Tamil village before.

When everyone's foreheads had been coloured with the red of *gulaal*, the visitors sat in a circle outside the village hall. A local woman sang a song that calmed the crowd to an attentive silence and then, one by one, women stood up to speak about various aspects of village life.

They explained how the leader of the village is elected, his roles and responsibilities, how the temple festival is organized and why they celebrate the goddess Mariamman. One woman spoke of the Women's Groups organized by Auroville Village Action and their important role in the lives of the women.

They also voiced some of their concerns. One woman mentioned that an evening school that was previously run by Auroville has now been shut down. They hoped it could be re-opened. They also spoke of a piece of land belonging to Auroville which is in the middle of their village. It is the only playground for the village children and also the site of a village well, but the village has not been allowed to access the well because it is on Auroville land. They hope very much this issue can be resolved soon.

They also discussed the employment opportunities offered by Auroville. Some women who used to work in a large Auroville tailoring unit expressed their disappointment over its closure, as it was an important source of village employment. Now some of the women who used to work there can only find employment sweeping the Pondicherry roads at night.

The village women reminisced about their childhood days when Auroville seemed as accessible as their backyards. However, now they feel that Auroville and Matrimandir are less accessible to the locals.

After the presentations, the visitors were divided into five groups, each with a guide and translator, and taken around the village. When they returned to the community hall, they were served *vadai* (Tamil-style *pakor*s), tea and lemon juice. The Aurovilians enjoyed the warm welcome. They were concerned by the villagers' perception that Auroville was less accessible for them now, so they extended a warm invitation to the people of Annainagar to spend a day in Auroville as their guests.

And so, a few days later, a bus full of Annainagar women arrived at the Auroville Visitors' Center. Here they were given an introduction to the ideals and Charter of Auroville, and to Mother's Dream.

Then they visited Shradhdhanjali, a unit which employs women from the villages to press and arrange flowers to make beautiful products like cards, calendars, lamps etc. Seeds and other dried plant parts are also used to make attractive, delicate looking jewellery and accessories.

In a region where flowers play a significant role in everyday life, the visitors were fascinated by Shradhdhanjali's concept of preserving the beauty of these plants to make everyday products. As the women strolled through the adjacent flower garden, their faces lit up as they called out the local names of the different flowers.

The group then went to the Earth Institute, a unit that researches applications of earth building technologies and construction, using stabilised earth blocks for building.

Concrete is often seen in rural India as the material signifying "development" and is chosen to fulfil aspirations of a better future. The women learned from the Earth Institute visit that there are alternative ways to build beautiful and environmentally-responsible homes.

When institute director Satprem explained that the block-making machine is normally operated by two men and not by women due to its heavy weight, the Annainagar ladies exclaimed that, given a chance, they could surely operate it themselves. At this point, Satprem spoke of his experiences of working with people from villages and made a special mention of the hardworking and responsible nature of the village women.

The last stop was the Matrimandir complex. A special tour had been arranged for the group to see the lotus pond, the Banyan tree and the amphitheatre. A Matrimandir volunteer shared interesting facts about its construction and described the procedure to access the complex.

The visit ended with the group sitting together quietly under the Banyan tree.

Ain Contractor



Welcoming a guest by applying gulaal

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Editorial team:

Alan, Amy, Carel, Inge, Manas. Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

Contact: Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. phone: +91.413.2622572. Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in

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