

How to protect the lands for Auroville

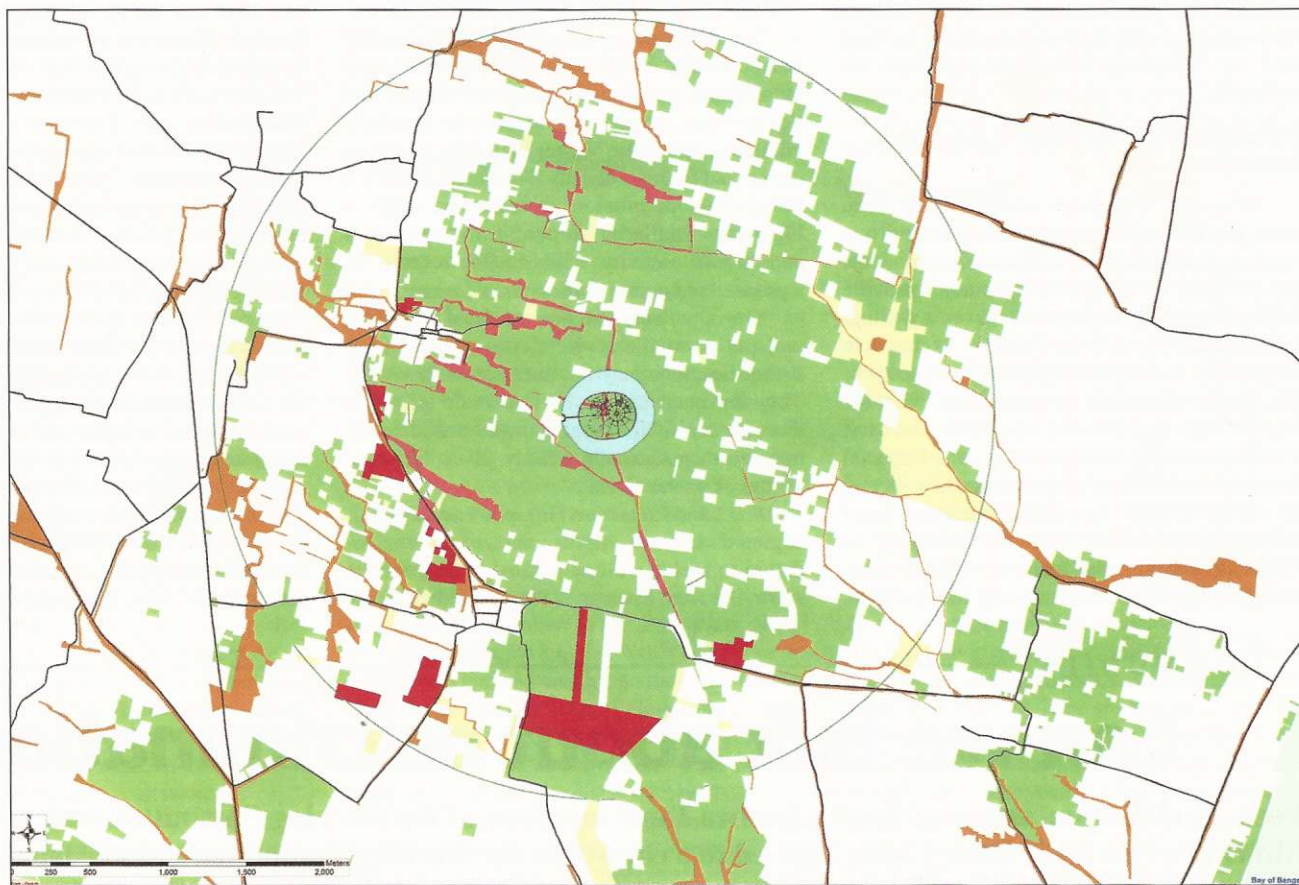
On May 7th, the Land Protection Group presented in a public meeting its findings on the best way to protect the land needed for the Auroville township from unsolicited development.

What is Auroville? A dream, an ideal of human unity, a utopian society, a nature conservancy? One is hard put to define it, but what is certain is that when people think of Auroville, they think of it as a place – an area in South India, once barren – where something unique is happening. For most of us living here, and for the many who visit regularly, it is home. We love it for its quietness, its refusal of consumerism, its burgeoning city, for the people that populate it – many of whom are striving to be their better self – and for its forests. Around the bend of a dirt road you may catch the sight of a hare; or witness the battle of a snake and a mongoose under the green canopy that harbours a multitude of birds. When night comes the jackals howl and the owls hoot. Auroville is a magic land full of crooks and crannies that hide wonders.

Pondicherry: a megacity in the making

This ideal place is under threat. It is no longer unrealistic to believe that in a not too far future Auroville could become a suburb of Pondicherry. The numbers speak for themselves. The municipalities of Pondicherry and Ozhukarai, bordering the south of Auroville, had a population of 150,000, according to the 1971 census; in the 2011 census it reached 540,000. Likewise, Tamil Nadu that had registered a population of about 41 million in the 1971 census reached more than 72 million in 2011. In that period the population of Tamil Nadu increased by 75%, below the national average of 114%, but the Pondicherry and Ozhukarai municipalities increased by a staggering 260%. (For comparison, in the same period, the US population increased by 57% and France by 22%). Figures of the population after 2011 are not available, but they, without doubt, would only show a continuous increase. The next Indian census will take place in 2021.

For those who remember the sleepy provincial town that was Pondicherry in the 1970's and 1980's, the city's expansion boggles the mind. The consequences of this population explosion are obvious: there is an increasing need for land to accommodate the new residents. This has a direct effect on Auroville.



The Auroville area. The central area is the Matrimandir surrounded by a lake. The City area is located inside the middle circle. The area between the middle and outer circle is the Green Belt. In green the lands owned by Auroville, in white the lands privately owned, in red privately owned lands where building developments have taken place. Government lands are marked in brown, temple lands in yellow.

Located only 12 km from Pondicherry, Auroville is feeling the winds of expansion gushing in, entering areas that Aurovilians thought were out of bounds. To date there are more than 60 private and unsolicited construction projects within the Auroville area, while the villages within the Master Plan area are expanding at breakneck speed.

Purchasing the lands

Though started in 1968, Auroville has not yet purchased all the lands needed to manifest the Township. Auroville's Master Plan, often referred to as the Galaxy, is a perfect circle with a diameter of 2.5 kilometres. At the centre is the City area, which is surrounded by a Green Belt. Out of the 2,000 hectares (5,000 acres) needed, Auroville owns 437 hectares (1,080 acres) in the city area and 425 hectares (1,050 acres) in the Green Belt. While the city centre is 87% owned, the Green Belt, at 72%, is largely in the hands of third parties.

Purchasing the needed land requires funds far beyond Auroville's current means. The real estate pressure has pushed up the prices to levels that often match those of western industrialised nations, bringing the total amount required to an estimated 250 million USD.

There are many reasons for the slow pace at which the lands have been purchased. The most obvious has been a chronic lack of funds. The Government of India, notwithstanding its passing of the Auroville Foundation Act, has never donated any funds for land purchase. Auroville depends on private donations to purchase the land and the generosity of the donors has not yet matched the needs.

Today, due to the increasing real estate pressure, the Auroville Land Board, the Auroville working group in charge of land purchase, finds itself often competing with bidders wealthier than itself. Sometimes the process becomes frustrating, as when some acreage, which Auroville refused to purchase in the past as it found the asking price too high, is again up for sale, now many times the original price. Other problems that hinder smooth purchases are family-ownership disputes, doubtful or even false land deeds, and sometimes dubious succession claims, which compromise ongoing negotiations and may even overturn a completed deal.

Protecting the Master Plan area

Since the early 2000's, Auroville planners have been seeking a solution to the ever-increasing number of unwanted developments within the Master Plan area. They have requested

the help of the State of Tamil Nadu to protect the lands needed to manifest the City of Dawn.

The Ministry of Human Resource Development, Auroville's nodal ministry, approved the Master Plan of Auroville in 2001 and has published it in the *Gazette of India*. But this approval only offers a genuine protection once the State of Tamil Nadu, in which Auroville is located for the most part, transcribes it into State regulations. For in India, all matters related to land are the prerogative of the states, not of the Central Government.

What Tamil Nadu can offer is governed by its Town and Country Planning Act, which says that the State representative, the Directorate of Town and Country Planning (DTCP), can constitute administrative entities over areas where it desires to create a planned development. The creation of such an administrative entity would offer Auroville a statutory protection, defining what can and cannot be built within the Master Plan area.

A New Town Development Authority for Auroville?

The administrative entity best suitable for Auroville is a New Town Development Authority (NTDA). An NTDA's task is to promulgate a planned development over a territory, prepare a New Town Development Plan, and get it approved by the Tamil Nadu Government. Once approved, the Plan becomes mandatory on all those who live in the area. Any building construction will need permission from the NTDA which approves what can and cannot be built in accordance with the approved development plan.

The idea to seek an NTDA for Auroville has not been welcomed by all Auroville residents for a variety of reasons. One is the fear that such an Authority might hamper instead of promote the development of Auroville as it would create an additional bureaucratic layer consisting of people who, in majority, would not be related to Auroville. Some residents are concerned that the Auroville Master Plan would be tampered with and insist that the NTDA should integrally accept it and not change it in making its own Plan. Others, to the contrary, fear that the NTDA would be used to impose certain aspects of the Master Plan, with which they do not fully or partially agree.

To try to find an alternative statutory solution, the Working Committee and the Auroville Council established a study group in 2016, whose role it was to study all legal venues, including requesting the nomination of Auroville to the UNESCO World Heritage Site list.

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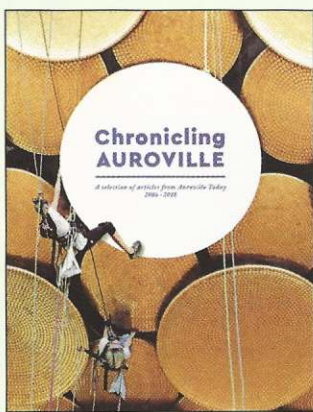
A new anthology from Auroville Today

In 1998, we published our first collection of articles from ten years of *Auroville Today*. This was called *The Auroville Adventure*, and ten years later a second anthology called *The Auroville Experience* was published. Now it is time for the third anthology in the series.

Chronicle Auroville is the newest anthology, a compilation of articles published between 2006 and 2018. Not only do the articles and illustrations represent a rich chronicle of developments in the economy, arts, planning, education, outreach activities, etc. of Auroville over this period, but some articles written a decade ago remain as relevant today as they were back then. *Chronicle Auroville* gives a taste of the challenges, frustrations and joys of trying to live the future in a community that, in its longevity and diversity, is unique in the world.

Chronicle Auroville will be released on 15th August, 2018, and will be available from a variety of outlets. If you want to pre-order a copy, please send an email to avtoday@auroville.org.in.

Chronicle Auroville, published by Auroville Today, 290 pages. Price in India Rs.1025, abroad US \$ 27 or Euro 23, including mailing charges.



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Also studied was an amendment to the Town and Country Planning Act by the Tamil Nadu State Assembly that would create a special legal framework for Auroville allowing it to develop independently. This option was recognised as desirable but has not been followed up as it stands little chance to be carried out by the Assembly in the present political context. In the end, the study group's recommendations reflected the assessment of prior experts; buy the land and try to obtain an NTDA tailored for Auroville.

Discussing the NTDA with the Tamil Nadu Government.

In a series of meetings with the Tamil Nadu State authorities, members of the study group were impressed by the understanding and the goodwill that were expressed towards Auroville and its ideals. The authorities showed a willingness to accommodate Auroville in its desire to retain a say in the planning and development of the Master Plan area in accordance with the Master Plan approved by the HRD Ministry. They showed an understanding of the special nature of Auroville in its spiritual endeavour and its socio-economic values, and expressed great willingness to help with the planning of Auroville, within the measure of the law. Comforted by these reassurances the members

of the study group concluded that an NTDA is the most appropriate statutory solution. But it should be well-negotiated: the notification establishing the NTDA should explicitly recognize the Auroville Master Plan and its socio-economic ideals, Auroville's right to manifest it and specify the collaboration of Auroville with the DTCP in preparing the New Town Development Plan.

Would an NTDA really protect Auroville?

The opponents of an NTDA for Auroville point out that even if an ideal NTDA would manifest, it would not fully protect Auroville. For example, private individuals who own land within the Auroville Master Plan area, in a zone earmarked for high-density residences, could not be refused permission to construct such a high-rise. Similarly, a permit to develop a commercial activity couldn't be refused to a private land owner in the artisanal zone.

The opponents also point out that an NTDA will put Auroville at the mercy of the NTDA authorities, who may not understand Auroville. They also question if an NTDA would indeed be more successful in stopping unauthorised developments than Auroville is today, given the possibilities of power abuse.

The Land Protection Group, while acknowledging these concerns, maintains its recommendation to seek a well-negotiated NTDA for the Auroville area. Such an NTDA would show the

endorsement of the State of Tamil Nadu for Auroville and its Master Plan. The possibility that private landowners in the city area would benefit from the NTDA is limited, as Auroville already owns 87% of the area. But an NTDA would be of great benefit to the Green Belt, by keeping it as an agricultural and forested area.

The need of an aggressive land purchase policy

What is novel in the Land Protection Group's proposal is its conclusion that without an aggressive land purchase strategy the NTDA will not suffice in protecting the lands in the Master Plan area. The land purchase strategy proposed is twofold: one part is to define what is most appropriate and urgent to buy and discontinue opportunistic buying [*purchasing a piece of land because it comes up for sale and there is money available, eds.*] and aggressively seeking-out strategically earmarked plots. The other part pertains to the need to raise the funds needed to purchase these strategic pieces of land.

What are these strategic plots of land? For the Land Protection Group, they are the plots needed to consolidate the city area as an integrated campus. Considered equally strategic are lands that by their nature and location have an intrinsic productive capacity, i.e. farm land, forest land or lands that need urgent protection for environmental conservation and water preservation. Also, lands that could slow down

or prevent further private development should be identified and receive the upmost priority.

In order to overcome the chronic shortage of funds the Land Protection Group proposes to intensify "wealth generation". The group advocates to sell unnecessary land assets, monetise underused assets and invest in business ventures on viable land assets. They also encourage and support land fund raising efforts. A first target of 20 million USD would be of great help to consolidate and protect the City area and the neighbouring Green Belt, says the group.

Outcome

Pondicherry and the surrounding villages will not slow their growth. India foresees a population expansion of 300 million by 2050, and the real estate pressure on Auroville will increase accordingly. If Auroville wants to remain relevant as a unified and integrated geographical entity, it must act assertively. The proposal of the Land Protection Group will not unify the community as it raises issues that remain sensitive, such as Government interference, land sales, and creating collaborative business opportunities on Auroville land. But it has the merit of offering a thought-out solution that blends both statutory and community-generated solutions, which will offer Auroville the protection it needs.

Bertrand

COMMUNITY

Can we talk about discrimination in Auroville?

Feelings of discrimination surfaced after two Tamil members of the Working Committee were not given proximity passes for the Prime Minister's visit on February 24th. This led to a rift within the Working Committee and the debate spilled over into the larger community. The Auroville Council, asked by many members of the community to look into the matter of feelings of discrimination, called for a Restorative Circle to support the Working Committee to work through some of their internal dynamics. In addition, Restorative Auroville also organized a Cross-Cultural Dialogue on the topic of discrimination. L'aura reports.

Although I can connect with the discomfort that many Aurovilians felt with regards to the recent claim of discrimination being published on AuroNet, I'm actually celebrating the courage and clarity that it took to name it, and to do so this publicly. And instead of spending time and energy on defending or disproving the claim, I wish we would simply acknowledge the legitimacy of the inquiry, whether true during the Prime Minister's visit or not, and take this incident as a real opportunity to reflect deeply on how we live and work together in Auroville – and especially now, after our 50 years together.

I'm reminded of some of the comments we received as we were planning our first Cross-Cultural Dialogue two years ago (September 2016). "You are opening a dangerous conversation; you would be better off not getting into it." "There's no discrimination in Auroville; you are looking for problems where none exist." "If you raise this topic so openly, you will encourage the Tamil community to feel justified in their victimhood." I was quite horrified hearing these comments, which I in turn disregarded and judged as denial and non-willingness to engage with something that would clearly be an uncomfortable, yet radically revealing, conversation.

And yes, of course it's uncomfortable! Strong emotions, blame, judgements, not understanding each other, maybe not even really wanting to understand each other, because maybe choosing what's familiar is easier. And yet, at the end of that first Cross-Cultural Dialogue journey together, the 55 Aurovilians who participated felt a deeper connection with one another, and there was gratitude for the scary honesty that was expressed, as it provided an opportunity for a heartfelt sharing and introspection.

One of the biggest take-aways from that Dialogue (2016) was acknowledging how easily we, as individuals and as a community, can jump to conclusions about people's behaviour, based on what labels and stereotypes we place on them, and indeed we neglect to seek connection or to understand what might have motivated the person's choices in that moment. For example, we might label one group as arrogant and treating others as less worthy, and another group as not understanding the ideals of Auroville. Several Aurovilians in the room expressed a commitment to engage with our fellow



Eugénie Dumont

The second Cross Cultural Dialogue in the Unity Pavilion

brothers and sisters as individuals and to be curious about who we are as unique human beings, instead of clubbing one another into stereotyped groups.

As we prepared for our second and more recent Cross-Cultural Dialogue (April 2018), the comments were of a very different nature. "It'll all just be a waste of time; we'll sit around and say nice things, but nothing will actually change in Auroville." "We won't get anywhere on this topic, because the real people who need to be there won't come; you should force them to come and take responsibility."

And yet interestingly, two years later, and clearly marked by the wake-up-call during our 50th anniversary events, the conversation among the 47 Aurovilians who joined this second Cross-Cultural Dialogue was palpably intensified and riskier than the first one. And almost every person in the room expressed, in their own way, that undoubtedly non-Tamil Aurovilians do discriminate against the local Tamil community in Auroville.

What was strikingly touching about this Dialogue was how much space was both taken and given, spontaneously, for Tamil Aurovilians to express themselves. They said that never before had they experienced such a safe and open space to

share and be heard for their story. What I registered was a rich array of human depth, from sharing about painful experiences, to deep questions about our distinct paradoxes in Auroville, to true commitment and intention to serve Auroville, to simple unassuming acceptance of our differences in education and lifestyle, to courageous honesty in disclosing internal dynamics and "politics," and to dreaming and aspiring to create a better world.

Now, just as in many other Auroville conversations and platforms, we often seem unable, as a community, to translate our meaningful experience together into something that's felt tangibly in the community. For example, a resounding plea in the room was for a more balanced cultural representation in Auroville's governance structure and working groups. So how do we shift something systemically, at the core of how we function, to truly include and embrace all of us? If Mother said that the simple Indian villager is closer to the divine than the educated Westerner, it seems unfair that we place more merit on fluency in English and computer skills than on other forms of knowledge and wisdom. So how do we start to truly meet each other, without our ideas of being separate?

L'aura Joy

From the spiritual point of view, India is the foremost country in the world. Her mission is to set the example of spirituality. Sri Aurobindo came on earth to teach this to the world. This fact is so obvious that a simple and ignorant peasant here is, in his heart, closer to the Divine than the intellectuals of Europe. All those who want to become Aurovilians must know this and behave accordingly; otherwise they are unworthy of being Aurovilians.

To Be A True Aurovillian, 8.2.1972
Mother on Auroville, 8.2.1972

Is Auroville a post-racial society?

“Your data suggest a strong automatic preference for White People compared to Black People.” The words screamed at me from my computer screen. Stunned, I immediately started looking up research that might show that the Implicit Association Test (IAT), which I had just taken, lacked reliability and validity. Anything to confirm my belief that I was without bias, at least when it came to skin colour.

Although the IAT is widely used in social psychology research, some scholars have indeed raised questions about the test and pointed out that our behaviour and attitudes in real-world contexts are very different from responses during laboratory experiments. But the question still is deeply troubling: are we subject to biases and prejudices that we are unaware of?

Implicit bias

Here is where the idea of implicit bias comes in. This is a cognitive bias where we attribute a specific quality to all members of a particular social group. The quality could be positive or negative, and the social group could be defined by one of many different factors, such as ethnicity, skin colour, shape of the eyes or gender. So, saying that the “Swiss are punctual” is as biased as saying that “girls are number-challenged.” (Fun fact: Swiss International Air Lines is not ranked among the top-20 airlines with the best on-time performance; the top spot goes to airBaltic, a Latvian airline.)

Implicit bias is only one among a bunch of cognitive biases that affect our thinking about people who we perceive as different from us. The other well-researched biases include: the outgroup homogeneity effect (where we perceive members of an out-group to be more similar to one another than members of our own in-group); the group-attribution error (a belief that a characteristic of a member of a group reflects the character of the group as a whole); and the cross-race effect (being able to recognise own-race faces more easily than other-race faces).

Added to this is our evolutionary history, through which our brains have evolved to respond extremely quickly to differences between “us” and “them.” Infants are able to learn the faces of same-race people better than other-race people. Children as young as three automatically group people by race and gender, consider “thems” in more negative terms, and perceive the faces of other-race people as angrier than same-race faces. By the time these children grow up to be about ten, cultural associations are added to the mix – they soon learn that some feelings and thoughts about “thems” are expressed only at home, not in public.

The roots of racism

The combination of these biases can easily lead to prejudice, discrimination or injustice. Is it even possible to get rid of these deeply ingrained cognitive habits? In an address to the Auroville community in 2007, Doudou Diene, a former member of the Auroville International Advisory Council, nicely summarised the challenge: “... all manifestations of racism have a long history and are the result of social, cultural, political, religious and

philosophical processes. Racism has very deep roots. Not only is it deep, it is also universal. All communities, nations, wear cultural glasses; they all look at other communities through lenses tinted by prejudice.”

Most scholars agree that the roots of racism lie in colonialism. The “scientific” ideas about race – that some people are biologically superior to others – were used to morally justify the slave trade and the mass atrocity crimes of European settlers in Africa, the Americas and Asia. Skin colour became a convenient marker for race.

Although racism as we understand it today is a relatively modern phenomenon, perhaps starting in 17th century Europe, discrimination based on colour is a much older idea. Let me stick my neck out and talk about references to colour in our earliest text, the Rig Veda. Colour is not the most important differentiator between the arya and the dasa and dasyu – that would be religion. The non-aryas are variously referred to as *a-yajvana* (not sacrificing), *a-vrata* (not religious), *a-vrdhya* (without blessing) and *a-devaynu* (godless).

But colour shows up as the second most common way to differentiate between the superior arya and the inferior dasa and dasyu in the Rig Veda. There are at least three references to dark-skinned dasyus who are vanquished by Soma and Indra. If we don’t look for specific mention of skin (*tvac*), but look only for references to the “dark ones,” there are many more references to the dark colour of non-aryas. For example, in one verse the poet invokes Indra, who “drove away the dark ones [*krsnaasedha*]” and “killed the dasas [*ahan-dasah*]”. In another, the poet invokes Agni and says, “from fear of you the dark tribes went in all directions, abandoning their possessions.”

Even a society as culturally evolved as the Japanese is not immune to prejudice based on skin colour. As recently as in 1993, a public bathhouse (*onsen*) in Otaru put up a multilingual sign on its front door saying, “Japanese Only.” In traditional Japanese entertainment, the heroes are always fair-skinned, who battle hairy and swarthy barbarians. In popular culture, darker skin tones are associated with villainy. Also, Japan is one of the largest markets for skin-lightening creams.

Settlers and natives

Where does Auroville fit into all of this? Clearly, we are subject to the same biases and biology as everyone else. But in overcoming racism, there is one aspect of Auroville which is an additional disadvantage. In many ways, Auroville is like a settler colony. People have come in from different parts of the world, and from all across India, to settle in a place that has a native population. Without exception, settler colonies have always experienced race-based conflict. Settlers typically perceive themselves as superior, and discrimination against the native population is pervasive. Sometimes, this conflict can lead to extreme forms of racial injustice, such as in South Africa or Australia.

When we think of settler colonies, the image that comes to mind is white Europeans settling in an area with traditionally darker people. But this is not always the case – settlers are sometimes people from the same country with very little difference in

external appearance. There are examples of settler colonies in Afghanistan and Vietnam, where one ethnic group has settled in another’s land. Closer home, the Bengali settlers of Tripura is a good example. Before 1946, the indigenous tribes of Tripura made up more than 50% of the population. In 30 years, this reduced to 30%, with Bengalis from East Pakistan, and later Bangladesh, settling in millions. The settlers came to dominate the culture and imposed their language and customs. Even today, there continues to be widespread discrimination against the tribal population by the majority Bengalis.

We need to talk about racism

At a recent meeting on the topic of discrimination in Auroville, there was great reluctance to talk about racism. Many of the participants felt that the term “racism” is too strong – it brings up images of genocide, lynching, and apartheid, and does not apply to Auroville. Perhaps this comes from a partial understanding of the term. Racism is separate from its effects of discrimination or injustice. Racism merely means that one racial group, a culturally constructed set of people based on appearance or ethnicity, consider themselves to be biologically or culturally superior to another racial group. Very often, this notion of superiority leads to racial domination.

The term race was originally used to mean ethnicity or nationality. When Europeans started encountering a wide range of “other people” in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, race took on a more biological meaning. Enlightenment scientists and philosophers made race a natural system of categorising the human species. And with the expansion of colonialism and slavery, these “others” were racialised as non-whites and exploited. Few people today subscribe to this idea of race. We now know that race is not a biological category and is a pure cultural invention. Of course, this does not mean that racism has gone away – it continues to have tremendous power in structuring social relationships.

Traditional scholarship on racism was focused on overtly racist attitudes and policies. In the mid-twentieth century, racism was considered to be a historic relic, which would inevitably fade with time. Modern educated society, based on humanistic philosophies, was meant to transcend such barbaric beliefs and attitudes. Unfortunately, racism survives in much more subtle ways.

Therefore, contemporary studies of racism look at the diffuse ways in which racism leads to racial inequality. No longer is it mostly about hate, violence or segregation (although examples of such forms of racism continue to exist). It is much more about unconscious and systemic forms of racism that perpetuate racial inequality.

If racism is not as brutal as it used to be, at least in so-called civilized societies, why is it such a big deal? Why go on and on about it? Because, as one neuroscientist put it, the “countless pinpricks of microaggression ... produce oceans of pain.” Recent research shows that racism is a source of chronic stress. This means that the person at the receiving end of everyday racial discrimination experiences frequent negative stimuli and feels helpless to cope with this perception of threat.

Everyday life is impacted by these mundane experiences of racism. These are the experiences that are least resolved and most pervasive. Ultimately, the greatest burden of chronic stress is produced by the routine experiences with racism.

Chronic stress changes the way the brain functions. In fact, it changes the very structure of the brain. As we constantly employ the stress response, the neural pathways connecting the amygdala (the seat of fear), the pre-frontal cortex (which regulates social behaviour) and the hippocampus (which regulates emotions) become hyperactive. The result is that we become hypervigilant, constantly looking for threats to fight or flee.

What can we do?

So, is Auroville a post-racial society that is free from discrimination and prejudice? Given the evolutionary and cultural history of humans, it’s unlikely that any society is post-racial. But what can we do about racism and its effects? For many people, the reflexive answer is effective education, especially in the arts and humanities. However, there is little evidence that liberal education works. Neil Postman once remarked that, when people tell him about using arts education to reduce prejudice, he “invariably think[s] of the Minister of Propaganda for the Third Reich and the ideological head of the Nazi Party, Dr. Joseph Goebbels, who at the age of 24 received his Ph.D. in Romantic Drama at the University of Heidelberg.”

It is also true that most parents who are interested in preventing racism have very little idea about how to do it. They are uncomfortable discussing race with their children and instead resort to meaningless abstractions, such as “we should be friendly with everyone.” Also, overt forms of racism can be addressed through dialog and cross-cultural understanding, but not the subtle and diffuse form of racism that pervades modern society. How can we talk about unconscious biases when we are, by definition, unaware of them?

The core problem appears to be that of generalisation. Whenever we use language that generalises the characteristics of a particular group, even non-racial groups, we reinforce the idea of racism. Even positive generalisations, such as “Germans are efficient” or “women are nurturing,” are counterproductive. They cement the notion in young minds that everyone in a group shares the same qualities, whether positive or negative. And it’s easy to see how that can lead to statements like “Indians are dirty” or “Muslims are cruel.” In other words, we must individuate, always. Instead of saying “East Asians don’t participate in community processes,” we need to say, “I don’t remember seeing so-and-so in any general meeting.” Rather than saying, “Tamilians have no sense of time,” say “so-and-so showed up late for the meeting.” Make it specific. Individuate, individuate, individuate.

Perhaps it’s appropriate to close with Doudou Diene’s advice to us: “... working on diversity does not mean working on the entire cosmos. The first step is to work on the way you interact with and empower the local inhabitants. This is the ‘cleaning of one’s bowl’, the modest task that each of you can practise every day. It’s not easy, but it’s indispensable.”

Manas

ORGANISATION

A new Land Board

On May 12th, the Selection Committee for the new Land Board selected five new members to join the two continuing members. Their term of office started on May 21st.

It takes time to select members for important working groups. The selection of new members for the Working Committee, the Auroville Council (AVC), the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) and the Town Development Council (TDC) last year took three days [see *AVToday* # 340 November 2017]. The time needed to invite nominations and scrutinize the list of candidates took more than three months.

This process was considered too time consuming to be repeated for selecting the new executives of the Matrimandir and, more recently, the members of the Land Board. For the Matrimandir, the Working Committee and the Auroville Council sat together for two days to decide on the best

team, after the nominated candidates had been screened by a Feedback Review Committee. This process was not repeated. Instead, in an ad hoc decision-making process formulated by the Working Committee, FAMC, Auroville Council and L’avenir, 76% of the 108 residents that chose to participate, agreed to a revised selection process for the Land Board, and not follow the formally approved decision making policy of the Residents’ Assembly.

It was decided that each of the four main working groups would nominate one of their members as representative in a Land Board Selection Committee (LBSC); each working group would also nominate four community members and an outgoing Land Board member.

The Residents’ Assembly Service (RAS) then picked the names of four community members and one outgoing Land Board member out of the hat; they, together with the nominated members of the Working Committee, FAMC, TDC and AVC constituted the LBSC. One member of the RAS acted as ‘silent observer’ in the meetings of the LBSC.

The community, in the meantime, had been asked to propose candidates and, afterwards, give feedback on the names proposed. A Temporary Feedback Review Committee (TFRC) went through the feedback received, filtered all submitted nominations and compiled the final list of nominees. From this list the LBSC selected the five new members of the Land Board.

The LBSC reported that the task

had been arduous. They had met with the Secretary, Auroville Foundation; had studied the responses from the four working groups on a questionnaire; and had met with present and former Land Board members, with members of the fundraising team and with members of the Auroville Security team.

The LBSC had formulated general criteria for selection of candidates such as time commitment, the ability to be a team player and there being no conflict of interests. It also had agreed on land-specific criteria, such as experience in land matters and understanding of legal issues. They met with all the nominees. Then, after two rounds of seeking consensus amongst themselves, they came up with the five names required for the Land Board.

When the names were announced, one selected member declined to participate and was replaced by another person.

The LBSC also made some recommendations. One is that there should be a minimum of two standby nominees chosen by the LBSC in case members step down from the Land Board mid-term. Another is that there should be a land purchase and protection policy, which should guide the functioning of the group. This policy does not exist. Lastly, it proposed to change the way in which land purchase decisions are made and involve more working groups so that the community, through these groups, can maintain an oversight on the work of the Land Board.

Carel

The difficulties of building Auroville

Michael Gransitzki first came to Auroville in 2008 and joined six years later. Here he talks about the problems of architecture, contracting, and the economic situation of Auroville.

Auroville Today: How did you come to Auroville?

By accident. I had done my first year of architecture studies in Germany and had become quite tired of Germany. I wanted to be an intern somewhere else. I applied all over the world. And the reply was always the same: "you don't even have a degree in architecture, what do you want here!" Eventually my urban design professor, who was Louis Fédouchi [he later married Auroville architect Anupama and became intimately involved with developing the Detailed Development Plan for Auroville's Residential Zone, eds.] advised a contact in Bangalore. That worked out. It was June 2008.

I had no idea about India except the usual nonsense such as fakirs sitting on nail beds and peaceful people meditating under palm trees. I hadn't even heard about Bangalore! I arrived in Mumbai, and then took a train to Bangalore, 2nd class non a/c. It was a revelation. I met many people, and one of them said, "my friend, after three months you will either hate India and never come back, or love it and stay." My love affair with India started after two months.

I began working in Bangalore as an architect at a big company. By coincidence, Aurovilian Fabian had joined the company a month earlier. He became my team leader. The work went well and at the end of two months the company allowed me to continue for a year. I managed to get permission from my German university to take a one-year break, worked for a year in Bangalore, went back to Germany and finally got my degree. Then I joined an architecture firm in Hyderabad.

When I was working in Bangalore, Fabian invited me to a weekend in Auroville. As I didn't have anything better to do I said, "sure, I'll come along." That's how I learned about the place Auroville, but not about what Auroville is about. That came many years later. In 2011, after my stint in Hyderabad, I came to work with Fabian in Auroville. But though I lived here for 1.5 years I had no clue what Auroville was all about. Only when I met Sindhuja did I start getting into touch with the background of Auroville. We started discussing Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's teachings. I was just considering going back to Germany, but thanks to her I stayed, and we eventually got married in October 2013.

What is the work you are involved with in Auroville?

My first job was working with Fabian on a project in Hyderabad. Afterwards, Sindhuja and I started our architect unit Imago. I still had no status in Auroville. I didn't like the idea of becoming an Aurovilian or a Newcomer before being fully into Auroville, and that took me a good six years. But then I was ready to commit myself totally. Those days I worked for Imago for free. We won a competition for the SAIER staff quarters, and I started working for SAIER as architect consultant. Other projects came up: we built a post office in Moratandi, we were asked to work for the Golden Jubilee Hostel, which was later re-baptised 'The Hive', and we made the design for the birthing centre. [see *AVToday* May 2018 No 346]

The Golden Jubilee / Hive didn't take off as hoped. The 100-bed project was first downsized to a 50-bed hostel, and then to a kind of training centre. But recently the project holders decided to put it on hold. [see *AVToday* May 2018 No 346]. It is a great project, and we hope that in due time something of it will manifest.

Apart from this work, we often help other architects with what I call "the dirty part of the architect's work," e.g. the accounting, the checking of the bills, making the detailed drawings, and making detailed estimates and the Bills of Quantities.

You have also started work as project consultant for the GGG, the Government of India Grant Group.

The GGG was set up by the Working Committee together with the Funds and Assets Management Committee. My role is to assure that government procedures are followed, that the paper work is in order and that all the beneficiaries follow a system of accountability in



Michael in his Imago office

the execution of their buildings so that we know where the money is spent on. I am not going into the details of design; that should have happened at an earlier stage.

In that process a certain amount of quality assurance happens by default. I check what exactly has been built, if the steel used is in accordance with the thickness prescribed, if the concrete mix is of good quality by doing slump tests, and so on. This is a very important work; if Auroville would have set up this group earlier, many mistakes, such as have surfaced with the Tamil Heritage Centre building, could have been prevented.

In Auroville we work almost exclusively with Auroville contractors, except for Sunship and Kalpana which have employed a contractor from outside. Do you consider working with non-Auroville contractors an advantage?

No. Because I've experienced that the outside contractor is always trying to maximize his profits. For Sunship, I was given the function of quality checker. The discrepancies I found between work done and the contractor's bills was staggering. The building of Sunship was tendered. When we received the bills we checked what was actually built. For example, the contractor submits a bill for a floor slab of 6 x 6 metres and we found it measured 5 x 5 metres. That makes a lot of difference in the costs of steel, concrete and shuttering. The first time we thought it was an honest mistake; the second time we started doubting it, and the third time we reported it to the Auroville authorities as a case of deliberate cheating. Excuses were made, but there was a distinct feeling that they simply tried to get away with it. We must have saved a crore for the Sunship project simply by correcting bills.

In my experience, Auroville contractors are not so blunt. But construction, world-wide, is one of the most corrupt businesses. And that's why the 'third eye' approach initiated by the GGG is so important. And this work will need to be expanded to include all constructions in Auroville, not only buildings constructed with Government of India grants.

Rumour has it that buildings in Auroville are much more expensive than outside. What's your experience?

The main difference is that in Auroville we are not compromising on quality and the higher costs are a natural consequence. Take the Humanscapes project. Before starting the project, a detailed material research was done and this has been meticulously followed in the execution of the project. Compare that to a large project outside, where the client wishes to build as cheap as possible and the contractor obliges by cutting costs at every corner; the walls are not 22 cm thick as prescribed, but just 10 cm, the steel thickness is less than approved and so on. But that compromises the quality of the building. Also, Auroville has not set-up a system to benefit from large scale discounts, and that also makes outside projects cheaper.

Can you explain?

In all material procurement there are big margins. We have done some research and noticed that material suppliers are willing to support Auroville by giving large discounts on first-quality materials and even more on materials with small imperfections which don't affect the quality of the construction. If Auroville could set up a central purchasing department, which would be responsible for the bulk purchasing of the construction materials of all new buildings, huge discounts could be earned. For example, we had a project where we had to purchase plumbing materials and bathroom and kitchen fittings for 50 small bungalows. We managed to get 50-60% discount. For the SAIER staff quarters, I tried to purchase superfans from an Auroville unit; they were unwilling to give a discount, so we bought them straight from the manufacturer and we got 20% discount. If, moreover, the architects could unify their designs and coordinate their efforts, another 5% extra could be earned. The lakhs saved could be used for those design aspects for which there is never any money available, such as for the landscaping around the project.

The Governing Board, in its meeting in August 2014, observed that all buildings in Auroville need to be environment friendly and be built with sustainable materials and technology. The Board also directed the Town Development Council to finalize Guidelines for Auroville construction activities reflecting these concerns. The TDC tried but never finalized. What exactly is the problem?

It is a big challenge. The list of permissible construction materials specified by the Public Works Department for buildings built with grants from the Government of India is very limited: concrete, bricks, mortar – the standard. The system allows for the use of alternative building materials, but it requires a lot of extra work. The compressed earth block technology which has been used to build the Visitors' Centre and communities such as Vikas is now accepted. But that's just one alternative option.

Take, for example, the steel capsule that was built for The Learning Community. We hired a structural engineer, but he calculated the steel so much heavier than we had anticipated that the building became almost too expensive and unsustainable.

For the Hive project, we proposed a cross-laminated timber structure, even for the structural elements, which is new to India. Cross-laminated timber is engineered wood made from small wood pieces, which comes with a 25-year guarantee and is said to be termite proof. These products are imported from New Zealand or Canada, and are made from so-called agricultural wood, trees planted for construction purposes. I met a New Zealand supplier who is setting up shop in India and who is super interested to do something in Auroville. He is willing to give a large discount, as this would be a reference project for him.

Another construction material is bamboo. In countries such as Thailand, Vietnam and

Indonesia, beautiful structures have been made using bamboo; but not in India. Auroville's Bamboo Research Centre is also not yet geared to using bamboo in construction projects.

For projects using alternative building materials, we need a structural engineer who is willing to sit down and spend a month or so calculating the structure and figure out how to do maintenance and replace materials when required. There is a tremendous amount of beautiful work done using these materials, but we do not have the architects and engineers with the required skills.

Yet, Auroville attracts a lot of architects.

Yes, Auroville has been experimenting with brands of architecture that are so different from the main frame that many students are attracted to come to Auroville. But are we really all that different? Take the Prarthna, Maitreya II and III and the Sanjana communities: they aren't very different from the standard architecture elsewhere in India. Sacred Groves was a valiant attempt, but it hasn't been able to live up to its hopes. At an estimated cost of Rs 4 crores and the construction going on for now 5 years this project is not cost-effective, certainly not if you consider that community members participated in the construction for free. These type of buildings do not help Auroville in its current need.

There is a criticism that Auroville architects do not work together ...

True. The sad thing is that we have architects who are really good in designing buildings, but who are not good in the implementation of projects, and vice versa. Not many architects are willing to take a design from another architect and implement it. To be honest, most Auroville architects have big egos and find it very difficult to accept and integrate feedback, or accept professional criticism and advice from other architects. There are quite a few buildings in Auroville which have serious design mistakes, which could have been avoided with some cooperation.

In the past, the idea of having a so-called 'charette' has been mooted. A charette requires all parties involved or to be involved in a project to sit together and finalize the best design. It's a good idea, but only if all those involved would get paid for the work they do.

So architects cannot be expected to work for free?

No. Running an architect office is expensive, and the 3% on the estimated building costs an architect earns is not sufficient. Contrary to rumours, Auroville architects do not earn a lot of money on Auroville projects; in fact, most of them barely break even. Designing the Golden Jubilee project, for example, has cost us a lot of money, and nobody will pay for that. The down-scaled project doesn't cover the costs of the initial work we have done. Ideally, architects should also receive a compensation for work done if a building doesn't materialize. For how can they otherwise sustain themselves? They have no option but to work outside Auroville.

There is another aspect, which is less obvious. In Auroville, the architect of a new community is not only the designer, but also the person who needs to find the clients, meet all their individual demands and secure the financing. Most architects are out of their league if they have to deal with the entirety of a project. This is no longer acceptable. The responsibility for a project needs to be taken up by a group of people, including specialists in project management and financing. Then the architect can step in and do the work. And such a group should also define the limitations in the freedom of the individual client to make design changes, as they increase the costs.

A particular challenge for collective housing projects is the privacy requirement.

Yes. The problems are those of sound pollution – you don't want to hear your neighbour – and how to manifest the need for cross ventilation. We are designing a community building named 'Vibrance', which is at a 30 meters distance from the Invocation community. They were concerned about the loss of ventilation, and we therefore positioned our building in such a way that there would still be a flow of air.

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The necessity of co-development with the local villages

Cristo has worked for many years on developing collaborations with the local villages. Why does he do it? What are the challenges and the satisfactions?

Cristo is a long-term Aurovilian who was involved in constructing Auromodèle and other communities in the 1970s and 1980s. A civil engineer by profession, he also worked in French Guiana in the early 1990s on the planning and development of new townships.

This experience taught him how important a greenbelt is to a city, and how difficult it is to prevent it from being encroached. The reality of the danger was brought home when, in the mid 1990s, a developer purchased a large piece of land in the Auroville greenbelt.

Cristo told a member of the Development Group that Auroville should challenge this in court on the basis of our Master Plan but he was astonished to be told that no such plan existed. (Actually an old one did exist but nobody knew about it at that time.) So it was decided to make an Auroville Master Plan, and for four years Cristo coordinated this work.

While making this Plan, Cristo realised that it made no sense to develop the city and protect the Greenbelt without involving ourselves in the development of the surrounding villages. The rationale for doing this was summarised in a draft document Cristo wrote for the Town Development Council (TDC) in 2017.

"If one looks at the Auroville Universal Master Plan – Perspective 2025, one sees on the maps the villages' areas marked by yellow squares. These yellow squares confirm our ignorance of what constitutes the area meant for expansion of the villages' housing and facilities such as schools, community halls, health centres, etc. It is likely that the same ignorance prevails in the villages, which for centuries have been developing in an unplanned manner.

"Today, due in part to population growth, the prospect for village expansion and development of common facilities is limited to poramboke lands that are either already encroached or unsuitable for supporting construction sites.

"Therefore, there are two choices in front of Auroville. One is ignoring the village needs for expansion altogether and let happen what will happen. Today, these villages are expanding their territory mainly along roads, to the point that one can expect the entire stretch of road between Kulapalayam and Edaiyanchavady, and from Edaiyanchavady to Kottakarai, to be lined on both sides by shops and housing. This is already the case on the stretch from Aspiranto to Periyamudaliyarchavady. The same is happening on the road from Bommayarpalayam in direction of Le Soleil Hotel.

"The second choice consists in being proactive and harmonizing village infrastructure developments by integrating them into Auroville's own Master Plan."

Cristo emphasises that his motivation in helping develop the villages is not philanthropic. "It is in our own interest. If we don't make the second choice now, we will lose much of the Greenbelt to uncontrolled development, particularly to the west, and life in Auroville will be hell. We also have to understand that if Auroville develops at a certain material level and the villages are left behind, it can create social tensions and impact our security.

"So, for me, the future development of

Auroville depends upon every village having a development plan so that their development is not impaired by Auroville or, in turn, impairs Auroville's."

He envisages a land use plan for each of the seven neighbouring villages. "The plan would be like Auroville's Master Plan in that it would identify the different areas for economic development, educational activities, etc."

Cristo says we cannot expect the government to do this and the villages themselves do not have the capacity. Auroville would have to take the initiative. This was recognised five years ago when Cristo was asked to create a Regional Development Team under the Town Development Council to take up the work.

But how to go about making such plans? If Auroville adopted the typical top-down approach to planning which is the norm in India, this would only arouse resentment and non-cooperation in the villages. Instead, David Stein and Mr. Dattatri, two town planners with enormous experience of working in India who have also assisted in our town planning, advised that Auroville should cooperate with the politically-recognised entity in each village, the panchayat, to draw up village development plans.

The idea was that each panchayat would create a sub-committee to work with the Regional Development Team of the TDC. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) would be drawn up with each panchayat, specifying the activities to be carried out and the responsibilities of the different parties.

"We made it clear we are just the facilitators, the technicians, so don't ask us for money from Auroville," says Cristo.

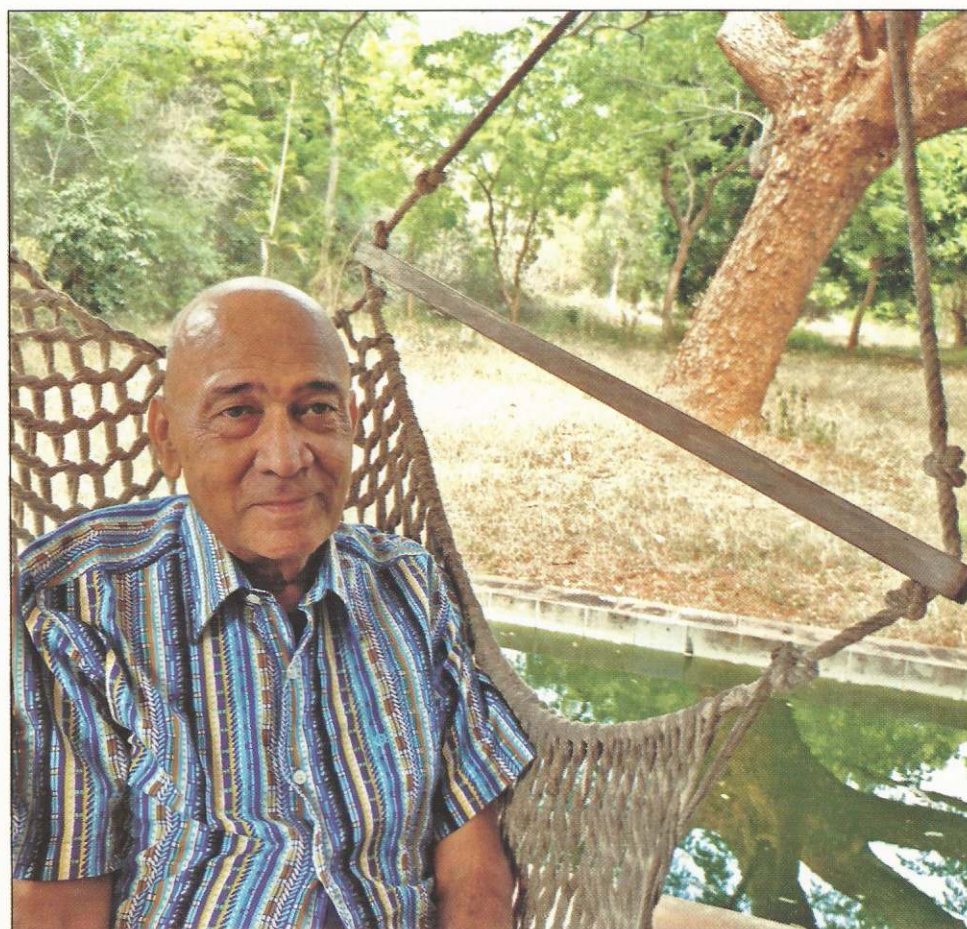
So far, MoU's have been signed with two local panchayats. In 2013, the Bommayarpalayam panchayat entered into an agreement, which led to the formation of a Planning & Development Committee under the Panchayat. A year and half later, an MoU was signed with Irumbai panchayat.

"The idea was to begin with Bommaiarpalayam and, if the work was successful, to replicate the approach elsewhere." The collaboration started well. Work began on a compressed earth block training programme and the construction of individual toilets; on identifying Auroville land for a much-needed TNEB sub-station to serve the area; and on planning a beach beautification project in Pillaichavady.

However, the work was interrupted by the assassination of the panchayat President's husband, Rajendran, who was the de facto President. After that, the Planning and Development Committee met less often and contact with Auroville slowly died out until the term of this panchayat expired at the end of 2016. No new elections have yet been held.

Meanwhile, word of Auroville's collaboration with Bommaiarpalayam had gone around, and Irumbai panchayat, comprising the villages of Edaiyanchavady, Irumbai and Kottakarai, requested a similar collaboration. An MoU was duly signed.

"We were told not to work in Edaiyanchavady as it had a bad reputation," says Cristo, "but this is where we had our biggest success. This village was supposed to be very hostile to us but thanks to the work that we did, that perception changed."



Cristo

The work included assisting in the completion of the Community Centre in Edaiyanchavady; making Irumbai a village solar library with the Solar Street Lights project in collaboration with Auroville Consulting; setting up a plant and tree nursery in Edaiyanchavady; constructing individual toilets based upon an Auroville design; and initiating solid waste management awareness programme.

Two of the most important achievements were providing purified drinking water for the whole of Edaiyanchavady village ("because they told us that access to clean drinking water was their main problem"), and, with the help of Aurovilian expertise, setting up a profitable compressed earth block production unit in the village (the local administration has now decreed that every government building in this region would order from this unit).

But what about the larger issues of planning? A few weeks before the end of the term of the Irumbai panchayat, Cristo started discussing with them the possibility of constructing a bypass road around their village to relieve it of all the traffic travelling to and from Matrimandir. This would also benefit Auroville. Such a road would have to pass over both village and Auroville land. "I showed them the map and said that without their help we cannot do it, and you cannot do it without our help. They agreed and we started studying the idea. This was precisely the real planning work I wanted to do with the villages."

The work stopped only when the term of the Irumbai panchayat finished. For the last one and half years, Cristo and his team have been waiting for new elections to take place.

But isn't this an argument not to work with the panchayats? After all, every time a panchayat changes a new MOU has to be signed with a new group, and the panchayat term is limited. All this can disrupt the work. Why not work with civil society in the villages instead, as is done by most of the Auroville outreach groups.

Cristo clarifies that planning must involve the local administration. "Also we believe that if during the term of one panchayat the projects we had done were successful, confidence would have been created and the next panchayat would want to continue the collaboration. As there is a political dimension to the panchayats, we also made it clear that we would work with any political party who wished to work with us." At the same time, he emphasises that his team are in contact with many Auroville outreach groups, and are always willing to work with them in the villages.

But while the work with these two panchayats has been suspended pending new elections, Cristo continues to look toward the future and has drawn up a five-year plan of action for regional activities. For the period 2018-2022 it includes hiring a team of regional planners to start planning for the region; revitalising the Water for All programmes; and coming up with a detailed working plan for the creation of a service that will take care of solid waste management for Auroville and its satellite villages.

Solid waste management in the villages is a particular priority for Cristo. "We have to find ways that this is taken care of without polluting the village or the water table. It's a huge challenge but, as an engineer, this is the kind of challenge that I love."

However, there are more immediate challenges that he and his team are facing. In September, a new interface L'Avenir team was selected. Cristo had high expectations that they would support his work, but he was to be disappointed. In fact, they seem to have decided to disband or, at least, suspend, the activities of the Regional Planning and Development Team. "They say they are too busy with other things, like focussing upon creating a detailed development plan for the city, but I feel they do not understand, or are not interested, in what we have been doing in the villages. They do not understand that we are part of the solution, not the problem."

He concludes, "I feel desperate because I know that if this work is not done the consequences will be catastrophic for Auroville."

Cristo feels that L'Avenir's stance is symptomatic of a narrow, Auroville-centric focus that is still prevalent in certain individuals and groups in Auroville. "This approach will never work." He is also concerned that some influential individuals continue to look towards the Central Government in New Delhi rather than the Tamil Nadu government for guidance and assistance when it comes to development matters: "This is a grave mistake as you must involve the local state government."

Cristo's solution is to recreate the Town Development Council but in a new form. "There is a need for an Auroville municipal body that includes the heads of all the major departments – electrical, water, waste management etc., – to plan infrastructural development. In fact it was the true role of the original TDC, but it got hijacked.

"Regional development would be included because we are doing mainly infrastructure work. We should set up a regional planning office which is in contact with L'Avenir, the villages and competent planners."

Cristo believes that if we are seen to be doing good work in the villages, it can be a replicable model for co-development for the rest of India. "Also, it will certainly boost Auroville's image when it becomes known that Auroville strives to turn its satellite villages into model villages. And, of course, there are areas where it is very much in our own interest to collaborate: for example, in the fields of electrical power distribution, a drinking water management, wastewater treatment and solid waste management.

"Today, if you go through a local village like Kulapalayam you see cars parked in front of the houses and the kids are driving motorcycles, but the roads are in poor condition and the village is still a shabby place. It should not be like this. But unless Auroville is behind it, nothing will change.

"Ultimately, it all comes down to this. If we don't work with our neighbours, human unity is just a slogan."

From an interview by Alan

The difficulties of building Auroville

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But that doesn't solve the problem of noise. If you want to block noise, you have to design buildings with closed windows that use air-conditioning. And that is unsustainable.

This problem will also come up for the proposed Line of Goodwill [see *AVToday* September 2017 # 338]. Its 18 floors high main building will put much of the neighbouring Auromodèle community in its shadow, and if they use open windows, the sound pollution will be tremendous. I am curious how they plan to resolve those issues, and also, if they could build not a concrete box but use alternative construction materials. It is possible: Yemen has high rise buildings made with earth architecture; and in many parts of the world wooden skyscrapers have been designed and built. Of course, this will be an issue for the entire community, not only for the architects.

You have expressed some concerns about the way Auroville is going...

I am concerned that Auroville becomes over-bureaucratic. We have about 200 people in the governance of Auroville which seems a bit much for a community of barely 2000 adults. Another concern is the low level of the Aurovilians' maintenance. I sometimes wonder if we need so many people, or if we could do with less people who then can earn a bit more than the pittance of Rs 15,000 / month which is today's average maintenance. Do working groups or units require so many people? Could they do with fewer people which then would have a better income and perhaps enjoy the higher lifestyle they feel they need, without having to look for an additional income elsewhere? These are questions the community has never looked into, but I think it's time they get addressed.

In conversation with Carel

Amrit joined Auroville in 1969. Recently he wrote about his life and spiritual development before and during his residence in Auroville. As a member of the so-called 'Neutral' group, his account offers a very different perspective upon Auroville's troubled history in the late 1970s and 1980s.

Auroville Today: Why did you write this account?

In no other account, except for Tim's *Neither For Nor Against*, regarding this period of Auroville's history, did I read any truly accurate narrative of what the 'Neutrals' [those Aurovilians who, while they did not support the Sri Aurobindo Society, did not approve of the behaviour of the dominant Auroville collective, eds.] and others went through in the 1970s and 1980s. I felt this perspective had to be described more fully to balance the picture.

This account was a kind of outpouring, it just came out. But I should clarify this is only my experience and viewpoint, it doesn't exclude others, especially when you look at it from a higher standpoint. It is just what I went through and felt had to be expressed.

To what extent do you feel your upbringing influenced your response to later events in Auroville?

It was definitely a factor. The first influence was birth in a U.S. relocation camp during the Second World War. [All people of Japanese ancestry were interned in these camps, even if, like Amrit's father, they were U.S. citizens, eds.] I didn't remember the camps themselves, but knew my parents were traumatised by this experience, because they refused to speak to me about it.

I had to do my own research on what happened and why. And what I discovered had a profound effect upon me. I began to see there were aspects of human nature that were not very nice and that led people to do things that normally they would not do, like persecute other people.

That is why, from a young age, I was very sensitive to this type of behaviour and why, in my college years, I participated in the anti-war and the civil rights movements in the USA. I became a pacifist, but also felt very strongly about how blacks were treated in America. When I saw racial segregation in Mississippi, it had a powerful impact upon me, because here was an entire society based on suppressing a whole group of people, relegating them not just to second-class citizenship but to an effective state of semi-slavery.

So when I came to Auroville, I thought all that was finished, because this was to be a new spiritual society which mirrored all my ideals. But I was served a shocking return to reality when it turned out differently. That's why I felt it necessary to take a certain stand regarding what was happening. It had a lot to do with my experience in Mississippi and the camps.

The first conflict you were involved in concerned the dispute with the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS)? What were the roots of this dispute?

The differences between people in the SAS and the Aurovilians were largely cultural, showing how conditioned we are by our backgrounds. In India, caste forms character, as intimidated by The Mother. The SAS people who were running Auroville were Marwaris from the business caste, so their general, though not necessarily only, orientation towards Auroville had mostly to do with business. Moreover, traditional Indian society is paternalistic and hierarchical. The Western Aurovilians had a different outlook, so naturally there was a conflict.

The original purpose of the Aurovilians who registered the new Auroville Society in November 1975, was not to throw out the SAS but to have a voice in their own affairs. However, the motivation of the individual behind this initiative was more rooted in the divisions and disagreements among those directly associated with The Mother, that erupted after Her passing.

Actually it all goes back to a decision taken by The Mother Herself. Navajata, who was managing Auroville affairs, decided to take a world tour and was absent for a prolonged period. In the meantime, Mother very

deliberately put Shyamsunder in charge of Auroville. When Navajata returned, he wanted to take back his portfolio, but The Mother remained silent. This started the fight between him and Shyamsunder, an internecine struggle that played out generally in Auroville.

In fact, most of our conflicts originated from those who were closest to The Mother: Navajata, Shyamsunder, Satprem, Roger.

In a way, this was not surprising because Mother had gathered very difficult personalities around Her in order to change them. And She was partially successful. I remember seeing Navajata coming down from Mother's room, luminous and full of light, so it's understandable why people were attracted. But after She left Her body, this luminosity dimmed, mostly disappeared, and there was a clear reversion to his former self, as was the case with so many others after Mother's passing.

A major problem also was that Auroville's condition in those days was very fluid. It was only five years old when Mother left, and hardly stable. Most of us were very young, with very little experience in a spiritual approach to life, so in that sense Aurovilians cannot be fully criticized for what happened. How can you blame children for immature behaviour?

Truly, these older disciples who were around Mother for so long, could have been our exemplars, helping and guiding us with gentleness and understanding, not misleading us deeper into the morass of further darkness and division.

You were the first Aurovillian to have his visa threatened.

Yes. Navajata called me to his office for a meeting with his SAS trustee group. I think he chose me because I was quiet and never much politically involved, so he thought I would be an easy target. He asked, 'Do you support the Auroville Society?' I said 'Yes'. He said if I did not join the stand of the SAS, then I must go. As the SAS was guaranteeing my visa, this meant a cancellation would force me to leave India.

I told him if there was a will on both sides to find a solution, then one could be found, but my first loyalty was to Mother, and my second was to Auroville. When he insisted I join them, I said, 'OK give me my visa papers.' I wasn't angry. I just thought the whole thing was stupid. Anyway, for one reason or another, Navajata did not act on this threat.

This demand that you choose sides was later forced upon you by Aurovilians.

Yes. From about 1977 onwards, a group of us felt growing discomfort with events that embroiled the Ashram, Auroville and the SAS, leading to more and more hatred and intolerance. Though I was opposed to the actions of the SAS, this increasing fanaticism and insistence on collective conformity alienated some of us from the main body of the Auroville community. Because of past experiences, I valued individual freedom, both socially and spiritually, particularly in the choice and pursuit of one's own unique path of yogic endeavour.

What were the consequences?

We became outcasts, punished and ostracized by our fellow Aurovilians for our non-conformity. Many former friends and acquaintances turned against us, driving us off the roads, spitting, coming in mobs to our houses. When I walked to the sports ground, people would stop and stare, and my closest neighbours constantly harassed me. This went on for years, and it started to wear me down. Sometimes it got so bad, I felt to be in a totally hopeless situation with no end in sight.

Were you not tempted to leave?

Though I considered it, there were several reasons I didn't and couldn't leave. The most important was The Mother's clear directive for me to remain in Auroville because, She said,

'He can do what he wants there (dedicate his life to the Divine) I know it!' And it was because I came into contact with Panditji [a tantric guru, eds] that I could deal with it. When you do japa or puja or meditate, it creates a kind of protective force field. I think without that, it would have been almost impossible for me to stay.

It's also something to do with my character. Although I am American, I have strong Japanese values. For a Japanese, there are two things unthinkable and unacceptable: one is giving up and the other is cowardice.

And yet, at a very extreme moment, you contemplated suicide.

Yes, this is, fortunately or unfortunately, an atavistic remnant of the Japanese character, in which *harakiri* or ritual suicide is a tradition. Incidentally, The Mother did not view *harakiri* in the same negative light as most other acts of suicide, saying, 'that's different.' The Japanese consider this an act of courage, not cowardice.

I determined that to stop extremism an extreme act was necessary. But, as a former pacifist, if I was going to hurt anybody, it would have to be myself. This was in response to the mob action on 9th March 1982 when over 100 Aurovilians surrounded my house, and of other 'outcasts' as well, mocking and banging on my windows, 'he's meditating, hahaha...' This is what instigated my resolution to do something. I felt things had gone too far.

I made detailed arrangements. Mindful of the monks in Vietnam who immolated themselves, I procured some petrol and selected a kimono. Under consideration were statements to Indian newspapers and others explaining the situation and the reasons for my action.

Then I went to see a close friend, Dietra. Without being informed of my intentions, suddenly she burst out that something terrible was going to happen, an event that my neighbour would not be able to live down for the rest of his life. Somehow, she had intuited my plan to immolate myself on his doorstep, though I never disclosed this to her or anyone else at the time.

But the next day, again a smaller mob came to my house and somebody shouted, 'Kill yourself, you're better off dead!' and I thought, if that's what they want, I shouldn't satisfy their wish! Still, I sat down in my meditation room and asked Mother, should I do it? The answer was a very clear, 'no'.

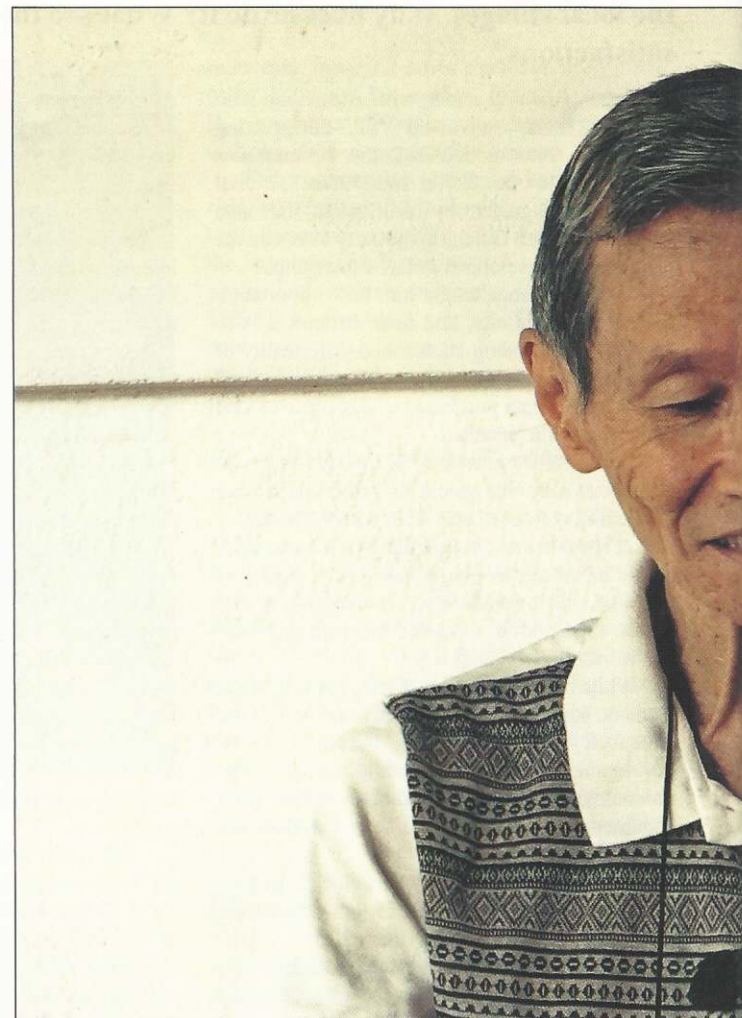
Then I understood why self-immolation would have been a rash act. While my aim was to stop this insanity, I realised that this might have a very adverse effect on Auroville. It's very possible that the government would have closed it down, and that I definitely didn't want.

What causes people to act so intolerantly?

As individuals, people usually are decent. But in a group, the level of behavior is often much lower. This I could see in Auroville meetings. Many, even friends, said and did things that were definitely not normal. Though a certain degree of paranoia is understandable as a defensive reaction against a common enemy, unfortunately, anything based on fear easily gets out of hand and crosses boundaries of common sense and basic values.

Maybe because of my background of the camps and involvement in social movements, I developed a sensitivity to issues of fairness, human decency, and goodwill, and a

'Everyone was caught'



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conviction that a subtle 'red line' of behavior associated with these principles cannot be violated. To be fair, to treat others with respect and kindness, no matter what you feel and they feel, these are the civilised fundamentals of our common humanity.

Without acceptance or consciousness of such limitations, just a few steps more, the end gradually justifies the means, and the inevitable descent down the slippery slope to the camps and Hitler's Germany begins. And at that time in Auroville, this line was crossed increasingly with impunity. Externally, even though it did not develop as far as what happened in Nazi Germany, the impetus was the same. And it came to me almost with a kind of mantric cadence, 'the force of fascism has entered Auroville.'

It was a force for division?

Yes, it's a kind of tribalism that leads to the creation of division. Auroville became a tribe. Luc Venet, one of those closest to Satprem, who later defected, in his article, *The End of Illusion*, terms this 'jihadism', which is basically the modern religious/ideological equivalent of fascism. I remember somebody told me, 'You don't understand the love we feel among us'. But I said, 'Wolves also form a pack when they hunt and tear apart their victims. You call that love?'

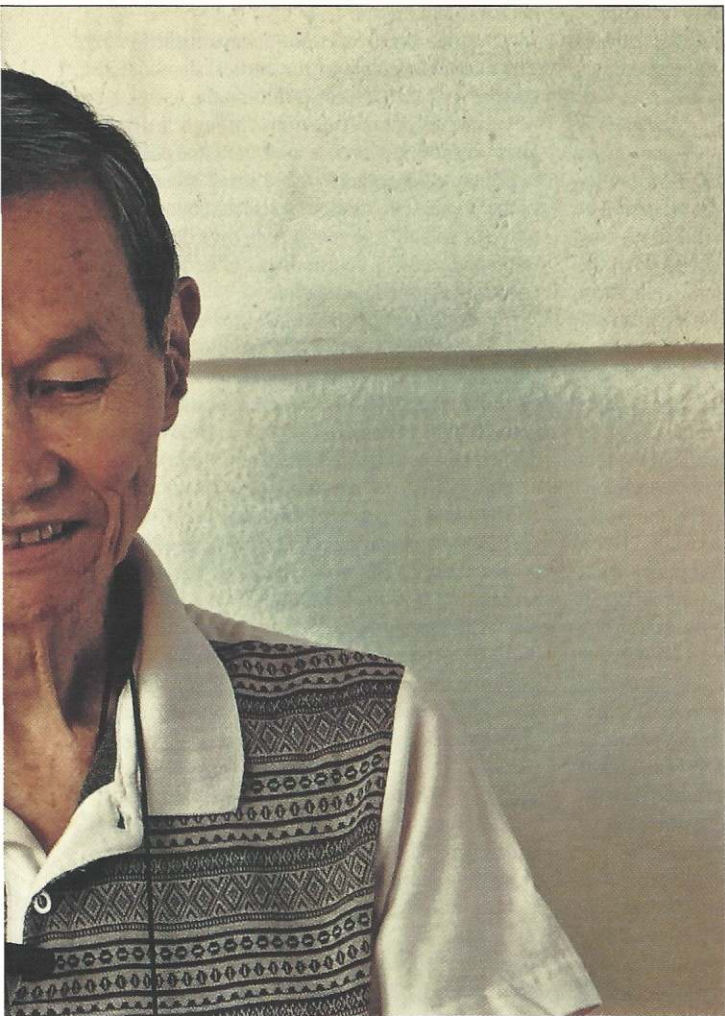
At a certain point from the late 1970s, there was a fanatical and distinctly theocratic impetus that distorted the whole thing even more. And with fanaticism, there is no such thing as spirituality because spirituality, by definition, is all-inclusive.

Strikingly remarkable now is the fact that many who participated in this madness have totally forgotten what happened and deny their involvement. Observing these mobs in action, I could recognize a pattern of behaviour like that of those subject to a kind of possession. In such a condition, there may be two distinctly different personalities, the one not remembering what the other did. In fact, I witnessed this very phenomenon in several instances involving Panditji's exorcism of individuals thus afflicted. The atmosphere surrounding the behaviour of the mobs was similar, but more like a collective possession.

In fact, when one of the people who was leading these mobs came to me later and apologised, he said, 'I just don't know what happened to us, why we behaved in this way.'

The Auroville Collective discriminated against you and the other 'Neutrals' initially because you were not supporting its behaviour. But later, because of your association

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with Panditji, you and some others were attacked for 'Tantric' practices.

This is a very complex question. It has almost exclusively to do with Satprem and his relationship with Panditji. There are many things that aren't generally known. Satprem previously had been a disciple of Panditji, then severed the connection, and when Satprem and the Ashram trustees were in conflict, from the mid 1970's, he tried to enlist the support of different people to take his side, even Panditji. And in letters from Satprem to Panditji, I saw him once again addressing Panditji as 'Guruji'.

While this conflict was ongoing, he extended an invitation to Panditji to come to Pondicherry as his personal guest, but Panditji refused. He realised that had he gone as Satprem's guest, the Ashram would have assumed he was siding with Satprem against them. And he had no intention of doing that, since previously, he had always visited Pondicherry only as a guest of Mother and the Ashram.

So he rejected the offer, and from that point of refusal of support, this anti-Tantric reaction started in Auroville.

Satprem had a certain intensity, a charisma, that people were attracted to, but possibly because of his experience in a concentration camp during the war, there was also a kind of bitterness and vindictiveness in him. He never forgave slights. And he didn't forgive Panditji, in spite of Panditji's deep love for him.

I don't feel any personal antagonism towards him, but when I see what was done in his name, the hurt and pain caused to so many people and the harm inflicted on Auroville by his statements, I think he really messed up. And it didn't have to be like that. He really could have helped Auroville; he could have elevated Auroville to a higher level.

How did the situation change?

Much more than external circumstances, the spiritual force Mother installed in founding Auroville, also when She left her body, worked to change the situation. That was a very clear experience of mine. When She passed in 1973, I perceived a rainbow of force pouring into Auroville. For me, it is that force which is the true reality of Auroville, and She wanted the Matrimandir to be finished so it could be a receptacle for that force.

Around mid-1982, there occurred several definite descents of this same force of Mother, in these particular instances also connected with Panditji, which consciously initiated the process of change to stop all this madness. And I know that if each person makes a sincere

effort to come into contact with that force and allows it to work on things, including oneself, it would solve a lot of our present conflicts.

But why did this force not stop the 'madness' in the first place? Why did the madness have to happen?

The Mother said of the First World War that there was a descent of such darkness, of such vital forces, that even those with the knowledge could not fully protect themselves. I felt something like that happened here.

This situation can also be compared to the parable of the asuras and the devas churning the ocean of life to produce amritam, the nectar of immortality. But the poison has to come up first before the amritam. And this poison could have overwhelmed Auroville but for the guardian force sent by Mother to save it.

In this yoga, the shakti energy is primary, which means dealing more directly with the forces underlying material creation; escape into the Absolute, the aim of traditional yogas like Non-

Dualistic Advaita, is not possible. And since this is a creation of suffering and conflict, until it changes and is transformed, when we are exposed to this shakti, all of our unfortunate samskaras [deep-seated impressions from past actions that influence an individual's behaviour eds.] come up to the surface. It's bad enough to have to deal with them on your own. It becomes a hundred times worse when you are dealing with them in a community. And that's why Auroville has such problems.

When Mother was still here physically, She could absorb most of these negative karmic consequences of people, which She said were like blows on Her body. But when someone asked Her what would happen if She left Her body, She shuddered and said, 'Chaos'. And that's what happened. We had to face our own darkness.

Interestingly, before all this happened I had a vision. A transformative force was slowly covering the earth like golden lava, but everyone was fleeing this force because they thought it was going to destroy them, which was, in actuality, true. All these beings, representative of our lower selves, were dark and small, as if made out of mud. When they saw how ugly and dark the others were, they started to attack and fight with each other. It was like war, a melee of utter confusion, each seeing the darkness in others but not in themselves.

Then appeared another scene of a concentration camp-like enclosure. There were unseen but enormous hostile beings bearing whips, tormenting and driving us round and round in circles, taking a great deal of joy in inflicting suffering.

This was symbolic of the two basic elements of the human condition and what Auroville was to experience: the general state of ignorance, and its resultant conflict and confusion, and the malevolent will to evil embodied by these adverse entities. Though both ignorance and evil are not exactly the same, one feeds upon the other.

Suddenly there was a cry for help, for deliverance. In response, there was a burst of light – it was the Auroville colour – and the whole sky was radiant with this luminosity, and the air filled with the song of angelic voices. And from this light an angel with wide wings, holding a spear and dressed in medieval armour descended. The huge dark beings disappeared and the angel motioned us to follow him. We came to a ramp. At this point, he turned to us and put his finger to his lips in a gesture of silence, then again turned around, and we followed him down the ramp. We went up through a door to another level, where we came to the entrance of a chamber.

The angel disappeared, we entered the room, and it opened on to beautiful gardens in which were enchanting beings, like *apsaras* [celestial singers and dancers eds.] and a very sweet vibration filled the heart. Then the vision ended.

Later, when I started working on Matrimandir, Piero and Gloria brought a model of what it would look like, and it was exactly what I had seen in this vision, which took place even before knowing anything about Auroville. The angel delivered us from the conflict engulfing Auroville into what the Matrimandir represents, a place of psychic tranquility. But who was the angel? Later, the angel was revealed to be Panditji.

I know that in Auroville many have a negative conception of him, but my experience was totally different. I am very clear that it was The Mother who brought me to Panditji. My perception is that She involved him in Auroville to help protect it, as this guardian angelic force, even though many Aurovilians rejected him and considered him the opposite, an asura [demonic being, eds.]. Mother once stated that there will be some yogis who will help Auroville, and it's evident to me Panditji was one such individual.

But Panditji, as Mother made clear, represented the traditional yogas which had no concept or interest in physical transformation.

This may be so. But Mother absorbed all the traditional knowledge of the tantra from Panditji, an assimilation absolutely necessary for Her work. In fact, She stated categorically that with his help, in three months She had achieved what otherwise would have taken Her ten years of sadhana.

Are you still affected by what happened? In your account, there are times when a certain bitterness seems detectable.

Yes, this could be because, to some extent, I deliberately and graphically described the events of that period. And this was with an intensity of feeling to convey forcefully the reality of what had been experienced in this conflict. But taking only this particular section in isolation without reading the first part, which underscores the background for this mindset, as well as the last part, which summarizes and attempts to resolve what was learned, would create, I feel, a misperception. The account has to be taken as a whole, one movement leading to the other.

I really had to deal with my own reactions, more disgust than bitterness. Bitterness to me implies vindictiveness, 'getting even', which I didn't feel at all. Instead, for some time, I didn't want to be bothered anymore by people who had done these things. It was rather, 'Leave me alone!'

But I learned through the long practice of japa, puja and meditation that it all depends upon where you put your consciousness. If you place your attention on Mother's force or the inner reality of what one is deep within, what Auroville is, and what the Aurovilians are, there is an abiding sweetness. But if you look at the terrible things that people have done, then it is very difficult not to react with disgust. And these were actual events which I felt had to be described and narrated, as part of Auroville's history, which should be viewed clearly and courageously and not glossed over.

So, for a long time, I alternated, I flipped back and forth between these two perspectives, a kind of dilemma of consciousness.

But taking up work again at Matrimandir had a very good effect, because even those who hated me had to interact and personally deal with me. And I tried to overcome my inveterate tendency to withdraw by going out of my way to help, to be positive. It was a very good field in which to train and change myself, and it aided me in overcoming much of the negativity.

Actually, I wasn't concerned so much with individual as much as with more universal dynamics. In fact, there were those who personally had done really bad things to me and when I met them later, there was no real reaction. But I suppose what I did feel, was connected more with a generalised sense of injustice or unfairness, the fundamental question of the existence of evil in this world. In fact, I

experienced much more outrage at the hurt caused to others, than to myself. Strangely enough, I didn't consider myself particularly victimized, because this implies one weaker bullied by someone stronger, and I didn't feel particularly weak, only incomprehension at what was happening. And naturally the stress began to wear.

Do you feel that what happened then could happen again in Auroville?

Until the community reaches a certain point of evolution, it is possible, though I think improbable. And this was one very personal reason for writing this account: it must never happen again, something The Mother explained when She disagreed with proposals to dismantle the Nazi Concentration Camps in Europe. She was very clear it must not be forgotten. And I regard this aspect of Auroville's historical past in a similar light.

When you look back at your own part in what happened, do you think there is anything you could have done differently?

In a certain way, nothing was in my hands. We were all swept away by a flood, a river of force so powerful, all we could do is try to survive. But, of course, we still could choose, whether to flow with the more luminous or more negative currents, because these two choices exist in everything.

Certainly, there is nothing I could have done to change other people or the course of events in Auroville. The only thing I could do is to change and work on myself, and to understand from my previous experience in the civil rights movement that this type of revolutionary activism is not the solution.

But initially I allowed myself to be drawn into it. That was a big mistake. Luckily there were certain inner experiences that indicated this to me, and I was able to withdraw in time.

In the end, when I look at myself, I was as stupid and ignorant as everybody else. So who is there to blame? Everyone was overwhelmed: like the *asuras* and the *devas* churning the ocean, we were caught in the churning. In that situation, the only thing to be done is pray and activate an aspiration. Only this can invoke a liberating grace, otherwise it's hopeless.

Mother said if you are in contact with your soul, something can act to protect and save.

I never claimed to be a yogi, I'm like everyone else dealing with their problems. It's just that in these rather horrendous circumstances, I was blessed with a grace because of Mother, Panditji, and the Force ever present since childhood. Otherwise, I think I might have been totally drowned in this thing: I'm not sure I would have survived. If anything, I am grateful that there has been a kind of guidance through dreams, visions and experiences, that have indicated and warned me of what was to come, and what I had to deal with in terms of my own difficulties.

Each person has to confront a karmic knot. In my case, there was a karmic knot that I have had to deal with from childhood. So the main thing is to try to work on that. It's difficult but we have to try. Mother said that if each can change even one small defect, then She is happy. So that's all we can do.

And there are ways this can be done. We have been assured that this is one of those tremendous junctures of Grace in human evolution when that is possible. And to avail of this unique opportunity, She has indicated the way and the process: surrender, offering all we do and are into the luminosity abiding in our hearts, whose core qualities are detachment, benevolence, compassion and love, imbued with gratitude for the ever-present Grace that is upon us all. And if we can accomplish this, to live in this state of gratitude and grace as constantly as possible, called the 'sunlit path', then can we merge ourselves into the stream of the radiant Shakti that pervades everything.

This is the true power of transmutation, and only in this Mother Force that is the very essence of this Creation, can Auroville's collective aim be fulfilled: the psychic brotherhood and unity of souls that one day certainly must and will be. And this is the spiritual significance and effective power of realisation of the Matrimandir.

From an interview by Alan and Francis

Searching for a model of governance

“What is the honey?” asked Chintan Kella, a researcher working on a PhD thesis titled *“Novel Forms of Organising.”* Chintan was in Auroville, which is one of the communities he is studying, and had invited a group of Aurovilians to a presentation of his idea of Auroville as a beehive. According to him, Auroville is best understood as a self-organising colony of honey bees, and if we understand how a beehive works, we will be able to apply those principles to the organisation and governance of the community.

Analogies from nature can be inspiring, but they can also be misleading. Looking at Aurovilians as workers, drones, scouts and queens has a folksy attraction. However, this way of looking at Auroville is perhaps a false analogy, a logical fallacy. We can get insights about our organisation using arguments from analogy: how is Auroville like a termite colony? Or like a troop of baboons? But taking any one of these organising principles from nature and using only that to organise Auroville would be a little naïve.

As always, the obvious place to start looking for a model of governance for Auroville is what The Mother had to say about it. In 1972, a French television crew was filming in Auroville and the Ashram, and they asked The Mother, “What political organisation do you want for Auroville?” The Mother replied, “An amusing definition occurs to me: a divine anarchy. But the world will not understand. Men must become conscious of their psychic being and organise themselves spontaneously, without fixed rules and laws – that is the ideal. For this, one must be in contact with one’s psychic being, one must be guided by it and the ego’s authority and influence must disappear.”

Most people balk at the idea of anarchy, divine or otherwise. It brings up images of chaos, unruly mobs, even violence. But that’s not what anarchism is as a political ideal. According to the

Oxford English Dictionary, as a political ideal, it is the “absence of government and absolute freedom of the individual.” The word anarchy comes from the Greek *anarkhos*, which means “without a leader.” The anarchist historian Rudolf Rocker wrote that, “For the anarchist, freedom is not an abstract philosophical concept, but the vital concrete possibility for every human being to bring to full development all the powers, capacities, and talents with which nature has endowed him, and turn them to social account.”

Mikhail Bakunin, the Russian anarchist, put it brilliantly when he said, “the only kind of liberty that is worthy of the name [is the] liberty that consists in the full development of all of the material, intellectual and moral powers that are latent in each person; liberty that recognises no restrictions other than those determined by the laws of our own individual nature, which cannot properly be regarded as restrictions since these laws are not imposed by any outside legislator beside or above us, but are immanent and inherent, forming the very basis of our ... being – they do not limit us but are the real and immediate conditions of our freedom.”

All this sounds really wonderful, so how did anarchism get such a bad reputation? Mostly because, for anybody with power, the idea of freedom is extremely frightening. No wonder the anarchist idealism of the Paris Commune and the Spanish Revolution were crushed by force.

Here in Auroville, we have been more fortunate. We were able to retain our freedom when it was challenged by the Sri Aurobindo Society. And the Auroville Foundation Act has placed the Residents’ Assembly as one of the three “authorities” that make up The Auroville Foundation, the other two being the Governing Board and the Auroville International Advisory Council.

How has this translated on the ground in terms of our organisation and governance? Like in most other experimental communities, the idea of collective ownership and communal work has collided with our desire for autonomy, freedom and

choice. Often, our instinct of self-preservation has been in direct conflict with community interests.

We have tried to codify our attempts at participatory governance through published mandates and a “Participatory Working Groups” manual. While the former is mostly uninspiring, the latter is a somewhat mysterious document. It promotes “the involvement of the community in its day-to-day functioning and a sense of dedicated sharing of the work,” but says absolutely nothing about how this aim could be fulfilled. It is not clear what the term “participatory” means in the context of Participatory Working Groups. Whose participation? In what way?

Participation is a laudable goal. As a note from the UN Social and Economic Council says, “Participation is a fundamental goal and object of value in and of itself. That is evident from the fact that the right to participate in a society’s decision-making processes has been accepted by the world community as a fundamental human right.” But it is not easy to set up systems for community-wide participation. Some of our own systems might even be counter-productive. Take the multi-day selection process for example, which we use for selecting members of the “important” working groups. The very fact that this process needs intensive time commitment over multiple days reduces participation. Also, we assume that this method of “selection through discussion” is better than an election, but it is subject to the same pressures of loyalty, interest groups and lobbying.

Electoral democracy, of course, has proven to be entirely ineffective. Again, The Mother was way ahead of her time when she said, “democracy always implies the idea of rich, educated people and that has shown itself to be totally inadequate.” We don’t elect our leaders, but we use voting in referendums as a method of community decision making. Again, the shortcoming is obvious – it is impossible for an ordinary citizen to fully understand the implications of a complex decision and vote with wisdom (Brexit is a prime example). In

Auroville this has meant very low participation in decision-making.

But democracy did not always mean voting. The central principle of the earliest democracies, such as in Athens, was sortition – the assignment of people to public functions through a draw of lots. Venice and Florence used the same democratic principle. The idea is that a small cross-section of the population, randomly selected but representative of society’s diversity, can dive deep into an issue and make a decision that is better than the entire uninformed population.

There have been successful experiments with sortition in the US, Australia, and the Netherlands. Ireland has been most innovative – in 2012, a group of 99 people started working on revising the constitution, of which 66 were ordinary citizens drafted by lot. The rest were elected politicians.

Is it time to experiment with sortition in Auroville? Could we select members of working groups through sortition? The obvious advantage is the elimination of “politics” in the selection process. Also, it will certainly save a lot of time. But will randomly selected people be capable enough? A qualified team of resource persons might be the answer. At any rate, given the problems we seem to face with many of our current groups, it seems unlikely that things could be much worse.

We are far from the utopia of a divine anarchy. Perhaps it is time to think in terms of a “protopia,” which is not the idea of perfection, but the idea of incremental progress. The futurist Kevin Kelly coined the term and described it like this: “Protopia is a state that is better today than yesterday, although it might be only a little better. Protopia is much much harder to visualise. Because a protopia contains as many new problems as new benefits, this complex interaction of working and broken is very hard to predict.” But this is exactly what Auroville is about – “protopian” experiments.

Manas

JOINING AUROVILLE

A determined pilgrim’s impressions of Auroville

Iknew that Auroville was my place the moment I read about it, now almost twenty years ago. The teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother resonated with me deeply, I loved the *Auroville Charter* and, even though I had grown up in the West, it was India that always felt like home.

As a very young child I remember looking around at the world from my pushchair and wondering whether I had come to the right planet. It was clear that the human society in which I found myself was severely lacking in a few fundamentals: joy, wisdom and brotherly understanding for example, as well as a complete lack of what I would call natural law.

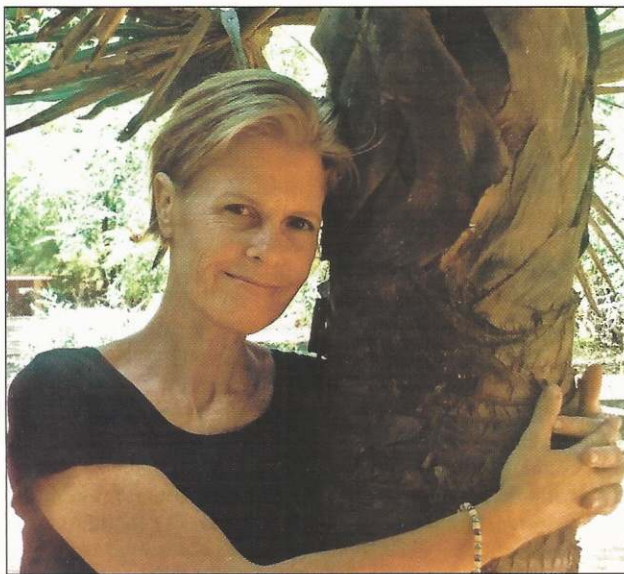
The resolution of this discrepancy between how the world is and the beautiful loving home that it could be, was too great for me to ignore, and so, like many of us at this point in time my *raison d’être*, my mission in this life, has been to ‘be the change’ I so dearly wish to see in the world – to the best of my ability. That change which, as Sri Aurobindo and Mother reminded us, is inevitable – as it is a Law of the Universe is it not, that all and everything tends towards harmony, even though it may meander and diverge somewhat en route.

When I first visited Auroville in 2001, the ecologically ideal, ultra-conscious utopia I had envisioned in my rose-tinted imagination was not exactly what I found here. My first impressions were of the – dare I say it – junk food being sold in the Pour Tous Purchasing Service (PTPS) together with the toxic chemical laden cleaning products and personal care items filling the shelves. Having been an organic obsessed eco-warrior for most of my life, I struggled with the reply I received from the sweet lady in the Pour Tous office to my question as to why these items were being sold in a ‘conscious community’. She replied: “because people want to buy them”. “Couldn’t they go to Pondy?” I politely responded – to which she faintly smiled and raised her eyebrows.

I felt a little disheartened, but rather than distancing me from Auroville it served only to fuel my determination to come to live here.

The next surprise I was met with was the number of motorcycles on the roads. “Shouldn’t everyone be riding bicycles?” I naively asked myself. I imagined there’d be bicycle rickshaws on every corner for those who weren’t able to cycle themselves. This way we’d be creating employment, staying green, and using a transport solution that’s amenable to shared journeys. I guess it’s simply not a very efficient method of getting around compared with just hopping on a moped and moving at speed directly from A to B. After all, everybody is so busy: with places to go, people to see, work to do! It’s also just as cheap, and sometimes even slightly cheaper, to hire a moped than it is to hire a bicycle, and it can be very hot cycling in summer. I remember one afternoon in June, having cycled from Kottakarai to Nilatangam in the blazing sunshine, with two heavy bags balanced on the handle bars and my clothes stuck to me with sweat, contemplating whether it may be prudent for me to place ‘saving the planet’ on hold whilst I hired myself a moped!

Another interesting observation I made was that there seemed to be a distinct lack of road signs here. Was this deliberate perhaps?



Fiona

Although regularly getting lost in the forest was a little frustrating I couldn’t help thinking that if a lack of road signs serves to deter the casual tourist from visiting Auroville then it may be a good thing – by serving as a filter such that only the determined pilgrim will persevere and stay.

I was heartened to see the sign outside the PTPS which read: “Mobile phones are harmful to birds.” My ‘inner knowing’ had always alerted me to the fact that high frequency microwave radiation is damaging to human, animal and plant biology, now well evidenced, so I was relieved that Auroville shared this awareness, or so I thought at the time.

My fondest memory of this growing township was the magnificent forested areas which were heroically created by those early settlers who transformed a desert wasteland into a lush green haven for humans and animals alike. For this I feel enormous gratitude. The forests are teaming with life, with prana and so are very healing and nurturing, and extremely necessary to Auroville’s wellbeing. I often feel that what trees give us is underestimated.

I also remember the Matrimandir which in 2001 was only partially constructed, and feeling a sense of awe and excitement that one day it would be completed in all its splendour. Mother was clearly inspired in her understanding of the importance of creating such a sacred space in the heart of Auroville, a place of sanctity where the earnest resident or visitor can find solace and a peaceful vibration amidst our challenging worldly lives.

And so now, almost 17 years later I am back in this crazy, wonderful city in the making, this time to stay, to form roots and make my home here.

So what has changed? Well the healthy, Auroville-made range of

delicacies has expanded. More motorcycles (including my own TVS), and noticeably more cars too, plague the Auroville roads; and a few more road signs have appeared, just for major landmarks.

The sign warning about the dangers of mobile phones still stands in the same place, but surrounding it many people are absorbed in their smart phone conversations and text messages – seemingly oblivious to the silent message being broadcast beside them. As is the case in the world at large, cell phone towers and wi-fi are gradually infiltrating the whole of Auroville. In my humble opinion this proliferation of microwave frequency radiation throughout our community is having – and will increasingly have – significant negative repercussions. ‘On verra,’ as the French say. I guess pressure from society as a whole makes it quite difficult to avoid ‘being connected’ 24/7, and I know that a large number of Aurovilians welcome this, seeing it as progress whilst others feel it to be a retrograde step. It is undoubtedly an extremely contentious and controversial issue but I’m sure all would agree that it is prudent to fully educate ourselves on this matter before forming any concrete conclusions about its safety or otherwise.

The forests look to be thriving and the Matrimandir is quite magnificent now, while the ongoing work on its surrounding gardens will create a delightful natural complement, just as Mother envisaged.

What has changed most though, in these past 17 years, is that I have changed. I am a little wiser and a little more capable of seeing the magic behind the more easily visible exterior which hit me in the face all those years ago. That magic is the multiple layers of Auroville, the enormity of the great work which goes on in the background on myriad differing projects, all inspired by the desire for a better world.

I think my disappointment on first visiting Auroville twenty years ago was due to my own naivety, as perhaps all of our disappointments in life are caused by our own naivety. Wherever there is a centre of Light it attracts pure souls who wish to grow in Love, Truth and Freedom, but it also inevitably attracts those whose role it is to thwart the efforts of those who are well-intentioned. This is simply the nature of duality, and should not dissuade us in any way, from our noble endeavours.

When I reflect upon Auroville as a whole there is one thing I do know for sure, and that is that I love this place with all my heart and soul, and I care deeply about its future. And the most beautiful thing is that I meet others here who feel the same, and it is this true spirit of human unity and shared intent that will bring about the realization of Mother’s dream. The imperfections that may be apparent to us can be the impetus for action on our part to transform them into something great – and there is so much learning to be had in the process!

I will end with a quote from the well known German writer and statesman Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: “There is one elementary truth, the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: that the moment one definitely commits oneself, providence moves too. Whatever you can do or dream you can do, begin it. Boldness has genius, power, and magic in it. Begin it now.”

Fiona

Back to the grassroots

Auroville Botanical Garden's Educational Programmes are teaching local students the importance of conserving our local biodiversity.

The Auroville Botanical Garden, situated on the main road near Edaiyachavadi, was established in August 2000. In issue 335-336 of June-July 2017, *Auroville Today* reported on the Garden's national outreach projects. In this article, we focus on the Garden's educational programmes.

How the programmes started

The Garden first focused on ten schools in the local area that had a good reputation and pro-active teachers known for their interest in environment. Arrangements were made for the teachers to attend an induction programme. "We explained what we do and what we wanted to do and the importance of this programme," says Satyamurthy, one of the teachers of the Garden. The proposal was accepted. The teachers returned with their students and participated in the planned activities, recording their students' experiences and taking photos.

They then assisted Satyamurthy to write a feedback report for the Chief Education Officer of the Tamil Nadu Education Department. They were granted permission to invite more schools.



Satyamurthy addresses the students

Now, over 3,000 students a year are experiencing the Garden's Education Programmes. A total of 120 government elementary schools are involved in the project: 70 schools in the Villupuram district, 20 in the Cuddalore district and 30 in Pondicherry.

Asked how they organised such a large number of schools to participate in the educational programmes, Satyamurthy explains that it is due to an informal teacher's network cooperative. "There are two to three teachers from each school who fully support our mission. Now I can share a message or an important letter by giving it to only one school. Those few teachers then assist me with the task of sharing the information about upcoming meetings and camps with the other schools in their district. This has made my job a lot easier."



Learning about solar systems

What is the main aim of the project?

The educational concept is quite simple. Satyamurthy and his team wish to raise awareness about the local environment. He says, "The students know about the kind of wild animals that can be found in the villages and houses, but they know nothing about their habitats. The students want to learn about their habits and to understand how each insect and animal are interrelated."



Studying the forest's species

"They also love to hear about the food chain: that a rat snake that lives near their house is not a danger to them, but that it protects their habitat by eating the rats and frogs and the scorpions that they fear. We teach them that if all the snakes are killed, then the other pests and vermin will increase."

"We also teach the difference between venomous and non-venomous. Snakes have the right to live with us without feeling threatened by humans."

Auroville 50th Anniversary Green School Project

At the occasion of Auroville's 50th anniversary, 50 schools have been chosen to be gifted ten trees of approximately eight-feet high. The Garden will install them in the school compound and fence them with quality steel mesh to protect them from the goats and cows. So far, 20 school campuses have been completed and the other 30 are planned to be commenced after the summer holidays.

The teachers and students are providing for the aftercare of the trees.



Kamatchi with the students

The impact

Satyamurthy and Kamatchi, another Garden teacher, say that the programmes show good results. "Many schools use less waste. The children are collecting waste paper and plastic to sell for recycling. They even clean up their school after public functions and make sure the campus stays unpolluted," says Kamatchi.

Many students, when they have a birthday celebration, give only fruits and local produce. They have stopped distributing packaged chocolates and other company products. "One day a teacher told me that an underprivileged family had sent their child to school on its birthday with 20 rupees. The class decided, instead of buying sweets, to buy ten bananas and cut each one into three pieces. The plate was then shared between all 30 students in the class," says Satyamurthy.

Many students take home the valuable environmentally-friendly practices they share. They have learned that vinegar and curd water and *dosama kira* can be used to clean the toilet. They have been taught how to prepare their own Effective Micro Organism (EM), and use Naturepest, a herbal extraction, to spray on the plants, instead of chemicals. Even tips of how to keep ants at bay without using toxic chemical sprays and chalks now reach the homes of families who have long forgotten their ancestral solution of using salt and turmeric.

Satyamurthy mentions that every year in March, he is inundated with invitations to attend the schools' Annual Day celebrations. Officials, teachers, students, parents and village elders congratulate and honour him and his team for their commitment and hard work to help nurture their children.

Emma

The Botanical Garden educational programmes

The one-day nature programme

The Botanical Garden spends about 8-10 lakhs a year on its educational programmes, for which they receive a contribution from the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research of approximately Rs. 3 lakhs. The educational experience is free of cost for the students and includes food. Transport is organized by the school.

A typical one-day starts at 10 am, when a class of around 30-40 students and their teachers arrive by bus from their home village. They begin the morning session with an introduction to the international township of Auroville. All programmes are conducted in Tamil to ensure every word is understood.

"Every day new students are coming to take part, they come from up to 40 kilometres away, and the majority of them have no idea about the concept of Auroville or that it even exists," says Kamatchi. "We tell them about Auroville, what it means, who is living here. The children ask lots of questions: about the Matrimandir, about meditation, and why so many foreigners live here. We describe the different areas of Auroville, the City area, the Greenbelt area and the reforestation projects that we are involved in. We talk about trees, particularly about the species of the *Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest* which was native to this area and which India was starting to lose."

Next, a video about the Garden is screened. It's a funny movie created by Wazo with Satyamurthy as its main actor. He proudly tells, "We had a lot of fun making this movie, the children love it."

After the introduction talk, the students walk through the Medicinal Herb and Plant Garden, created and nurtured by Kamatchi. The beneficial plants are shown and an explanation is given how they can be utilised.

Then Kamatchi talks about the alternate energy that the Garden utilises. The students visit the solar power systems and climb to the top of the windmill to view the Garden from above. They question how the red brick elevated water tank functions, and learn about energy efficient architecture.

The lunch is served at the Garden. "At first, we would order the food from a local eatery," says Kamatchi. "But as each portion would come packaged in plastic, we realised we had to change. All food is now prepared by our own kitchen team. Students are asked not to bring outside food so that the programme can follow a zero waste policy."

To show the students how not create excess waste and spoil the environment, they are invited to take their plates and cups back to the kitchen, so that they can see for themselves how much and what type of waste is produced.

Conserving water is another topic. The students learn about the daily dishwashing routine and how it is possible for 50 students to wash all the vessels using only two 30-litre buckets of water.

After lunch, the bus takes the students to the Auroville Visitor's Centre. The students watch the Matrimandir informational video, walk to the Viewing Point and then, after a fun filled amazing and exhausting day, return home.

The three-day nature camps

Three times a year, about 70 students take part in a three-day Nature Camp. Students are taken on a nature study trip through Auroville's Forecomers canyon and the Pitchandikulam Forest. They do all their cooking and cleaning themselves and collect firewood together.

Back home, the study work is shown to their schools and families. This creates awareness within the villages of what the education programmes teach. Satyamurthy mentions that in the Indian culture, girls are generally not allowed by their parents to attend overnight school trips. It is deemed unsafe.

The five-day summer camps

The five-day summer camps are an extended version of the one-day nature programme. Three days are spent at the Garden and two days on a 300 kilometres road trip to collect seeds of the *Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest* species for the seed bank and the nursery of the Botanical Garden. The night-time activities include a Yatra awareness movie and songs around the camp fire.

The cycle rallies

Two or three times a year, the Garden organizes a one-day cycle rally around Auroville to discover the diverse nature of the flora and fauna and see wild animals such as snakes, hares and lizards. Bird watching is part of the early morning activities. Even the school teachers are excited to now learn about the many different types of birds they have seen and heard since childhood.

Once every year there is a seven-day cycle rally. The students cycle up to Kodaikanal or the Kalvarian Hills, and on the way plant trees in local schools. Upon arrival, they do a guided track in the hills.

Every student is given a drawstring cotton bag with a steel plate and cup to use in the local restaurants if their food is not served on a banana leaf, rejecting take away containers, plastic bottles and bags, thus keeping to the zero waste policy.

They stay overnight in government public buildings such as schools or in the village temple. The students learn to leave the area cleaner than they found it. The local temple priests are very grateful for this initiative. Satyamurthy describes the daily ritual: "Every morning we make an eco sand toilet. We dig a big hole which gets filled in, and everyone takes their turn."

The five-day Kodaikanal Nature Camp

Since the last five years, college students have been invited for a two-day camp at the Auroville Botanical Garden followed by a three-day forest camp in Kodaikanal. They visit the *Anglade Institute of Natural History*, where late Father K.M. Matthew resided, an Indian Jesuit priest and botanist and the renowned author of "*The Flora of Tamil Nadu*". In the forests of Kodaikanal, the students spend their days comparing the species of the local forest, known as *Chola*, with those of the *Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest* they have seen around Auroville.

Ranjith's organic chicken farm

As early as August 1970, the Administrative Committee of Auroville, which reported to The Mother, agreed that Auroville, like the Ashram, would have a poultry farm. Today, Auroville has two commercial farms: Auro-Orchard, which has broilers, and Ranjith's, which has country chickens.

When Ranjith, one of the members of the Working Committee, built a chicken coop three years ago, it was for fun. He had bought some chicken to get eggs for his family and was pleasantly surprised when some hatched. He sold excess eggs to neighbours and friends, bought more chicken from local farmers and from the Rajiv Gandhi Institute of Veterinary Education and Research (RIVER) in Pondicherry, started brooding them and then discovered the ever-increasing demand for free-range organic eggs and meat.

Soon the hobby turned to business. He did a lot of internet research, participated in training programmes ran by RIVER and the Veterinary University Training & Research Centre in Villupuram, and visited farms and factories in Tamil Nadu and other states. It wasn't a great experience. "I found so many unhappy situations! India is one of the largest egg and poultry meat producers in the world. Large corporations run vast industrialized farms holding hundreds of thousands of chickens. But the chickens are kept in cramped cages and are pumped with antibiotics to prevent illness and bolster growth. When broiler chickens were introduced in the market, their normal life span before slaughter was 90 days; to increase profits, they are now bred to slaughter weight within 40-45 days and they are trying to further reduce that to 30 days! The traditional country chicken takes about 10 months to reach full maturity and 6 months for high-breeds."

In line with Auroville's ideology, Ranjith decided to go for organic free-range country chicken. He fenced a large plot next to his house in Kottakarai, built a big hut and a few more coops, and bought chicks. Was it difficult to get country chicks? He smiles. "Not really. Quite a few Indian government institutions are helping small farmers and Indian forest dwellers to gain a decent livelihood by selling them different varieties of country chicken. They are specially bred for free-range farming in rural and tribal areas."

Nattukozhi and other breeds

Ranjith's flock has four such breeds. One is the country chicken or Nattukozhi, as the many indigenous breeds are known that for centuries have been raised in the villages of India. They have a slower growth cycle than the high-breeds but have a natural instinct of foraging and escaping from predators. They are resistant to diseases but lay only 60 to 90 small eggs per annum.

Second is the Giriraja, a breed of chicken developed by the Karnataka Veterinary, Animal, and Fishery Sciences University (KVAFSU) in Bangalore. These birds are resistant to many diseases and can be fed with green foliage and farm and kitchen waste. They produce 100-130 eggs a year. The breed is also called Bonda Chicken, a reference to a deep-fried chicken snack.

Another breed is the Gramapriya, developed by the Project Directorate on Poultry, based in Hyderabad. The females of this bird can lay 160-180 eggs a year with minimum supplementary feeding. The males are suitable for tandoori preparations.

A fourth major breed is the Swarnadhara, also developed by KVAFSU. Swarnadhara lay about 140-160 eggs a year.



"I have also a few chickens from the Nicobar islands and ten black chickens" says Ranjith. "The Nicobaris are very hardy and produce small eggs, about 140-150 a year. The black chicken called Kadaknath originated from Madhya Pradesh forest. Their eggs and meat are famous for their medical properties and are extremely expensive. My country chicken eggs sell at Rs 12, but the black chicken eggs sell at Rs 50 each!"

Ranjith explains that when he buys chicks, they are one-day old. "Half of them will be rooster and half of them hen. For 10 hens, one rooster is sufficient, so you need to get rid of the roosters in due time. But when you buy chicks, you don't know their gender. That only becomes obvious after two to three months. After four months I bring the roosters to Kootroad [a village near Auroville, eds.] where they are butchered and cleaned. The meat of free-range chicken is tougher than that of broilers and I've found that birds of three to five months old provide the tender meat my clients like." Country chicken meat is much in demand and Ranjith serves clients in Pondicherry and Auroville.

Predators

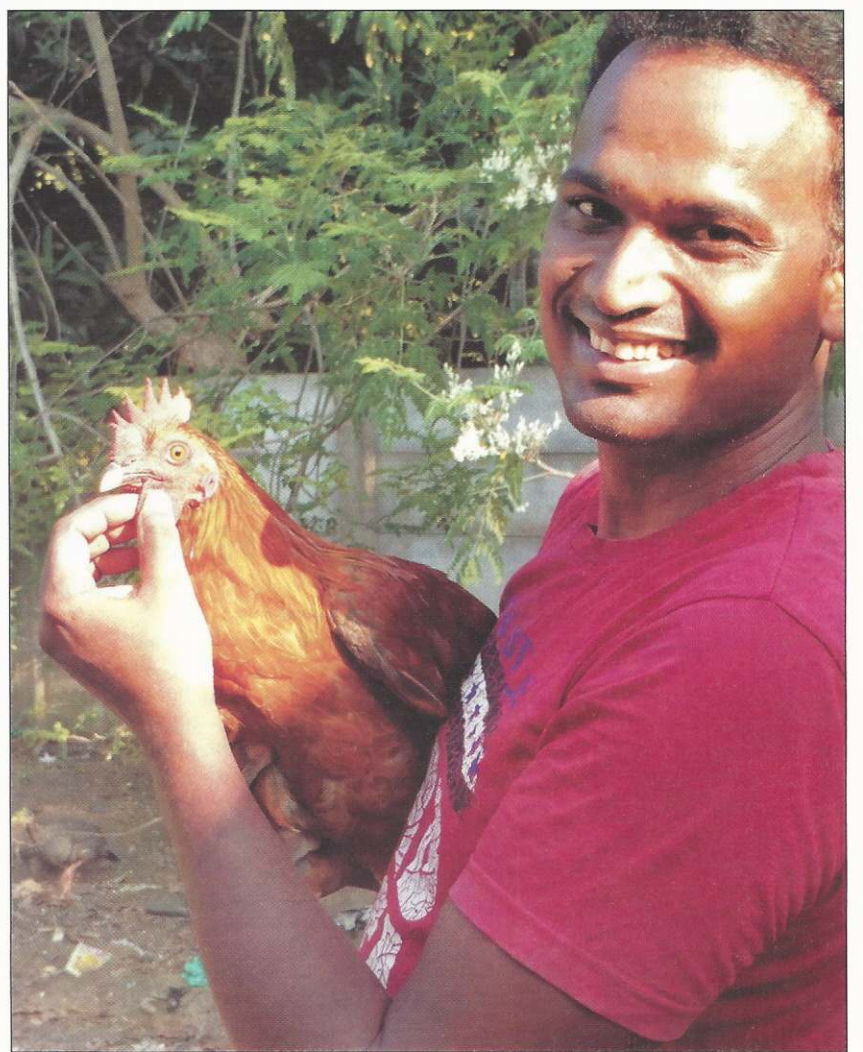
Apart from clients, Ranjith's farm also attracts predators, particularly as the Darkali Forest is nearby. "The first problems were the mongoose," he says. "Mongoose goes after young chicks and over time I've lost more than 500 of them. I trained my dogs by throwing stones at any mongoose I saw. Finally, my dogs got it and took up the job. Now any mongoose is greeted by aggressively barking dogs."

That took care of the mongoose, but their

absence created a snake problem. "Once a cobra killed three hens and 20 chicks; they tried to run away, but the snake still managed to bite them and within minutes they were dead." Though not a professional snake catcher, Ranjith removes the snakes himself. "Rat snakes can be removed quite easily, but cobras are trickier. I use a stick and a bag, and release them in the forest". Nowadays snake visits are rare, he says, but their absence has created a rat problem. He sighs. "I guess I have to live with that".

Truly organic?

Ranjith's chickens have the run of the range, but are their eggs and meat truly organic? "In daytime I give them the chicken feed I buy from a local supplier. It contains maize, millets, soya, shells and dry fish. I'm not sure if the maize is organic, but the rest is. In the evenings, I feed them with kitchen waste from the Solar Kitchen,



Ranjith with one of his roosters

and we can trust that most of it is organic," he says.

Ranjith doesn't use antibiotics, neither in the feed nor in the treatment of sick birds. He feeds his chicken twice weekly with a mix of ayurvedic herbal medicines that go by the Tamil names of Nilavembu⁽¹⁾, Kuppaimeni⁽²⁾, Keezhanelli⁽³⁾, Thulasi⁽⁴⁾, Thuthuvalai⁽⁵⁾ and Athimathuram⁽⁶⁾, which, he says, gives excellent results. "These ayurvedic medicines work wonders, and there is no need for antibiotics in the feed or for vaccination. I'm sure they also work against several human illnesses, particular the almost magical herbal medicine of Nilavembu. It works against dangerous illnesses such as chikungunya, dengue, malaria, and bird flu."

Ranjith's farm is the only organic free-range country chicken farm in the bioregion. It now has 900 birds, but the ideal number, he says, should be 5,000. His yard is sufficiently large to host all those birds, but his financial means limit this expansion. "I am going to explore the possibilities to get loans," he says. "In the present conditions, a Rs. 4.5 lakhs a year turnover should be possible. I have started to financially contribute to Auroville and hope to do more in future."

In conversation with Carel.

(1) *Andrographis paniculata*, (2) *Acalypha indica*, (3) *Phyllanthus niruri*, (4) *Thulasi*, (5) *Solanum trilobatum*, (6) *Glycyrrhiza glabra* lin.

MATRIMANDIR

The Matrimandir water harvesting project

Preparations are being made to realize a long intended goal for the Matrimandir gardens area, to harvest as much of the runoff water from the stormy winter monsoon rains as possible. Water harvesting is more and more a subject of interest in Auroville, as water levels in the underground aquifers are rapidly lowered during the summer due to intense usage by Auroville and the surrounding bioregion as a whole.

While it is true that recharge of the aquifers through rain fall is an important yearly occurrence, geologists note that less than 25% of the rainfall actually gets added to this recharge. Thus, if one can catch some of the rainfall and store and use it directly at the surface it could contribute greatly to our water



A trial sample of the open storm water collection channel being created at the edge of the oval road in April

balance in the city. Matrimandir is ideally suited for rainwater harvesting, as all three catchment areas in the gardens

oval can be separately and easily dealt with. Out of the 86,000 sq. mt. of this oval, some are very near or below the

Matrimandir. Water falling here is already collected in a large underground tank below the building and pumped back to the surface when needed by a set of pumps.

Water falling on the 4420 sq. mt. of the Amphitheater can also be easily collected. To do this, we will construct an underground sump in the line of the currently existing large drainage pipe, and redirect this water flow into our catchment area.

The third collection area is the web of paved pathways and plazas which lie between the gardens on site. These pathways all slope outwards, towards the edge of the gardens oval. Thus here, at the edge of the gardens, we will now construct an open channel, about one meter wide and one kilometer long around the oval to collect this runoff water.

The water from all three sources will be directed in a large test pond which is to be made on the southeast edge of the gardens oval. It will be interesting indeed to make this experiment of collecting the runoff waters from the garden area. The catchment pond will have to be lined with a waterproof HDPE liner and will be stocked with fish and water plants to create a living and beautiful water body.

This project, which is being taken up now will be monitored over the next few years: it will be a real test of the concept of rainwater harvesting in Auroville.

We note that the ancient villages surrounding Auroville, and throughout Tamil Nadu as a whole, had mastered the technique of seasonal water harvesting a thousand years ago! We are now trying to recreate this idea in more modern ways.

John Harper

Visions of Champaklal at the Matrimandir

Champaklal first met Sri Aurobindo in April, 1921. Two years later he joined the Ashram and became the faithful personal attendant of, firstly, Sri Aurobindo and, later, The Mother.

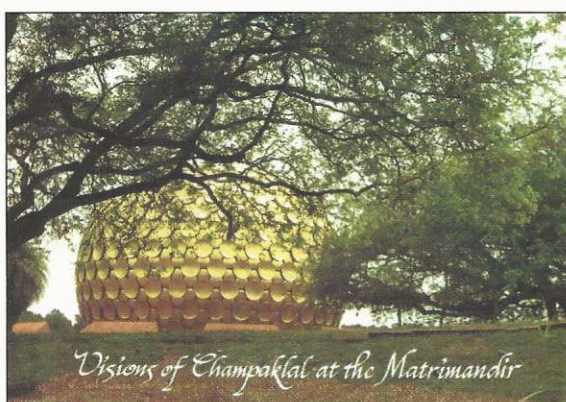
Both held him in very high regard. In a letter of 1920, Sri Aurobindo wrote, "I do not want thousands or lakhs of disciples. It would be enough if I get a hundred men free from their petty egoism and ready to work as the instruments of the Divine." The Mother was later to identify Champaklal as one of that hundred.

Champaklal began seeing visions in 1929. This book presents six of those visions, including three extraordinary ones at the Matrimandir, which he visited a number of times while it was under construction. In one,

he sees someone cutting off the heads of those meditating in the chamber, and from the severed heads a shining white liquid spread all over Auroville, while each head became a glorious golden light.

In another, he describes a 'heavenly darshan' at Matrimandir which reveals to him a transfigured world.

Around Matrimandir, up to a certain distance, there were different kinds of trees of beautiful bright and fascinating flower plants of varied hues, never seen before....Beyond them, very far away, there was a vast open space in the midst of which shone an exquisite, radiant and magnificent throne of superb workmanship and golden glow...My eyes turned again to the throne and I saw that golden light was continu-



ously emanating from it. It seemed that The Mother was seated there in Her golden translucent body.

These visions truly breathe a different, liberating air.

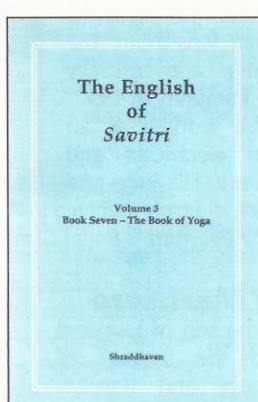
This handsomely produced book also includes extracts from Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's writings on the symbolism of visions, an account by Nirodbaran, another of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's closest attendants, of the significance of the Matrimandir, as well as paintings by and photographs of Champaklal.

Alan

Visions of Champaklal at the Matrimandir. Compiled and edited by Roshan and Apurva. Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, 2017. Price Rs 150. Available from SABDA.

The English of Savitri Volume 3

Savitri Bhavan has published the third volume of *The English of Savitri*, based on the transcripts of classes given by the author, Shradhdhavan, from July 2014 to July 2015. The volume contains summaries of Part Two, Books Four, Five, Six and Eight of Sri Aurobindo's epic *Savitri*



terised as 'the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision.'

As we came to appreciate in the first two volumes, the third volume too gives many insights in texts whose understanding was unclear; or perhaps better said, provides the help for the mind to fall silent and receive the revelation of the mantric lines

just read and, as Shradhdhavan had explained before, "wake up an inner knowledge or experience".

These volumes are a treasure for all those who wish to better understand *Savitri*. We hope that Savitri Bhavan will publish the edited transcripts of all of Shradhdhavan's classes on *Savitri*, such as Part 1 Book Two, *The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds*, which takes such a large place in the poem, and of its concluding Part Three, Books Nine to Twelve.

Carel

The English of Savitri - Volume 3, Book Seven: The Book of Yoga. Available from Savitri Bhavan and SABDA. Price in India Rs 550.

Search for the Divine

That many Aurovilians have hidden talents is well-known. But I hadn't expected Satprem Mañni to be a poet in disguise. Acknowledged as Auroville's earth construction guru, with world-wide experience in promoting earth architecture and winner of over a dozen awards, I knew him only as an architect, a trainer in earth technology and supervisor of construction sites, invariably with half a dozen pen markers in his shirt pocket and a roll-up ruler belted to his side.

This man of action yet has another side: he is also a man of contemplation, of searching, of trying – and sometimes desperately – to find harmony and the meaning of life, as is witnessed in his booklet *Search for the Divine*, a collection of 88 poems and thoughts written between 1995 and 2002. Take, for example, the poem *Suffering*.

*Once more I find myself again upon the roads.
This story has been repeated for so long
Mercenary sent on the world's battlefield.*

Whether priest or ascetic, pursuing an elusive God.

Whether warrior, fighting for the Truth.

Whether architect, manifesting the premises of a new creation.

Always I am uprooted.

Always I am projected in the unknown.

Always I am living a suffering whose facets seem infinite.

When the Joy of Being?

When the infinite Peace of God?

When the Transformation, Ultimate?

Some poems also reflect happier states, such as *Offering*.

*This human Nature is a gift from the Supreme Lord.
Good or bad, its attributes are all Divine.*

*Beauty, Light, Grandeur of the Being
Are jewels for the Soul!*

*Obscurity, narrowness, imperfection,
Are opportunities for the Being.*

*Being grateful for all these marvels,
Acknowledging these limits in order to grow.*

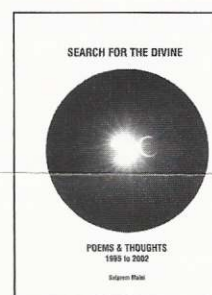
*Offering the whole to be raised, transformed.
Giving back with gratitude what belongs to Him.*

That He may dispose of all in the best way for His Work.

That the author is an architect transpires from many of the poems. In *Harmonic Architecture* he describes the holistic architecture he aspires to manifest, in which beauty is expressed with simplicity because inspired by an inner harmony, and matter's inner beauty is shown without cosmetic disguise; an architecture of subtle music, of natural matter, of radiant light, for an ocean of peace: where the world could grow towards a progressive harmony for a New Creation.

The booklet is not publicly available. But copies can be obtained from the author by emailing him at earthinstitute@auroville.org.in.

Carel



Farewell Zackaria

On May 14th, our spiritual brother and companion on the road to the "Life Divine", Zackaria Moursi, left his body and this earthly realm. He was 75 years of age.

Zackaria had gone through open heart surgery last August, from which he gradually recovered, but then suffered a debilitating stroke in mid-November that left him gravely impaired. In some ways over time, his condition slowly and sporadically improved, and a team of dear friends and Ashram residents were witness to his struggle and journey as we took turns being with him at the nursing facility for some time each day. But, in other ways, his body was just unable to overcome the severe incapacity of his condition. In the last month, friends pitched in together to hire a caregiver to come and be with him for an extra two hours a day to help with physical therapy, read to him, play music, and wheel him out into his beloved sunshine. This dear young woman became in Zack's words, his "angel" and "breath of Spring" in his life.

During the long months of his ordeal, Zack was often straddling two worlds – one very much in the physical and all its frustrating challenges and limitations, the other connected deeply to his inner life of *sadhana* and an inner reality that he often confused with the outer, where he was back at the Ashram, able to traverse stairs, visit the meditation hall, or walk the corridors of the nursing facility and among other things make an appointment to meet Sri Aurobindo. He sometimes believed much more

in this inner reality than in his confinement to bed or wheelchair.

Zack was born in Egypt and had a materially privileged, though lonely, upbringing at a time when Islam was more tolerant, open-minded and progressive. At a young age he discovered the joy of reading all kinds of literature in his father's marvelous library and the world of books became his refuge and later his life's calling pursued through academic studies.

During the tumultuous times following the revolution in Egypt in the 1950's, after his family lost most of their possessions and his father died, Zack put all of his efforts into his academic studies hoping to win a scholarship to study abroad. At the age of 20 he realized this dream and found himself doing post-graduate work in Germany. There he became acquainted with Sri Aurobindo's Yoga through a German compilation, "*Der Integrale Yoga*", and felt these inspired words filling a void that all his intellectual pursuits had not been able to.

A profound turning point came when halfway through his doctoral program he fell into a severely debilitating depression where life had no more purpose. At a crucial moment of despair he remembered the Integral Yoga book and gazed at Sri Aurobindo's photo which shifted something deep within, leading slowly but surely out of the depression and into the beginnings of his spiritual life. In Germany he met and married his wife, a fellow scholarship holder, but soon found an insurmountable conflict growing between his outer married life



and inner spiritual life. Though his wife was sympathetic and they continued the marriage for 30 years, moving from Germany to Cairo, to the U.S., in the end they parted as dear and respected friends and Zack was free to pursue his *sadhana* unencumbered. This led him to Auroville, back to the U.S., to Switzerland, back to Cairo, changing life paths, careers and relationships, still finding the challenge of the outer circumstances at odds with the inner ideal.

Finally at the end of a short visit to Auroville 10 years ago, he received the Adesh, the inner command (and in this case also the outer command) of what he ultimately understood to be a kind of fulfillment of his life's purpose: to translate Sri Aurobindo and Mother's works into Arabic. In 2008, Zack returned to the Lodi Ashram and devoted half his time to Ashram work and half to his translation work and to the development of his website which served as a vehicle of outreach into the Arab and Islamic world, to allow some Light of Sri Aurobindo's teachings to penetrate into the chaos and barbarism of fundamentalism that is raging there. The translation work continued to expand with the publication of three books and numerous essays and articles. He continued to grapple with ways to reach the Islamic psyche in a non-threatening way, inviting Muslim readers to perceive the possibility of a spirituality that grows naturally out of the Islamic faith into a wider Light.

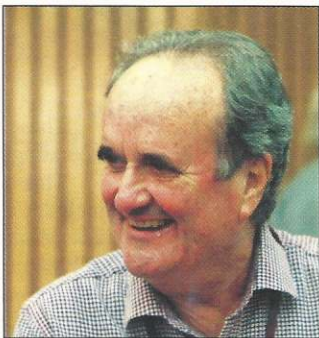
In Zack's words, "The reason I have left Egypt to spend my remaining years in an ashram dedicated to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is that I find this ashram to be, for me, the most suitable place to deepen, in and around myself, that solid peace... the peace on which, in the long run, a divine life can be established on earth".

Dakshina

Website: sriurobindo-inarabic.com. Plans are underway to keep Zack's website alive and well in perpetuity so that his work may continue to inspire those in the Arab world and elsewhere.

Sir Mark Tully receives Lifetime Achievement Award

On May 18, 2018, Sir William Mark Tully, who has served 12 years as Chairman of the Auroville International Advisory Council, received the RedInk Lifetime Achievement Award from the Mumbai Press Club. Sir Mark Tully, who worked for over two decades as the Bureau head of BBC in the subcontinent, said in his acceptance speech that he grew up as radio reporter and he would always prefer radio to television. Sir Mark, who was deported during the emergency, said for journalists credibility was everything, and in today's age they must learn to grapple with fake news by crosschecking and verification of facts.



Four-lane bypass threatens Auroville's Forests

Markings left by a consultant working for the National Highways Authority of India (NHAI) revealed that plans are afoot to design a 4-lane National Highway from Ayyur near Viliyanur to the north of Kalapet before the toll gate. This road would cross the Auroville Green Belt for a length of 3.5 kilometres through the Forecomers, Pitchandikulam and Aurogreen areas and destroy decades of work, much of the Auroville Greenbelt, and come too close to city area. Discussions with the authorities have started to shift the road outside the Auroville Master Plan area.

Land purchase problems

The ownership of a recently bought eight-acre plot of land on the tar road between Certitude and Edaiyanchavadi, for which negotiations have been going on for almost three years, is in dispute and Auroville has been denied possession of the land. The negotiations involved ten different owners, and a family member of one of the parties now claims ownership. The Land Board informed the community that it is confident that it will regain possession of the land as the person has not produced any valid claim and only used threats and violence to take possession of the land.

Tibetan students help with land purchase

Since 2010, the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture in Auroville's International Zone has been inviting teenage students from the Tibetan Children's Village school in Dharamsala to come to Auroville for a cultural exchange program during their winter vacation. This year the 9th batch of students from 12 to 15 years old visited Auroville.

During the Marathon Market Fair 2018 at the Visitors Center, the children were given information about the land of Auroville and how crucial it is for Auroville to purchase the remaining land. One of the boys said, "Land is the main thing without which we may not be here today. For Auroville to reach Mother's vision of a universal town with 50,000 inhabitants, Auroville really needs help to purchase all the needed land." One of the girls followed by saying "How can we help?" and the students decided to contribute their weekly pocket money and made postcards for the Pavilion for fundraising for the lands.

Careless driving brings speed breakers back

The Auroville Council and the Auroville Safety and Security Team issued a public warning against careless driving which is on the rise since the speed breakers on Auroville roads were removed for the visit of the Prime Minister. Parents were warned not to allow their children driving before the right age, and without a driving license or insurance. All road users are encouraged to take more care, obey the rules of the road, and have respect for fellow drivers and pedestrians.

L'avenir d'Auroville has meanwhile finalized the positions for removable speed breakers in the City area which will be installed soon. At the community's request it will remove the "chicanes" – 10 centimetres high road dividers, as they appear to be a danger to road users.

Smart Street Lights

Auroville Consulting has designed and is in charge of implementing the installation of 87 smart street lights along the Crown road from the Farewell Centre to the Mahalakshmi Home, from the Visitors Centre to Savitri Bhavan and from the Matrimandir Visitors' Gate to the Solar Kitchen Roundabout.

The funds have been made available from the 50th anniversary grant. The street light clusters will be connected to a solar PV system (grid-interactive plus battery storage) which is installed in a public building identified along the stretch. A similar pilot was implemented last year from the Solar Kitchen roundabout to the Vikas Radial crossing, with the PV system in the Auroville Library building.

Djaima community without electricity

The residents of Djaima community have complained about their recurring problem with poor and inconsistent electric power supply. The residents often live with no current for two or three consecutive days and this results in a water problem, and the impossibility to use essential appliances such as washing machines and fridges. They requested that their supply shifts to a more reliant power line.

Library expands

With the opening of the new wing at the Auroville Library more space has become available in the main reading hall. Following a proposal from some readers the Dutch and Spanish sections have been made more attractive by expanding their shelf space. A generous book donation has allowed the opening of a Korean section for this rapidly expanding part of the community. The library houses now books in English, French, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Tamil and Korean.

Design invitation for the Matrimandir Garden of the Unexpected

The Matrimandir is calling for design proposals for the Garden of the Unexpected. This garden was described by Roger Anger, the chief architect of Auroville, as a place where a child could have an initiatory experience, a place of wonder, a garden for discovering the unexpected. This garden is in four sections and lies between the Unity Garden and Oval Road, spreading in a Japanese fan-shape from the office to the West Gate. A design brief has been formulated and designers are invited to present as an individual or as collaborative teams a submission that demonstrate a high level of capability, as well as a concise yet compelling design response to the design brief. Registrations close on July 31st. To ensure that the best possible design is selected, experts will be invited to assess and rate the incoming proposals to help select the final one.

Matrimandir Garden of Progress almost complete



The Garden of Progress seen from the top of Matrimandir in April 2018

The Garden of Progress has been brought very close to completion. The 7 x 7 m pool in its outer portion has been completed, as well as several details in the large central area which features an ascending line of granite stepping stones moving through the three level terraced areas of the garden. Multi-colored Progress flowers are happily blooming there and the *Lagerstroemia speciosa* trees, with Mother's significance of 'Intimacy with Universal Nature' are showing their purplish blooms. Her comment on this flower was: "This intimacy is only possible for those who are vast and who are without preference or repulsion."

In the portion of this garden nearest to the Matrimandir, a curving pathway has been built, moving beside and above a narrow winding water body. The final feature of this garden, a low fountain at the base of the line of granite stepping stones, will be finalized during the coming summer months.

AuroOrchard goes fully organic

In October 2012 AuroOrchard converted to organic farming all of its central area of about 20 acres, where food for the community is cultivated: vegetables as well as the fruits like papayas, limes, avocados, coconuts, guavas, lemons, ramphal and some mangos. Its free-range eggs are also produced inside this zone. However, the surrounding mango and cashew orchard area of approximately 25 acres continued to be leased to an outside contractor (with some control on types of

pesticides used) as the area was too large for the limited farm team and there was no scope to consume all these fruits in Auroville.

From the beginning of this year, with a new contractor, the conversion to organic cultivation of all mango and cashew orchards has started, a process that normally takes 3 years for full conversion. Soil, leaves and fruits samples have been sent for lab testing to know the levels of residual chemicals from past sprays, to know the degree of conversion achieved in this first season.



Bamboo tower

Mohanam and the Auroville Bamboo Centre are collaborating to create a unique helical designed 50 feet high bamboo tower as a tribute to 50 years of completion of Auroville. The tower is to become a symbol of unity and a prototype for future innovation, and is aimed at becoming the tallest bamboo tower in the world. The ultimate use of the project will be as a viewing tower and a meditation space.

Passing V. Devaraj

V. Devaraj, husband of D. Davamani and father of Ranjani, Nathiya and Sathiya passed away on May 26th in his house in Aspiration after a long extended illness. He was 57 years old.

Devaraj came to Auroville from Edaiyanchavadi in the early seventies and officially joined the community in 1992. Originally he worked as an independent electrician and later at Aureka. His wife and daughters are all firmly involved in Auroville. His remains were cremated at Adventure's Burial Grounds on May 27th.



Passing Marcauro

Marcauro, the son of Lisa and Volker and the brother of Grace, Aurora and Karuna, passed away on April 29th. He had been given the name Marcauro by the Mother and had been living in The Netherlands. He was 46 years old.



LETTER

Hello Aurovilians,

Sub: The Tourism Challenge in the May 2018 issue # 346.

This question from you: Does it help or harm us? But what about the opposite? Do Aurovilians help people who come to Auroville as a tourist, a guest, a volunteer with some interest in Auroville?

Did Aurovilians ever ask visitors: how do you experience Auroville? What can be better? And what's your feeling about us Aurovilians? And?

When I was in 2005 visiting Auroville I met some volunteers, young students, and guests and all of them had the same complaint: Aurovilians are not open, there is no dialogue, they are angry when you criticize Auroville. Aurovilians have no free thinking, they always say: Mother said this and that. But what about you Aurovilians, what are you as an individual? What about your community? What about this Charter of Auroville? And then this problem with money, how to deal with it? What a confusion!

And Aurovilians gives you the feeling: we are better than you. So what do you expect if there is this attitude?

Of course Auroville is not a place just for fun, and people who visit Auroville have to respect your privacy. But it is up to you to learn to deal with it and look at and understand both sides of the challenge. And if you develop rules regarding tourism, don't forget that this tourist is also a human being, who has his or her life and level of consciousness. What do you know from the world? Why not learning to deal with the world and its challenge?

With Greetings
Angela, Belgium

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

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