

Auroville Today

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The onslaught continues: update on the beach

In the last Auroville Today we reported on the urgent situation facing two of our beach communities due to coastal erosion. Since then there have been several developments. It was reported in The Hindu of November 5th that the Chief Minister of the Tamil Nadu Government, Jayalalithaa, has sanctioned 31 crore rupees to construct groynes along the coast, and that the work has begun. The report mentions that this is specifically to arrest seawater incursion into the village of Chinnamudaliarchavady, which is close to Repos community and just north of Quiet and its well-known natural healing therapy centre.

Meanwhile people employed by the Tamil Nadu Government have been taking measurements along the beaches from Quiet up to and beyond Repos. They reported that a protective seawall is planned along the seafront which will be 2-3 metres high and 2-3 kilometres long. This raises some questions. How will this seawall be constructed? Where will it begin and end? And is such a seawall necessary if groynes are also planned? Clarifications are urgently being sought from officials of the Tamil Nadu Government and there is a request that Quiet and its healing centre is included in the Government's plans so that the whole of the Quiet seafront (about 550 metres) is protected from ongoing erosion.

At present, lorry loads of heavy black granite boulders are being dropped in front of Chinnamudaliarchavady. As a result, erosion has suddenly dramatically accelerated on the northern side of Quiet, which is closest to the village. Part of the fence has been destroyed and fishermen have pulled their boats into the Quiet compound, thereby causing a serious security issue. Meanwhile, the waves are pounding frighteningly close to the recently renovated parking area.

The situation has dramatically deteriorated in Repos as well. One month ago, Bhaga's house was four metres from the sea. However, in one night during the recent cyclone 'Nilam' all four metres of land was washed away and her house began to be undercut by the sea. The next day Bhaga had to move to another house in Repos a little more distant from the waves. It is estimated that Repos has now lost 15 metres of land to the sea since June.

During the same cyclone, the entire fence was also washed away. For a brief period Repos was unprotected and thefts took place, including a solar panel from the top of Bhaga's house. However, within a day Auroville's Cyclone Relief team came down and started rebuilding the fence.

The most important intervention, however, came from Satprem of Auroville's Earth Institute. Satprem was shocked when he saw the precarious condition of Bhaga's house, and even more shocked that no Auroville group had done anything over the previous months and years to prevent this happening. Helped with funds from the Housing Service, he immediately organized emergency work to prevent Bhaga's house from collapsing on to the beach, which is what had happened to Sam's house a few months earlier. "The aim of this emergency work," wrote Satprem, "was to prevent the house from breaking in two because the front side was supported only by two columns instead of five. It was necessary to work fast as the sand was drying and progressively eroding below the two remaining foundations."

Using his entire team of masons and workers and with the help of a JCB, the team broke down the derelict café building next door and used the rubble to provide support for the foundations of the house. Additional pillars were also constructed. Satprem wanted to construct a rubble wall in front of Bhaga's house to provide some protection from the sea, but he was unable to do this because the sand was too soft for the JCB to work on. This means, as Satprem points out, that while the house has been secured for the moment, the work "may not sustain the fury of waves of another cyclone, especially because no wave breaker can prevent erosion below. This extra protection will help for a short time only. As long as the real cause of the beach erosion is not resolved, [the Pondicherry harbour and groynes which are restricting the natural sand replenishment of the beaches eds.] Repos will lose more and more land every year."

Bhaga, however, seems in remarkably good spirits, in spite of the chaos which has unfolded around her in recent days. She is already planning to buy more tables and chairs so that she can resume providing food from the Repos kitchen to guests and visitors. Her famous breakfasts have already restarted. So what is her secret?

"It's thanks to this place. After the big cyclone in December when I saw all our big coconut trees were still standing firm, I felt this place is alive, it still wants to live. After all, this place is been named by The Mother, it was a gift from her to Auroville. Repos is part of the body of Auroville and many people feel this place is special. That's why I am not planning to move somewhere else even though many concerned Aurovilians feel I am mad to stay here. I will only move if I get an unmistakable message from The Divine."

In fact, she is concerned that so many people seem to be expecting the worst. "When something bad happens people think it will continue that way and I have to tell people, 'Stop imagining a horrible future. It doesn't have to be that way; there are so many possible futures. Sri Aurobindo and The Mother have explained this and that we can attract the future which is the best rather than the worst.'"

However, she is saddened that, in spite of the assistance she has received from various individuals and groups over recent weeks, so little has been done for so long to protect our threatened beach communities. "People could see, month after month, how the land here was being destroyed by the waves, but nobody lifted a finger. The Auroville Foundation could be doing much more. It is their responsibility. This is a much-loved asset of Auroville which is endangered - Satprem estimates that Repos may have suffered losses of 80 lakh rupees over recent months - and they don't seem to care."

"If Auroville does not act now," warns Satprem, "in less than 10 years Auroville will have lost the entire land at Repos, including all its assets, and half of the land at Quiet."

Alan



Photo top: all that is left from the house which was on the beach a month ago (insert). Photo middle: work done to save Bhaga's house. Photo bottom: fishermen boats parked within Quiet community. Its protective fence has gone

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Auroville will be facing a water crisis

Toby, former director of Hydron Flevoland, later Vitens, a public water company supplying drinking water in the province of Flevoland, The Netherlands, is now executive of the Auroville Water Service. Here he talks about the present and future water supply system in Auroville and the critical water situation facing Auroville and the bioregion.

Auroville Today: Ditches are appearing in many parts of the city and huge lengths of black pipeline are lying along the roadsides. What is going on?

Toby: We are replacing old PVC pipes which are leaking badly. In the Residential Zone we are losing 40% to 50% of the water through cracked or leaking pipes. Their lifetime is over, and we are replacing them with high definition polyethylene pipes (HDPE) which are very strong and can last 80 years. My experience of using these pipes in Holland is that the losses are only about 0.2%, even after many years.

At the same time, because these new pipes last so long, we have started preparing the water infrastructure for the future city. We are still discussing where exactly all the pipes should go, but the main lines of the new infrastructure are clear. Starting in the Residential Zone, we are putting in a pipe along the Crown Road: this ring will be the backbone of the future system.

What about storage? Will you have to create more storage tanks?

We have two possibilities. Either we create a pressurized system and then we don't need tanks, or we construct a new water tank that would be sufficient to supply the needs of half or more of the population of Auroville.

The main discussion going on at present concerns whether we should have a decentralized or a centralized water system in the city. At present, we don't have a decentralized system, we have a fragmented one. There are about 150 water systems serving different communities and these systems vary tremendously in terms of capacity and quality. Some people pay a lot for getting poor water and others pay nothing for getting good water. In the long run, this is not viable. We must standardize as much as possible the quality and ensure that everybody has the same access to good quality water.

The next step we envisage is to connect some of those systems together into local systems so that gradually more systems interconnect with each other. This has already happened with the communities which share the big water tank near Invocation. In the end, I think the whole city system should be totally interconnected to ensure that the water supply – the wells, pipes, pumps and storage – is optimized.

Let's look at the larger water situation. Do we have enough to support a future township of 50,000? In fact, do we have water security even today?

In many ways, we are blessed here. We have a lot of rain, about double what falls on my country, although here it falls only between 30 and 60 days a year. We also have a number of aquifers which are fantastic reservoirs for the rainwater. Then again, we have the technology here to convert wastewater into usable water. So, all in all, if you look at our resources they are quite fantastic.

Nevertheless, the situation has become critical in regard to the water supply as we cannot isolate Auroville from the rest of the bioregion with which we share the aquifers. And here things are going badly wrong. The Government of Tamil Nadu pro-

vides free electricity to farmers, who have installed huge water pumps, often without switches, which run whenever there is current.

Consequently, they pump out much more water from the aquifers than the natural recharge. As a result, over the last 30 – 40 years the people of this bioregion have managed to exhaust almost all of the groundwater resources. But that's not the end of it. The main aquifer is below sea level. This means that when the pressure in the aquifers drops too much due to the gap between extraction and recharge, seawater will intrude and our groundwater system, which is our main source of water at present, will become salinated.

Nobody knows exactly when it will happen. It may take two years or four years or ten, but it has already happened in many places in southern Tamil Nadu under similar circumstances and it is likely to happen here too. We are in a dangerous situation. And once it starts happening, not only is it irreversible but it also goes fast. The experts predict that it would take only three to six months for the whole system to become salinated. That would put Auroville in an impossible situation as we can't reorient a whole water system in just six months. For this reason, some of us have been urgently looking at alternatives. Moreover, when I'm putting in these expensive pipes that will last for 80 years I want to know for sure that I have a resource that I can completely rely upon for that period, a resource that will provide for all our water needs.

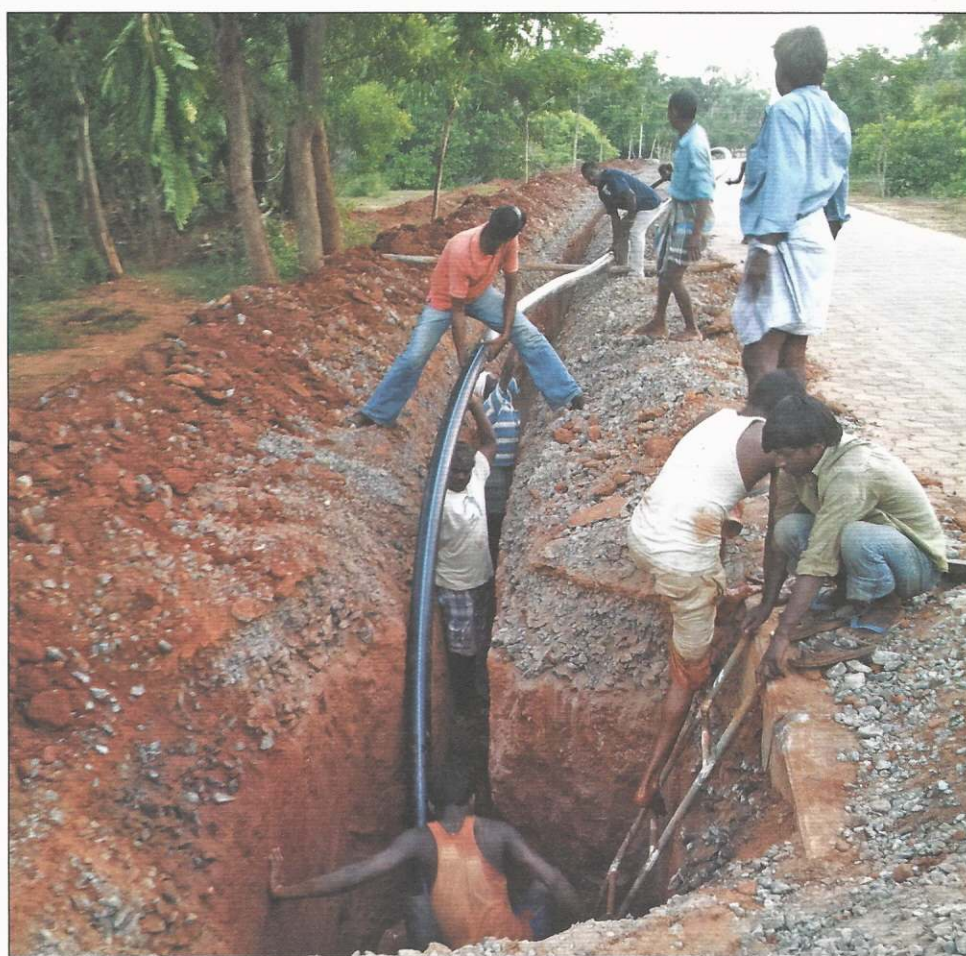
What are the alternatives?

At present, our possible sources are rainwater, groundwater, treated wastewater and desalinated seawater, but there is a question mark over the continued availability of groundwater. All of these sources can make a contribution – and I like it that we are simultaneously developing rainwater and wastewater and desalinated water as possible scenarios – but to have three or four or five different water supply systems for the numbers of people who are here is crazy. We have to have a main line, a principal source.

We are still discussing what this could be. While the matter is undoubtedly urgent, I regret that sometimes in Auroville we choose too quickly on the basis of our likes and dislikes. We judge too quickly, without looking at the total picture – the available resources, our present and future needs and how we can bring the two together, both technically and economically.

For example, each system requires a different set up and has its advantages and disadvantages. We have a lot of rainwater here, and I fully support those people who want to maximise our capacity to harvest it. But the disadvantage of rainwater is that you are never sure how much you will get, and most of it falls in a limited period, so you need a lot of storage. My focus is on desalination. I envisage desalinated water being pumped up from the beach, stored in a big tank somewhere in Auroville and being distributed from there. But desalination also has its advantages and disadvantages.

The advantage of desalination in terms of it depending upon an abundant resource is obvious. However, there are questions regarding the pollu-



Laying HDPE pipes along the Crown road

tion of the seawater and the high energy costs involved.

The desalination plant at Minjur north of Chennai has been operating for about two years and it seems to be operating well, but I don't know how they have dealt with the problem of dispersing the brine which is accumulated in the process. I've read the reports that gave permission to construct this plant and I was very surprised they said that the accumulation of brine would only have a marginal effect on the environment. The Ministry of Environment and Forest, which has to give permission for the setting up of desalination plants, is now scrutinizing the consequences for the environment of each proposed plant.

At the same time, over the past 20 years the amount of chemicals needed in the process, and which also accumulate in the brine, has been much reduced. The same is true of the power consumption. The old desalination plants used about 4 kW of electricity per thousand litres desalinated, and that has now gone down to about 2.2 kW. In fact, desalination is now roughly comparable to other water treatment systems in terms of power consumption and environmental impact. And if the electricity can be generated in an environmentally-friendly way, desalination becomes even more attractive. However, the cost per 1,000 litres is still high.

What part would the projected Matrimandir lake play in these different water scenarios?

Those who favour harvesting rainwater or treating wastewater see the projected lake around Matrimandir as one of the main storage areas. Personally, I don't believe that you need a lake to have a drinking water system, but as the lake will be there we should see how we can use it optimally.

Unfortunately, the whole Matrimandir lake discussion is very polarized at present. Questions abound. To fill the lake, should we use rainwater or desalinated water or a combination of both? Should the lake be part of the drinking water system or merely aesthetic? Should the level of the lake be allowed to rise and fall? Is there an occult dimension to water in proximity to the Matrimandir and, if so, how does that affect our planning? I think we should experiment with different scenarios, but before we do so we should sit together and decide how the whole system will connect together. This is the information, the thinking, which is not sufficiently there at present.

If the aquifers become saline it will affect the whole bioregion, which means hundreds of thousands of people. Will Auroville be able to provide itself with water without including these people?

If the groundwater in the bioregion turns saline it is the government which is responsible for providing the inhabitants with drinking water. But Auroville can help in developing solutions for a situation like this and, if we have sufficient resources, we can also share.

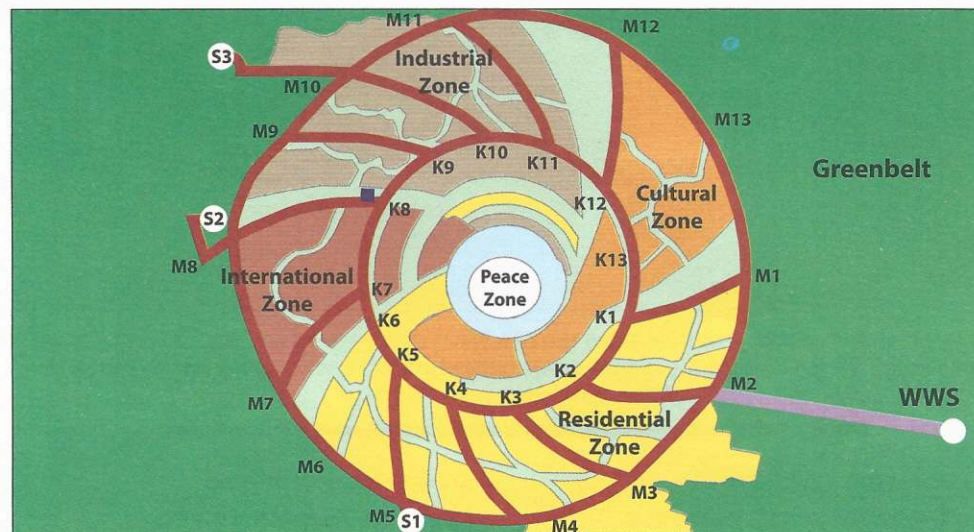
What about the demand side? Do you see the need to educate people to use water more wisely?

Absolutely, we have to change the way people use such a precious resource. Actually, from a water management point of view, the ideal is to deliver as little water as possible, not as much as possible. It's not well known that water organizations are one of the most environmentally-conscious organizations because they not only provide water but also have to see that that water is used in the right way. In Europe the average total water consumption is about 140 litres per person per day whereas in Auroville we are using 250 litres and, in some cases, 450 litres per person per day (although the system losses are high at present). This is not sustainable. I don't know the figures for the rest of India, but 50% of the people in Tamil Nadu are involved in farming and as they get free electricity to pump water their usage is probably high. The biggest lever of change would be if the electricity company would start charging the farmers for the electricity they use – but this is unlikely to happen as this would result in a massive loss of votes for the political party which imposes this measure. But there are many things we can do in Auroville to reduce the water that we use. We should choose the right technology – the most efficient pumps, washing-machines, shower heads, taps etc. Secondly, there is the educational aspect. We need to keep telling people not to water their gardens in the middle of the day and to immediately mend or replace leaking taps and valves. People should also plant species which are drought-resistant. Thirdly, we have to meter the water and charge people for the water that they use. When we started doing this in certain communities in the Residential Zone, we noted an immediate effect: the usage went down by 25%. In future, in an interconnected system in the city everything would be metered and the tariff would be the same for everyone.

Isn't the human element a much bigger challenge in Auroville than in Holland when it comes to developing new water systems and convincing people to use water intelligently? There, for example, you have the benefit of legislation and a social agreement that everybody cooperates in ensuring water security.

Yes. The country where I come from has a long history in terms of the development of its water supply. Every year there's a substantial investment in maintaining and developing the supply while, by law, everybody has a right of access to water and you're not allowed to pay more than a certain rate. Here in Auroville many people have paid for their entire water system – the pump, pipelines, and in some cases the windmill or a generator – out of their own pockets, and this sometimes leads to problems, like people prioritizing it for their own use or, in the past, even refusing to provide water to somebody they don't like. This is why there is an urgent need for depersonalization of assets like this. Otherwise we face difficulties which are hard to overcome.

From an interview by Alan



The planned underground water network (red lines), which follow planned roads. Desalinated water is planned to be fed into the system from an overhead tank located in the Greenbelt (violet line)

The future of the arts in Auroville

The Auroville Festival held in September in New Delhi had the first curated Auroville art show ever. For curators Sebastian Cortés and Marco Feira, the event highlights the importance of art in Auroville. They also have big plans for Auroville arts and artists.



From left: Krishna, Christoph, Marco and Sebastian

Sebastian Cortés is no stranger to the arts, having had a career in photography before joining Auroville. It was this background and his familiarity with modern art that made Aster Patel ask him to curate the art exhibition of the recent Auroville Festival in New Delhi. He, in turn, asked Marco, Krishna and Christoph to help select the pieces and organize the exhibition.

"I have years of contact with the Auroville artists and we have been involved in creating other exhibitions and festivals," explains Marco. "So when Sebastian told us that the theme of the exhibition would be 'Transformation,' I selected works which, for me, express that. Of course, not all artists agreed with the selection. A few artists had quite a different point of view and wanted us to include pieces that Sebastian and I felt did not fit. And on a few occasions we had to push an artist to do something more in line with the theme of the exhibition. But the artists accepted our final word in the matter. We exhibited pieces that are pushing the boundaries of possibilities: Adil Writer's works crossed the border between ceramics and painting; Henk van Putten's art showed the bending of something which apparently cannot be bent. Each piece represented transformation: of space, of matter, of solidity or liquidity."

"The idea of having a curator means that someone takes responsibility for the entire exhibition," explains Sebastian. "Though it is new for Auroville, the concept worked out very well and, I think, will now be followed in future Auroville art exhibitions, each with different curators and different themes." Marco agrees. "To make a minestrone of all Auroville art is not interesting. It is better to create an exhibition on the basis of a theme. The success of the Delhi event proves this."

The Delhi experience

"It was a great show and we all were very touched by the responses of the people," says Krishna. "New Delhi has a very refined public, knowledgeable on arts, and we received a lot of positive comments." "Many people were surprised," adds Christoph. "Some of them said they had never seen anything like this, and Delhi is highly competitive. Many people expressed a desire to come to Auroville and see how it is possible that such quality pieces come from one place."

"Overall, it was a success," Sebastian agrees, "even if we did not employ the public relations structures needed for the Delhi art world, as our budget did not allow for it. Next time it would be essential to invite critics, museum directors and gallery owners. Nevertheless, three well-known curators visited the exhibition and were enthusiastic. The internationally-known Indian art cura-

If we take these three elements as making the whole of Art, perfection of expressive form, discovery of beauty, revelation of the soul and essence of things and the powers of creative consciousness and Ananda of which they are the vehicles, then we shall get perhaps a solution which includes the two sides of the controversy and reconciles their difference. Art for Art's sake certainly; Art as a perfect form and discovery of Beauty; but also Art for the soul's sake, the spirit's sake and the expression of all that the soul, the spirit wants to seize through the medium of beauty. In that self-expression there are grades and hierarchies, widenings and steps that lead to the summits. And not only to enlarge Art towards the widest wideness but to ascend with it to the heights that climb towards the Highest is and must be part both of our aesthetic and our spiritual endeavour.

Sri Aurobindo

tor Rajeev Sethi selected art from two Auroville artists – the installation of ceramic objects by Priya Sundaravalli and a sound installation by Aurelio – to become permanent exhibits at Mumbai's upcoming international airport. Mr. O.P. Jain, the director of the Sanskriti Kendra Museum, invited artists from Auroville to participate in the museum's artist-in-residence programme; and the curator of the Visual Arts Gallery of the India Habitat Centre, Dr Alka Pande, asked Auroville to do an exhibition there. They wouldn't have done that if they hadn't appreciated and sensed 'something special' in the exhibition."

So what is this 'special something'? Sebastian grins. "That's a bit of an ego-inflating question. Let me just say that Auroville art probably reflects the special atmosphere of Auroville. In the visitors' book at the exhibition the words 'peace' and 'elegance' kept reappearing, and there were no negative observations. This does not mean that everybody liked the art. Perhaps those who didn't just walked out without leaving a comment. It would have been interesting getting professional critiques from art critics. But as they hadn't been invited we lost an opportunity for growth. For it is good for artists to have their work analysed and criticised; that raises the level of the art."

"Our International Advisory Council Dr. Vishaka Desai, who is now Senior Advisor for Global Policy and Programs of the Guggenheim Foundation, made an interesting observation: that all Auroville art on display was abstract. We did not consciously want it this way, but when Marco and I were selecting the art pieces we

noticed there was simply no figurative art available. In all utopian communities of the past, the figurative art was the most important. But in Auroville contemporary art, the human figure has basically disappeared. Dr. Desai said that Auroville artists have taken art away from the personalisation of the figure of the human, to an assessment of the material. I would like to add that much of Auroville art is also an expression of a spiritual aspiration, which is why it emanates quality and elegance. That is felt, and that's why many people enjoyed the exhibition."

The Auroville talks and art package

"If Delhi has taught us something, it is that the package of talks on Auroville and an exhibition of Auroville art works well," says Krishna. "If we are given the right space and ambience, and with sufficient time for preparation, we can do many such presentations all over India. It would be a great advantage for the artists: for in India, you are not taken seriously unless you have exhibited somewhere, articles have appeared about you, you've sold some of your pieces, and there is a gallery where your work is on permanent display or for sale – otherwise you are a nobody." Christoph mentions another aspect of such shows: they not only reach out, but also reach in. "By creating awareness about Auroville, artists will want to come to Auroville for doing artist-in-residence programmes. Auroville artists could invite them to be their guests. The synergy would be interesting for both."

Artists involved in building the city

For Marco, the Auroville artists have yet another task: to actively participate in the building of the city. "In Auroville we are constantly exposed to *koans*, impossible situations to realize. We are building a city from a plan which is not a plan but a piece of art. We are pushed to live without money even though money is central to our lives. We are constantly trying to find new ways of being which force us to transform, to change. Artists are doing that spontaneously, it is part of their nature. They have a natural

drive to exceed boundaries, to explore new spaces, new situations. That's why I believe that the building and planning of the city should not be left to our politicians or bureaucrats, but involve people who have an artistic spirit and creativity. For example, when Pierre Legrand was a member of L'Avenir, he brought a new point of view on the Galaxy into the planning process [see *AVToday* # 255, September 2010, eds.]. It proves my point."

Sebastian is not convinced. "It's very complicated to bring an artist into the planning process. Town planners consider themselves to be artists as well, and would only invite others if they consent to be integrated into their vision. They would designate an area and then give it to the artist to express his or her creativity. But the artist's way of thinking is different from the spatial thinking required for town planning. In my view, the artist comes in later, not in the first phase with the planning board."

The Auroville Museum of Modern Art

Inevitably, the experience of organizing the Delhi art exhibition raised the question, should Auroville have its own Museum of Modern Art? "I've been dreaming about that," says Sebastian, "about a space in Auroville designed by a world-renowned architect which would be a cathedral to artistic expression, a place of beauty inviting beauty, a platform for global contemporary art and culture. Not a museum in the traditional sense, though all important artistic achievements of our time should be presented there; but a place which also offers space for conferences, workshops, shows movies, has artists-in-residence programmes, publishes scholarly materials on the arts, and offers interactive educational programmes. It wouldn't be Auroville-centric, though Auroville artists would have a place. Guest curators from all parts of the globe should be invited to create world art exhibitions showing the works of the most unique artists. It should become a platform for something that is not happening anywhere else in the world, and finds its place at par with the big cultural institutions of the world."

It's an ambitious vision. But Marco agrees. "Most museums are mausoleums, hosting collections of dead art. But museums should be living and show the never-ending research in the arts. The hallmark of an Auroville museum should be hosting art that is speaking directly to the viewer, who should experience 'something' and ask questions that are so deep that answers have to be found. Here, of course, the spiritual ideals behind Auroville become very relevant."

Is an Auroville Museum of Modern Art feasible? "Definitely!" says Sebastian. "In the area of arts also Auroville has to become a shining light. The example has been given by Mother herself. The Auroville Festival in Delhi coincided with a photography exhibition 'Mastering the Lens before and after Cartier-Bresson in Pondicherry' at next door's Alliance Française. Apart from showing photographs from an unpublished album of Cartier-Bresson, which included photographs of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, the exhibition also carried artistic photos created by Ashramites Tara Jauhar and Venkatesh Shirodkar. I learned that Mother had started a salon of photography in the 1930s, even though at that time photographic materials were not available in India and everything had to be brought from France! Another example is the Golconde building, which was an incredible achievement for the time it was built and still is a 'must visit' for every architect and artist. Such a far-ahead vision holds true for Auroville. I am certain that this is the direction She wants Auroville to take."

In conversation with Carel

Art is nothing less in its fundamental truth than the aspect of beauty of the Divine manifestation. Perhaps, looking from this standpoint, there will be found very few true artists; but still there are some and these can very well be considered as Yogis. For like a Yogi an artist goes into deep contemplation to await and receive his inspiration. To create something truly beautiful, he has first to see it within, to realise it as a whole in his inner consciousness; only when so found, seen, held within, can he execute it outwardly; he creates according to this greater inner vision. This too is a kind of yogic discipline, for by it he enters into intimate communion with the inner worlds.

The Mother

Auroville and the world: a brief overview of educational exchanges

In the late 1970s, a Harvard Divinity School graduate student, Peter Calloway, had a vision of three points of light shining from the earth. At the time he knew nothing about Auroville, but he subsequently identified it as the source of the light coming from south India. The other two light sources were the communities of Findhorn, in Scotland, and Arcosanti in Arizona. Peter felt these represented crucial experiments for the future of the Earth and decided to provide funding for members of the three communities to learn from and support each other. Thus the Hexiad and Merriam Hill projects were born.

Hexiad and Merriam Hill

The Hexiad project provided funding for two members from each of the three communities to travel together to each of the communities, documenting what they felt was important. The project lasted six months and was considered a success by those who participated in it. The Merriam Hill project was designed to build upon this foundation by implementing a regular inter-community exchange programme. As a result, some Aurovilians visited Findhorn or Arcosanti. Selvam, who spent many months in Arcosanti, had a very positive experience. "They helped me appreciate the importance of communities in saving the Earth. Having this mutual interchange, learning, sharing ideas and skills helps us to achieve our goals faster and easier."

The interchanges also helped participants from other places see their own communities in a different light. David Tollas, who lived in both Arcosanti and Auroville, realized that "the spiritual dimensions of Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's writings are what provide me with the element which, for me, is missing in Arcosanti." Conversely, those Aurovilians who visited Findhorn enjoyed the community spirit and organization which they sometimes felt was lacking in Auroville.

However, these inter-community exchange programmes never really took off. This was partly because Auroville didn't have the resources or organization to host exchanges – the few members of Findhorn or Arcosanti who arrived here were left very much to their own devices, in contrast to the warm welcome and support Aurovilians received in those communities – and partly because Aurovilians never really saw Findhorn and Arcosanti as sister communities: Arcosanti has never really figured on our mental map while Findhorn was dismissed as being "New Age".

Teacher exchanges

Exchanges were revived in a more dynamic form in 1990 when the Antioch New England teacher exchange was begun by Heidi Watts. This successful initiative, which continues today with financial support from the Foundation for World Education, brings Auroville teachers to the US to study informally at Antioch University, New England (ANE) and to visit local schools. At the same time, it provides opportunities for ANE students to do internships in Auroville.

Yet another exchange programme was initiated by The Pestalozzi International Development Education Centre in the U.K. It supported the establishment of links between a primary school in the U.K. and the New Creation Bilingual School, with teacher exchanges taking place and joint projects undertaken.

Geo-Commons and Living Routes

Another of Merriam Hill's original goals was to send U.S. college students to Auroville for one semester to study aspects of community life and sustainable living.



Top: Planting a tree for unity during the International Youth and Human Unity conference in 1985. Right: Delegates to the international conference 'Youth for Human Unity' in 2005.

Initially this was taken up in the early 1990s by Bruce Kantner in a programme called Geo-Commons. This led to the Living Routes programme. Affiliated with the University of Massachusetts, Living Routes offers annually two semesters of community study in Auroville using Aurovilians as some of the teachers. The University of Washington has been offering similar programmes in Auroville since 2001. A group from this university also designed and constructed the International House in the International Zone.

The California Institute of Integral Studies

In addition to these regular programmes, there have been one-off programmes. One such was the visit in 1995 of postgraduate students from the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS). What made this group particularly interesting was not only that they had been studying in an institution which was conceived on the basis of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, but also that some of the students were African-American and very attuned to issues of racism and inequality. This made for some illuminating exchanges with Aurovilians at a specially arranged discussion.

Colette, one of the African-American students, said she had observed that people with dark skins were often in the roles of servants in Auroville, that the concerns of the local people were not well understood by non-Tamil Aurovilians, and that Tamil people did not appear to be much involved in decision-making. "And this reminded me of my experience of being an African-American woman in the US."

The response from Aurovilians was interesting. While there was acknowledgement of a certain lack of awareness of the needs of the local people, it was also pointed out that many local people had joined the community and some were in very influential positions. As to perceived

inequalities, one Aurovillian pointed out, "I think we are confusing racism with the effect of educational disparities and limited opportunities."

Participants originating from the local villages

In this context, it is interesting to note that many of the young Aurovilians who went to Arcosanti or Findhorn, or were hosted by the Sirius community in the U.S., came from the local villages and had never travelled outside India before. The experience not only widened their horizons, but they gained the confidence that they could make it in a very different culture, partly because they were so well appreciated by the people whom they came into contact with. Tixon was one of a group of local Aurovilians who went to study for an International Baccalaureate in England under the auspices of the Pestalozzi Children's Village Trust. "It was a fabulous experience, living in England opened up a whole new world."



Academically it was very tough for the first six months – we were not properly prepared for it – but most of us managed well in the end."

UNESCO-sponsored international conferences

The CIIS visit was an example of how a group of educated and committed people could help Aurovilians look at their own community in a new light. This has happened in other ways, too. For example, over the years Auroville has been the venue for a number of international conferences on themes related to Auroville's ideals. In 1985, for example, there was a UNESCO-sponsored conference which brought together youth from all over the world to discuss human unity. For many Aurovilians, the conference was an eye-opener. Not only did we learn that we had the inspiration and resources to surmount the huge logistical challenges of mounting such a conference, but we also got an insight into the politics of international meetings. For it was obvious that while some of the delegates had been selected at random by their governments, others were professional politicians who had been tasked by their governments to get certain resolutions passed. The resulting clashes and backroom dealing made our

Pour Tous meetings seem positively tame by comparison.

In 2005, a second UNESCO-sponsored conference, 'Youth for Human Unity' was held in Auroville to create dialogue between the major religious and cultural young people of the SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) region. The delegates came from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Bhutan, Nepal, in addition to Auroville, and spent five days discussing issues like spirituality and religion, education, culture and integral development. The local Aurovilians were brought in to give lectures, but the real value was the freshness and depth displayed by the young delegates. Sound bites from the students included, "Religion is like scaffolding. When the edifice of the spirit is complete, the scaffolding is no longer necessary"; "Schools are conveyor-belts, turning out packaged goods. Let's change the whole damn thing"; "Let's change the whole damn thing"; "Let's keep the dream we can transform the system."

At the conclusion of the conference, many delegates felt that they had been changed fundamentally. "If we can live together so happily for a few days, then why not forever?" asked Zahid from India's traditional *bête noire*.

Peace Trees

Creating intercultural harmony was also the

aim behind the Peace Tree programme which was initiated in Auroville in 1988. The idea for this came from Dana, a founder of the Earthstewards work, who conceived the project of promoting friendly relations between traditionally hostile people by getting them together to do something good and beneficial to all: planting trees. Auroville was the site of the very first Peace Tree, which brought together young people from the then Soviet Union, the U.S. and India to participate in ice-breaking games, challenges and environmental education. The event was a great success and spawned Peace Trees in conflict zones like Northern Ireland, Africa, Palestine and Vietnam, as well as in neglected

areas of the U.S. in which some young Aurovilians participated in the latter.

The situation today

Today, Auroville students are participating in international programmes in places like Mexico and Canada. Major conferences like the recent Rio+20 event at the same time, more and more researchers, volunteers and students are coming to Auroville. While we have learned enormously from their skills, energy and commitment, some of them have carried away a new perspective. For example, Jonas Leipold, a German volunteer with the Weltwärts Programme, reported that after visiting Auroville, "My thoughts are different now; I see the world in a different light. After only six months, Auroville and India have changed my life."

At the same time, sharp-eyed researchers are not easily fooled. They know that dreams and ideals have a shelf life if they are not expressed through reality. And this, perhaps, is their greatest gift: they keep us unsettled, they remind us of our limitations, they keep us striving to exceed our limitations.

Pathways to Living Routes

Daniel Greenberg, founder of Living Routes, writes about the programme and his connection to Auroville.

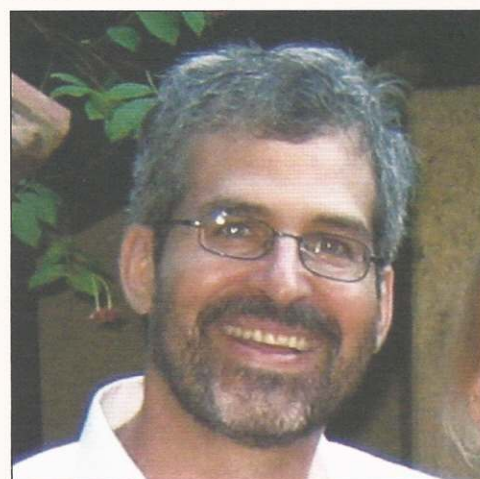
Has it really been 20 years? My relationship with Auroville began in 1992, during a wonderful year at Findhorn in Scotland with my wife, Monique Gauthier. Having researched education within intentional communities and visited over 30 in the U.S. and Canada, I was at Findhorn completing my Ph.D. in Child Development and dreaming of some day creating a school for children in a community setting.

How did I get from there to founding, directing, and recently leaving Living Routes, which partners with the University of Massachusetts to run college level programmes based in Auroville and other "ecovillages" around the world? The seed was planted the first day I set foot in an intentional community. I learned more in that one day than in the two years I had spent researching them. Rather than eccentric or strange, these communities seemed aligned with humanity's evolutionary history, 99.9% of which we spent in tribes. A long dormant need for community and belonging awakened in me. Suddenly, it was my own suburban childhood that seemed odd and out-of-place.

friend brought over a group of college students and I witnessed many of them "Pop!" – their lives transformed in a matter of days by Findhorn's visions and practices. Something clicked. I woke up one night with goosebumps thinking "This is why I am here!" I felt called to create more opportunities for young adults to experience a new way of being and belonging within communities striving to model positive visions for humanity and the planet.

This seed was further nourished a few months later when I met Dhanya, a long-term Aurovillian, who traveled to Findhorn to cross-pollinate ideas and learn more about Findhorn's "touchy-feely", new-agey ways. I was inspired by Dhanya's stories of Auroville and committed to visiting one day.

A year later, I called Bruce Kantner who had started the Gaia Education Institute and was bringing U.S. college students to Auroville through the University of New Hampshire. A mere six weeks later, I joined a group of nine students on their way to Findhorn, Plum Village (Thich Nhat Hahn's Buddhist community in SW France), and Auroville. My dream had come true! I remember walking out of the Chennai airport feeling I had come home.



From '95 through '98, I co-directed five semester programmes (three with Monique) and truly loved facilitating students' deep immersions and transformations within these communities. It was also crazy with lots of near-miss travel stories, jet lag, sickness, and exhaustion from this gurus' model of education where we lived and worked

with students 24/7. This was also in the days before ubiquitous email, so we would travel for four months and then come back to a stack of letters and applications and struggle to catch up before the next programme.

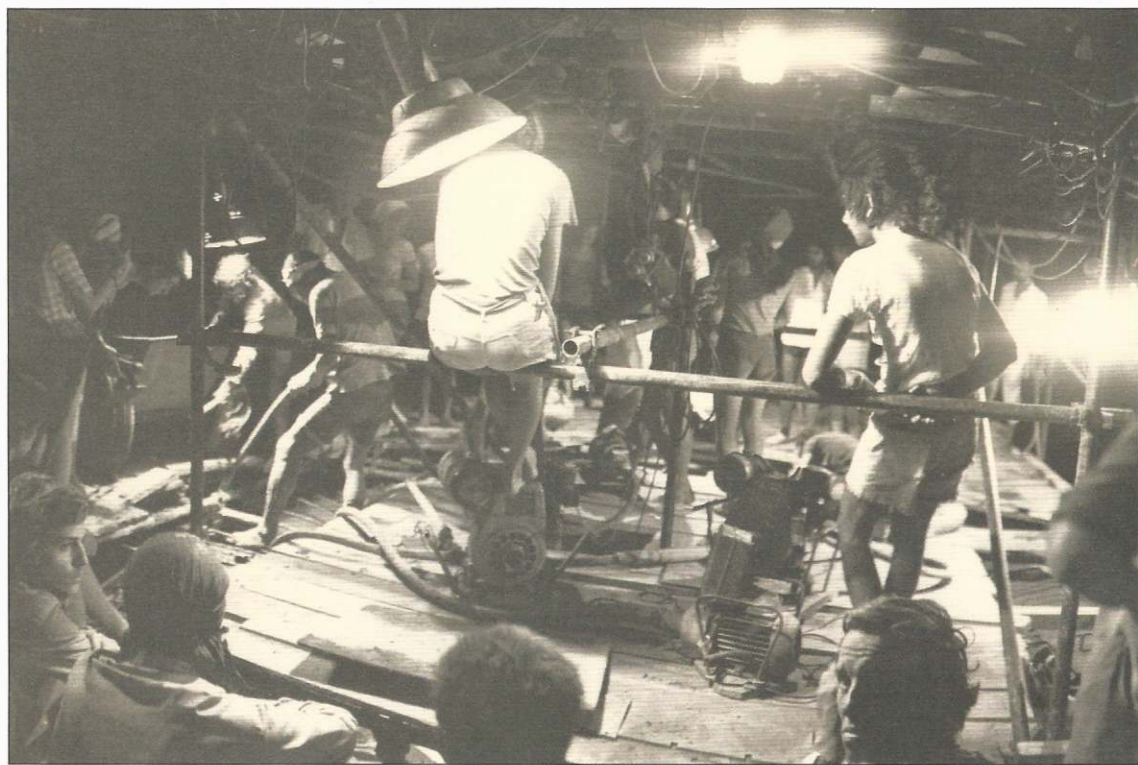
Eventually, Monique and I wanted to live more fully in community, and I was drawn to start something new, so in 1998, we moved to the Sirius Community, a Findhorn spin-off in western Massachusetts. Here, we took the leaps into parenthood and starting a new business.

Living Routes was incorporated just two days after our eldest daughter, Simone, was born in November of 1999. I felt like I had twins. Here were two beings, each deserving of more love and attention than I could possibly give. While both have had their crises and growing pains, it has been a privilege to watch them develop and I like to think they are both turning out fine. It was a special honour to connect them with each other in 2010 when Monique and I returned to Auroville to teach again while Simone and our younger daughter, Pema, attended Deepanam and Nandanam schools and soaked in Auroville and India.

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The Ashram students and Auroville

Mandakini, an ex-student from Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE), Pondicherry, has experienced at first hand certain 'divides' between Auroville and SAICE and its Physical Education Department (PED). But the time has come for healing.



Night concreting at the Matrimandir in the mid 1970s in which students of SAICE, with the full support of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, participated. Photo by Venkatesh, courtesy Auroville Archives.

Born in Auroville to Aurovilian parents, I lived in Promesse for the first two years of my life. My elder sister, though being an Aurovilian child, was accepted as a student of the SAICE, as was my elder brother. In my case, I was not an Aurovilian by the time I was accepted in the SAICE as my parents had meanwhile moved to Pondicherry. It was the early 1980s, a little after the Government of India promulgated the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act to end the problems between Auroville and Sri Aurobindo Society, and a deep divide had been established between the two communities. Anything to do with Auroville was a big question mark for the SAICE, and in particular, for its PED.

The SAICE students were asked not to visit Auroville. If they were found engaging with the youth or students of Auroville they would be removed from the school. It was explained that the youth and children in Auroville could be a bad influence and that this prohibition was laid down in order to protect them. The students were also asked not to go to restaurants in Pondicherry or watch movies in the cinemas.

As a student, I respected this. To make it easier for us, the SAICE provided us with various recreational activities such as Saturday movies on the big screen in the Play-Ground, picnics and get-togethers, night-outs by the lake and celebrations. The SAICE also agreed that we were allowed to visit Ashram restaurants and guided and provided us with alternative avenues for the restrictions they expected us to follow. I soon let go of my keenness to explore deeper into the causes of the divide.

Today, however, almost 3 decades later, after I found my way back to Auroville and became part of the experiment, I am brought once again face to face with that divide that prohibits me from entering PED premises like the Sports-Ground and the Play-Ground, just like all other SAICE ex-students living in Auroville, implying to me that Auroville is still seen, perhaps, as contagious.

But is this a 'real' difficulty, or are the habits of the past still being continued?

Aurosree, an ex-student of the SAICE who has been visiting Auroville for the past 14 years, remembers the restrictions placed upon the students regarding interacting with the Auroville youth. At the time, he thought they were 'purely political'. Now, he is not so sure. "From a certain point of view I resonated with the rules set for the students. There was a lack of discipline in most Auroville students and this may negatively influence the upbringing of the Ashram students if they were allowed to mingle with them."

Srimoyi, another ex-student living in Auroville for 27 years, agrees. "These restrictions were valid from the perspective of implementing protection measures. In Auroville, an abundance of unchecked and unmonitored freedom and license was and is available to the youth. Therefore stopping the Ashram children from engaging with the Auroville youth was understandably a protective measure, although one can argue about how it is being done."

However, Srimoyi notes that "While there were restrictions imposed on the SAICE students, some of us were never actually prohibited from visiting Auroville." In fact, she remembers in the mid and late 70's cycling to Auroville

very early on Sunday mornings for a picnic or to visit a community. "In those days, we visited Utility and Aspiration very frequently. There were group midnight cycle outings into the Utility canyons and Aurobeach where we lit a fire and had great fun. I also remember coming to do the all night concreting of the Matrimandir. It was another era, another age."

Aurosree also remembers that, "In spite of the rule I always visited Auroville and no one from the authorities objected. In fact, Pranab-da [*the head of the PED which enforced the restrictions, eds.*] allowed some of us to come to Auroville." At the same time, Aurosree acknowledges that there was a cost. "The general restriction against coming to Auroville curbed the Ashram students from getting exposed to the vast knowledge and culture of the outside world."

Shashwat, an ex-student of the SAICE who now teaches there, points out that, "The world around the Ashram and Pondicherry has changed dramatically in the past few years. There are far greater challenges facing our school and its children than those that arise from interactions with children from Auroville. Many more students today interact with children from other schools in Pondicherry, and there are new avenues of interactions emerging from social platforms like Facebook. To be honest, I doubt if restricting one form of interaction while turning a blind eye to the others is really a matter of policy. I think it is rather inertia, having certain rules in place that are outdated and should be modified as both communities move forward."

What should be done?

"What should be set aside," says Srimoyi, "are the prejudices and impressions, stemming from events in the past, that some authorities and Aurovilians still hold against each other. A new and fresher understanding can be established if more exchanges or mixing between the two communities could take place." Shashwat says, "I think some form of collaboration at the school level would be incredible. The New Creation Choir, for example, which came and performed for us here, was stunning. Getting teachers from both communities to attend or conduct workshops would be fantastic."

Even sharing the challenges both communities face in bringing up children would give all of us insights in how to be prepared for the onslaught of changes that are beginning to take place around us."

Actually, there are already many interchanges happening between adult Ashramites and Aurovilians. Shashwat notes, "There aren't any restrictions imposed on adults in the Ashram in interacting with Auroville and its members. I personally have worked very closely with Didier and Kumbha at SoundWizard, Ricardo from New Dawn Carpentry, Palani at Aureka and they have all been incredible people to work with. The studio we built in Delafon (the SAICE building for children between 6 - 9 years) would not have been possible without their expertise and help. Manoj-da, the Managing Trustee of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, has always been very supportive and encouraging of the collaboration with Auroville. Also, the solar power project in the SAICE is being taken up by people in

Auroville." And he notes, "I believe the SAICE has outgrown those issues towards Auroville and is far more compassionate today than before. There is a growing understanding between the two communities. Even Pranab-da, who had strong reasons for why he didn't want the Ashram students to mix with young Aurovilians, told us that the day those reasons were no longer valid, he would be the first to open his arms to Auroville."

Nancy, who lived and worked in Auroville in the early days and now teaches in the Ashram School reflects, "If one of the purposes of the division was to be able to keep them separate in order to help them develop in their own way, I think that time is coming to a close. Auroville has certainly developed its own identity and the Ashram children are now connected to so much of the world that at this point in time the division is purely out of habit. There are no strong feelings against each other. So it would now seem beneficial to come to know each other more. There are so many wonderful people doing such sincere work in both places. We in the Ashram could really learn and develop from the contact with Aurovilians who are sincerely seeking to do the Mother's work in ways which are sometimes different but often similar to our own in the Ashram." Aurosree agrees, "I believe the SAICE has outgrown those issues towards Auroville and is far more compassionate today than before. There is a growing understanding between the two communities." And Shashwat notes, "Both institutions were created by The Mother and, I am sure, both will some day grow to serve their true purpose in human history."

This note is echoed by a considerable number of individuals who are or have been part of Ashram or Auroville or both. They all have a common, innate aspiration that both entities reciprocate more, open up to interactions between their members and encourage increased collaboration between the SAICE and Auroville by allowing ex-SAICE students living in Auroville and the Aurovilians access to all the SAICE and PED premises, and so nurture the Oneness which underlies the apparent differences. For it is The Mother's Grace which is present and guides both institutions.

Mandakini

tion out of Living Routes. As Living Routes has matured, my "start-up" style of directing was becoming less a fit with the organization and I increasingly felt my vision and creative energies being drawn elsewhere. I am leaving Living Routes in good hands and fully expect to stay connected to Auroville. So as our students sometimes say, "It's all good".

Looking back, after 13 years and over 400 alumni from 28 programmes in Auroville, I continue to believe Auroville is one of the most unique and important experiments happening on the planet today. How could it not be with over 2,300 people from 45 nations trying to build a "City the Earth Needs"?

Living Routes students often come with specific interests (e.g. in agriculture, education, or alternative energy), but they leave with a sense that the whole is much more than the sum of its parts and that it is up to each of us to create the world we want and need.

Of course, Auroville is far from perfect. When interviewing students, I always try to help them understand Auroville's mission to build human unity and experiment with conscious evolution,

while also dissuading them of any utopian fantasies. Reality usually hits home after a week or so of navigating Auroville's dirt roads and bureaucracies. I've even played with the idea of starting the semester programme at the Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry and then moving to Sadhana Forest for a week or two before landing in Auroville proper in order to offer a compressed experience of Auroville's history from Ashram to land regeneration to today's expanding community.

Running an academic programme in Auroville also requires balancing deep immersion in the community with a high level of objectivity and critical reflection. Overall, I am proud of how deeply Living Routes' students have learned about and integrated into Auroville. Students have collectively offered thousands of hours of community service in dozens of units, including building water tanks at Solitude Farm, creating raw food recipes at Satchitananda, planting trees and bunding at Sadhana Forest, and teaching children in various schools, just to name a few.

While Living Routes has played with the idea of co-developing a "home base" within Auroville (most recently and seriously in 2008), it has also

been a privilege to participate in so many existing communities and facilities such as Verité, Aspiration, College Guest House, Youth Camp, and the International House. While moving around has been occasionally challenging, it has also allowed Living Routes to stay nimble as Auroville evolves.

Another long-term balancing act involves faculty. Living Routes faculty work extremely hard to create "learning communities" within the living community of Auroville. While the intention has always been to hire all faculty from within Auroville, this has not always been possible. It's not that Auroville doesn't have many capable educators; the problem is that these people tend to be overcommitted and unable to carve out five months of their lives to devote to holding a Living Routes semester programme.

One possible way forward is to adopt Living Routes' "Findhorn" model in which faculty focus on particular courses rather than holding students in their day-to-day experiences. This works at Findhorn because the community is geographically much smaller and has a very strong "hosting energy". Students arrive to Angel Cards and folded tow-

els on their beds and feel held simply by participating in community activities and rituals.

In contrast, Auroville is a bit more like the "Wild West" with visitors needing to find their own way without as much hand-holding. Living Routes has succeeded in Auroville at least partly because of the full-on facilitation offered by core faculty and it is not clear how well a looser structure would fare.

One positive development is the recent creation of a "Living Routes in Auroville" Unit, which has formalized this long-term relationship and allows further integration with Auroville's systems. Hopefully this Unit will allow Living Routes to hire all-Aurovilian faculty teams on most future programmes.

We are living in a time of transition, full of crisis and potential. Auroville offers a beacon of hope and an ideal "campus" for future leaders to learn how to live in harmony with each other and our planet. I am forever grateful for the opportunities to connect myself and others with the vision and members of Auroville and hope Living Routes will continue doing so for many years to come.

Daniel Greenberg

Farewell Matters

The Auroville Farewell Service, which takes care of the body of an Aurovillian after death, is facing challenges.

“We need a farewell room. That’s our biggest challenge. The Auroville Health Centre in Aspiration, which for many years had generously made one of their rooms available, needed it back for in-patient care. Today, Auroville no longer has a collective space where the body of an Aurovillian making the passage after death can be kept till the time of burial or cremation. We have made numerous appeals, we approached more than twelve public or semi-public places or communities, we received many sympathetic responses and enriching exchanges, but a solution has still not been found.”

Suzie sighs. As a member of Auroville’s Farewell Team, together with Pala, Kalsang, Manuela, Barbara, Ela, Jasmin, Lisa, Loganathan, and Michael, she deals with the departed. It is a highly responsible and difficult job, and not made any easier now that the community’s farewell room is no longer available.

Kalsang explains the reasons for this room. “In Auroville, the body of the departed is nearly always kept in a cool box for a number of days. This has practical reasons – often family members who live abroad want to attend the cremation or burial and need to fly in – but, more importantly, also spiritual reasons. On many occasions, The Mother has expressed that the body should be given rest, that all the parts of the being should be given time to depart and that there should be no hurry to dispose of the body. In our climate, the body can only be preserved in a cool box, a glass case where the temperature is kept low. The farewell room is the place where family and friends can say their farewells and sit in concentration around the body.”

“For the last four years we have been talking with a wide range of Aurovillians about building permanent Farewell facilities for Auroville for a population of up to 5,000 people,” says Suzie.

“It is planned nearby the upcoming Auroville Institute for Integral Health on the Crown Road. But due to lack of funds, the project hasn’t moved beyond the concept plans. This means that, as no space is available, there is no other option but to move the box to the house or the community of the person who has died, together with a generator as there is no continuous electricity supply. It isn’t an attractive solution. Not every house has a proper space for such a cool box and for receiving people who want to say their last goodbyes. But for the time being it will have to do.”

The work of the Farewell Service

“Though we are a spiritual community, I have noticed that there is still a lot of anxiety in facing the concept of dying,” says Manuela, a

Newcomer from The Netherlands, who recently joined the Farewell Team. “I am a mid-wife by profession and am used to bringing life into the world. Now I also deal with the departed and have come to realize that it is an amazing miracle that we enter a body and leave it again, with our essential being continuing to exist. That is the dimension which comes to you when you live in this place and have come to learn about death from Sri Aurobindo and The Mother’s writings. But the knowledge is perhaps not so widespread and I have noticed that especially those people who haven’t had the experience of being exposed to death tend to avoid the issue. The Auroville unit Prisma recently published the booklet *Death doesn’t exist*, a compilation of texts from The Mother on death. We recommend it to everybody. For The Mother’s writings are the bases for our way of operation.”

When somebody dies, members of the Farewell Team take care of the body and put the farewell room in order with flowers and cushions and chairs for seating.

Other members organize the cleaning and preparation of the burial and cremation grounds, digging the grave or calling the cremation team from Pondicherry, and for making flower decorations at the gravesite or around the crematorium. Everyone in Auroville, as well as friends and family members, are invited to participate.

“The atmosphere in the farewell room is one of silence,” says Suzie. “Sometimes, when it is explicitly asked for, there is some background music such as the organ music of The Mother. But generally, there is only silence. There are no rituals. People bring flowers and put them around, some incense is lit, and they sit down in concentration. Some people ask that there are night vigils when the body is in the farewell room. At the cremation or burial, there too there are no rituals. Sometimes someone speaks briefly. Almost always there is a deep and caring atmosphere.”

For Kalsang, who is of Tibetan origin and who has been educated in the rituals of *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Auroville’s ways were hard to get used to. “I have seen people touch the body which is unthinkable in Tibetan culture!” she exclaims. “And then there is the lack of rituals. But in Auroville, there is only

silence. And that silence, in fact, is very beautiful. For during someone’s lifetime so many things have happened, and in that silence people can say goodbye and even make amends for hurts caused or received, which can help the deceased pass on.”

Loganathan, who comes from a nearby village, also had to get used to it. “The Tamil tradition is very different. There, the women are supposed to wail and cry over the body and when it is brought to the cremation ground, young men light firecrackers and dance in front to scare off bad spirits, and the flowers that deck the body are taken off and thrown on the road. In Auroville it is the opposite. Flowers decorate the body before it is being cremated and, in the case of a burial, are put on the coffin before it is lowered into the grave. Afterwards, not only the grave but all the other graves around are decorated with flowers.”

The Ashram tradition

Silence follows the tradition of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram prevalent during The Mother’s lifetime. There are no rituals, some people come and put a flower on the bed of the deceased, some individuals concentrate next to the body, and a dish with flowers from The Mother’s room is brought to the body at the time of cremation. The body is then driven for the last darshan around the main Ashram building, before it is brought to the Ashram cremation ground. The body is generally cremated on the same day or the following day, depending on the time of departure. The body is only kept in a cool box at the request of family members outside who want to come to the cremation. But the room of the person is kept undisturbed, sometimes for many months.

Contrary to the Ashram, where all bodies are cremated, Aurovillians can make a choice. “We have published a document on Auroville’s internal website called ‘Serious Events in the Lives of Aurovillians’ which we ask each Aurovillian to fill in and send us,” says Manuela. “The first portion of the document deals with events such as what should be done in case of accident or serious illness. In another section the Aurovillian can state his or her wishes concerning the process and location of dying, as well as about how the body should be handled, e.g. whether it should be cremated or buried. But for many Aurovillians this is a topic they do not want to think about. Some people have given us verbal indications concerning what should be done. But it would be better if they would send us the filled in document, which can be modified at any time, which will be kept in strict confidentiality and only referred to when needed.”

The burial and cremation ground

Auroville’s burial and cremation ground was started in the year 1999 when four acres of land were set aside in the Adventure community. With funding provided by ‘Gateway’, a well was dug



The Auroville open-air crematorium

and a simple open-air crematorium constructed. The burial place came to be located nearby, and over the years, all cremations and most burials have taken place there.

“We need funds to improve the grounds,” says Loganathan. “Some work has already been done. With help from the Auroville Botanical Garden team numerous flowering shrubs and some shade trees have been planted. We also put some sitting stones around the crematorium, and a small gate and a stretch of fencing were installed. But we need more fencing to protect the grounds as there have been cases of vandalism in the past. We have never been given a budget to maintain this place but this can no longer continue.”

Towards a better understanding of Farewell Matters

The attitude towards those dealing with the departed differs in many countries. “In India, it is a low-caste activity looked down upon,” says Logonathan, “and it is not easy finding people who want to dig the grave. Even digging machine operators sometimes refuse the work.” Logonathan himself also had quite some problems. “In the beginning, I was often taunted by the Tamil community. Nowadays, I think they have understood that this work too is respectable.”

“But even the Auroville community shows little understanding,” says Kalsang. “It was a very painful experience for me to have to explain our need for at least one full-time maintenance as people did not consider it ‘a job’. At the end they understood that what matters is the responsibility we take, being available 24/7. Then they agreed.”

Says Manuela, “Communities, societies and civilizations have been defined by how they deal with death. Auroville is still in the process of understanding farewell matters.”

In conversation with Carel

For more information contact
farewellmatters@auroville.org.in

But people are so ignorant! They make such a fuss over death, as if it were the end - this word ‘death’ is so absurd! I see it as simply passing from one house into another or from one room to another; you take one simple step, you cross the threshold, and there you are on the other side - and then you come back. ...

It’s simply that - you take a step, and you enter another room. And when you live in your soul there is a continuity, because the soul remembers, it keeps the whole memory; it remembers all occurrences, even outer occurrences, all the outer movements it has been associated with. So it’s a continuous, uninterrupted movement, here and there, from one room to another, from one house to another, from one life to another.

*The Mother in Mother's Agenda,
24-06-1961*

Death doesn't exist

The Mother on death



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At a burial

A mushrooming business

Edible mushrooms are a delicacy for people in Europe and the USA. But even though about 2,000 species of fungi are eaten by tribes and various communities in India, the general population has only started to accept mushrooms as a popular food in the last decades.

“As recent as three decades ago, people in my village regarded mushrooms with suspicion,” says Anbu. “They were not considered as food. My interest in them started when I visited my friend’s mushroom farm in Marakkanam. He showed me that some types of edible mushrooms can be cultivated as a viable business.”

Anbu has been working at L’Avenir d’Auroville, Auroville’s town planning department, since he joined Auroville 21 years ago. Interested in growing mushrooms himself, he approached the Auroville Farm Group with a proposal to allow him to build a house at Windarra Farm to start cultivating mushrooms. They agreed, as did L’Avenir, and so Auroville’s first mushroom business was born.

Anbu recalls his nervousness when presenting his first batch of oyster mushrooms in 2004 to his advisor and mentor, Mr. Sundaramorthy, a proficient mushroom cultivator for 35 years. He had done everything to ensure the good health of his produce and had religiously followed the prescribed quality standards and checks. Sundaramorthy approved the first batch and it was time to test them. Anbu laughs as he recounts his story. “I spoke to my friend at La Terrace and asked him if he would use my mushrooms in his cafeteria. He gladly accepted the lot. I was working that morning at L’Avenir, but couldn’t really concentrate on my work as I was anxiously awaiting the



Top: Anbu inspecting a mushroom ‘bed’

Cultivating mushrooms: the process

Anbu uses rice paddy, procured from a neighbouring farmer, as the growth medium. He has asked the farmer not to use pesticides, but neem oil and dry leaves compost instead.

After sterilising the paddy, his helpers, two ladies from the village, prepare the mushroom beds. Cylindrical polythene bags are stuffed with three alternate layers of paddy and spores. Once the bags are packed and tied at the end, the ammas punch holes in them and then hang them neatly in the sheds.

The sheds are dark, thatch-roofed rooms with a sandy floor. Gunny bag sheets hang parallel along the walls. They are watered thrice a day, and so create the humid environment for the mushrooms to grow in. Three weeks later small buds sprout from the holes in the bags. Within the next two days these buds grow to full-size oyster mushrooms, ready to be plucked, packed and sent out.

Each bed gives an average of 750 grams of mushroom. After harvesting, the beds are used for compost for the rice farmer in exchange for his paddy. The polythene bags are discarded according to waste management regulations.

ARTS

Sculpture exhibition



The Citadines Art Gallery hosted an interesting exhibition of sculptures on the theme ‘balance’ by Auroson. Some of them displayed a fascinating combination of fluidity and fragility. He writes: “At all times in our lives we are balancing things – desires, aspirations, loves. There are moments when these acts take on a certain weight and gravity; everything can rest upon a single point; this point is both symbolic, but somehow also very real. In these latest works I explore this supposition by balancing one piece of discarded polished granite atop another, using their own weight and form to hold them in place... The figures that emerge out of these acts are things of aspiration and incredulity.”

The nutritional value of oyster mushrooms

Indigenous to Asia, oyster mushrooms have been cultivated in China for thousands of years as a ‘medicinal mushroom’ and for their refined flavour. In some parts of India too, oyster mushrooms are a traditional food item (called ‘dhingri’ in Madhya Pradesh).

Oyster mushrooms are the richest source of plant protein presently known. They have all the essential amino acids, most of the minerals required by the human body, and high levels of vitamins, notably C and B complex.

Oyster mushrooms do wonders for the health: they stimulate the immune system, control cholesterol and high blood pressure, help to prevent and cure heart disease, diabetes, digestive problems, and have anti-tumour, anti-inflammatory, antibiotic and anti-viral qualities.

Information provided by FoodLink

verdict. Four hours later the phone rang. My friend extolled the magical taste and smooth texture of my mushrooms. They were a success!”

Today, eight years later, with a capacity of 500 beds, Anbu has started to turn a hobby into a business. He supplies his mushrooms to FoodLink (Auroville’s central farm-food distribution hub), to Nilgiris and to some other department stores in Pondicherry. “There is a lot of demand for mushrooms, I need to expand my production!” he says. For that, an economic barrier has to be lifted: he has to start producing his own spores. “If instead of buying spores from outside I could grow my own, then this business will become really profitable.”

Anbu approached the Farm Group to provide funds so that he can set up his own spore-growing process and install sprinklers to maintain the high level of moisture required to produce mushrooms consistently throughout the year. They agreed, and Anbu is now setting-up this part of the business. And not for himself alone. “A government organisation in Pondicherry, Kamaraj Krishi Vigyan Kendra (KVK), has already shown interest in buying spores for distribution in south

India,” he says.

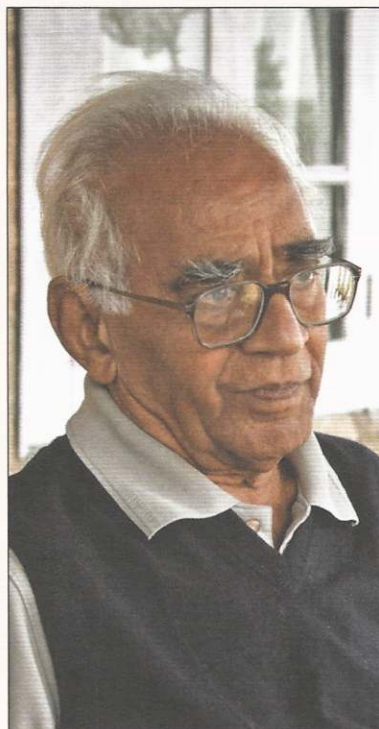
Along with cultivating mushrooms, Anbu is also spreading awareness about mushroom growing based on his own experience. Three years ago he conducted a workshop for Auroville Water Harvest. “Twenty rural women from neighbouring villages participated. They’ve meanwhile started their own mushroom business and today supply various shops in the villages.” He also gives presentations to students of Auroville’s primary and secondary schools. “Lucas coordinated a course in agriculture for students of Future School. The course involved lectures, a few practical exercises and exposure visits to several farms, including mine. Also students from Deepanam school visited. They were very interested, especially in my wife’s mushroom soup,” he says, laughing.

Like any business, a mushroom farm needs planning, personnel, resources, a mentor and a distribution chain. Anbu is very grateful that Auroville has all of this and he will continue spreading awareness, conducting workshops and expanding production of this mushrooming business.

Mandakini

PASSINGS

Jayant Patel



Jayant Patel, husband of Aster Patel, left his body on November 20th in the Ashram Nursing Home surrounded by his family and friends. He was 87 years old.

Jayant had joined Auroville in 1977 but then left. He rejoined in 1991, when he became the executive of Aurosarjan which was at the time operating in Pondicherry. In the years that followed, he built the Aurobhakti factory in Auroville’s Industrial Zone with the intention to move Aurosarjan to Auroville. However, Aurosarjan was closed in January 1998 before the move could take place and the Aurobhakti building was then subdivided to house many Auroville units.

During recent years, Jayant’s ailing health made him rest at his home in Auromodèle.

Jayant’s remains were cremated at the cremation grounds of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram on 21-12-2012. On Sunday 25, there was a brief concentration for him at his house in Auromodèle.

A. Elumalai

A. Elumalai from Kuilapalayam passed away on November 15 after 35 years of working for Auroville as an accountant. His dedicated work for Auroville was well known and appreciated. Elumalai started working for Auroville in the early days of Pour Tous, together with Clare and Surabhi. He also worked for Auroville Fund, SAIER, Matrimandir, and, until his retirement last year, for ABC and Artisana Trust. He was 57 years old and is survived by his mother, his wife Anjalai, and three sons and a daughter. His body was cremated that same day at Kuilapalayam.



"We need to get the young involved in planning the city"

Urban Networks, the professional consultancy which is developing a plan for the outlying lands of Auroville Isee AVToday October 2012, is led by Bankim.

Bankim first learned about Auroville in 1999 when he was studying for his bachelor's degree in architecture. "I chose as the topic for my dissertation 'sacred city forms.' It dealt with a series of cities in which some spiritual thought had gone into the design of the city. I learned about Auroville through a book called *The City Shaped* by Spiro Kostof that used Auroville and its Galaxy Plan as a case study. I was totally taken by that. The next year my college sponsored a trip to Madurai for a study tour, but we also came to Pondicherry and very briefly to Auroville. While I was at the Visitors' Center, I thought, 'I have to come back here.'"

He came again the next semester. He also had to do a thesis, and decided to do it on the Auroville's Unity Pavilion. Afterwards he came back again for his internship and worked on the layout of the International Zone and on some studies on the city centre with Roger Anger. "That was between 1999 and 2001. Then Asia Urbs happened. Auroville had two projects which were funded as part of this programme, one being 'City Networking for Sustainable Development and Human Unity.' I was appointed the local coordinator for that by Auroville's Future, the project holder." The project was trying to match Asian cities with European cities and build partnerships to work together on urban management solutions. Bankim worked with various groups and got to know a lot about Auroville. "I came to know that Auroville has a lot of architects, but no urban planners who were thinking on a larger scale about how the city would finally materialize, and how all the components would come together. I decided I needed to get myself trained in the subject and then come back after gaining some experience."

Bankim then went for a Master's degree in urban planning in the USA. After graduating from the University of Michigan in 2005, he started working in a small firm for urban planning and landscape architecture in Florida. "But I kept coming back to Auroville. In 2010, I decided to move to Pondicherry, where I continued to work 'remotely' for my employer in the U.S. But after eight months, I got an opportunity to serve as the coordinator for the Puducherry-Viluppuram-Auroville-Cuddalore Sustainable Regional Planning Framework project with INTACH Pondicherry and PondyCAN – two of the most active NGOs in our region. Simultaneously, I started working with Ulli,

Toine, Luigi, Pashi and Chandresh as part of the Land Resource Development (LRD) Task Force, developing a strategic plan for all the lands that Auroville owns outside the Master Plan area. In the first phase, we did an inventory of what we actually owned, and a preliminary strategic planning analysis. [See Sept. and Oct. issues of AV Today]. Now we are starting on the second phase in which we will establish priorities for determining which of the outlying lands are suitable for development, which should be conserved or maintained, and which should be sold or leased, together with a phased plan of action of how to do it. Over the next four months we are going to be doing a lot of interviewing of people in Auroville to see what they think we should do with these land assets, because we feel it has to come as a community decision."

He stresses that Auroville cannot be seen in isolation, but only as part of the larger picture. "Although Auroville may not be growing much, India is growing rapidly all around us. We did a market study as part of the first phase. The population of Villupuram has grown by 17 percent in the last decade, Pondicherry by 30 percent. Pondicherry is going to get a commercial airport soon, perhaps in the next year. If we do not preempt these radical changes, we'll end up with many hazardous developments coming up around us. What we want is to come up with a holistic approach to our development, for the city and surrounding area. We would like to create balanced growth alternatives for the typical unsustainable, profit-driven 'American suburbia' type of development that we are witnessing in the entire country today."

Simultaneously, Bankim is working with the new Town Development Council (TDC) in seeing how a detailed development plan for implementation of the 2025 Master Plan can be created. "One of the weak points in that plan is the implementation chapter. How do we actually implement the vision, what are the details, where does the funding come from, how does it all interact? Over the next six months the TDC wants to come up with an implementation strategy. We are building upon the impressive body of work collected as part of the Integrated Sustainable Platform (ISP) initiative conducted a few years ago."

"We are doing a so-called gaps and consistency analysis. We want to see where the gaps are in the vision. One of the fundamental questions everyone is facing right now is whether to



Bankim addressing a workshop on sustainable planning for the Puducherry-Viluppuram-Auroville-Cuddalore region.

follow the Galaxy Plan or not. But the central issue is not the shape of the city, but how everything gets connected and implemented. So in the next 6 to 8 months, my focus is to get people on the same page, or at least at the same table, looking at the different options that are available."

Does this mean that the TDC will be closely interacting with various Auroville groups? "I am aware of the difficulties Auroville has in making decisions. That disappoints me sometimes, because here we should have a unique opportunity not to become bureaucratic. In terms of planning, I see an 'analysis paralysis', where we don't have enough action but continue with over-analyzing the fundamentals and theories. What Auroville has achieved in the last 40 years is amazing, if you put it in the Indian perspective. But there is also a lot of stagnation. For example, today I am working on some of the same plans that I was working on ten years ago before I went to the US."

Another project of Urban Networks is developing a Master Plan for a new city – Naya Raipur – that is being constructed as the capital city for Chattisgarh. "Interestingly, a lot of

things that they want to do there, Auroville has already gone through and tested. At the same time, we can learn from their approach. For example, the special development authority established to implement the Master Plan developed a set of policies for how to interact with the villages. They are not resettling the villages, they are working with them and creating land uses around them so it is not going to infringe on their way of life and vice versa. Another lesson from that work is planning for infrastructure. They are starting with the notion of having a public transportation system in place before the people come in, so everything is getting planned around that."

Coming back to Auroville, Bankim expresses his main concern. "Auroville is not sufficiently utilizing its own resources. We need to get the young involved in planning the city. Whatever we're going to build is going to happen in the next 20-30 years, so we're actually building it for them more than for anyone else. I want to develop a team of young people who are excited about building the city and get them involved in its planning."

In conversation with Larry

REFLECTIONS

Which Auroville story?

Our view of how well Auroville is doing tends to be based upon the version of the Auroville story we tell ourselves, or are told. Of course, there are many Auroville stories, and we may buy into more than one: we don't have to choose. Nevertheless, people tend to have a dominant story which determines the lens through which they view the community. One of the most popular stories goes something like this.

The first years of Auroville were spent in survival mode. Many Aurovilians had to learn how to exist on an eroded plateau, in an alien climate and in the midst of an alien culture. They were pushed to the edge of extinction by ambitious individuals who lived outside Auroville who wanted to take over the experiment, only for the Aurovilians to be rescued by the generosity of the Indian Government. The benign hand of the Government ushered in a period of relative stability during which the population increased, many commercial units were founded and Auroville began to be recognized as a centre of environmental and entrepreneurial excellence. However, the last decade or so has seen the stagnation of the economy, the mushrooming of bureaucracy and the collapse of community participation in decision-making, while the

average age of the Aurovilians has increased as the community is no longer affordable for the young.

This parabola of initial idealism, followed by stabilization, followed by disenchantment, is a familiar one in communities worldwide. This is what makes it such a compelling 'explanation'. However, it may not be our only story or, indeed, the most important one.

Here is another. The Mother founded Auroville as, among other things, a place where the spiritual evolution of humanity would be accelerated. To do this she needed a certain slice of humanity – not necessarily the 'best' or the most enlightened or even the most agreeable people, but those who are representatives of particular difficulties to be overcome and who are able to bear a certain evolutionary force, even if only infinitesimally and in spite of themselves. The Mother, or the Divine Force or whatever we want to call It, is very selective. She selects those individuals who can best accelerate the spiritual progress of each other and of the whole, often through their unconscious ability to expose other's weaknesses or to unerringly push each other's buttons. And She needs the diversity – a diversity of natures, understandings, capacities – not only to keep up the creative 'friction', but also to ensure that any individual and col-

lective progress can only happen if the very different elements yoked together here, like fractious bullocks yoked to the same bullock cart, are genuinely resolved into something more harmonious and complete.

In this version of the story, absolutely everything we need to make individual and collective progress is provided for us here. So, how are we doing? Are we progressing? Are we helping each other take off our heavy backpacks so that we can stand unencumbered in the light? It's not obvious. In fact, it's tempting to take over the disenchantment chapter of the previous story because everywhere we look we seem to see conflict rather than resolution, recession rather than evolution. But this may be a superficial prognosis. For if the first step in transformation is to understand clearly what we are now, what better place to be than Auroville where, daily, we meet somebody who teaches us how very stupid/unaware/opinionated/limited we are?

Then again, in this particular story what constitutes progress? On an individual level, is it indicated by one's popularity, or by one's membership of 'important' groups, or by the amount of money one generates or the number of hours one spends in Matrimandir? Perhaps. But it might also be indicated by something much less visible, something,

for example, that involves overcoming a habitual movement or thought, like beginning to understand and feel compassion for someone you believed for many years had done you wrong. And if Auroville is really about consciousness evolution, and if, as Mother pointed out, one effect of the descent of the Supramental world is that "things that were insignificant are becoming categorical", one such self-exceeding may be far more important and far-reaching than all the more obvious material achievements. For if we are truly meshed together in this particular experiment, then one such victory, however infinitesimal and localised it may seem, will have repercussions, however subtle, on the whole.

Is this happening? I've no idea. Some days I sense a change either in myself or another (and I've never known a place where people can reinvent themselves so rapidly) or in the general atmosphere; on other days I think we are reverting to the Stone Age. But if we choose consciousness evolution as our dominant story, at the very least it gives us another lens, another way of perceiving what is going on here. And, hopefully, it makes us pause when we are tempted to make too easy judgements about the 'failure' of The Dream.

Alan

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