

Demonetization and Auroville

On the evening of 8th November, the Government of India announced that Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 banknotes would no longer be legal tender from midnight. New Rs 500 and Rs 2,000 banknotes would be issued to replace them.

It has been described as one of the most radical economic experiments ever made because India is overwhelmingly a cash economy and, at only four hours' notice, the Government made 86% of the cash in the world's seventh largest economy virtually worthless.

The stated rationale was to stop the counterfeiting of banknotes and to stop tax evasion by exposing "black money", money on which no income tax is paid. According to figures published by the government earlier this year, in 2013 only 1% of the population paid any income tax at all. Huge amounts of untaxed cash are stored away or used in India's shadow economy. The size of this shadow economy is reckoned to be as much as 20% of India's entire GDP.

The Government also hopes that the present situation will encourage more people to opt for electronic forms of banking, which can be more easily monitored.

The Government allowed people to pay the old banknotes into their bank accounts until the end of December. For a certain period, and up to a certain amount, they could also exchange them for legal tender at banks. Demonetized notes could also be used for a time for specified transactions, like paying municipal taxes or purchasing fuel at petrol stations.

The scarcity of cash due to demonetization led to widespread chaos as 90% of the Indian economy is cash-based. There were huge queues outside banks and ATMs, but many banks and ATMs rapidly ran out of cash because it took time for the new notes to get into circulation. (The new Rs 500 were still not available by the end of November. Lack of these commonly traded notes is a key factor in the present liquidity crisis.) Further complications were that all the ATMs had to be recalibrated to accept the new banknotes, and when the new Rs 2,000 notes finally arrived, many shopkeepers refused to accept them for transactions of less than Rs 1,000 as they only had limited change.

Some banks attempted to ease the situation by offering free card readers to shopkeepers and small traders, so expanding the point of sale options for credit and debit card holders. Also Paytm, India's largest mobile payment company with 85,000 merchants on its platform, has seen a 700% increase in overall traffic.

However, the sector that has been hardest hit are the small shopkeepers and market traders and those people, particularly in rural areas, who do not have bank accounts. While the *Aadhaar* drive means that many more people have bank accounts today, the World Bank reports that almost 50% of the population still do not have bank accounts. Small traders have seen their temporarily businesses collapse for want of customers and the poor everywhere have had to radically curb their expenditure.

As to the success of demonetization, opinion is divided. Many economists initially hailed it as a brave move to clean up the Indian economy. However, the economist and former Prime Minister, Manmohan Singh, was critical. He said demonetization would only result in hurting the poor, eroding people's confidence in the currency system and it would adversely impact the economy, parts of which have already ground to a halt. He estimated that India's GDP this year would fall by at least 2% as a result of the move.

Prime Minister Narendra Modi replied that he had the support of the common people, who are his 'soldiers' in the battle against black money and corruption.

As to the figures, the Government told the Supreme Court that it expects to unearth 4,000 crores (US \$ 583.8 million) of unaccounted cash. On 25th November, the Centre for Monitoring the Indian Economy calculated that the cost of with-



drawing high-denomination notes and replacing them with new ones will be about 1.28 lakhs crores (US \$ 18.7 billion). The overall cost of the whole exercise, they estimated, could be much higher.

The effect upon Auroville

So how have Aurovilians and the Auroville economy coped with demonetization?

On the first day of demonetization, the Financial Service (FS) accepted old Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes if paid into existing FS accounts, and people could draw a maximum of Rs 2,000 in other denominations. On the second day, Auroville units could deposit old notes and draw a limited amount of cash. However, after this the FS announced they would not accept any more old Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes. Furthermore, they had no more cash to dispense.

Almost three weeks after demonetization was implemented, the Financial Service has still not received any cash from the banks. In other words, nobody can physically draw money from their account, and there is no indication of when cash will once more be available.

Rathinam who, in the absence of Otto was managing the Financial Service, admits that the first two days were very intense. "People were bringing their old money to us – there was a panic to get rid of the old notes – and there was a new Government directive every day. But after two days, the situation lightened. Although guests leaving Auroville were impacted because we could only disburse a limited amount of cash to them, most residents relaxed. They realized that because so much is paid through accounts in Auroville, they didn't need much cash except for a few 'external' transactions like buying petrol or paying workers. It was a great realisation that we have such an economy."

It's a point made by many other Aurovilians. "In my home life I have very few instances of needing cash," says Isha from the Auroville Board of Services. "All everyday things – household food and sundries, eating out, clothing, transport (electric), repairs and service calls – are done through collective accounting at Financial Service, not cash."

"Auroville can be seen as being very far advanced in having had a substantial cash-free economy in place since many years. As a community, we have pooled our considerable resources and as a result have enjoyed much less stress from the untoward fallout of a shortage of currency notes."

"I don't have employees. I don't have an amma. I don't employ a gardener. I put petrol in my little TVS about a week ago and don't go around too much. I mostly don't 'need' cash. I was aware of this already but this 'event' brought the knowledge into a whole new light. For me it is a freedom for which I am deeply thankful," says Amy.

But what about those Auroville commercial units that rely upon Indian customers. How have they been affected?

"Surprisingly little," says Nicole, who manages the Visitors Centre. "Most visitors to Auroville have credit/debit cards and we have not seen a significant drop in activity at the Cafeteria. Even the teashop kiosk, which is cheap and does not have a credit card machine, has been functioning pretty much normally."

"The first days were a bit confusing," says Marc, who manages two coffee shops. "but as the first week passed, we realized that most of our customers have shifted to alternatives to cash. The cafes, anyway, accept the three cashless methods (Financial Service Account, Aurocard, debit/credit cards)."

"The activity I help to run with my partner (Cycle Kiosk) regularly needs some amounts of cash to pay for stock items," says Isha. "Still, as Indian businesses are used to extending credit, we have not felt undue pressure by not having cash for the 10 days it has taken for the bottleneck at banks / ATMs to begin to clear up."

Our online retailers, like auroville.com, have also not been significantly impacted yet by demonetization.

On the other hand, Unity Transport Service has definitely been affected. "Taxi bookings are 25% down," says Krishna, the manager, "and it is difficult to get the money we need. We have an account with the State Bank of India, but at present we can only take out Rs 10,000 a day, which is definitely not enough to keep our cars running. And to get this someone has to queue up for 2-3 hours."

We may have to stop the taxi service for some time if we can't find a way to pay for fuel."

The Aurovilians most affected by demonetization are those who have been used to paying their workers in cash. This is particularly true of the farming sector, which relies heavily on manual labour.

"On a farm like Annapurna, cash transactions are 80% of how we spend our money, mostly for wages and fuel," says Tomas, manager of Annapurna Farm, "so weekly we need lots of cash to make the farm roll on."

"After I dutifully dropped a big bundle of those wonderful old Rs 500 notes at Financial Service, and I was told that next week all would be fine, I told my 25-odd workers to have a bit of patience because I couldn't pay them immediately."

"Now, almost two weeks later the situation is unchanged and I feel some tension is building up in our workforce. Although for me all this is like another challenge in life to look at and learn from, for the local people it's their basic income and I feel responsible to give them what they have earned and need."

"Right now we have stock of fuel and feed for the animals but if this delay continues we will get pretty stuck and will need to use all our creativity to make ends meet."

Bindu adds that other Auroville farmers have similar difficulties. "Murthy hasn't been able to pay his workers for two weeks now (and this is sad, for the weekly wages allow these people to buy basics) and he can't buy seeds to sow his peanut fields. Velmurgan stood two hours in a queue but then all he got was 2,000 rupee bills, with which he can't pay wages."

In fact, standing in line for hours at ATMs or in the bank is becoming a new routine for those Aurovilians who need cash to buy things like petrol or to pay their employees. One Aurovillian spent four hours in a local bank, only to finally receive Rs 2,000 bills which are almost impossible to change into lower denominations. Another had been standing patiently in an ATM queue, only to have the shutters come down with only three people before him: the ATM had run out of cash. "I was lucky that I passed by another ATM which was just being loaded, so that was just another 30 minutes to get Rs 2,000 in Rs 100 notes, out of which I had to pay Rs 1,750 to my gardener..."

The latest hot news about where cash was available spread like wildfire. When an Aurovillian mentioned on AuroNet that a local ATM was dispensing Rs 100 notes with minimum queuing, a long line of Aurovilians soon materialised outside.

One possible solution when it comes to paying workers is to go electronic. "The big increase in our work in Financial Service has been bank transfers," says Rathinam. "Matrimandir decided to pay wages directly into the bank accounts of its seventy workers by online transfers. Road Service has done the same. In fact, we are advising all Aurovilians that the Financial Service can help by making bank transfers to their workers' bank accounts."

Of course, not all workers have bank accounts. And even those with accounts are not overjoyed at the prospect of queuing for hours every week at their local bank to receive their wages.

Preliminary lessons

What are the preliminary lessons that can be drawn from the demonetization exercise in its impact upon Auroville?

Firstly, that we have an alternative economy that can shield us, at least temporarily, from situations like demonetization. Secondly, that Aurovilians are resilient: they preserved their good humour and found ways of helping each other when the cash flow was interrupted. For example, the Visitors Centre lent cash to Aurovilians needing to pay workers on a weekly basis, and Marc's coffee shops offered credit to regular customers who did not have any cashless options.

However, perhaps the most important lesson is how closely we remain dependent upon an external workforce and the larger Indian economy.

"I sometimes feel that when we live in Auroville we think ourselves quite independent," says Tomas. "But even when, as in my case, we have a store room full of grains as a buffer, we need people and fuel to be able to process those for consumption. All this shows me how much we function by the grace of the world around us."

"It is thanks to the strength of our alternate economy that we can continue to function," says Bindu. "That's great, that's what a community-based economy is all about. But I think this will soon peter out, given our dependence on the outside world."

In other words, if the disruption attendant upon demonetization continues in India – several business sectors have seen a drop of 30% in demand and the transportation of raw materials and finished goods has been delayed, according to industry spokesmen – Auroville will not be unaffected. For example, disruption in the supply of raw materials and reduced customer demand will impact the profits of some of our commercial units, and this is the income upon which much of Auroville's vaunted alternative economy is based.

No city, not even the city the Earth needs, is an island...

Alan

Auroville's population: A 20-year analysis

As of October this year, we are 2 565 residents in Auroville from 52 nations. Looking at the population numbers over the years (see Figure 1: Total number of residents from 1997 to 2016), we seem to be coasting along nicely. But a slightly more troubling picture emerges when we look at growth rates over the years. At a recent community meeting on the Auroville economy, the presenters made an assumption that the population will grow at the rate of 10% every year. How realistic is this growth rate? If history is any guide, it doesn't seem very likely.

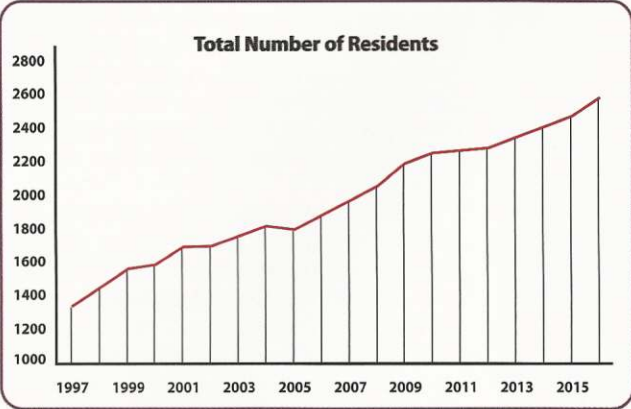


Figure 1: Total number of residents from 1997 to 2016

Uneven growth

In the last 20 years (see Figure 2: Year-on-year growth rate over the last 20 years), we had the highest rate of growth of 8.8% in 1998. Since the year 2000, growth has been very uneven, swinging wildly between +6.6% and -1.1%. In 2004, the population shrank from 1 803 in the previous year to 1 783 residents. What drives these extreme ups and downs? Is it the inherent unpredictability of population figures? Or is it the lack of a sustainable Entry Policy?

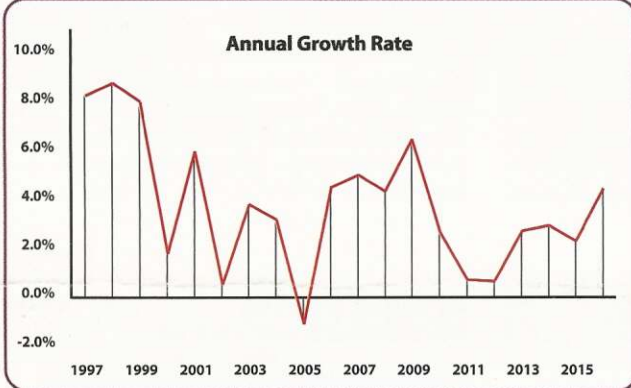


Figure 2: Year-on-year growth rate over the last 20 years

What is a little surprising is that the average growth rate in the current decade 2007 – 2016 is 2.7%, which is lower than the average rate of 3.5% in the previous decade. So, if you go by decadal trends, Auroville's growth rate is actually slowing down. Even if we take the current year's high growth rate of 4.5% (perhaps driven by the new Entry Policy), we will reach just over 11,000 people by 2050. To reach a population of 25,000 residents by 2050, we will have to sustain an annual growth rate of nearly 7%. Clearly, if growth is a priority, something needs to change.

What about growth of specific nationalities? Here again, the picture over the last ten years is far from consistent (see Figure 3: Ten-year growth of major nationalities). Some nationalities, such as India (33.2%), France (29.6%) and USA (29.9%), are growing quickly. Others, such as Switzerland (-25.9%) and Canada (-4.2%), are actually shrinking. And there are yet others, such as Belgium (84.2%), who are growing at an extremely fast rate.

Country	Population in 2007	Population in 2016	Growth Rate - %
India	811	1080	33.2
France	291	377	29.6
Germany	229	244	6.6
Italy	94	150	59.6
Netherlands	83	95	14.5
USA	67	87	29.9
Russia	45	65	44.4
UK	47	51	8.5
Spain	35	51	45.7
Switzerland	54	40	-25.9
Israel	28	38	35.7
Belgium	19	35	84.2
South Korea	19	32	68.4
Sweden	14	25	78.6
Canada	24	23	-4.2
Ukraine	16	20	25.0
Australia	12	17	41.7
Austria	7	13	85.7
Japan	4	13	225.0
South Africa	7	12	71.4

Figure 3: Ten-year growth of nationalities with 10 or more residents in Auroville

Regional imbalances

Some of the national growth figures are driven by active Auroville International (AVI) centres or just by historical connections with Auroville. In order to get a more generalised view of

population trends, it is useful to collate the data into eight regional clusters – South Asia, Rest of Asia, Middle East & North Africa, Sub-Saharan Africa, Europe, North America, South America and Australia-Oceania (see Figure 4: Population trend by region).

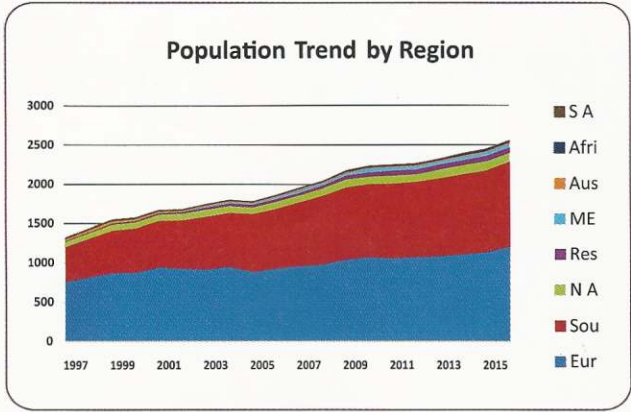


Figure 4: Population trend by region

Europe has the highest representation in Auroville, although the percentage of Europeans have reduced from 57.3% in 1997 to 46.9% in 2016. Residents from Europe and South Asia make up 89.4% of the current population, which leaves a thin sliver of representation to be divided amongst the other regions. Representation has reduced quite dramatically for some regions. For example, the percentage of South Americans has reduced from 1.6% in 1997 to 0.6% in 2016. Does this affect diversity in Auroville? Is it important to invite new Aurovilians from regions and countries that might have very different cultures and ways of being? How important is this for the project of human unity?

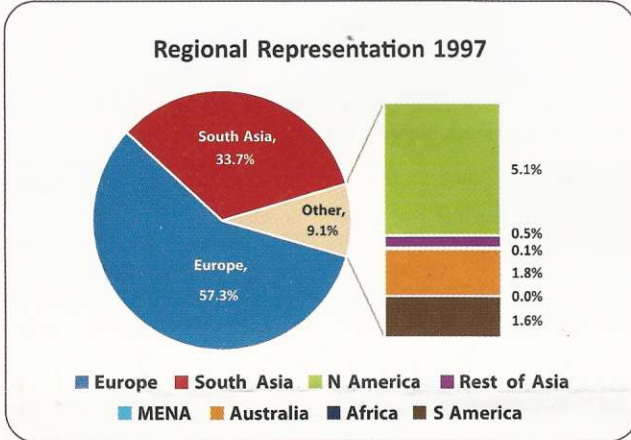


Figure 5: Regional representation in 1997

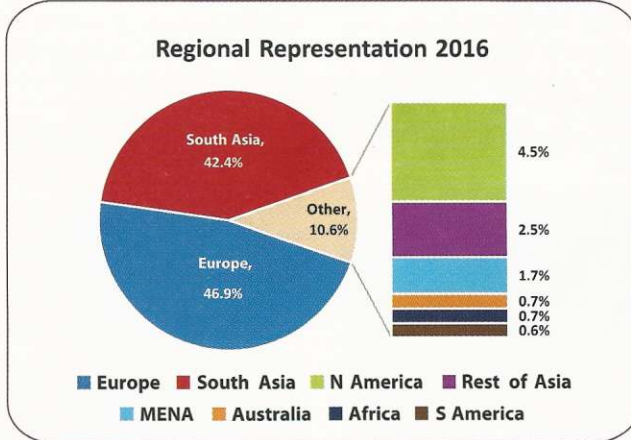


Figure 6: Regional representation in 2016

'Pull of Auroville'

One of the ways in which we can measure the 'pull factor' of Auroville in different nations is to calculate the number of Aurovilians per one million population in the home country. For example, Auroville currently has two residents from Iceland, a country which has a population of about 0.3 million people. So the number of Aurovilians per million population is 2/0.3, which is a 'pull factor' of 6.67. But Iceland's case, with just two residents, might not be truly representative of the 'pull' of Auroville in that country. To make the measure of 'pull' realistic, we have only considered nationalities with at least ten residents in Auroville.

Figure 7 ranks countries in terms of 'pull factor'. As expected, France, with its deep connection with The Mother and a very active AVI centre, leads the table. And unsurprisingly, China, with its huge population, is ranked last. Although there are very many Indians in Auroville, it ranks 11 because only a very small section of the 1.3 billion Indians are aware of the idea of Auroville. Is there anything to be done to increase the awareness about Auroville in different parts of the world? Or should we let Auroville engage with the world organically, at its own pace? Perhaps there are factors at work that we do not fully understand.

Shooting stars

No analysis of the population of Auroville can be complete without talking about the shooting stars. These are nations that had representation in Auroville at some point in the last 20 years, but who no longer appear on the Register of Residents. These nations are Armenia, Estonia, Greece, Indonesia, Luxembourg, Morocco, New Zealand, Portugal, Thailand and Uzbekistan. We hope to see you again soon.

Country	AV Population in 2016	Country Population in 2016	Pull Factor
France	377	66.8	5.64
Netherlands	95	17.1	5.56
Switzerland	40	8.4	4.76
Israel	38	8.6	4.42
Belgium	35	11.3	3.10
Germany	244	82.2	2.97
Sweden	25	10	2.50
Italy	150	60.6	2.48
Austria	13	8.8	1.48
Spain	51	46.8	1.09
India	1080	1308	0.83
UK	51	65.1	0.78
Australia	17	24.3	0.70
Canada	23	36.4	0.63
South Korea	32	50.8	0.63
Ukraine	20	42.6	0.47
Russia	65	146.7	0.44
USA	87	325	0.27
South Africa	12	55.9	0.21
Japan	13	126.9	0.10
China	12	1380	0.01

Figure 7: Ranking of countries by Auroville's 'pull factor'

Auroville Population by Nationality		
Nationality	2015	2016
India	1044	1080
France	355	377
Germany	220	244
Italy	146	150
Netherland	92	95
USA	82	87
Russia	64	65
Spain	55	51
UK	46	51
Switzerland	36	40
Israel	37	38
Belgium	35	35
South Korea	35	32
Sweden	23	25
Canada	26	23
Ukraine	19	20
Australia	15	17
Austria	9	13
Japan	11	13
China	12	12
South Africa	13	12
Argentina	8	9
Hungary	6	7
Slovenia	6	6
Mexico	5	5
Nepal	3	5
Belarus	4	4
Brazil	4	4
Latvia	4	4
Ethiopia	3	3
Iran	1	3
Sri Lanka	3	3
Tibet	3	3
Bulgaria	2	2
Colombia	2	2
Danemark	3	2
Iceland	2	2
Ireland	1	2
Lithuania	1	2
Moldova	2	2
Philippines	3	2
Rwanda	2	2
Taiwan	2	2
Algeria	1	1
Czech Republic	2	1
Ecuador	1	1
Egypt	0	1
Finland	0	1
Kazakhstan	1	1
Norway	0	1
Poland	0	1
Romania	0	1
Uzbekistan	5	0
Total	2400	2455

Horizontal directional drilling at Varuna Beach

More than a year ago, in its June-July issue 2015, Auroville Today examined the challenges of meeting the city's future water requirements. One option, that of providing desalinated water, is actively being pursued by Varuna Pvt. Ltd., a company setup to help develop Auroville. How far is Varuna with its plans to build a small desalination plant?



PHOTO: IRENO AND CORIOIAN / MIA STUDIO

The drilling rig at Varuna beach

A large pipe slowly arises from the ground amidst cheers for a job well-done. The pipe went into the ground at 'Guna's school', the Kuilapalayam Trust School extension uphill at Bommaiypalayam. From there it travelled 400 metres horizontally underground at a depth of 7 metres – first beneath a narrow local road, then below the national highway known as the East Coast Road, then underneath a cemetery, before finally emerging at 'Varuna Beach'.

"It's fantastic!" says Toby, who has been overseeing the project on behalf of Varuna. "The underground drilling didn't disturb anybody!"

The decision to go for underground drilling was made after months of research and deliberations on how to pump desalinated water from Varuna Beach, the location of the future Auroville desalination plant, up to the centre of Auroville, 5.5 kilometres away. The main problem was crossing the East Coast Road, a two-lane National Highway which will soon be widened to four-lane. The Tamil Nadu Highways Department would not give permission to dig up the road and suggested to lay the pipe in an existing water duct. This solution was far from ideal, not only because it would involve a great number of perpendicular bends, but also because the pipe would be too exposed. Moreover, when the road would be widened, a new duct would have to be installed and the pipe would need to be temporarily removed.

Varuna proposed horizontal directional underground drilling to the Highways Department. "We supplied technical and legal reports and examples where it had been successfully done."

After crossing the ECR, how to reach Auroville? "We considered four possible routes," says Toby. "One was going along the road up to Kuilapalayam; the second going through a canyon and then through Auromodèle community; the third going along the Utility road; and the fourth, crossing a cemetery and going along a narrow local road which leads to Guna's school."

"The first option was discarded as there is not sufficient space along the sides of the road to dig in the pipes. The second option implied that the pipeline would have to cross many privately-owned lands, which could become a problem in future. The third option would entail demolishing houses at the crossing of the ECR and the Utility Road. This left the fourth option, but here too there were problems," says Toby.

"The villagers, understandably, objected to digging a trench through the cemetery. And the village road was too narrow to allow for a 3.5 metre deep trench to be dug next to it. People or cattle might fall in the trench; and during the monsoon, part of the road might slide into it. There was only one possibility: to go for a one-stretch seven metre deep underground drilling, starting at the Varuna Beach all the way up to Guna's school."

For Krita, the Bangalore-based engineering company that specialises in underground drilling, the Varuna job was nothing special. "We use the term HDD, Horizontal Directional Drilling," explains director Lalit Nahata. "HDD is a steerable trenchless method of installing underground pipes for gas, water, sewage and telecommunication cable conduits. The method causes no ecological damage, and has the big advantage that you do not need to disturb any surface or traffic, as compared to open trenching."

The Krita equipment – nine immense trucks loaded with the drilling rig, ancillary machinery and bentonite clay – arrived at the end of September at Varuna Beach. The process started with a pilot bore hole being drilled. A viscous fluid, a mixture of water and bentonite clay, was continuously pumped to the drill head to cool it, to facilitate the removal of sand and to stabilize and lubricate the bore hole. Once the drill head had reached the destination, it was pulled back and replaced by a larger drill head known as 'the reamer'. The reamer went back into the bore and increased its diameter to the width required for the passage of the pipes. In the process, more viscous fluid was pumped into the bore.

How did Krita know where the drill head was going? "We used the so-called 'walk-over locating system'," says Lalit. "A transmitter fixed behind the bore head registers angle, rotation, direction and temperature data. This information is encoded into an electro-magnetic signal and transmitted through the ground to the surface where someone holds a receiver which decodes the signal and sends steering directions to the bore machine operator, who is steering the drill from his cabin on the beach."

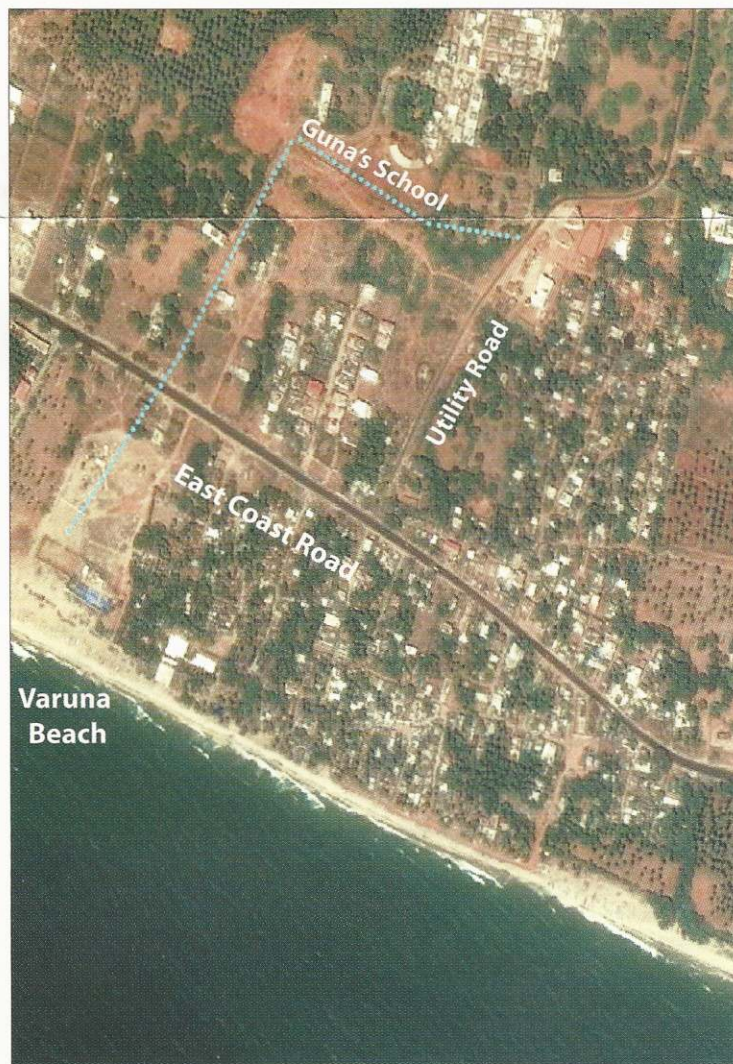
The 12 metre long, 400 mm diameter HDPE (High Density Polyethylene) pipes, which had arrived at Varuna Beach a year ago, had meanwhile been moved to Guna's school and had been fused together into stretches of various lengths, up to 120 metres. After the reamer emerged from the ground, it was replaced by the 'pulling head'. An HDPE pipe-stretch was connected to it and then both were slowly pulled backwards into the enlarged bore. A second stretch of pre-fused pipes was then butt-welded to the first, and so on, until the entire length of 407 metres was installed. [Butt fusion welding is a process where the ends of two pipes are pressed together after having been heated up to the welding temperature by a heating plate, eds.] Then followed the second pipeline – also a 400 mm diameter HDPE pipe, which was laid next to the first. "We have decided to install two pipelines, because a job like this, you only do once," says Toby. "The purpose of the second one has not yet been exactly defined – it may serve when we need more capacity in future, or when other ideas come up – there are many possibilities."

The process was completed on November 16th.

From Guna's school the pipelines go to the Utility Road in a stretch of land Varuna recently purchased, which connects the school to the Utility Road. UPI Polymers, the company that supplied the pipes and which does the butt-welding, dug a 3.5 metre deep trench, laid the pipelines and connected them to the underground pipes.

What is the risk that the pipes will leak in future? "Zero," says Mr. Bhushanam, the Director of UPI. "The walls of the pipes are 3.6 centimetre thick; each butt-

weld has been separately checked; and the entire length has been tested at 21 bar, 1.3 times the maximum pipe pressure of 16 bar, far higher than the operating pressure of 13 bar. As we anticipated, no leak was detected. That's why we have given a guarantee on the pipes for 50 years and on the butt-welding for 25 years." The guarantee includes replacement of defective pipes and fittings and the cost of civil works involved. The first, and perhaps the most difficult stretch of the pipeline between the beach and Auroville has now been installed.



MAP: WALTER

Google Earth map showing the route of the pipelines

Auroville's Water Group and the Town Development Council too are positive about the developments as there are increasing signs of ground water shortage. "Last year's enormous monsoon has recharged the aquifers, but we may have a deficient monsoon this year and over-pumping of the aquifers is ongoing. The salinisation of bore wells along the beach is slowly happening – not like a bombshell, but the groundwater's mineral content is increasing. This is a sign of worse things to come," says Toby.

It keeps him awake at nights, he says, and complains that Auroville is too passive. "We have only three sources of water: groundwater, harvested rainwater and desalinated water. The groundwater resources are slowly getting depleted; desalinated water may become a reality in say 5 years; but we are not sufficiently looking at the other possible source, and that worries me." Toby feels that each house should have a big sump to catch rainwater runoff, and that larger rainwater harvesting tanks should become mandatory for all new developments in Auroville. "Varuna is progressing slowly but steadily. I hope Auroville will find the money to do the same in this field."

Carel



Butt-welded HDPE pipes at 'Guna's school'

In September, Aurovilian Aneetha Pathak led a group of Aurovilian adults and students on a learning journey along the entire course of the river Ganges. Her story.

When I was young, I was a principled, disciplined girl. I was very studious and wanted to become a chartered accountant. But in the process I became aware there was a lot of corruption in the corporate world and I felt I could never agree with this. That's where the first major shift happened in my life.

I enrolled myself in a human rights course, the first regular human rights course launched in India. After working for one year for Doordarshan, the Indian Government TV station, as a researcher, which gave me an inside perspective of how the government machinery and politics work in India, I started working with tribes in the Himalayas. We were trying to open up community-based schools because it was very remote and education did not reach them. It was a very fulfilling part of my life.

I did a M.Phil in Diplomatic Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi and after that I worked with tribes in Jharkhand for six years, mobilising them and letting them know about their rights.

When my son was born, my husband and I were wondering what kind of education we wanted to give him. At first, we didn't want to send him to school but wanted him to stay with us in the villages. Finally, we decided to send him to school so he could integrate with his peer group.

When he was three years, I moved back to Delhi because I wanted to do a Ph.D on alternative education. My son went to a playschool on the Sri Aurobindo Society campus. This is where the magic started for me. Previously, I only knew about Sri Aurobindo as a freedom fighter, but at the playschool parents could come in the evening and learn about the philosophy of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, including The Mother's philosophy of education.

development through helping identify their challenges and core capacities.

We started our preparations and for two months, three days a week we trained ourselves physically and on alternate Saturdays we took long walks with backpacks. This was mandatory for everyone, both because I wanted everybody to be fit and not collapse in the mountains, but also to bond the group as the students, aged 15-20 years, came from different Auroville schools (NESS, Last School and Future School) and many didn't know each other. It was important that the group got on well because we had a very intense journey in front of us.

After reaching Delhi, we took a bus that I had hired for the whole trip. My original idea was to travel only by local transport, but in May and June I did the whole journey myself in preparation and realized that using local transport would be too harsh. When you go outside Auroville it is not an easy world, particularly in places like Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, which are hard-core patriarchal, feudal societies.

Almost none of the students had travelled in this part of India before and we had nine young girls in the group. I felt I had to be particularly protective of them. We were encountering all sorts of people, so sometimes I had to put my foot down and not let certain people enter our space. That's probably how I acquired the nickname 'badass'!

We covered more than 2 500 kilometres in one month and had very intense and diverse experiences. We trekked to the Gomukh glacier that is the source of the Ganges, did river-rafting at Rishikesh, stayed in an ashram in Haridwar, swam with freshwater dolphins, and celebrated Durga Puja in Calcutta.

We travelled through five different states, each of which was very different. The students were absorbing and responding to each culture, particularly regarding the treatment of young women. Delhi they didn't like at all, they found it crude, harsh; Uttar Pradesh, a hard-core patriarchal society, was the harshest of all. Surprisingly, they loved Bihar. Overall, they didn't like the city life; the best part for them was the mountains.

The educational aspect was very important. In Roorkee we had two seminars with IIT professors. One, who is associated with the National Green Tribunal of India, gave a presentation on the pollution of the Ganges. We received another perspective on this from the youth cell of the *Gayatri Pariwar Trust*. Whereas the approach of the IIT professor was very scientific, the youth had a more spiritual perspective. They wanted to effect change through working with the beliefs of the local people.

We only really appreciated the scale of the pollution problem when we reached Kanpur. An activist who has been working there for 23 years showed us the discharges from the many local tanneries into the river. It was horrifying.

The students learned that while there are programmes on paper to clean the Ganges, implementation is extremely hard. The volume of the Ganges is so vast that it can clean itself if it is allowed to flow naturally. However, in Haridwar and other places, barrages have been constructed. These divert up to 80% of the water to irrigate the fields. While the activists say the barrages should be removed, others say the water is needed to irrigate the highest populated river basin in the world.

In this way, the students were introduced to the political dimension of protecting the Ganges.

But pollution is not the only problem. We also learned there is over-fishing. For three days we were looked after by the local university in Bhagalpur. They told us that fish stocks and biodiversity are being threatened by those fishermen who use small mesh nets because these catch even the youngest fish. Our students learned there are legal restrictions regarding the size of the fishing nets and became quite expert at spotting the illegal ones.

On the journey, the students also learned a lot about themselves. They could talk openly about their personal challenges and learnings because in our evening circles we created a safe environment where they felt they could share anything.

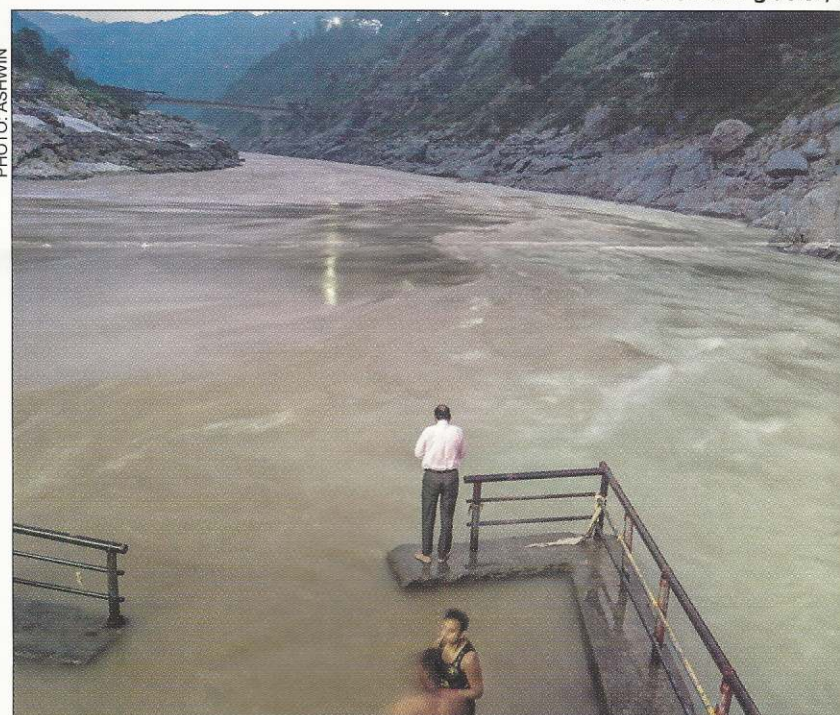
For example, one boy said he thought at the beginning of the trip that he was not good for anything. He had no purpose in life, he wasn't doing well in his studies and he had lost all his friends. But during the journey this changed. He felt a new sense of achievement because he learned to work in a team and be appreciated for capacities he never knew he had.

And he was not an exception. We had a mixed group of students, some of whom I'd never seen smiling before. But they bloomed during this journey. During this trip, each one

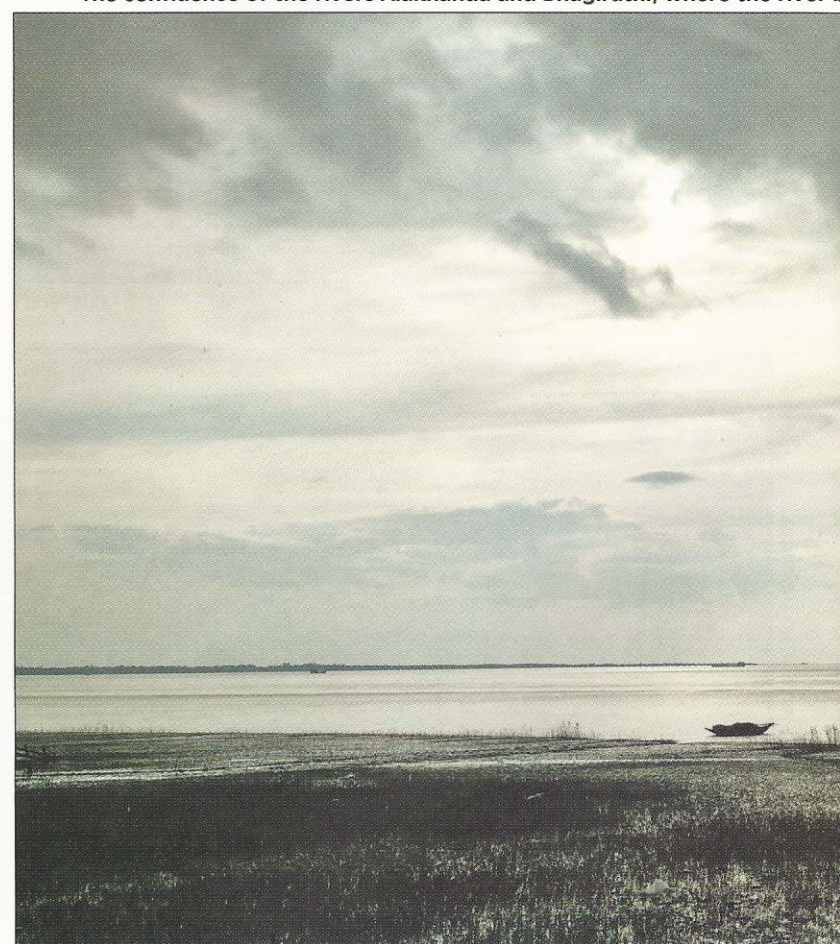
Ganga Yatra: a jourr



At the Gomukh glacier, c



The confluence of the rivers Alaknanda and Bhagirathi, where the river b



The estuary of the Gang

PHOTO: ASHWIN



The Auroville expedition team at IIT Roorkee. From left: Aneeta, Aryaman, Somdutta, Aditya, Bhavya, Ashwariya, Chandra, Nilla, Sagarika, Aadi, Sergei, Dinagar, Ashwin, Alex, Rajeev, Grace, Sasi and Lalit's father

When my husband passed away I gave up Delhi, and came to Auroville. This was in 2011.

At first, I worked with *Upasana* on their rural projects, particularly the Small Steps and Tsunami Projects, and later I worked at Udavi and Future School. In Future School I was teaching geography but, somehow, I felt some element was missing, that this was not the kind of thing I really wanted to be doing.

One offering I had always wanted to make to Auroville was the Ganga Yatra experience. Why? Firstly, I have always had a fascination with the Himalayas and the Ganges. I lived in the Himalayas for many years and I worked with remote communities there. Then again, I have always found my greatest learnings did not come from textbooks but from my travelling experiences, through meeting people and living in different cultures: I firmly believe in experiential learning. So I wanted to offer this opportunity to the Auroville kids because they don't get much exposure to the different cultures of India.

What I felt was missing in my textbook learning was my own self. Who am I, what are my strengths, capacities, my challenges? We never introspect in the classroom about these things. So this is what I wanted to offer to the students on this trip: to learn more about themselves in addition to learning about new cultures and environmental issues connected with the Ganges.

In preparation for the trip, I collaborated with the *Tata Institute of Social Sciences* and with Monica Sharma's team. We came up with a learning framework which identified three perspectives to work upon: the self, society and the environment. Each student had to do a project. They could choose what they wanted to focus upon in relationship to the Ganges, like biodiversity, the flora and fauna, urbanisation, pollution etc. This was the 'external' work. They were also asked to document how the journey influenced their inner

Key of self-discovery

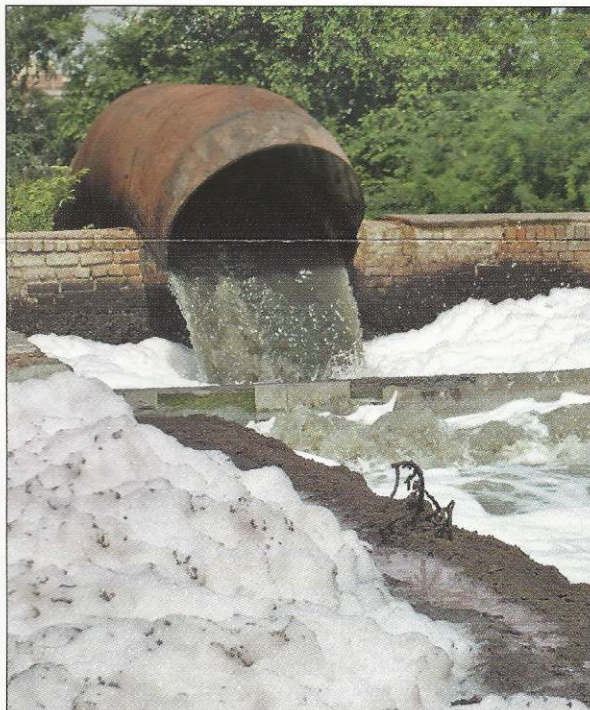


PHOTO: MMI

The source of the Ganges



Becomes Ganga



Tanneries' discharge at Kanpur

PHOTO: SERGEI



es at the Bay of Bengal

PHOTO: SASI

of them saw the good aspect of themselves.

In fact, I felt the whole group made a major perspective shift. It was tough travelling – we were sometimes 14 hours on the bus with little food – but in spite of this, none of the students ever complained. There was only gratitude and mutual respect.

The group cohered wonderfully. There was a time when the adults stepped back and for ten days I was running everything on my own and was feeling tired. So then we formed student teams. Every day there was a different call-out team, responsible for getting us away on time, and food team. They were amazing. And sharing the responsibility made them feel they were contributing, in a very practical way, to the success of the yatra.

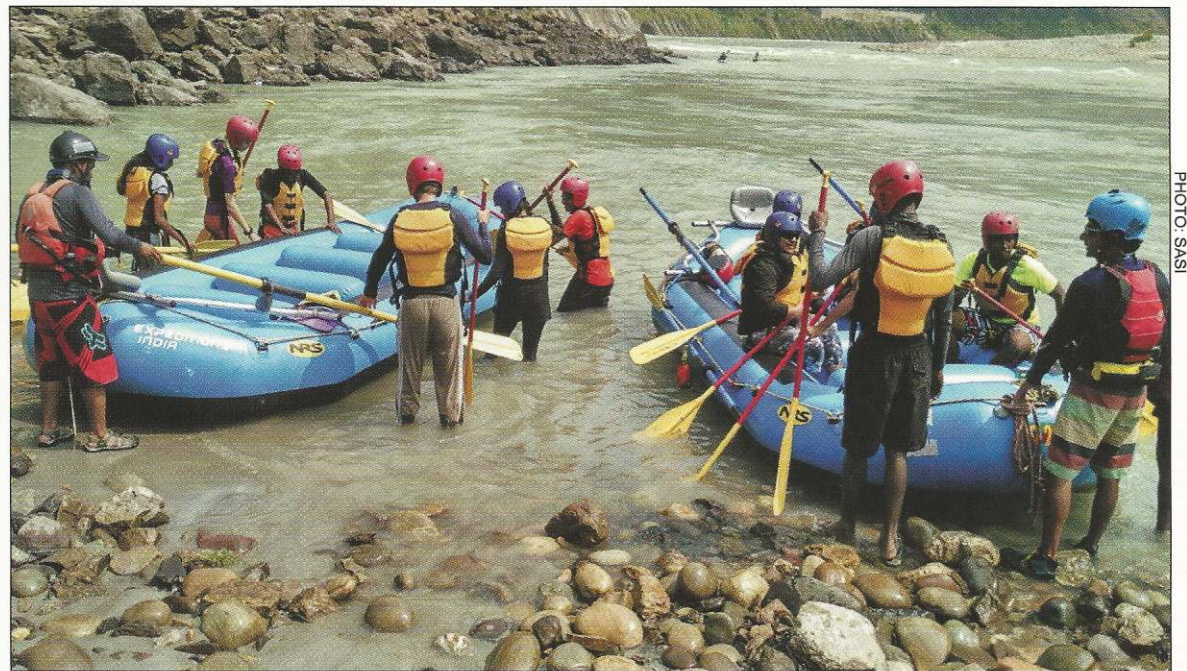


PHOTO: SASI

Rafting on the Ganges at Rishikesh

At the end, none of the students wanted the trip to end... I feel that we get lifetime learnings from such experiences. This is why I told them to document what had happened to them because when they read it after ten years they will feel inspired all over again.

But to get the learnings we have to unlearn many things. Often we are conditioned by society, parents and peer groups to believe we are not good enough or cannot do certain things, so the unlearning part is recognizing conditionings like this and seeing that we can be something completely different.

The other 'unlearning' we need to do is the assumption that all important knowledge is in textbooks. But we don't get knowledge only by sitting in a classroom: the whole earth is there to teach us. This is one reason why on this journey we lived the locals' life, ate the local food. Putting the students in an entirely different environment enabled them to learn something new. If you're still getting your cheese and brown bread, in one sense you have not left Auroville.

Now I would like to learn how to carry forward the learning from the trip. Individuals have all learned something but I would like to see how the student group as a whole can carry it forward, to provide them with the tools to do this. So the trip doesn't end here!

We have so much data to process. At the moment, I'm trying to look at the journey from the perspective of the twelve qualities of Mother. I feel that at every stage one or more of these qualities was evoked, strengthened: in the mountains there was a strong *aspiration* to reach our goal, and *courage* and *endurance* were needed to get there. And then, throughout the trip, there was an amazing feeling of *gratitude*.

I learned a lot myself. One day we fell behind schedule and we reached Patna late. We were not supposed to stay there overnight but it was too late to go on. So, through Facebook, I contacted an old school friend who I hadn't seen in 20 years and asked her to arrange a place for us to stay that night. And when we finally arrived at one o'clock

in the morning, they were waiting on the road to receive us! I'm very grateful to have people in my life who show such support when I need them. And to the Foundation for World Education, SAIER and friends whose financial support made this trip possible.

Also, having been an activist had somehow burned me. Having to look at the corrupt aspects of society had made me think that goodness is missing in this world. But this trip reminded me that this world is still beautiful, and there are many good people in it. That was very gratifying.

The next trip will be next summer when we will go to the Himalayas. These journeys have an incredible capacity to create harmony so, as an experiment, this time we will bring together students from different regions and backgrounds: ten students from schools in the larger India, ten from Auroville and ten from the bioregion. I will continue with the Ganges trips for other students. We are also planning another journey in the Ladakh region, where we will be working with the local tribes.

In other words, the Ganga Yatra is just the beginning of the adventure of a lifetime's unending learning and unlearning.

Alan

Ganga Yatra students share their learnings

Arayman (NESS): While trekking, I had a dip in the freezing water and after that I had a headache and was not able to walk well. But Ashwin and Aneeta said, "Keep going, you can do it," and this helped me finish with the others. In the circle that evening, they explained that I succeeded because mental strength is stronger than physical strength. I will always remember this.

The other thing that really struck me was that in Haridwar the youth activists told us, "We are not trying to clean the Ganga, we are trying to clean the mindset of the people so that they don't pollute it." That was the best thing that I heard on the whole trip.

Chandra (Future School): For me it was a journey of self-discovery. In the mountains, I found out I had a lot more strength than I realized. I felt such joy during that trek. In the mountains I felt my full potential and now I am back in my day-to-day life I'm trying to apply this joy to the tiniest things.

Also, being with people all the time forced me to connect. Before, I found it hard to open up, but during this journey I learned just to be myself and open to whatever came my way.

The main thing I discovered is that it is not what happens to you that is important. It is your attitude, the way you deal with situations.

Sagarika (Last School): I have travelled in India but mainly with an architectural perspective because both my parents are architects. But during this journey I was able to look at India in a different way.

When I set out on this journey I had a conflict within me. I felt I had to decide which educational path I should take in future: the path of exams or the path that I was already following in Last School.

By the end of the trip, I realised I had the answer all along. Essentially, I can create my path. I'm going to continue to develop my inner being and help myself evolve in the way I believe and feel comfortable with.

Bhavya (Future School): Before this trip, for me the Ganga was just a river in the North that meant a lot to the Indian community. Now it is a river that I will always have a connection with because of the people we met along it, and because of what I experienced beside it.

When you enter a church or mosque or temple inside there is a special energy. When we were at the confluence of the Ganga, for the first time I experienced this energy outside, beside the river. I felt so much I cried. I realise that this energy is what spirituality and religion are based upon; that this is the energy we all want to receive. I still don't know what the Divine is, but this is where I felt closest to it on this trip.

Somdutta: I came to Auroville four months back through a programme called Swadharma. For me this yatra was like a journey within, which was my intention in coming to Auroville – to find my inner calling.

Every day there was so much to reflect upon. When I heard about the different solutions offered to the Ganga problem they all seemed very small; something was missing for me. So I tried to work out my own solution. Finally, I realised that it's not only about cleaning the river. It's also about keeping yourself clean. The dirty river is like a mirror that shows the current state of our country.

We have become too stuck on wasteful and polluting consumerism. So we need to change ourselves as well as clean up our surroundings.

In October, there was a film festival in Cinema Paradiso and dialogue sessions on the theme of 'Restoring Connection' as related to the restorative justice movement. The organizing team talk about the response, as well as their ongoing plans to raise awareness about restorative justice in the community.

Auroville Today: Why a film festival on the theme of restoring connection?

Kati: It is part of the work we have been doing the past year, raising awareness in the community about restorative justice and restorative circles.

Did you think that people might come to films on the topic who would not sign up for workshops?

L'aura: Absolutely. We are trying to use as many strategies as possible for raising awareness. We've been experimenting with restorative circles for about five or six years, and often we wondered how to inform the larger collective. A few years ago, Jason and I did a presentation in the Town Hall and later I hosted a meeting in Unity Pavilion, but a project such as this needs more consistent engagement. Then last September, I had a renewed spark of energy and wrote a one-year applied research project to explore how to bring restorative circles to Auroville as part of a larger community-wide justice system. The film festival was the latest strategy in raising awareness.

What was the response?

Kati: We got very positive feedback, not only regarding the quality of the films but also on the post-film dialogue spaces. People were very happy to have that safe space after a screening to express their feelings. What was also nice about this film festival was that the audience was very mixed and included young people.

Hélène: Some people said it was too intense to have twelve strong films in six days: they didn't feel they had time to digest them. Sometimes a film touches your life so deeply you need time to process it.

The films were certainly very powerful. However, if people came to these films without a background in restorative justice, would they make the connection? And did anybody wonder about their relevance to Auroville?

L'aura: Most of the people who came didn't have a background in restorative circles. However, everybody said we need more films like this and they really saw a connection with Auroville. Of course, our Auroville situations are very small compared to the extreme situations focussed upon in the films, yet there was a feeling that if we don't do something, this could be where Auroville is heading.

Hélène: One thing you could see in the movies was the need to connect, to hear and accept each other. It made people very aware of how much we lack this connection with each other in Auroville.

Restoring Connection



From left: Janet, L'aura, Hélène, Kati

Janet: In this context, our relationship, or lack of relationship, with the local villagers came up a lot during the dialogues.

'Restoring' connection implies a former connection that has been broken. Yet in some of the films, the individuals involved in conflict situations seemed to have no prior connection or relationship.

Kati: A conflict or a crime ruins or disturbs the connection and trust either between individuals or within a community. The South Africans have this principle of 'ubuntu', which can be roughly translated as "I am what I am because you are". This implies we are all connected at some level.

L'aura: For me, the need for connection is innate in human beings: we feel good when we feel connected. When we have conflict, it is clear that to move forward we have to restore something, because in our humanness we are connected and something has happened that shows we have become disconnected.

What are the common threads, learnings, in these movies?

Kati: The humanity, the love, and learning to listen to each other are the crucial threads that run through all these films. For example, in the French movie the woman who had killed her son was brought back to normal life through the unconditional love of her family.

Is one of the fundamental principles of restorative justice that when you're in a conflict you learn to see yourself in the other person? This seems to be one of the turning points in the film 'On the Path of Forgiveness'.

L'aura: It is a possible outcome but it is not a fundamental principle: restorative circles are not solely designed to get you to that point. They are based on hearing each other and reflecting back the meaning of what we are hearing. What happens from there, happens, but it's not a failed process if you don't put yourself in the other person's shoes.

Janet: But when I see a film or read a book about somebody's life, I am only touched if I can see myself in that person.

Is the key realisation then of our essential oneness?

L'aura: Yes, and for me it can't remain only at this philosophical level. It's more than that. I'm most concerned about the practicalities of how we learn to live together, because Auroville is not going to survive unless we figure out how to live together, how to dialogue with each other and our village neighbours. That's why it is so important to raise awareness. From that, a spiritual understanding of oneness may emerge, but for me it is not the other way round.

One of the motives of the festival was to get ideas about how to develop a justice system in Auroville. You asked this question at the back of the film programme. Did you get many responses and any clarity?

Hélène: We didn't get a lot of feedback to questions like this. I don't think we got any clarity about the nature of an Auroville justice system because, while the films were about restorative justice, the process followed in the films was not one we can use in Auroville. Restorative justice in Auroville should involve the whole community, whereas in the films it generally involved only individuals.

L'aura: If designing a justice system was a mental exercise, we could do it. But it wouldn't work here because restorative justice is based upon the community holding it, not upon a small group imposing it. There needs to be a collective realization that we don't have a real justice system in Auroville, and we need one. For example, when there is an arbitration and the outcome is not respected we are quite limited in our choices of how to respond. But such a system needs to be designed collectively, and this requires a lot of dialogue, perhaps for as long as five or ten years. It's not a quick fix or top-down process.

Janet: I think many people think of punishment when they hear the word "justice". But I think that's a misunderstanding. I think justice means restoring balance: even those who have designed punitive justice systems were attempting to restore balance. It's just that their attempts were often not successful as some victims are more harmed by the punitive justice system than by the actual offence.

L'aura: In Auroville at present, we don't yet have a formalized alternative to the existing law system. Our community goodwill and the services offered by Koodam are obviously a great support, but I think we have a lot more work to do on the larger systemic scale. And, unlike mediation, restorative circles ideally need a restorative justice system to be in place: you can't really have restorative circles as a stand-alone. And setting up such a system requires a collective cultural shift.

Your present approach is bottom-up, but presumably at some point you hope this will result in the whole system changing?

Janet: Yes. Recently the Housing Service closed temporarily because the people working there felt criticized by some people using the service. If there was a culture in this community to call a restorative circle in situations like this, it

could have been worked out in a different way. This is the culture that has to develop.

From comments made to an article written by L'aura on Auroville some time ago, it is obvious that some people interpret restorative justice as being too "loose"; that in restorative circles everything becomes somehow acceptable as long as you can talk it through. They believe it is not a real deterrent.

L'aura: Restorative justice doesn't say that you can't have a very strong outcome. In conventional society, the outcome of a restorative justice process might be you would go to jail, but maybe in jail you would get therapy and the victim might also get therapy. The difference is the outcome would come out of dialogue, not because you broke a specific law and must suffer specified consequences for that crime.

Hélène: We need to offer people choice. If they don't connect with restorative justice, they can choose the existing method of police, lawyers and courts etc.

Janet: We try to dissuade people from using this option in Auroville. But if someone commits a crime in Indian law, they will clearly be subject to that law.

What is the next step in raising awareness about restorative justice?

L'aura: We will continue to use all kinds of strategies to raise awareness; not just workshops but also more cross-cultural dialogues, movies and World Cafes. One of the best ways to raise awareness is through 'live' circles – restorative circles that deal with real issues – because these involve more people and they tell their friends about them. In the past year, we have had quite a number of these.

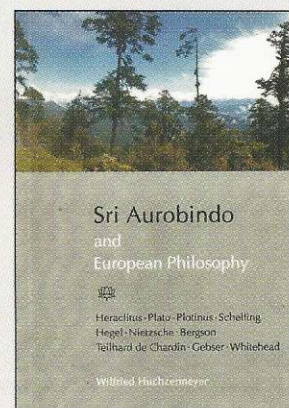
Also, we have a survey coming out soon in which we ask the community to give us their thoughts about justice.

In other words, we are committed to a long-term project.

From an interview by Alan

NEW BOOKS

Sri Aurobindo and European Philosophy



What comparisons can be made between the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and those of European thinkers? Was Sri Aurobindo influenced by the philosophy of some Europeans? Have European philosophers been influenced by Sri Aurobindo?

Wilfried Huchzermeyer, in his book *Sri Aurobindo and European Philosophy*, investigates these questions. The book not only studies the visions of the ancient Greek philosophers such as Heraclitus, Plato and Plotinus, but also those of Schelling and Hegel and the 20th century philosophers Nietzsche, Bergson, Teilhard de Chardin, Gebser and Whitehead. Huchzermeyer does not confine himself to his own research but also uses comparative studies and critiques of others such as S.K. Maitra, R. Safranski, F.J. Korom and K.D. Sethna.

He shows how closely Sri Aurobindo's thought is related to European philosophy and how Sri Aurobindo took up some basic approaches and deepened them in the light of his larger vision, as well as influencing the thought of Teilhard de Chardin and Gebser.

Carel

Sri Aurobindo and European Philosophy, published by Verlag W. Huchzermeyer, Karlsruhe, Germany. Price in India Rs 399. Available from SABDA and from www.edition-sawitri.de.

Selected films from the festival

On the Path of Forgiveness: Charts the extraordinary process of reconciliation between a white South African woman whose daughter was killed in a bomb blast in Cape Town, and the black commander who gave the instruction for the attack.

Unforgiven: Twenty years after the civil war in Rwanda, victims and perpetrators live next door to each other. The documentary portrays three extraordinary stories of freedom and forgiveness in an unsentimental way.

Il y a longtemps que je t'aime: (I've loved you so long): about the rehabilitation of a woman who killed her young son through the love and support of her family

My Enemy, My Brother: A documentary about two soldiers, one Iranian, one Iraqi, who encounter each other as enemies. One saves the life of the other and, 25 years later, by chance they meet again.

Bloodlines: the grand-niece of Hermann Goering agrees to meet the daughter of a Holocaust survivor. They have a series of very intense interactions which result in transformation and forgiveness.

The Railway Man: based on the experience of a British soldier in a Japanese prisoner-of-war camp. Much later he faces his oppressor, a Japanese officer in the camp, leading to a moving reconciliation.

Beyond Punishment: Three men who have killed and three families who have lost a loved one, in three different countries. This film tells the impossible stories of meeting one's enemy. A movie about restorative justice.

Five minutes of Heaven: One man has killed the brother of the other in Ireland. A quest for understanding amid the hatred and trauma of past pain.

Linking Learners @ ProSkills

Higher education and learning opportunities have been on the minds of many groups such as the Centre for International Research on Human Unity (CIRHU), Auroville Campus Initiative (ACI), Auroville Consulting, and Youth Link, all of which have focused on linking learners with a myriad of existing resources within the community. CIRHU has been hosting the "Every Aurovilian is an Educator" talk series, ACI has been hosting "Joy of Learning" programmes and is on the verge of launching a portal website that will inform the wider community about learning activities in Auroville, and Youth Link is setting out to create a dedicated, youth-driven space which would host a variety of youth-focused initiatives, including 'ProSkills', which it actively supports, organises and hosts. 'ProSkills,' a skills-based, participatory programme for Auroville teenagers and young adults that grew out of initial efforts to develop internships and apprenticeships, was presented to the community on the 28th of October at the Visitors Center, with much support from Peter and Nicole. The kitchen was handed over to the young cooking apprenticeship team for the night, a training exercise to develop their professional know-how, from menu-design to plating dishes, and the whole event was conceived and organised as part of the pilot curriculum's 'Communications' module. It became clear from the onset to the hundreds of Aurovilians in attendance that the event was much more than just an opportunity to introduce a new initiative – it was for everyone to experience it.

Having enjoyed a delicious Green Thai Curry meal prepared by the cooking apprentices, people settled into their seats and waited for the show to begin. Instead, within the first few minutes, the audience was asked to reflect on how they could contribute to the programme. The ProSkills team recognise that there is a wide range of expertise and opportunity within Auroville, and seek to highlight its accessibility to youth. Jesse, one of the people driving the project says it wants to "materialise a linking platform and agency that connects people offering skills with people looking to learn



The Eluciole Circus

skills." The presentation was followed by the showcasing of various categories of activity that offered learning opportunities. There was a live performance of Anadi skillfully zip-lining down a recently built tree house, demonstrating the work of TreeCare and Tree House Community; an energetic Capoeira dance by Sam and his crew; a graceful and enticing show by Kalou and the students of Eluciole Circus; a presentation by Om of Sunlit Future, and by beautiful singing by Manisa.

The ProSkills team has compiled a list of

opportunities that units and activities in Auroville are offering, building onto earlier efforts by Vikram who had worked on making such placements available to Future School and Last School students. This includes apprenticeships, service activities, exchange programmes, internships, skills-training, and short courses. The learning experiences currently offered fall in the categories of food, green technology, performance art, sustainable design, organisation, green work, and visual art, web and media.

ProSkills seeks to complement the various opportunities already available in Auroville with core skills sessions where youth learn basic professional skills such as communications, budgeting, public speaking, project writing, and design tools such as video editing and poster design, applicable across fields. The pilot 'Communications' module held over the last couple of months was the first of these, and out of it the whole event at Visitors Centre was conceived and organized. Professionally and entertainingly hosted by Jesse, who led the communications module, Vijayan, who has helped organize the core programme, and Chandana, one of its enthusiastic participants, the presentation was also broadcast live on the Youth Link website, giving the dedicated tech-team a chance to tune up their skills. A similar opportunity was offered to the cooking apprentices. "The event was a great experience which taught us how to not only cook some delicious Thai food, but also get hands-on knowledge of what it means to run a restaurant for one night," says Pavitra, one of the apprentices. "The event was a delight to experience... to observe how youth come together to work on areas that interest them, and how so many older Aurovilians raise their hands to offer new programmes and help. We do face challenges of limited amount of space, and the growing need to integrate more youth from the bioregion, but we are confident that solutions will emerge as the community is now engaged on various levels," says Kavitha.

Inge van Alphen

Brief News

Dr. Karan Singh re-appointed

Dr. Karan Singh has been reappointed as Chairman of the Auroville Foundation for a period of 4 years by the Minister of HRD by notification dt. 23-11-2016. The remaining Board Members, other than the ex-officio Board Members from the HRD Ministry, have yet to be notified. The re-appointment was very much welcomed in Auroville.

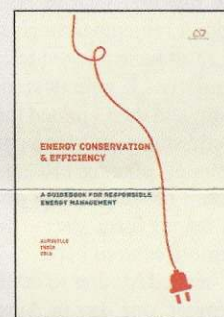
Thamarai 10 years old

The Thamarai learning and community centre celebrated 10 years of working towards impacting better health, education and leadership in Edayanchavadi village and other villages around Auroville. For the occasion, the teachers of today, who were the children in 2006, created a short video of Thamarai's journey which can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b4NJ6IFH6t4>.

All about water

The water group, formed and endorsed through an initiative of the Town Development Council has created aurovillewater.in, a new website. The website plans to act as a platform for updates on water related matters for the Auroville Community as well as an exchange with different water initiatives in India and around the world for the purpose of creating an Auroville water management plan.

Energy guidebook



Energy Conservation & Efficiency – A Guidebook for Responsible Energy Management has been published by Auroville Consulting. The publication is devised to help residents understand various technologies available in the market and make pre-meditated choices in choosing the most energy efficient appliances. The guidebook can be downloaded at goo.gl/FKMWeg.

Entry Policy problems

In response to a petition signed by 60 Aurovilians, the Auroville Council has temporarily paused new entry applications and has decided to slow down the process until clarity is provided. Together with the Working Committee, it has formed an Entry Task Group to look into the problems of implementing the recently approved Entry Policy, which aims at delinking the process of welcoming new people from material criteria such as permanent housing requirements and money. However, questions about the impact this influx of people will have on Auroville's economy and how the existing organization is going to respond to the new housing needs of those who come in have been raised and need to be studied and solutions explored. Also, clarity on the role of the mentors is required.

Award for Auroville Earth institute

The Auroville Earth Institute was awarded the international "Low Carbon" award for the Kaza Eco-Community Centre it had built in the remote valley of Spiti with raw rammed earth, integrating solar lighting and a solar passive "trombe wall". The award was given by Construction 21 in Marrakech, Morocco.

REFLECTION

The power of empathy

The result of the U.S. election generated some interesting responses. One of these was a perceptive essay written by the economist, Charles Eisenstein, called "The election of hate, grief and a new story". His thesis – shared by many others – is that Trump's success was essentially due to a revolt against a system that was failing many people, as well as destroying the environment. This system, he believes, is in the process of collapsing, but no clear alternative has yet emerged. In that sense, the U.S. and much of the larger world is in a "space between stories".

Eisenstein mentions that the new space opening up in the U.S. "between stories" offers both danger and hope, depending upon the nature of the forces that occupy it. If the forces of reaction prevail, it can lead to totalitarianism. But a different force can animate new movements of reconciliation and environmental responsibility. That force he defined as empathy, "born of the understanding that we are all in this together".

What is the relevance of this to Auroville? Auroville is clearly not the U.S. Yet, in one sense, we are also "between stories". Not because we lack a new story – Mother made it very clear how she wanted Auroville to be – but because, for many of us, our day-to-day behaviour reflects a very different story. To put it brutally, it is the difference between being servitors of the Divine and servitors of our smaller selves.

Min identified aspects of this latter story in a series of questions he posted recently on Auronet:

How many of us work for the community at least 5 hours a day? How many of us use Auroville as a semi-retirement base? Is money becoming

the sovereign lord in Auroville? Do we use Auroville assets under our stewardship for personal benefit and for the benefit of friends and next of kin?

So how do we begin to substitute Mother's story for ours?

Well, the way we have gone about it so far on the collective level has been to draw up guidelines and policies that we hope will take us closer to this goal. The latest of these is the draft document Values Guiding the Collective Life of Auroville drawn up by the Entry Service: the intention is that it should be signed by all Newcomers. Among other things, it identifies no ownership of property as a respected collective value, and it continues:

Auroville is a self-governing community contributing towards building a collective prosperity for all the members irrespective of the type of work one is engaged in. Everyone endeavours to build an economy based on generosity and sharing. All works and efforts as a member of Auroville's collective life are directed towards building a shared economy for the "city the earth needs". One refrains from participating in activities solely benefiting personal interests, institutions or family members outside Auroville.

This is fine: it is important to lay out the fundamental principles upon which we wish to base our lives here. The problem is the credibility gap, for Newcomers are very aware they are being asked to sign up to something that does not reflect how many Aurovilians actually behave.

In this situation, it is easy for them to become cynical, to accuse Aurovilians of hypocrisy. At the same time, many Aurovilians also have a tendency to divide the community into 'good' and 'bad' Aurovilians, depend-

ing upon how well they perceive them approaching these exacting standards. But does this really change anything?

Empathy offers a different approach. It doesn't begin by labelling people as 'good' or 'bad'. Rather, it tries to listen attentively to their individual 'story', to the circumstances of their life and the personal predispositions that cause them to behave in the way that they do. Having understood this, certain things may become clearer. For example, that it is not necessarily bad will that causes an executive of a commercial unit holder to withhold contributing a portion of their profits to Auroville. It may simply be that he or she does not feel able in the present Auroville to support their family in any other way.

There may be no immediate solutions for cases like this. But if the individual is clearly concerned about contributing to the larger community rather than simply maximising their own interest, it may be possible to design small steps, stepping-stones, that would move them closer to the ideal while taking into account of their present fears and insecurities.

The key assumptions of this approach are that everybody is different, and that many, perhaps most, people will try to do better if they can see a road ahead that takes account of the real pressures upon their lives.

But the deeper intention behind the empathic approach is to create, or recreate, connection between us. For, in many ways, the present Auroville is atomised: many people seem to relate more closely to their particular group than to the larger community. This can be seen, for example, in those long-time Aurovilians who have withdrawn from active participation in the collective

because they do not relate to anything that is happening in Auroville today, whether it be what they perceive to be the 'sale' of houses, the present open door entry policy or the pervasiveness of money power.

The problem with such groupings, with different 'Aurovilles' existing within Auroville, is that they tend to be self-reinforcing. People with the same viewpoint tend to cluster together and support each other's perspective – like those sneaky Google algorithms that pander to our present tastes rather than expanding our horizons – while increasing the sense of separation between those inside and outside the group. This easily leads to stereotyping of the latter, to those lazy generalizations about 'vellakaras', Tamil Aurovilians, unit holders or 'retirees'.

On the other hand, empathy, the attempt to listen and understand someone else, breaks down these categories because one is forced to deal with that person as an individual rather than as a type. And the more you understand, the harder it is to judge.

Such an approach requires endless patience and a willingness to suspend quick judgements. This is already happening in experiments in cross-cultural dialogue and restorative circles, but it is not easy and requires long-term training. It is certainly not suited to a mindset that prefers to deal with people through the implementation of general policies and rules, something that Auroville may be drifting towards. For while policies, guidelines, are useful as reference points and may help deal with those who set out to abuse the system, they are too crude as tools to deal with the subtle warp and woof of individual lives.

Alan

Vikram's journey

For some years, Vikram has been very much involved in youth and sports activities in Auroville. He is also deeply interested in conflict resolution and meeting process. Here he talks about the challenges and insights gained on his journey, both inner and outer.

When I was 17 or 18, I was already a successful professional cricketer in Tamil Nadu. I was travelling all over India, but the money and the lifestyle did not excite me. In fact, while I dressed in Armani, inside I was pathetic; my inner being was in chaos.

I didn't have any answers, only questions. I needed something to cling on to, so I started voraciously reading religious and philosophical books, but nothing touched me. All I did was skim the surface and then run back into chaos.

But then I came on a trip to Pondicherry with a friend of mine. I don't remember much of that visit except that we went to the Samadhi, but something must have touched me, some pull was there, because after that, whenever I got a break from cricket, I would revisit. I would work in the Ashram dining room, happily cleaning dishes.

At that time, I knew nothing about Sri Aurobindo and Mother. Later, I remember reading *The Sunlit Path* and *The Adventure of Consciousness*, and extracts from *Savitri* and *Letters on Yoga*.

But the carrot of cricket remained so juicy because I was getting better at it by the day, so I kept getting pulled back into that other world. I had developed a particular persona. I was aloof all the time and I could be incredibly rude because of the pain, the chaos, inside me. In the cricketing world, I was looked at as one of the bugs in the system who is not pretty but who does the job well! That system never had any control over me. I was free to come and go as I wished.

I made my first visit to Auroville when I was 24. I don't remember much of that visit, but something must have clicked because I began to return regularly. I volunteered at CSR and Matrimandir, and then I joined the Youth Centre team. I would still go out for a couple of months to make money playing cricket – it was very easy for me, I could play ten matches and that would set me up for a year – but my life was becoming more centred here.

I felt I needed Mother to save my being.

I remember, one day in Auroville I had no money for food and no belongings: all my things had been washed away in the cyclone that destroyed the house where I had been staying in Quiet. And I thought, "Man, what a relief. Mother has given me this perfect liberation."

I moved to a hut in the Youth Centre and I felt free.

One day, my friend, Jyothi, who works in Nandanam kindergarten, asked me to come dressed as Santa Claus for the kids at Christmas. I thought, "Really, a black Santa Claus?" But I went and spent some time with the kids. Then she asked me to join them as a kindergarten teacher.

I told her, she must be kidding. "I'm big, I'm heavily tattooed, the kids are going to be terrified of me!" But I dived into that thing and it changed my life forever. Mother gave me the exact work that I needed at that time. A tenderness came into me. My hands became looser, my soul became looser, my spirit gave up this big urge to search for things and it settled down into helping these new beings.

And Nandanam was where I met my partner, Maya. Her kid was in my class and we had a good connection.

Although I already felt like an Aurovilian inside, I was still a volunteer so, at one point, Jyothi said I should get my 'license' for living in Auroville. I told her I had no need of a label of any kind, I didn't need to officially be part of anything.



Vikram

In fact, I had applied to the Entry Service before and been rejected. And they were quite right. The entry filter was put in place exactly for people like me because I was not ready then. The being has to come to a place where it has to consciously dive into this adventure.

But now I felt ready, I had received an inner indication that I was ready for the adventure, both inner and outer. And I knew I would not return to that other world. This was maybe four or five years ago.

A lot of my time in Auroville is spent with young people. They know me very well, not only because I was part of the Youth Centre and, later, connected with Kailash and Future School, but also because of the way I relate to them. I don't talk to them from the first floor. I talk to them from the ground floor, on an equal footing.

I tell them I know exactly why they are doing certain things because I've been there myself. I know how many things in my inner closet I needed to clean at that age. I needed to be given the space and freedom to make mistakes and learn from them, and Mother gave me that space.

The Youth Centre team suggested we should involve the young Aurovilians in learning multiple life skills. So we decided to look into the possibility of having carpentry, metalwork classes etc. at the Centre where young people who had finished school could come and learn a skill.

I did the rounds of Auroville units to see who would be willing to offer trainings to young people, and this was the beginning of the vocational training programme in Future School.

The underlying idea was that the youth are our future, and their future attitudes will be very much formed by how they grew up. If there have a lot of negative experiences, if they don't feel trusted by adults, this baggage may still be carried by them when they are 45 or 50. So I felt that now is the time to invest in them, to give them the best possible foundation for serving Auroville.

At the same time, I am certain of one thing. Those who have been born here and who have grown up in this environment have a spirit that is naturally unifying: they always see each other in terms of unity. They have their squabbles, but they don't deeply disharmonise.

And when I see the fresh arrivals, the seven or eight-year-olds, I'm amazed. It is not just their vital; the mental is booming. Now seven-year-olds pull me aside and tell me they need to talk about different topics. And, in The Learning Community, the kids are learning different skills related to deep listening, conflict resolution and shared decision making.

This means that special beings are coming to Auroville now, and we are here just to hold this space harmoniously and with sincerity, and to collaborate with them so that it can be passed on nicely to them.

At one moment, a major shift happened inside me. I'd always been drawn to create harmony, but now any sense of division, of people being fundamentally different from each other, started to disappear. I couldn't understand anymore the meaning of terms like 'local Aurovilian' or 'Westerners', terms that we commonly use but are divisive. So I told myself I have to be super conscious about what comes out of my mouth.

As I became more conscious about communication, I began to understand what lay behind words – people's unexpressed needs and concerns – and this helped me empathise with them. I became so used to doing this, I was naturally attracted to experiments like Restorative Circles and Non-Violent Communication. I also started working with Koodam, the conflict resolution umbrella.

I told them I'm just there to help them out, I won't be involved in mediation because I do not have the competence. In fact, from time to time I myself feel a need for inner mediation.

It was very enriching to learn about these tools and to realise that almost every situation is an opportunity to practice them. I began to see

everything as potential building blocks for my progress and for bringing greater harmony.

Another direct outcome of my training in restorative circles and mediation is that I attend council meetings as a silent listener. It is not always easy to be inwardly silent, but Monica Sharma [a former UN Director of Leadership and Capacity Development who has offered stewardship and leadership workshops in Auroville eds.] helped me find ways to shut out the background noise, to eliminate my personal judgements. Now I can sit silently through intense meetings, sensing the meaning behind the words while inwardly trying to hold for the group a space of peace, consciousness and harmony. This discipline of being a silent listener has been life-changing for me.

In fact, I feel in Auroville we are slowly creating a platform for something new. For example, during the recent three-day process to choose new members of the Working Committee, FAMC and Council, something important was happening. Sure, there were still a lot of cobwebs, and not complete harmony among all participants. But the fact that people entered into dialogue and tried to understand rather than confront each other was a huge step. Something fundamental was shifting.

What I understood from this process and experience is that it is the spirit on which you stand and with which you communicate and function that is important. If I'm shocked by something that has been said or done, I should not respond from my ego or on the basis of some story from the past. I should take my stand on compassion, truth and integrity and say or do what I need to from there.

Gym is another opportunity to promote greater harmony. I've been managing the gym in Dehashakti since it opened and, as a professional sportsman, I know how to train myself and I can help train others. I believe the community should promote and maintain physical consciousness, so I open it up to everyone – Aurovilians, Newcomers and workers – free of cost.

What's interesting is that workers from the units have started to come and it has become a great platform for building bridges. I feel we need to invest more in common activities like this because if they feel welcome and are treated in a nice way, the gratitude will flow out in immeasurable ways.

But I truly feel that to achieve harmony all age groups, attitudes, visions, peoples and cultures have to collaborate, not compete. Competence and efficiency have to collaborate with beauty, vision, practicality, teamwork and vision to reach true unity.

As for the future, it's very difficult for me to think about it: I've always been a fan of being in the now. In fact, this is the first time in many years I have spoken about my journey.

Some time ago, I was struggling inside, trying to clean my inner closet. I felt something was missing in my life; I needed some inspiration because I was not moving forward. I asked Mother, what should I do? The next morning, I opened Auroville and saw that Annemarie had posted an article. It answered exactly to my predicament. She was quoting something from Eckhart Tolle, and I understood that inspiration will come if you can be in the now of evolution. As you take baby steps in the now, one's purpose will define itself.

I am very grateful to all the people and experiences Auroville has brought me which have helped me reach where I am today. But I know that without Mother, I have no chance of moving forward. Everything has to begin and end with Her and Sri Aurobindo.

Based on an interview with Alan

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