

Auroville Today

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Shalom Shanti Salam



PHOTOS: MARCO SAROLDI

On two successive evenings in March the combined Auroville adult and youth choirs – 78 singers in all – accompanied by an instrumental ensemble presented a collection of songs from *The Peacemakers* at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium in Bharat Nivas.

Karl Jenkins, the Welsh contemporary composer, composed the first of the 17 songs of this choral work on a line from the Gospel of Matthew, one of the four canonical gospels and the first book of the New Testament. “*Blessed are the Peacemakers for they will be called the children of God*”, reads Matthew 5:9. The other songs contain words of peace from a range of ‘peacemakers’, iconic world-changing figures such as Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, the Dalai Lama, Sir Thomas Malory, Rumi, Martin Luther King, Mother Theresa, Albert Schweitzer, and Anne Frank. Also included are religious texts from the Qur’an, St. Seraphim of Sarov, Francis of Assisi and the Bahá’u’lláh, and the poetry of Shelley, Terry Waite and Carol Barratt.

Not all songs from *The Peacemakers* were presented at this performance. “I was a bit overwhelmed and not entirely convinced when I first saw the score and listened to a few recordings of *The Peacemakers* on YouTube,” says conductor Nuria. “Then I found a version where Karl Jenkins himself conducts – and that made all the difference. It was beautiful! I thought, if we could do this! For *The Peacemakers* is very suitable for Auroville. The world is a mess, as you can read in the news every day. If for a moment we could bring something of another vibration, of peace and hope, something in harmony with the ideals of Auroville – ‘a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace’ – it would be wonderful. So we started.”

The song *Inner Peace*, based on a text by the Dalai Lama, particularly resonates with Auroville’s ideals, she says.

We can never have peace in the world if we neglect the inner world and don’t make peace with ourselves. World peace must develop out of inner peace. Peace starts within each one of us. When we have inner peace we can be at peace with those around us.

Jenkins wrote *The Peacemakers* for chorus and ensemble. But Nuria only had the vocal score with piano accompaniment, which was useful for practice but not suitable for a performance. “As we didn’t have all the instruments proposed in the score, the idea came up to do it with the instruments we have in Auroville. Matthew, the band leader, offered to arrange the songs for the small ensemble we

could get together: one violin, two Indian bamboo flutes, a western transverse flute, two keyboards, a saxophone, a fretless electric bass, an electric double bass, electric drums and ethnic percussion. Inspired by Karl Jenkins’ work, he also composed a small ‘Intermezzo.’ The result was very much appreciated by the audience and performers.

The performance this year, says Nuria, was a trial. “We are contemplating the possibility of performing the complete work, and perhaps also some other works on peace, in the Matrimandir amphitheatre for the 50th anniversary of Auroville. The first performance would be on February 18, 2017, to inaugurate the anniversary year, and the final performance at the year’s closing, on March 3rd, 2018.”

“Our aim with this performance is a collective aspiration for peace in the world,” Otto announced on the introduction to the performance. “A line from the 13th century Persian mystic poet Rumi sums up the ethos of this piece: ‘*All religions, all this singing, one song.*’

Every war and every conflict between human beings has happened because of some disagreement about names. It is such an unnecessary foolishness, because just beyond the arguing there is a long table of companionship set and waiting for us to sit down.

What is praised is one, so the praise is one too, many jugs being poured into a huge basin. All religions, all this singing, one song.

The differences are just illusion and vanity. Sunlight looks a little different on this wall than it does on that wall and a lot different on this other one, but it is still one light.

We have borrowed these clothes, these time-and-space personalities, from a light, and when we praise, we are pouring them back in.

Rumi

“Shalom. Shanti. Salam.” sang the choir – the words for ‘peace’ in Hebrew, Hindi and Arabic. One song.

Carel

A video recording of the *Peacemakers* by Fred Cebon can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/160693535> and by Manohar at youtube.com/watch?v=jxYXR2DqGHU&feature=youtu.be



Top: The Auroville choirs and instrumental ensemble. Second row: Nuria conducting; Anandamayee in *Meditation*. Third row: Rishi soloing in *Dove of Peace* and ensemble leader Matthew on the soprano saxophone. Fourth row: a section of the children’s choir.

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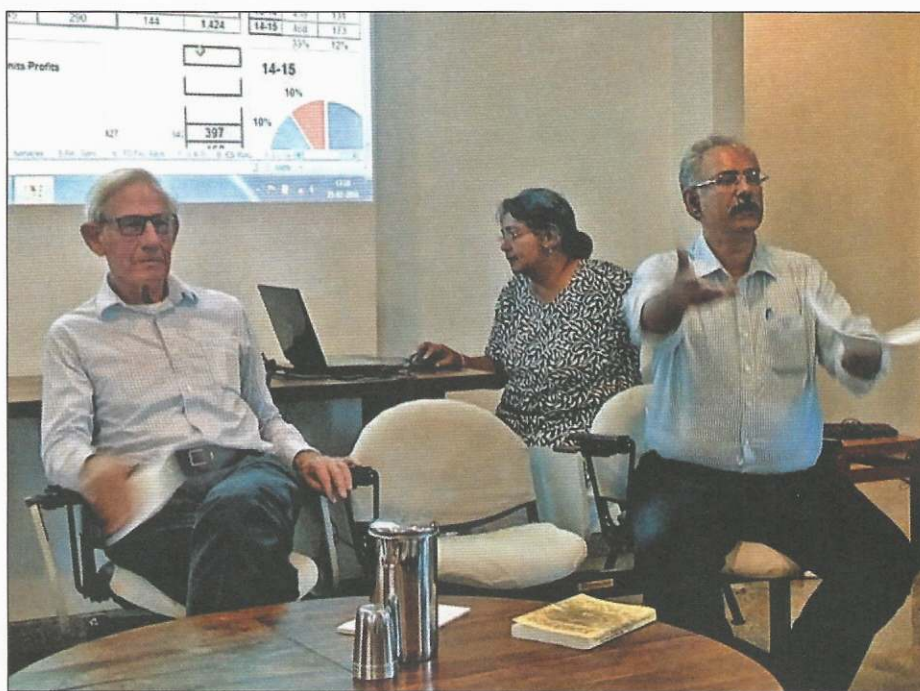
The Auroville economy: in dire straits

“After we presented in October 2013 our book *Economics for People and Earth – The Auroville Case 1968-2008*, we left Auroville with a modest hope that its economy would improve. Today, seeing what has happened to Auroville’s economy over the subsequent period 2008-2015, we realize that much of this hope was in vain,” says Manuel Thomas.

It’s February 25th. The conference hall of SAIIR is packed to listen to the presentation and conclusions of ‘the two Thomases’, chartered accountant Manuel Thomas from Chennai and Professor Henk Thomas from The Netherlands, two people who have been closely studying what has been happening to the Auroville economy over the last 47 years. “We had no intention to extend our initial study of the first 40 years,” says Henk. “But when Harini from Auroville’s Social Research Centre presented us with the data she had been collecting over the last seven years, using our methodology, we felt we should update our work.” It was a revelation, albeit a negative one. “The results of the first 40 years showed us that the Auroville economy was struggling; today it can only be said that the economy is struggling even more. In fact, Auroville’s economy is in dire straits,” says Henk.

A graph shows the dismal state. “In terms of actual rupees, the total turnover of all the income-generating units, which are the backbone of Auroville’s economy, has been rising nicely, as has their total surplus (the surplus after expenses and depreciation but before contributions to Auroville). But this is an illusion, as the rupee has lost value from year to year. A correction for inflation has to be taken into account, and then the picture becomes very different. With the year 2000/1 as base, we see only a modest rising of turnover and a decline of the total surplus and of the net surplus.

What’s the cause? “We’ve heard that it was due to the recession of the world economy. But we’ve found that this statement doesn’t hold. Since the year 2000, Auroville units have increasingly started doing business within India, and their exports have declined. Auroville’s economic development, then, has to be compared to that of India. The Indian economy has become the fastest growing economy in the world, with an average increase of 7% a year, in inflation-corrected terms, and it should have had a major stimulating effect on Auroville. But this has not happened. This means that we have to look for the causes within Auroville itself. We conclude that Auroville has not sufficiently reoriented itself and come up with solutions for reinventing its commercial approach in these dramatically changing times.” Henk and Manuel then detailed their findings.



Henk Thomas, Harini (at the computer) and Manuel Thomas during their presentation

The larger units

“When we looked at the performance of the larger income-generating units, we saw a negative development which has increased from 2007-8 onwards,” says Manuel. “After 2007, there has been a reduction of the number of larger income-generating units, as well as of the total value generated by them.”

In 2007/2008, 13 units had a turnover of more than 100 lakhs. They represented 51% of the total turnover. Over the years, that number has gone down to 10 units, who are responsible for 43% of the turnover. The decline in the number of larger units is worrying.

Some large units, such as Filaure, have stopped functioning altogether. No new units have come forward to take their place. Maroma, which has played a leading role for decades, is still the dominant unit. The normal scenario is that a unit grows, plays a lead role for some time, and then others take over. But this hasn’t happened. Moreover, the units that are doing well are led by older Aurovilians. Succession planning seems to be near to non-existent. In any outside company, two well-trained successors are the norm, but where is that development in Auroville? These are not healthy developments.

What is worse is the small growth of these larger Auroville units. By any outside criteria, these units are still small enterprises. If Auroville wants to develop in the direction of a full-fledged township, it will need a minimum of three to five units of medium size which, in

India, means a turnover of between 250-1,000 crore a year. Auroville is far from that.

The total surplus of the larger income-generating units has gone down. In 2007/8, 16 units had surpluses exceeding Rs. 10 lakhs; in 2014/15 only 9 units had. The total net surplus has fallen from 4% to 1%. This is very worrisome, they note. “For if this is not addressed, after a couple of years, you’ll be looking at negatives.”

The very small units

There has been a substantial growth of very small units, from 52 in 2007/8 to 108 today. But they questioned if this shows a vibrant start-up culture or if it is rather indicative of a survival strategy. These units all have a turnover below 5 lakhs, which means a turnover of less than Rs 42,000/month. This means they are making a minimal contribution to Auroville.

What they see missing is the willingness of the smaller units to scale-up. The working groups that are involved with assets and business do not appear to have studied the matter and have given the required support and mentoring. This, they believe, should change. They recommend that Auroville focus on a few promising units and cluster and support them, so that their growth and

contribution to Auroville can become meaningful. The others can continue in the way they like.

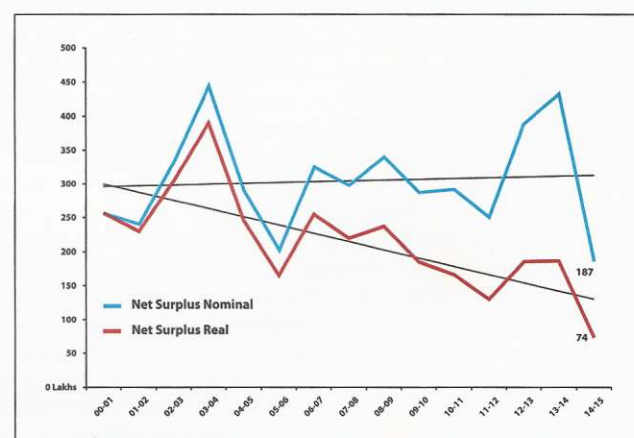
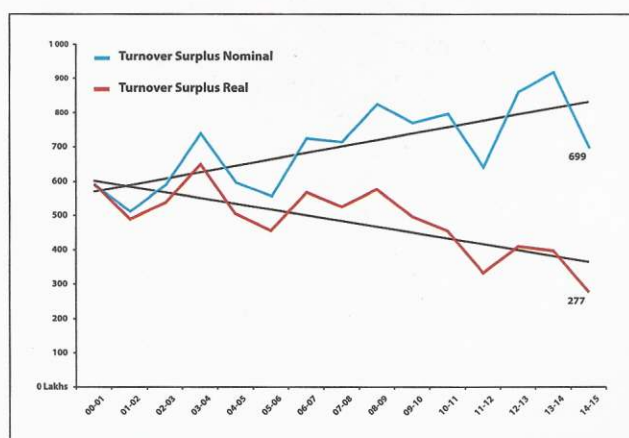
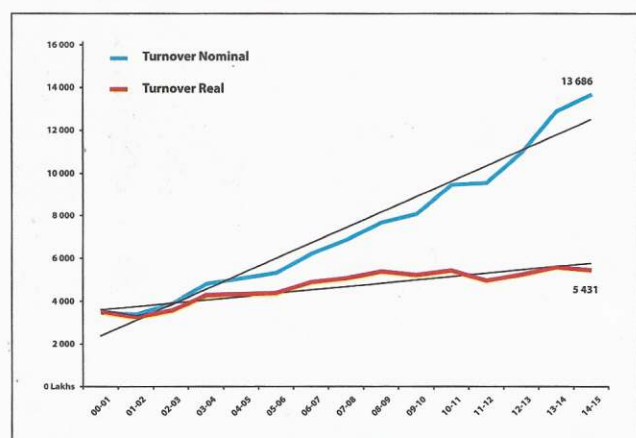
Auroville’s service units have also shown little development. 15 years ago they had a total revenue of 22 crores; now it is 25 crores, a marginal increase. The situation for grants and donations is similar: 15 years ago, grants and donations were totalling 21% of total monies received. There is hardly any change today.

We sound the alarm

“It’s true that the Auroville entrepreneurs are facing difficulties which are not there for an outside entrepreneur. They have been detailed in our book. But what’s distressing is that in all these years, Auroville has not found a solution to the problems. We are sounding the alarm as the survival of your income-generating units is at stake. You need to utilise your existing infrastructure (land), attract capital, attract entrepreneurs, and fight lethargy. Find solutions to overcome the specific problems due to Auroville’s legal structure. You can’t say that there is nothing you can do. You can!!”

Carel, in conversation with Henk and Manuel Thomas.

The findings of the years 2008-2015 will be published in a postscript chapter to the book Economics for People and Earth, and will become available as an e-book or print-on-demand by July 2016.



There is insufficient carrying capacity to sustain the population

Auroville’s population growth is, at best, stagnant – in the early 1990s, the projected numbers for the millennium were 10,000; in early 2000 the number became 5,000; and 15 years later, the actual number is not even half of 5,000. The current trend indicates that even the goal of reaching 3,000 people will call for a major effort. In our book we coined the term ‘carrying capacity’ to indicate Auroville’s economic capacity to sustain its population. Auroville’s present carrying capacity is insufficient to sustain its present population. Your population can only grow if Auroville’s carrying capacity increases dramatically – otherwise, many people, particularly those who join now, will be forced to look for their income outside Auroville.

Reasons for the stagnation of business development

The main reason for the stagnation of business development is the lack of access to capital and a very low level of banking involvement. Due to the unique structure of Auroville’s business, which are owned by the Auroville Foundation, venture capital cannot easily be attracted. It’s difficult to start joint ventures with outside institutions as the Auroville Foundation cannot hold

shares in commercial undertakings without losing its tax-exempt status. Loans can be taken from within Auroville, but only minimally. Loans can hardly be taken from outside as the units cannot offer normal securities and the Auroville Foundation is not prone to risk taking. The non-ownership issue adds to the complexity. The Auroville entrepreneur is beset by two problems: s/he is not working for him/herself, and s/he is working for a higher goal, which nobody outside, particularly bankers, understands.

The flat Auroville contribution of 33% also does not help smaller units.

Improve the brand name of Auroville

Auroville is in need of enhancement of its brand name ‘Auroville’. In the 1960-80s, many people had heard about Auroville. But today, that is no longer the case. Auroville should do more PR work, such as was done last year in the Auroville Festival in Chennai.

The bioregion is more than the region that surrounds Auroville. It is Tamil Nadu, India, the world. The success of Auroville in the future will be the sharing of its knowledge. For that, you’ll have to go out into the world so that the brand ‘Auroville’ becomes relevant again. Today, that’s done by only a few people, and their work is exceedingly well received. You

need to branch out. Your shops in Chennai do a great job – create more of them. Your architects, your afforestation work, your work in renewables and in education – all this knowledge needs to be shared.

Income inequalities in Auroville and their impact

The level of income inequality amongst Aurovilians has become a soul-searching issue. There is a considerable difference between those Aurovilians who are living only on a maintenance provided by the community; those who live on a maintenance plus some outside sources; and those who have their own outside sources. Many very well-to-do people do not appear in the Auroville statistics, which makes the statistical analysis weak. But that there is much inequality is indisputable.

Inequality is a worldwide issue at the moment. Mainstream economists such as Anthony Atkinson and Thomas Piketty see income inequality as the major barrier to progress in the world. Auroville should address the issue. For if there is income inequality which is not recognized, throughout history it has been shown to create tension and undermine solidarity. If Auroville is to be a model for the world also in this area, it should be prepared to be scrutinized on this issue and show answers.

While we are not advocating that everybody should earn the same, we propose that Auroville reconsider the monthly contribution amount. At present, each unit pays for each Aurovillian working in that unit a flat amount, while those who have their own sources of income pay for themselves the same amount (Rs 3,150 / month). We suggest that this system is changed into a progressive contribution system relative to one’s total income, where people who have more pay more, so as to create a fund where those that are better off cover those who are worse off.

We acknowledge that it will be impossible and most probably against the spirit of Auroville to control this. The success of this system will depend on the honesty and level of consciousness of each individual.

How many people are working for Auroville?

In the year 2000, a survey was conducted to assess how many people from the surrounding villages were working in Auroville and what the impact of the flow of money into the villages was. The survey showed that at the time, 4,179 people were working for Auroville. The situation today is unknown. We have to make an educated guess how many people use Auroville’s infrastructure. A new survey is urgently required.

Is Auroville moving towards a market economy?

*"For in this ideal place money would be no more the sovereign lord"
Excerpt from "The Dream" of The Mother, August 1954*

Money has become an integral part of the exchange between Aurovilians and the increased monetization of our interactions is a genuine cause of concern.

The community kitchen, which epitomizes community living, no longer serves free meals. Auroville's restaurants make little or no difference between guests and Aurovilians: all must pay. Housing is almost never provided free. If Aurovilians wish to give free workshops, concerts or shows, they usually have to pay a rental fee for the venue. Aurovilians are renting rooms or apartments to others. Office spaces are offered for a fee. And the list goes on. Everywhere today, Aurovilians request money from other Aurovilians for goods or services. There are still exceptions, some areas where the original spirit is maintained, though they are becoming increasingly rare. Some institutions and individuals still offer free health care, services or classes, and Auroville's cultural performances are usually offered for free to the community. But, by and large, Auroville's economy is fast becoming cash-based, and the dream of

a moneyless community is slipping away with time. The attempt of some people to minimise the money exchange amongst Aurovilians is facing a huge challenge.

As in all cash-based societies, there is a pressure to earn a living. Today, that need has entered Auroville. Characteristically, work that is done 'for free' is no longer recognized as having any economic value and does not entitle you to a free lunch, for example. The community has developed no system of compensation for work done outside of the traditional "money for work" system.

Because money plays such a predominant role in today's Auroville, the income inequality is striking. Those who come to Auroville without money struggle to find a place to live. They will have to survive on a community-provided "maintenance", which, as it is insufficient, means they'll have to look for other ways to finance their needs. Those who are richer, who have a source of income from outside, are able to make a donation for a large house or apartment, and can enjoy a more comfortable lifestyle. This income inequality reflects poorly on the higher goals and aspirations of our community.

The reasons for this state of affairs are numerous but most can be attributed to ordinary human nature. The humdrum of the world slips in and Auroville is hard pressed to deliver "the Dream".

Under these circumstances, what development can Auroville hope for?

Auroville, with almost 2,500 residents, has no economic development plan. Economic prosperity is a matter for the individual. Each Aurovillian is left to his or her own devices, according to his or her capacity. This free-for-all reinforces the current trend towards a monetized society.

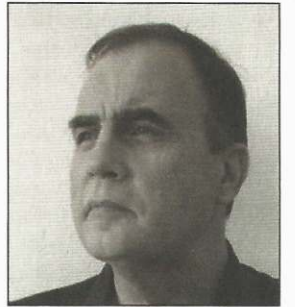
Housing is among the most problematic issues. The present model, where individuals make donations to become the steward of a house or apartment, is failing as the costs of construction are ever-increasing. This makes new houses or apartments unaffordable for many Newcomers who then - according to today's Entry Policy - cannot become an Aurovillian as they have no permanent dwelling. This stifles the growth of the community.

There is a lack of drive to change our economic system, and there is fear in many people to let go of the status quo.

Auroville is by no means a poor community but it is split between a rigid 'communist'-inspired system where Aurovilians without personal means receive the same maintenance, and a form of liberal capitalism where entrepreneurship is encouraged with little control from Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee. This system is showing its limits.

Auroville has reached a state of development that requires it to reinvent its relationship to money. Auroville needs to create a sustainable economic model that will allow it to meet its structural needs and sustain its residents in the future. The goodwill of all those concerned with financial issues, the competence of the few and the support of the community will be needed to manifest a community where "money would be no more the sovereign lord".

Bertrand



ENVIRONMENT

All for Water for All

*Man is the most insane species.
He worships an invisible God
and destroys a visible Nature.
Unaware that this Nature
he's destroying
is this God he's worshipping.*

Hubert Reeves

The All for Water for All (AFWFA) festival concluded recently on 22 March at Bharat Nivas, after seven weeks of knowledge sharing and learning. This took place in seven bioregion villages in districts of Pondicherry-Auroville-Villanur-Cuddalore. Upholding the United Nations Water's overarching goal of "Securing sustainable water for all", the AFWFA festival was an attempt to focus attention on the water crisis and pollution faced by the villages of this region and build a "culture of collaboration" to save the precious resource.

Celebrating the beauty of Water

The idea behind AFWFA was initially conceptualized in the Auroville Town Development Council by Tom and his team, with some support from Thamarai, while discussing the need for fostering good relations and aiding development in the bioregion. After intense brainstorming that started late last year, partners like PondyCan and the French Institute of Pondicherry were brought in. The primary aim was to create a platform for the people to step up and participate in decision-making in development activities around water - be it resource extraction or disposal. "What we see now is that a city grows at the expense of the organic

resources around it, mainly from the villages. But the wastage created from this is then irresponsibly dumped outside the city itself, with no proper channel to send them even to treatment plants," says Tom, who is one of the organizers of the festival and the water advisor to the TDC. "The UNESCO representative pointed out that in the coming years, 25% or more of the population will move to the cities, and then what happens to the areas outside? They will be like vast deserts", he adds.

The biggest challenge in water conservation efforts stem from improper waste management practices around the country, despite repeated efforts from NGOs or government programmes. Massive pollution is also caused by big players like industries that release excess amounts of untreated toxic wastes into rivers or lakes for disposal. "While visiting the villages in this region, you can see that the water is turning blacker due to the heavily loaded toxics present in the water," says Tom.

The solution? "For a start, as responsible citizens, we all need to segregate our waste, something we practise in Auroville and which happens in many other cities now. Compost organic matter at source, and ensure that it does not contain chemicals or plastics. Organic matter is a useful resource and cities can send such compost to the villages nearby to replenish the surrounding soils."

Tom recounts how in the past, farmers from Kuilapalayam purchased compost from landfills in Pondicherry which contained harmful medical waste like syringes. The result? A typhoid outbreak in



Preparing for the oath-taking to save water for the future

Auroville! Later, Aurovilians like Dr. Lucas initiated small projects to discourage the farmers from importing urban waste. Dr. Lucas later shifted his focus to EM technology for sanitation. These were among the various issues that the AFWFA festival tried to educate everyone about.

The festival was a meeting place for not just experts, but also saw the emergence of grassroot level leaders; school students from villages as far as 50 kilometres away came to share their conservation efforts for restoring their water resources. Mr. Krishnamurthy, a farmer from Bahour, displayed in his stall almost 20 traditional varieties of rice and other grains that he managed to revive in his ten years of farming work.

Lessons for Auroville?

Despite the ambitious intent and pool of partners to support the festival, Tom found the response from the community disappointing. "We Aurovilians sometimes get so busy with our many meetings and working groups that we forget that Mother's intent in creating Auroville was for it to serve as a beacon for humanity. Auroville has a primary duty to make this light available to the rest of the world, especially in the fields like ecology or sustainability where we have our niche expertise. These discoveries need to be shared."

Tom acknowledges that the limited attendance was also due to the poor visibility and communication about the Festival within Auroville. "We could have used a lot more support from skilled volunteers and the Auroville youth. Facebook and word-of-mouth isn't enough!" he admits.

The Festival

The AFWFA festival was launched by the Chief Minister of Puducherry on 2 February, which is also World Wetlands' Day, at a gathering which hosted prominent persons, including other Ministers of State, representation from the Consul General of France and noted NGO members. The highlight of the event was when Rajendra Singh, also known as 'The Waterman of India' and recently the recipient of the Stockholm Water Prize, shared his personal journey in the field of water conservation in trying to revive the rivers of Rajasthan which met with a lot of resistance from the 'forces at play'.

Over seven weeks, the festival organized multiple events in villages in the bioregion, reaching out to more than 15,000 children and their families. In each village, there was one week of cultural and educational programmes, including puppet shows and tank cleaning. There also was an eco-fair in Pondicherry and a film festival; at the Alliance Française.

The final event was an exhibition in Auroville with stalls displaying various water-related services. In the valedictory session, attended by the Consul-General of France and representatives from UNESCO, the organizers presented their experience from the past weeks. Students from schools of the bioregion then took a pledge to save water with a *Neer Kudam* ceremony. The musical performance by SVARAM on water and a Fire Dance later in the evening added a sense of grandeur to the occasion.

It doesn't stop here. The Festival organizers intend to keep up activities every year until 2025.

Shradha

"All For WATER For All" Collective, a network of citizens and organizations involved in the protection and conservation of water resources in the Pondicherry-Auroville-Villupuram-Cuddalore bioregion. It includes farmers, Tank Users Associations, NGOs, students, Industries, Business Institutions (academic, scientific and religious), UNESCO, Governments of Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu, Auroville, Centre for Science and Environment (CSE), French Consulate in Pondicherry & Media. For more information, visit their website <http://allforwaterforall.org/>



Students from bioregion schools who took part in the puppet show

Discovering Johannes Hohlenberg

Johannes Hohlenberg had important contacts with both The Mother and Sri Aurobindo in the early years of the century, and was the first writer to introduce the Integral Yoga to Europe. Today he is a neglected, little-known figure. However, Anusuya Kumar's recent discoveries may be about to change that.

Beginnings

It all began with a bout of pneumonia. Anusuya Kumar was a student of English Literature. She had been writing her Ph.D dissertation on Paul Scott, the author of *The Raj Quartet*, when she came down with pneumonia. However, even though she had a high fever, her deadline was close and she pushed on. "I had been approaching the topic from a fairly conventional Marxist perspective but suddenly, in my delirium, the novel seemed to open up and I could see through to a subtext. There seemed to be a central mystery, an invisible spiritual core, to these novels, and I saw that some of the English characters in the novels are initiated into this mystery. There is also an archetypal symbol that would resurface again and again which I could identify as a dancing figure in a circle of fire."

Born in India, Anusuya was living in the U.S.A. at the time, but after this experience she decided to explore more deeply aspects of Indian spirituality. She began studying Sanskrit in Varanasi, but fell seriously ill and decided to continue her Sanskrit studies in Denmark. "But because of my literature background I couldn't just sit and parse Sanskrit grammar all day, it would have been too boring, so I would go to the bookshops looking for some evidence of spirituality in Denmark. Within a month, in one of the second-hand bookshops I found a book called *Yoga and its Importance for Europe*, written by Johannes Hohlenberg. The rest, as they say, is history."

A renaissance man

Hohlenberg, who was born in 1881 and died in 1960, was something of a renaissance man. Philosopher, painter, journalist, musician, biographer, political economist, publisher, he is little known today in Denmark or, indeed, elsewhere except as the author of two respected books on the philosopher Kierkegaard.

However, alert readers of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo may recall that he appears fleetingly in their reminiscences. The Mother, for example, speaks of going on a trekking holiday in the early 1900s with three friends, one of whom was Hohlenberg. He also asked her to teach him how to exteriorise from his body. She recalled that when he succeeded, he was terrified by the experience.

Hohlenberg also visited Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry in 1915. During that time, he took a photograph and sketched Sri Aurobindo (his oil painting of Sri Aurobindo, completed on his return, is in the Ashram's Prosperity Room). Sri Aurobindo recalls that Hohlenberg, after their daily evening interviews and meditations, would say, "Let us now talk of the ineffable". And Sri Aurobindo would oblige.

All interesting, no doubt, but until now not worth much more than a footnote or two in the lives of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. However, Anusuya has discovered a great deal more about Hohlenberg. It confirms, among other things, that his work with The Mother (Mirra as he knew her) was deeper and went on far longer than formerly supposed, and that he was also a good receptacle and propagator of Sri Aurobindo's ideas. In fact, his book, *Yoga I dens betydning for Europa [Yoga and its Meaning for Europe]* which was published in 1916, was the first introduction to Sri Aurobindo's yoga for a Danish, Swedish and German readership. Actually, it was the first book on the Integral Yoga anywhere (Sri Aurobindo was already writing his *Arya* essays but these were not put into book form until later).

However, discovering more about Hohlenberg and his relationship to The Mother and Sri Aurobindo was no easy matter.

"He was a very private man," says Anusuya. "His widow, Eli, was responsible for his papers after his death and she burned what she thought were all his private papers. In doing this, she believed she was following her husband's wishes. The only papers she spared were those that had been in or related to the public domain, like his publications, newspapers articles etc."

Anusuya heard that the widow had donated the papers she had spared to the Royal Library in Copenhagen. When Anusuya went there, she discovered that there were twenty-five boxes of them. However, as she trawled through the boxes, it seemed that the widow had, indeed, destroyed all his personal papers.



Painting of Sri Aurobindo by Johannes Hohlenberg

His work with The Mother

"But in September last year, I found a very brief journal from his Paris years between 1906 and 1911. I knew I had hit pay-dirt when on the second page there is a reference to meeting Mirra Morisset, along with other painters. On later pages, he writes of having 'another deep philosophical conversation with Mirra last night', and of having dreams in which she visits him. Then there are references to her inviting him to do a kabbalah study with her."

Hohlenberg, who had come to Paris to study painting, was already interested in occultism and having out of body experiences. In the journal, he reveals that Mirra tells him that if he wants to have such an experience, he should seriously study Max Théon's system (Mirra had just returned from her first stay with the Théons in Tlemcen). And to do that he had first to study Hebrew. So they began studying the *kabbalah* together (as Peter Heehs has pointed out, Théon's 'system' – the Philosophie Cosmique – was partially based upon the *kabbalah*).

"There are these intriguing and cryptic messages in the diary about the need to start studying Hebrew with Mirra, and there is another *kabbalah* notebook, which I have yet to go through in detail, which refers to dreams and lessons about the cosmic system of Max Théon and a very esoteric form of the *kabbalah*. Hohlenberg says he is trying to understand this through numbers. There are also extended references to his teacher, 'Mirra Richard', as she then was after her second marriage. This notebook concludes in 1911. It suggests she had been teaching him since 1907!"

The studies, however, were not necessarily limited to the *kabbalah*. In 1911, she sent him

a postcard when he was in Egypt (he had gone there on her suggestion to continue his kabbalistic studies) referring to, "our fine evenings in Paris and our long philosophical conversations..." She later recalled that he "used to come and see me almost every evening" during his time in Paris.

And what about his exteriorisation experience that The Mother refers to in her evening class of March 3rd, 1954? The Mother says he was very insistent. She finally taught him how to do it, it happened in her presence and he was terrified. Anusuya says that he later wrote an article, called *The Silver Cord*, about the experience.

"I finally found it in an obscure journal and managed to copy it. As The Mother reported, although he was a courageous man he did panic when he exteriorised. This, he said, caused the silver cord to be jarred, and The Mother was concerned that it would be disconnected, which would have been very serious for him. I interviewed one of the few people still alive who knew him, and she

said that he was still talking about that experience a few years before his death. Clearly, it was a very significant moment that remained with him for the rest of his life."

Hohlenberg and Sri Aurobindo

But what about Pondicherry and his meetings with Sri Aurobindo?

Paul Richard had met Sri Aurobindo when he first came to Pondicherry in 1910 and Sri Aurobindo and the Richards had been corresponding ever since Paul returned to France.

Hohlenberg returned from Egypt in 1912 and began planning to visit Pondicherry along with the Richards. The Richards came to India in 1914, and invited Hohlenberg to join them and collaborate with them and Sri Aurobindo on the writing of the *Arya*. He agreed. "The idea was he was going to stay indefinitely." But when he arrived in October, 1915 the Richards had already left.

Sri Aurobindo evidently made a huge impression upon him, and he describes their first encounter with a painter's eye [see page 5]. However, after a stay of just over a month, Hohlenberg was arrested by the British and deported.

What happened was that he had entered English territory to buy cigars (quite possibly for Sri Aurobindo: Hohlenberg did not smoke). He had been warned by a friendly British police inspector, who, incidentally had great respect for Sri Aurobindo, that this would happen if Hohlenberg strayed across the line because anybody who consorted with Sri Aurobindo was automatically under suspicion. He was shipped first to Colombo, then Paris and then London, suspected of being a German spy. Here he was kept under surveillance. He was finally allowed to return to Denmark in 1916.

Hohlenberg made good use of his time in London. He went daily to the British Library to work on his book on yoga. But from where did he get his material?

By this time, Anusuya had examined almost all the boxes of Hohlenberg's papers in the Royal Danish Library, but still she had found nothing about his contacts with Sri Aurobindo. Perhaps, after all, nothing had survived.

"But just when I was about to bail out, in box number 24 I found a handwritten notebook about his travels in Pondicherry that contained notes of his conversations with Sri Aurobindo. I think it survived because of some cosmic irony. When he returned, Hohlenberg began writing articles on yoga and Sri Aurobindo for many magazines in Europe. I think his widow thought these were notes for these articles and did not burn them because, for her, they qualified as public rather than private material."

Anusuya has not yet had a chance to examine the notebook in detail, nor does she have extensive knowledge of Sri Aurobindo's work. What she has ascertained, however, is that this notebook contains much of the material that was used in his book, *Yoga and its Meaning for Europe*, which Hohlenberg published in 1916. This was later confirmed by Hohlenberg himself. In a letter in 1948 he recalls, "I wrote a book *Yoga*, which I dedicate to him and that for a great part is based on the entertainments I had with him." And in the third edition of the book, published in 1952, he writes, "The preconditions for this book were created during my stay in India in 1915, in daily talks with a man to whom it is also dedicated: Sri Aurobindo Ghose. He was then about thirty years of age and already known all over India as a thinker and mystic."

In fact, Anusuya has ascertained from the Pondicherry notebook that Hohlenberg had considerable contact with Sri Aurobindo during his brief stay. Sometimes he would spend whole days in his company, sketching him, meditating with him and listening to him speak. "It must have been like a continuous *darshan* for a man like Hohlenberg who was relentless in his pursuit of spiritual knowledge."

Hohlenberg's book

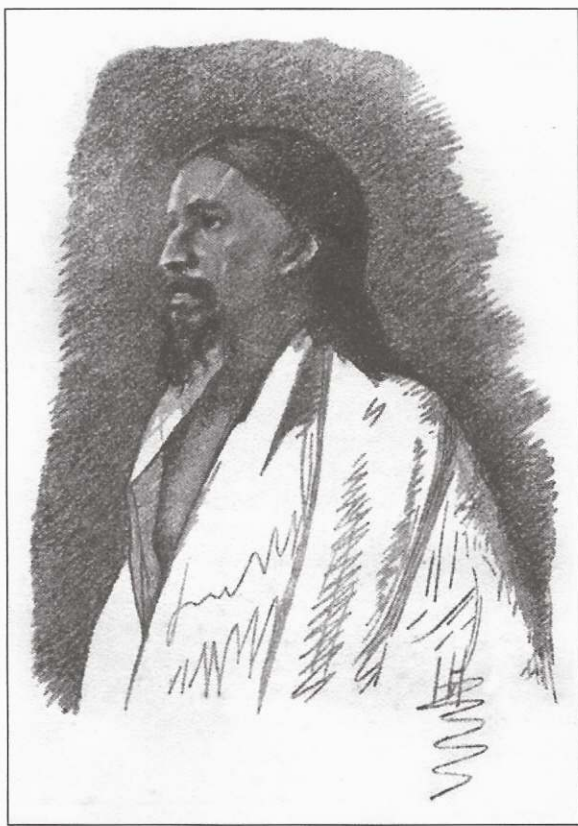
So how does Hohlenberg present Sri Aurobindo's yoga to a European readership?

Anusuya says that Hohlenberg introduces himself not as a scholar or Indologist but as a layperson interested in the topic of yoga and prepared to probe it to its depths.

"He then goes on to say he had recently been in India with 'a very holy man', from whom he had learnt the deep mysteries and secrets of yoga which he will now present.

"He clarifies that, firstly, unlike the arid spiritual traditions of that time, this yoga is not a spirituality that exists in some kind of never-never land based on some promised future. It is about the here and now, and it is scientific, based on observing nature and how nature works. This is very important for his readers because there is a very deep materialist tradition in Denmark: it is very grounded, very anchored in matter.

"He explains that nature is animated by a force, and this force has a *telos*, an ultimate object or aim. If you look at any plant or tree, he writes, what you see is that it is becoming more and more itself; it is in a process of self-realization. This is nature's



Pen drawing of Sri Aurobindo by Johannes Hohlenberg

From a letter written by Hohlenberg in 1948 about his conversations with Sri Aurobindo in 1915

As to the conversations I had with him it is impossible to me, after so long time, to give you any detailed record. They treated religions and moral topics, and my impression was of a very wise and noble spirit. Of the mystical experiences you say he went through at that special epoch he gave no direct evidence, but of course it was felt through his acts and words.

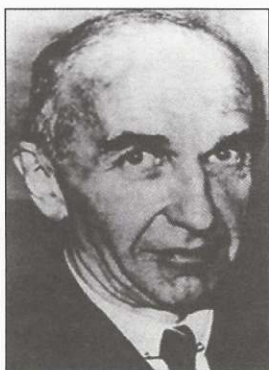
unstoppable evolutionary pathway. Moreover, this animating force is a unifying force, harmonising disparate elements in the being.

"In terms of the individual, Hohlenberg explains that the more you become truly yourself, the more unified and universalised you become. So, by understanding and practising yoga, one understands and accelerates the process of self-realisation, unification and universalisation."

Hohlenberg believed that the book contained a message of real pertinence for a fragmented Europe in the throes of the First World War. Yoga, he wrote, is the process of building higher and higher unities, more universal levels of being, through the harmonisation of conflicting parts and this is what Europe needed, above all, at that time. He had also understood from Sri Aurobindo that the point of historical evolution is not to dominate others but to realise oneself; and this can only take place if there is freedom for the individual and for the collective. This was a theme that informed the rest of his life.

Anusuya mentions that he also talks in the book about different levels of development. "He writes that Europe has now reached a certain stage of material development but this is not an end in itself, neither is the next stage, which is that of intellectual development. There is something still further. And now, he says, we are ready for that, we are able to manifest this other level, and there will come pioneers, visionaries, who herald this future. He identifies Sri Aurobindo as one of these: he calls him an arrow shot across the river to the other side."

"It's a beautiful book," concludes Anusuya. "The clarity of thought is uncanny – he was, after all, a philosopher – and the contents are profound but very simply presented. Through it, he brings a message to a Europe at war of the possibility of mutual cooperation without repression, of individualism harmonised with cooperation. This is a message that is still very relevant today. The book has been out of print for many years, but I have translated the book into English and it will be published soon."



Johannes Hohlenberg

How influential were Hohlenberg's writings?

Anusuya says he was trying to reach popular readers because at that time there were many misunderstandings about India and the Orient. So, in addition to the book, he also wrote articles about the yoga and Sri Aurobindo in various European newspapers and magazines.

What impact did this make?

Anusuya says it is very difficult to assess. The first Swedish Nobel prizewinner for literature,

Selma Lagerlof, was his yoga student for some time. She read the book and wrote about it. But the book and the articles on Sri Aurobindo appeared at a time of great interest in the esoteric and the occult in Europe and its message may have been subsumed in the plethora of writings about other movements like Theosophy, psychological research etc.



Anusuya

In fact, soon after writing the book Hohlenberg himself takes another path. Anusuya mentions that Hohlenberg had been encouraged to publish the book by Carl Vett, a Danish millionaire, and Hohlenberg came increasingly under his influence. "In 1917 this man begins to woo him away from Sri Aurobindo and draws him into anthroposophy, which was then a very new thing in Europe."

Hohlenberg's description of his first meeting with Sri Aurobindo

He received me on a big overshadowed verandah which is open to the one side. The furniture there is extremely simple. There is a table with three chairs around it. On the bare and naked whitewashed walls are a pair of Japanese mats or rugs hanging. Below the ceiling are some garlands of dried mango-leaves... One of the young men led me up to the verandah and I waited there for some minutes. Suddenly, it seemed that I was not alone in the space and turned around to see him standing just in front of me. He had soundlessly entered from a threshold. I looked into an extraordinarily beautiful face. He had a finely chiselled forehead framed with mahogany hair falling down over his shoulders. The eyes were dark with flashes of sienna-terra light. A decisively shaped sharp nose and unusually defined lips that were full and sensuous. A thin black beard fell below the throat. He was dressed in a kind of white cotton robe with a length thrown over his shoulder on one side. The robe was open in the front to the bare chest. He had naked slender feet lightly touching the floor. It was late afternoon with a hint of dusk in the air. The light gave his olive skin a transparency as if it were self-illuminating. When I shook hands with him I could not help becoming self-conscious how his golden arm contrasted with my own red-grey-white European skin. My own body beside his standing there seemed like it had been scrubbed by some abrasive cleanser and washed of natural color. Bleached to the bone. We sat down and began to talk in French and English. Both languages were equal to him. It was amazing to hear him quote Homer one moment and then the Vedas or Shakespeare. It was as if he belonged to all worlds and cultures at once.... But this was only one side of his personality. Another seemed to live in infinity. I seemed to sometimes notice a slight hint of a smile on his face when he saw my amazement at his penetrating words. It was like I had been shot through the heart and mind.

Rudolf Steiner invited him to study with him in Switzerland and when Hohlenberg returned in 1920, he established the first Anthroposophical Society in Denmark and later in Sweden and Norway. He finally left the Society in 1942 after a disagreement with Steiner's widow over her instructions not to obstruct Nazi censorship in Norway.

For some years he lived in self-imposed exile on an island in a Norwegian fjord. It is then that he began to translate Sri Aurobindo again, including his *Essays on the Gita*. In 1948, he returned to Denmark and re-edited *Yoga and its Meaning for Europe*. He started up yet another magazine where he printed, among other things, a selection from *The Life Divine* (in his own translation).

"His last period," says Anusuya, "is like Rembrandt's last period: there is an incandescence to his writing. And his last articles are on Sri Aurobindo – on freedom and the pursuit of universal consciousness: he comes back to him

in the end. In fact, I don't think he ever left. Those who knew him said he always lived and thought of himself as a yogi, and I think the alpha and omega of his life remained his connection with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother."

Hohlenberg died, unknown, in 1960 at the age of 79.

Anusuya admits she is only at the beginning of her research into the material, and, in particular, the three key notebooks – the *Paris Journal*, the *kabbalah journal* and the Sri Aurobindo diaries. "There is much more to discover."

Meanwhile, coming to Auroville has been a bit like a homecoming for her. "I have been a lone ranger in Denmark, so I am astonished and touched to find so much support and encouragement for my research both here and in the Ashram. I intend to stay in India now to pursue these studies."

Alan (with additional informational input from Gilles Guigan)

REFLECTION

Down Memory Road or The Tunnel

It is easy to remember because it hasn't really changed in 48 years: the same scanty grove of eucalyptus trees; the same flat expanse of fields now dotted with scrawny cashew trees and small, shadeless neems; the same red earth playing fields of Certitude; the same blast of sun that, along with the traffic, grinds the road into a fine dust coating its wayside shrubs from green to a diseased brown.

It's "Mother's Golden Temple Road," (address given on the Dinesh restaurant sign) or the Auroville Main Road (Google maps), still the main entrance to Auroville for hundreds of vehicles a day carrying Aurovilians swathed in dust-protecting cloth on motorbikes, visitors on carbon belching TVS's, rickety bicycles, listless walkers pulled over staring blankly at maps – plus lorries, small goods-vans, taxis, school buses, and me, with my memories of it.

The road from Kuilapalayam that feeds into it has changed. Joss's trees, planted in the 70's, provide shade and it's been widened and resurfaced with a few miniscule speed bumps over which young Aurovilians and visitors bounce with abandon in their need for speed. Commercial development has crept out of Lakshmipuram westward along it, offering everything from Greek food to furniture to choice coffee. Thunderous and dangerous, the traffic pours along it, much of it heading for the national highway near Koot Road.

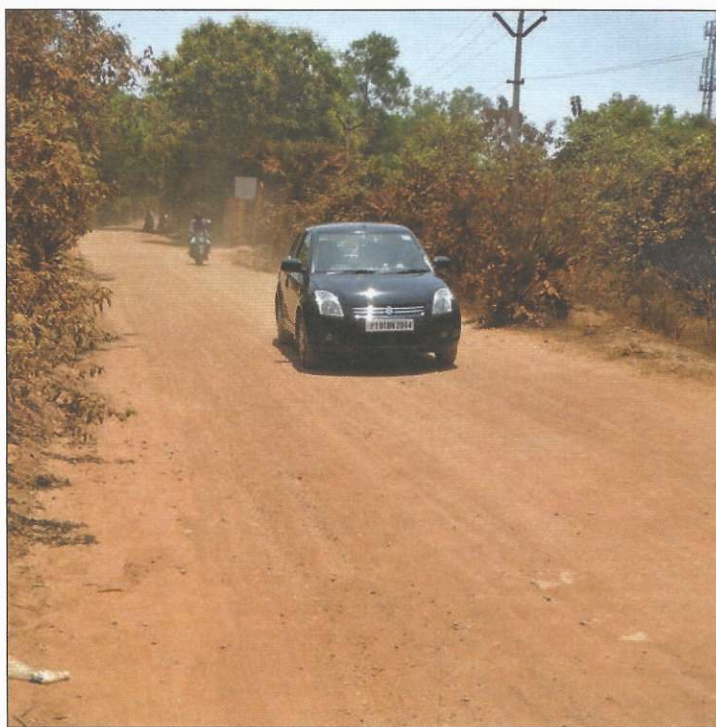
All this on a road that was not much different from Golden Temple Road in the beginning (I think it had some badly potholed surface) when we the stalwart pioneers pushed our ponderous Atlases toward the hole in the ground that was a budding golden temple of the Mother. The effort of that bicycle ride (only a few of us had motorbikes) kept both roads deserted during most of midday except for bullock carts with drivers half asleep in the savage heat.

We made the turn and saw the grove of casuarina trees that marked the centre of Auroville. After Certitude, there was little else except for the bleached beaches of sand on either side that only came alive, if there had been a few drizzles, in September when the low green peanut plants transformed them.

We pushed on in the heat, thinking wistfully of the ride back when the weight of our bikes would glide us easily into a Kuilapalayam that was a small village of mud and keet – no shops except those selling beedis. The then Golden Temple road had no solar kitchen or ring road; it just went straight into the Matrimandir workers camp, itself nothing but an extensive keet hut.

How many times have you ridden it? Cursed it? Gritted your teeth and narrowed your eyes against the fine dust that floats above it? While other roads were being tiled (and untiled) in and around Auroville why, you wondered, does this stretch of hell still look today like it had in the good old days?

The answer: *maya*. GTR is a temporary illusion that will vanish



The dusty time tunnel

when the real road, the grand entrance (will there be an arch?) to the city of dawn, appears some time soon. One day, golden-yellow machines will appear somewhere west of Certitude and in a matter of minutes a road will float down from the architectural drawing that constantly hovers above Auroville and be secured with golden spikes. Soon after, the GTR will lie abandoned and desolate. Instantly all of our angst-filled memories will have vanished as well.

So keep this vision in your consciousness as you sneeze your way along it this summer: it does not exist in the real Auroville – it's just this dusty time tunnel which we have believed for 48 years to be an actual road.

Gordon Korstange

Corrigendum

In the article "Searching for the spirit of seva", a profile of Tapas Bhatt which appeared in issue # 319 of February 2016, the date and time of The Mother's passing were incorrectly stated. The Mother passed on 17th November, 1973, at 19.25 hours.

NEW PUBLICATIONS

The English of Savitri Volume 2

The English of Savitri Volume 2 deals with Book Three, *The Book of the Divine Mother*. This volume, the second in the series *The English of Savitri*, is based on classes led by Shradhdhavan at Savitri Bhavan. The classes aim at assisting the understanding and appreciation of *Savitri – a legend and a symbol*, Sri Aurobindo's mantric epic which The Mother has characterised as 'the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision'.

Readers who have appreciated volume 1 of this series, dealing with Book One of Savitri, will be surprised to find that this second volume does not continue in sequence with Book Two, *The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds*. Instead it leaps to Book Three, *The Book of the Divine Mother*. This, explains Shradhdhavan, is because the immense journey through all the planes of existence followed by King Aswapati in the fifteen cantos of Book Two was too daunting a task to be taken up immediately. The weekly study sessions at Savitri Bhavan covering Book Two stretched over almost two years, and not all the recordings have yet been transcribed. Moreover, it appeared that much editing of the talks would still have to be done. As the sessions covering Book Three were ready for publication, it was decided to publish these texts as Volume 2 in the series.

The author also announced that it will not be possible to continue publishing detailed sentence-by-sentence explanations as was done for Book One for every part of the epic – which is a pity as these explanations are extremely helpful, in particular for non-native English speakers. The immediate plans are to publish an explanation of Book Seven, and possibly Book Ten. Interested readers are advised to subscribe to Savitri Bhavan's English Journal *Invocation* to read the explanations of Section 1 of Book Two, Canto One, *The World Stair*, which started to be serialised from issue #43, November, 2015.

Carel

The English of Savitri Volume 2 : Book Three, The Book of the Divine Mother. Published by Savitri Bhavan, Auroville. 272 pages, hard-bound. Price in India Rs. 450. Available from savitribhavan.org, from sabdasriaurobindoashram.org, and as an e-publication from www.auro-ebooks.com.

"You have to keep going forward": a portrait of Pashi

Pashi Kapur came to live in Auroville with his family in early 1974. Since then, he has contributed a great deal but his Auroville journey has not always been smooth. Here he tells about the 'adventure' to which he has dedicated his life and which, in spite of its ups and downs, he would not have missed for the world.

When Pashi was about ten years old, a swami came into the lives of his family. He was to have a big influence upon the young boy's development. "He guided my young mind towards the biographies of great people, and towards the study of philosophy and religion. Under his guidance, I read both the Bible and the Koran. In other words, he was a very unusual kind of swami who introduced me to a way of thinking that was very different from the orthodox, to something beyond conventional religion."

Much later, when Pashi was married and had a family, he went to a talk by J. Krishnamurti. He was impressed and thought about sending his three children to the Rishi Valley School, which is based upon Krishnamurti's educational principles. In a quest for more information, in 1968 he got an appointment to meet Krishnamurti in Rishi valley.

At that time, Pashi was the senior manager of an engineering company in Calcutta. When he travelled south to meet Krishnamurti, a colleague who was a devotee of The Mother suggested that Pashi should also visit Pondicherry where another experiment in education was taking place.

"There I met Kireet Joshi, who at that time was the Registrar of the Ashram School, and told him I would like to understand this system of education. He said, 'Go and see' and waved me towards the classrooms. I walked into one classroom and sat at the back. Everybody was quietly reading. Suddenly, a student raised his hand and asked a question. The teacher paused, and then said, 'I am sorry, I do not have the answer. Shall we go to the library and find out the answer together?'"

"That really hit me: it was so different from the schooling I had experienced."

Pashi immediately asked Kireet how he could get his children admitted, and what it would cost. Kireet said there was no fee. As to how the students were selected, he said The Mother decides, and he pointed to a large picture hanging behind him.

"I said, 'Do you mean that old lady?' and he smiled and said 'yes'. So I asked if I could meet her. He said she only gives four darshans a year. I thought, 'This is a madhouse'. So I told my friend I would not send my children to this place because it just didn't sound rational enough."

However, the friend persuaded Pashi to purchase *The Life Divine* in three volumes from the Ashram bookshop. That evening he had a few hours to spare while waiting for his train, and he started reading it. "And even in the first two chapters I found there was much rationality in the explanations given, and so much freedom given to the reader to make up their own mind".

Pashi ended up reading all three volumes. Then he started looking for people in Calcutta who were associated with the Ashram and discovered a branch of the Sri Aurobindo Society in the city. He began going there. Finally, he asked somebody if he could help him meet The Mother, and he obliged.

Meeting The Mother

"It was July, 1968 and the time I was given to meet Mother was 7.13 in the morning. I still remember this because it was so damn specific!"

"But at that time I was very reluctant to accept somebody as a guru, so when this friend gave me flowers to give to The Mother I said I don't need these, I am just going for an interview."

"Finally I was called in, and she looked up. My eyes locked with hers. All I remember after that is that I had my head in her lap and she was stroking it. I don't know how long I was there, but when I finally got up, I was shaking and crying. I walked down to the meditation hall and there I kept on crying."

"This was the moment that decided my life."

After this, Pashi was introduced to Navajata, who talked about Auroville. "For me, there were no second thoughts; I fell in love with the concept of Auroville and immediately offered to work for it in any way I could."

Pashi started visiting the Ashram regularly. In November, 1968 on his way back to Calcutta he met Roger for the first time at Chennai airport. Roger told him that the next time Pashi



came to Pondicherry he should come and see him. It was the beginning of a deep friendship.

In 1970, Pashi suggested that the various Ashram-associated organizations around India could initiate karma yoga activities to benefit the society around them as well as contribute revenue for the Ashram and Auroville. He sent his proposal to The Mother.

The Mother sent for him and asked him what it should be called. "I said, 'Auroville service'. Then she took a large sheet and wrote on it, 'Auroservice'."

Organizing the activities of Auroservice became one of Pashi's main jobs. After some time, he decided to franchise Auroservice so that centres in different States could have some independence. It was in this context that Auroservice d'Auroville became an Auroville unit and trust in the year 1974.

"From the early 1970s I started pestering The Mother to give me permission to come to live here. Finally on my birthday in 1973 – and I was very privileged because soon after that she stopped seeing people – I asked her again if I could come. She said, 'Why do you insist? I'm with you all the time.' I said, 'Mother, being physically in your presence is very important for me'. And I don't know why, but I added, 'I want to stop doing what I'm doing now because it involves giving people bribes'."

"She looked at me and said, 'So, you are a superior being.' I came down and met Nolinida and mentioned to him what Mother had said. I asked him what she meant. Did it mean I could come? He told me to write a short note asking her for an explanation. He took the note and came back, gave me three flowers and said, 'This is what she has given to you'. Explaining the significance of the flowers, he said her message to me is to have faith and perseverance. I took that as a positive answer and prepared to move my family here."

Moving to Auroville

Pashi moved to Pondicherry in March 1974. Two months later, when a hut became vacant in Aspiration, the family finally moved to Auroville. "It all took much longer than I had originally planned, partly because my wife was not sure at first that she wanted to move from Calcutta. Looking back, I think Mother did not tell me I could come immediately because she understood my wife was not ready."

Meanwhile, The Mother had passed away. At the time, Pashi was in Assam on Auroservice business. "Dr. Datta, who is now the Ashram doctor and trustee, was the medical officer there. In the morning of 18th November, 1973, he woke me up and said Mother had gone. I had to wait three days for a flight because of the weather conditions, and by the time I reached Pondicherry it was too late. She was already in the Samadhi."

"I cried my heart out because I couldn't see her one more time. Nolini came by and asked why I was crying and I said I could not have Mother's last darshan. He said, 'Don't you see Mother is always with you?'. He put his hand on my head, I closed my eyes and since that moment I've never felt away from her. It's amazing."

After meeting Roger, Pashi became a regular visitor to the Aurofuture office in Pondicherry. "My relationship with Roger was immediately very close. When he wanted to think out loud about something, he would turn to a small group including me, and we would do the same for him. I had tremendous affection and respect for him. Mother had chosen him to be an instrument for her work, and, in spite of opposition from others, she had consistent faith in him. She saw something in him which we could not see. I think he was a very sincere instrument and I believe that through working with The Mother he became a yogi."

The crisis

When the crisis erupted between the Sri Aurobindo Society and Auroville in the mid 1970s, Auroservice d'Auroville supported Aurofuture because the Society cut off funding and Auroville had no financial resources of its own.

This was the time when Aurofuture took work outside Auroville for the first time. The projects included planning Salem Steel Town (interestingly, for a population of 50,000), an iron ore township, a coastal development for Orissa and a concept plan for Haryana's new capital among many others.

"All this was successful in bringing in money," says Pashi, "but it created a conflict in Auroville because, at a certain point, the Pour Tous group decided they wanted control of all the incoming monies of Auroservice. I disagreed. I said Auroservice will keep providing for the upkeep of the people working there, but please don't touch the source as, from a business point of view, Aurofuture needed the freedom to make decisions concerning this income. In response, some Aurovilians started an agitation saying that Auroservice d'Auroville was not an Aurovilian activity."

"Finally, I was asked to resign by Pour Tous. I said I would do so, provided it was accepted as an Aurovilian activity. This was agreed upon. But after this, steps were taken to shift Auroservice d'Auroville to Pondicherry."

At this point, Roger and Pashi decided to leave Auroville for some time. "Roger felt disappointed with the developments as he felt unable to continue L'avenir d'Auroville, and I had managed to become *persona non grata* for both the Society and the Aurovilians. I had annoyed Navajata by an attempt to resolve the crisis between Auroville and the Society, and I annoyed the Aurovilians because I didn't agree with their idea to set up an Auroville Association as a separate legal entity from the Sri Aurobindo Society. As a consequence, my food basket was stopped and I was not allowed to eat in the Aspiration kitchen. And my daughter, who was very young at that time, was even boycotted by her former friends. Finally, I moved to Pondicherry so I could put my children through a proper education."

A French friend offered Pashi a job in an international marketing company, for which he became the Indian representative. "This started a new journey for me which took almost 20 years. But now my whole attitude to business

had changed. I was no longer bothered if I was 'successful' or not. I took little commission and sometimes I would even recommend our competitors' products."

"People could not understand why I was doing this, what was guiding me, and they started coming to Pondicherry and Auroville to see the places that were breeding this idiot!"

The challenges today

Pashi returned to Auroville on 1st January, 2000. "By that time Roger had also returned and he asked me to come back." Since then, he has helped to raise funds for Matrimandir and worked on tax-exemption issues, but his main concern has been finding ways to secure the land so that at least the urban aspect of the city can be built. "We have not been able to do this so far because of lack of funds and because we have neglected to do certain things. For example, land issues are dealt with by the Tamil Nadu Government, but we have missed many opportunities to get them on board."

Pashi thinks that the New Town Development Authority initiative [see *Auroville Today* 309, April, 2015] may be the answer to Auroville acquiring control over the land. "We are engaged in a conversation with the relevant authorities at the moment, trying to find a possible answer to our problems. They recognise it will require some out-of-the-box thinking, and I am very happy with that."

Another source of support which Pashi feels Auroville has failed to tap is the international community. "Mother waited to inaugurate Auroville until UNESCO had passed two resolutions supporting the project. It was not the money that would come from UNESCO that was important for her; it was the internationalisation of the project. Later, UNESCO passed further resolutions of support, the Secretary-General even came here, but we have continued to ignore this dimension, even though we only got the Auroville Foundation Act because it was seen that Auroville had this international support and dimension."

Pashi believes we now have another chance because UNESCO is ready to recognise Auroville as a Heritage of the Future project. "If UNESCO and the Government of India supports this, it could be an additional shield for our protection."

"I hope that before I finally close my eyes I will see the fruition of this work."

Pashi admits that his Auroville journey has not been a smooth one. "For some people, I've been a controversial figure from day one, and I've had to put up with all kinds of jealousies and animosities. But I would willingly go through it all again because it has only made me stronger."

"Above all, my faith in Auroville has never been shaken. I have an absolute faith in The Dream, in the Charter and in The Mother's vision. It has to come because it is what the world needs."

"For me, the most important thing, the underlying principle, is that to live in Auroville one must be a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness. We are not here to question her, even though some people say she would have changed her mind concerning certain things. But she would never have changed her mind regarding the essentials."

"I'm afraid that what we are doing at present is trying to build Auroville based upon our incapacities, our limited minds, rather than her vision. To constantly carry an urge towards the future is not easy. Sometimes, mentally and physically, we get tired and then we want to settle down, to revert to old patterns of thinking and living."

"Mother was a realist: she knew the difficulties and she knew it would take time. This is why she wanted to create a special ambience that would support the work; it is why, for example, she wanted the Matrimandir to be built first and insisted on realizing the township in a particular time scale."

"Finally, without a spirit of adventure and a sense of humour you cannot last here. You have to learn not to take everything to heart, and to keep going forward."

From an interview by Alan

German volunteers in Auroville: the Weltwaerts programme

Under this programme, over the past eight years 122 young German volunteers have come to work in Auroville, generally for a period of one year.

Weltwaerts in German means "towards" or "in the direction of the world". The idea behind it is to provide German youth with an experience of different cultures and, through this, to learn more about themselves and the wider world. The hope, as their website puts it, is that this will lead to them making a positive contribution to "a fairer world".

Although the overall programme is under the German Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, the programmes in the different countries are run by local or international organisations. In the case of Auroville, a sub-group of Auroville International (AVI) Germany is the core team responsible for selecting the volunteers and preparing them for the experience, while an Auroville team supports them during their stay here.



Birgit and Thomas

Thomas and Birgit from AVI Germany, who visit Auroville every year to speak with all the volunteers and assess the programmes, are the indispensable bridge between the two groups.

"It wasn't so easy to get Auroville accepted as a venue for the weltwaerts programme," says Thomas. "In the beginning we were a little bit suspected to be a sect, so we had to assure the Ministry that we would not force the volunteers to become Aurovilians, that we would not indoctrinate them! Subsequently, a number of officials from the organization have come here and all have been very pleased with the work and the quality of the people running the projects. So now we have a very good standing with the organisation."

In fact, this is not Auroville's first experience with German volunteers. There was an earlier scheme, beginning in 2000, in which young Germans could opt out of military service to do development-related work here. However, the experience was not completely positive for all concerned. "It was not so well organized," admits Thomas, "the volunteers were less prepared and less well looked after in Auroville. The weltwaerts programme is quite different."

The preparation

It is indeed. Run with German efficiency, every detail seems to have been covered. Every year, the Auroville programme is posted on the weltwaerts website and on the site of AVI Germany. People interested, between the ages of 18 - 28 years, send an application to Birgit.

The team has decided that eighteen volunteers a year is the optimum number they can manage in Auroville at present. As there are often more applicants - in one year over one hundred - a selection has to be made. The selection group consists of Thomas, Birgit, Muna and Anke, a former Aurovillian who is living in Germany, and former Auroville volunteers.

The team determines their motivation and whether they have had any experience of working abroad or of social work in Germany. "These are indicators," says Birgit. "If you have lived in a different culture or engaged yourself in a social activity in

the past, it is more likely you will commit yourself to the Auroville programme."

Once a selection has been made, there are further phone interviews with the chosen applicants to ensure there are no health issues or psychological issues. "In the interviews, we are also very realistic in the way we present Auroville," says Thomas. "We do not try to persuade people to come; rather we tell them it could be very difficult, so that people who might already be a bit uncertain would back out by themselves. At this point, we also ask a former volunteer to meet with them to give them more information and to give us their impressions of the candidate."

Finally, the volunteer is asked to sign a formal contract. The contract specifies, among other things, that they have to work for at least 30 hours a week in a specified Auroville project. The volunteer also has to contribute financially. While 75% of the programme is funded by the German Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation, the rest has to be supplied by the volunteers themselves. If there is a gap, says Thomas, AVI Germany has to bridge it.

Finally, before the volunteers leave for Auroville, they come together for two seminars in Germany. In the first seminar, all the Auroville projects willing to host the volunteers are presented in detail, and then they have to make up their mind where they want to work. "They are told how many people can work in one project," says Thomas, "but then the choice of who works where is made by the volunteers themselves. Only if they cannot agree among themselves we may intervene. Normally, they should stay for one year with their chosen project, but if the project doesn't work out for them they can change later."

The second seminar is a preparation seminar where the volunteers get a crash course in Tamil, learn about intercultural communication and engage in further team-building.

The Auroville experience

During their first week in Auroville, the volunteers live together and attend an introductory seminar run by the Auroville team. They are given a basic orientation to the most important places in the community, and taken to all the projects that will be hosting volunteers that year.

At present there are about thirty work places in Auroville projects for weltwaerts volunteers [see below]. "Each Auroville project has to be accepted by the German Ministry to become a weltwaerts project," explains Thomas. "The project holder applies to the Ministry through us, and we ensure he or she supplies the necessary information and can provide the necessary support structure."

After the first week, the volunteers split up and go to their different work places. They can choose where they want to live. Some of the project holders provide accommodation for the volunteers. Additionally, some capsules in Discipline community have been constructed for them.

During their Auroville stay, they come together monthly, and there is a seminar in December or January when they share their experiences with the Auroville team. "This happens after three or four months," says Thomas, "so there is still time to move them in the right direction if a course correction is needed. After four months, we come over and interview all the volunteers individually, as well as the project holders, to assess if everything is going well. The local team is also very important because they have to intervene if there are problems."

Towards the end of their stay, there is a second seminar when the volunteers review their experiences here and start looking towards the future. Generally, these are overwhelmingly positive. "The weltwaerts organisation does a survey, and 100% of the Auroville volunteers report it was really

worthwhile," says Thomas. "They say the most positive aspect for them is their personal development."

The designated Auroville projects benefit not only from the work and enthusiasm of the volunteers but also financially. The organization donates €50 a month per volunteer to every project where a volunteer is working. If a volunteer discovers their project needs special help, additional support may also be given from the running budget of the Auroville weltwaerts programme. In the past, the programme has also helped finance volunteer huts and a new well in Discipline, a computer building in Aikayam School, and when the cyclone struck in 2011 it provided emergency help for the projects that needed it.

The return

The volunteers do not always experience a soft landing when they return to Germany.

"Sometimes they feel they have changed but nothing in Germany has changed, and their family does not understand how they feel," says Birgit. "For some, this is the worst aspect of the return." "Some have problems reintegrating because they look at German society in a new way now," says Thomas. "We are very limited in what we can do to help them reintegrate. What helps the most is for them to meet together as a group in Germany. They can give each other emotional support and talk about their issues with those who will understand."

Once they are back in Germany, they have the opportunity to remain active, either by helping select future volunteers or becoming a contact person for them.

Do they become interested in the ideal, the philosophy of Auroville? "Some of them do," says Thomas. "Two of them have joined our core group in AVI Germany. An astonishing number also revisit Auroville, and one has become a Newcomer. We also have a Sri Aurobindo centre in Berlin where we have an Auroville garden, and many former volunteers come and work there. Many also come to our annual Auroville International meeting: about 20% of the volunteers have actually become members. This is already changing the nature of our meetings."

As for the future, Thomas envisages the possibility of a reverse programme in which Tamil Aurovilians or local people from the bioregion could come to Germany for training. "It would require quite a lot of preparation. To qualify, they would need to attain a certain level of proficiency in a skill as well as in German, but then they could receive further training in Germany and come back with an extra qualification. At present, the students in the outreach schools here are not well enough prepared but this is a possibility for the future."

And what about Thomas and Birgit themselves? What impact has the Auroville weltwaerts programme had upon them? "Sometimes it is hard work," says Birgit, "but this job makes me happy because through it I feel I can contribute something to Auroville."

"It gives me a chance to learn much more about Auroville," reflects Thomas. "Having studied in detail some 25 Auroville projects for the weltwaerts programme, I feel I understand Auroville a bit at a deeper level. I have more understanding of the internal developments and a better sense of what needs support. The weltwaerts programme is part of our contribution to the development of Auroville."

Alan

Some of the projects at present hosting Weltwaerts volunteers include Discipline and Auro-orchard Farms, Botanical Gardens, Sadhana Forest, Ecopro, Sunlit Future, Thamarai, Udavi and Aikayam schools, ALAT, Ecofemme, Village Action, Deepam, Pichandikulam, Swaram, Mohanam, and Lively/Bamboo Centre.

Experiences of Weltwaerts volunteers

Jeline ("call me 'Jeli'") is working on Auro-Orchard Farm. "So far we've been weeding and planting, as well as harvesting vegetables. I really enjoy the work, even though sometimes it is hard. In the middle of the monsoon, we had to harvest peanuts. The local women and I were out harvesting in the heavy rain for hours, but it felt good because there was a strong feeling of solidarity between us."



"In fact, two of the reasons I signed up for the weltwaerts programme were to be active outside, digging in the soil (my previous job had been in an office), and also to get more deeply inside another culture."

"I am living in Kottakarai village and I really appreciate the local culture. It is very different from Germany. Germany culture is very individualistic, whereas the Tamil culture is very family and community-based: the individual does not seem to count at all. In the village, you always have to be there for your neighbours; you have no private space. This can be hard to cope with, but I think it is good for me because I have a tendency to shut myself off and create my private world, and here I am forced to open up."

"After Auroville I will go back to Berlin for at least one year. After that, I think I will continue travelling and doing voluntary work. What I really like about it is you are not doing it for the money but for what you can contribute to the project. You just want to help the project and gain some knowledge, and I really, really like this approach."

Florian is one of the older volunteers.



He studied landscape architecture in Germany and worked for two years as a landscape architect. He is volunteering at the Botanical Gardens.

"The Botanical Gardens is a very nice place to work because there are a lot of different things to do and you can change every day; it is very flexible. In the beginning, I did a lot of tree-planting, learning about the local trees which are very different from those in Germany. These are some of the reasons I am here, to extend my knowledge and to do physical work which, for someone like me who has worked in an office, is a really good experience."

"After a few months, another volunteer, Kirar, and I started our own project, which was to create a dyeing garden, planting trees and shrubs from which dyes can be made to colour clothes. Our next step is to build a small pavilion."

"What I will take back from here is the realization that things can be done in a different way. Everything is regulated in Germany, but here you don't have all these rules and regulations. With the dyeing garden, we didn't start out with a plan. We just set off, and let it shape itself. This is really un-German! But it's a great experience to know that you don't need a lot of regulations to achieve something interesting."

PASSING

Eric Hughes

On March 6th, 2016, Eric Hughes passed away after suffering a stroke. He was 84 years old.

Eric was well-known as the caretaker of Matagiri (meaning Mother's Mountain), a 42-acre retreat in Woodstock, New York, which he co-founded with his life-long partner Sam Spanier who he had met over fifty years ago. Sam, an accomplished painter, had become a disciple of the Mother. Both went to Pondicherry and met with her, meetings which led to profound spiritual experiences which changed the course of their lives.



Winner of the Edward Albee award for his play *The Empty Room*, Eric had a deep love of theatre and the opera. He worked as a copy editor for many years both in Manhattan and later in upstate New York. Eric translated the 13 Volumes of *Mother's Agenda of the Supramental Action Upon Earth* from the original French into English for the Matagiri community. His work contributed to the final official translation. He also edited a book entitled *On Collective Yoga* containing quotes from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

Over the years, Sam and Eric received thousands of people at Matagiri. After Sam's death in January of 2008, Eric continued to

greet visitors and share insights until his passing. He will not only be remembered as someone who had the wealth of Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's wisdom at his fingertips, but also for his quick and acerbic wit. He did not suffer fools easily, but was inspired to meet any true seeker.

Matagiri, which is now incorporated as a non-profit organization, will continue under a Board of Trustees including Julian and Wendy Lines, whom Eric named as his successors. They both have been students of Sri Aurobindo's yoga since the early 70s.

Eric will be remembered on April 24th, a Darshan day, at Matagiri.

Rockstar Racing

In a homely rustic workshop opposite Svedam, Luca and Ami are diligently working on a sleek-looking racing motorbike. This one is a Yamaha model, and they are getting it ready for the Madras Race Track near Chennai, where Ami regularly competes against two dozen other racers. Their dialogue is minimal as the growing heat of mid-day rises, but they are used to it; both have been living in Auroville since they were 9 and 8 years old respectively. Their love for bikes and racing has not only formed a great friendship between them, but has also materialised into a full-scale workshop where Luca customises motorbikes. This is the place where Rockstar Racing was born.

Being his classmate, I know that Luca never enjoyed school as much as doodling bikes. To the dismay of our teachers, the pages of his notebooks were filled with them on a daily basis. When he built his first go-kart at the age of 14, his first solo ongoing project, he visited bike shops in Chennai to purchase a Suzuki engine for it. A little before his 18th birthday he received his first motorbike, and he has been obsessively taking bikes apart and putting them back together ever since. To finance his passion, he regularly makes trips to Switzerland to work for a few months.

So far, he has constructed around 20 custom bikes, both for himself and others. He admits that although the future plan is to turn it into a business, at the moment it's more a passion. The two young Aurovilians believe that there is a huge growth market for custom bikes in India. Ten years ago, custom bikes were a rare sight. Today, you'll often see one. "In Delhi there are at least 5 custom shops that I know of, and maybe 20 around the country," says Luca.

Ami's love for bikes also began when he was very little. He remembers that his mom showed him a bike shop in Spain, where he found a small white mini bike that he admired for hours. Ami's brother Edgar (Eddy) who was then working in Rêve with Boris, Chris and Velu, told him that if he came to Auroville he would see to it that Ami got to ride a bike for real. In fact, he even promised to make him one of his own. Ami admits that this offer greatly sparked his curiosity and enthusiasm for Auroville.

In their early teens, Ami and Luca often spent their free time at Mani's workshop on the ECR, watching him work on bikes. Eventually, they got him to put a 100cc engine in Ami's Explorer. At that point, Ami's love story with bikes truly began. Talking about their first customised bikes, they say: "No mechanic wanted to touch those bikes, often exclaiming 'alteration bike, alteration bike!'". According to Ami and Luca,



Ami during the KTM race

mechanics get confused if they do not work on ordinary bikes.

Besides fixing and customising bikes, Luca is also involved in giving mechanics classes to the younger kids of Auroville schools. He mentions that he missed this apprenticeship opportunity while he was in school, so now is happy to contribute in that way. While Luca has also tried racing, what he loves is the technical and mechanical aspect of building and customising bikes. Ami says: "I also like the technical part of it, but I love to race them, that's my passion. If I build them, it's to drive them."

The Beginning

After having seen the article 'How to Become a Racer' in Bike Magazine, (the only good bike magazine in India according to them), Ami got his racing license in Chennai at 18. After a medical check he was entered into his appropriate category. From then on, he has been regularly seen at the Madras Race Track near Chennai, one of three race tracks in the country. Ami and Luca have been to all three tracks, one of them being the F1 track, which is as large as Auroville. Ami's favourite track is the one near Chennai. "It opened in 1990, but it was resurfaced in 2007. New tar, bigger exits, and to have one so close to us.... We're very lucky."

Every year there is racing on five weekends. That's 4 days of racing including practice, official practice, qualifying, and the main race. He adds: "The bike has to be got ready, tested and improved each time. Each round has different groups, such as TVS, Yamaha, or Suzuki. Between rounds, bike

mechanics such as Luca and Eddy have the time to get the bike ready, make new pieces, and do all the necessary adjustments."



Ami wins first prize

Ami started racing 2 years ago, and has raced two seasons: "I met a few racers such three time national champion Emmanuel Jebaraj, who inspires me and gives me useful tips after each race." Luca intervenes loudly: "When it comes to building the bikes they're not as helpful! They all have their secrets that they don't want to share, and deliberately try to confuse me!"

Talking about their race history, Luca mentions: "The first bike Ami raced was a Yamaha R15 that we made into a racing bike. We joined the Honda One-Make, which is part of the Indian National Championship calendar, with a CBR 250R in the expert class, in 2014. There, all the racers have to ride a semi-stock bike. So, we are provided with the Honda motorbike and we can then change a few things such as the 'mapping' (these bikes are fuel-injected and have an in-built computer (ECU) that tells the engine what to do) and the suspension can be adjusted for the rider." With that bike, they achieved the fastest lap time during qualification in the expert class against professional racers such as a MotoGP calendar racer, a national champion, and race academy instructors." Despite a problem during the race when one of the mechanical pieces of the front suspension broke, Ami made it to the podium in third place with that bike," Luca says, proud of his friend.

"For the past month, I have been building our own race bike from scratch! It will be a group C bike for the Indian Nationals in the expert class, which means it's relatively modified and we are quite free to customise it." The Federal Motor Sports Association of India has a rule book that is followed in order to keep the costs down, as well as for safety reasons. For example, teams cannot use imported parts. "We chose a Yamaha R15. They sponsor us in stock bike parts. They are motivated by the fact that the current winning bike in the National Championship is their rival Honda." The bike has been tested already in the last round of expert races in 2015. Although they had no expectations, they finished with four other bikes behind them. Ami adds: "Next season, we will fight for a podium finish."

The race

I ask Ami about what goes on in his mind when he races. He answers: "I try to eliminate any weird thoughts from my head, I meditate and relax, and think of nothing else except what is happening." He continues: "Before the race, we even dance! Luca hits me on the helmet, and we sing weird songs to release any stress I have."

During the race, I have no exterior thoughts. The machine dances under me, and at every corner I think of the next braking. Each little detail of the track is a reference point." Ami explains to me that practice makes you learn the track by heart. The success of a race lies 50% in the bike and 50% in the rider. The key is how much courage and confidence the rider has as both rider and bike are pushed to their utmost limits. In Chennai, bike and rider reach a top speed of 170 km/hour. The role of the tuner (ie Luca) is to make sure that the bike responds exactly to the cues of the rider. Each rider has a different style, some like to break harder, lean more, give more gas, or like more suspension. Ami explains: "I'm also heavier than most racers, and I'm quite aggressive on the track, so Luca makes sure that my bike is perfect for me. Even one second difference is hugely important, a race is won and lost by tens of seconds."

Ami and Luca explain to me that because there is no exposure for sponsors — there is no live television coverage on the races, they are on a tight budget. They are grateful for the three sponsors that they do have: Yamaha provides them with spare parts, Auroville-based INDI Surfboards is making the Rockstar Racing team the first custom carbon fibre bike body, and Race Dynamics, a company in Bangalore, provides them with tunable ECUs.

Ami and Luca are no doubt materialising their dreams, and have found a perfect fusion between their skills and their passion. Their thoughts for the future? To provide the next generation with eco-friendly competitive electric bikes, and enter an ebike race with a bike 100% made in Auroville.

Inge van Alphen



Luc, Ami and Edgar with their Yamaha

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Editorial team:

Alan, Carel. Guest Editor: Inge, Shradha. Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville - 605101, Tamil Nadu. Contact: Auroville Today, Samasti, Auroville - 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Phone: +91.413.2622572, avtoday@auroville.org.in.

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