

# Auroville Today

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## Auroville in Delhi

As a prelude to next year's Golden Jubilee, a series of events took place in the nation's capital in November to create awareness of what Auroville is, has achieved and aims to become. "We have stories to tell," was the motto of the events. But the main maxim was "Auroville becoming," an indication that if there is some looking back, there is more interest in looking forward.

The opening event was the Auroville Expo at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, a sprawling campus in the heart of New Delhi. For three days starting November 22nd, posters and audiovisuals displayed thematic areas of Auroville: the City, the International Zone, Sustainability & Green practices, Outreach & Education, and Auroville's Organisation. Aurovilians interacted with the public, some Auroville products were on display, and visitors could join an 'Awareness Through the Body' workshop and play the WasteLess 'Pick it Up' game. 'Coffee Ideas', 'Sciro Pizza' and 'Bread & Chocolate' provided drinks and snacks.

Recalling the difficulties of the early days, "the motley crowd coming to Auroville at the end of the 1960s – a bit of a shock for the Ashramites, the fights with the Sri Aurobindo Society, the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act followed by the Supreme Court judgment that the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Auroville are not a religion," he spoke of the marvel that the Indian Government had tabled the Auroville Foundation Bill in Parliament.

"You will remember the memorable words spoken by lawyer Chittaranjan Das in the Alipore Bomb Case in defense of Sri Aurobindo: 'Long after the controversy will be hushed in silence ... his words will be echoed and re-echoed, not only in India but across distant seas and lands ...'. A similar impact, said Frederick, had been created by the words spoken by Dr. Karan Singh defending the Bill: 'This Bill could conceivably be the most important single Bill ever passed by this House, because it deals not simply with material manifestation, not even with the collective human manifestation, but it deals with something which is still beyond the ken of human consciousness. It deals with an idea which is an arrow into the future.'

"Auroville now has a Foundation, a legally identifiable basis. But another danger looms: we are becoming an institution, we are becoming systemized. Where is the fire of the pioneers? 'I invite you to the adventure, come what may,' She said. That's the real challenge: going from within to the without. The Matrimandir is ready, a place for going within and finding that source that carries

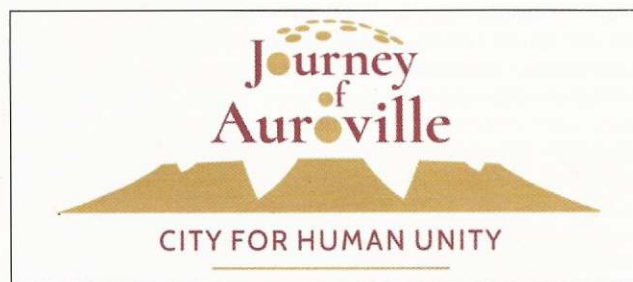
us all. And from there, we'll have to look up and forward to become a partner to India and the world, and share the results of the many experiments and research conducted at Auroville."

Sir Mark Tully, the former Chairman of the International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation, said Auroville expressed two hopes about how Auroville will develop in the next 50 years: that the city of Auroville will grow without losing its principles by sticking to the original plan and that its influence on the rest of the world will grow by it becoming a shining light on how people can live together in harmony. "The Auroville concept has never been more important than today in a world

where materialism and consumerism is doing enormous damage to society," he said.

The panel discussion that followed was led by Dr. Ronald Meinardus, Regional Director of the German Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom. Panelists were Aurovilians Anu Majumdar and Dr. Jürgen Axer, Governing Board member Prof. Sachidananda Mohanty, and Professor Makarand Paranjape of the Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. The panelists gave their views on where Auroville stands today on the eve of its 50th anniversary; on urbanism and to what extent Auroville can be called 'a smart city'; the challenges in fulfilling Mother's Dream; and how they see Auroville in 50 years.

Anu took the lead. "After 50 years I sense a great opening forward. What we have travelled so far is not even half the journey. At its birth, Auroville was given a Charter, which was put in a stainless steel container in the urn in the amphitheatre, and the map of the city plan which was placed under the Banyan tree. These are the symbols of the spiritual and material experiment Auroville is intending to be. I believe that a lot of answers will be given when we really start building the city. Auroville was initiated as a planned city, which should now be approached in a more conscious way. If we are able to do that, it will have the power of material and spiritual development."



Answering the question if Auroville is a smart city, she replied that Auroville's emphasis is on humanity and human unity. "Our smartness is different. We do not shy away from technological inventions, but ours lies in being able to address the material from a spiritual perspective. Its smartness will be its ability to work from ever higher levels of consciousness."

For Jürgen, the focus is on education. "Is Auroville able to create an educational environment which generates an aspiration for something which is going to come? On the surface, you do not see any particular difference with schools outside. But there is one. Not the curricula or the subject, but the attitude and aspiration of the teachers and students."

Professor Paranjape recalled his first visit to the Ashram and Auroville in the 1990s. "When I entered the Ashram dining room, I felt a welcoming force of the Mother, a force of love. That carried me through. It was about my own journey, a journey towards transformation. Then I went to Auroville and queued up to visit the Matrimandir, which at the time was far from ready. It was a very restless place. Twenty years later I was there again and then felt that these people, the Aurovilians I had met, are not normal, there is something different about them. I wondered what it was and found the answer in Anu's recent book. Auroville is a community without an ego. The Mother intended Auroville to be the hub for a supramentalisation. Auroville is a place for collective yoga, and the prime condition is that you have to shed your ego. For me, Auroville is a great experiment not only in managing matter and material resources in a manner that is less predatory, but really an experiment in consciousness."

Dr. Sachidananda said that he had been seeking answers experimentally and existentially to some of the questions that have bothered the 20th century man. "One answer I found in Sri Aurobindo's book *War and Self-Determination*, in the chapter *Self-Determination*, which gives an answer to the questions Auroville has been facing. From a conventional point of view, Auroville appears to be insignificant. But its dimension of collective living with people from more than 56 nationalities who have invested their own personal money and energies in this project is one of its unique selling points. In Auroville, people are living together and experimenting with a model that doesn't exist anywhere else."

Dr. Karan Singh brought in the time factor. "During these 50 years, the Aurovilians have not been able to come to consensus on the design of the town plan with pro and anti Galaxy proponents. My prayer is that they get their act together." Frederick replied that he has lived through many polarities, but wouldn't be able to say if Auroville has been delayed or fast-forwarded because of them. "We all know that what we are doing is not for ourselves. We are, as Dr. Kireet Joshi said, coolies of the Divine. We have to reach a third space where both viewpoints are complimentary and not confrontational."

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Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, in discussion with Inge and Frederick at the Auroville Exhibition at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

Later that afternoon a panel discussion on the theme 'Auroville: City for Human Unity' was introduced by Dr. Karan Singh, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation. "Many people in India and New Delhi hold Sri Aurobindo in high regard but do not know much about Auroville," he said, while stating that "no other country could possibly have hosted Auroville and passed the Auroville Foundation Act." Highlighting some of Auroville's achievements, such as building the Matrimandir and converting a barren arid desert into a lush green area, he stressed that "the whole point of Auroville is that it is an adventure of consciousness, bringing about a rise in collective consciousness."

The second speaker was Frederick, who told the story of how he came as a young boy out of a troubled Germany to India. "I came and met the Mother and her touch changed me. Something which had always weighed on me was suddenly removed when she took me and led me within." He joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, then heard that She wanted to start a city ... and it dawned on me that She wants us to be construction workers, to prepare the ground for a space in which something new and fresh can grow. She told me on my 21st birthday that there was no living matter in the land, go and plant some trees. We went out and planted 21 transformation trees. We were following a high command, without an idea what we were meant to do. Behind was Sri Aurobindo, our captain and path finder; in front was The Mother, who was the absolute for me. Then the first settlers arrived, and there was this inauguration, like a scene from a Spielberg movie: cars, buses, cycles were coming from all sides, and then suddenly a silence fell. And into that silence a voice spoke, the voice of The Mother, broadcast from her room in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, inviting all men of goodwill who aspire for a higher life to join Auroville. And then She read Auroville's Charter."



The exhibition booths at night at the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts

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# Auroville in Delhi

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The Galaxy is the underlying tectonic plate of Auroville, but it cannot be pushed as a fixed and unalterable plan. It is the diversity which gives the impetus to move into the future." It was a view shared by Governing Board member Dr. Anirban Ganguly, who argued that "50 years is nothing. We have cities in India that are eternal. Auroville has just started. 'What next' can be safely left to The Mother. Auroville is a spiritual smart city, it is through the churning that it is advancing to a new prototype." Prof. Mohanty concurred: "The Mother, when speaking about education in the Ashram, said She was looking for living souls, then only will we be successful. For Auroville, it is the same."

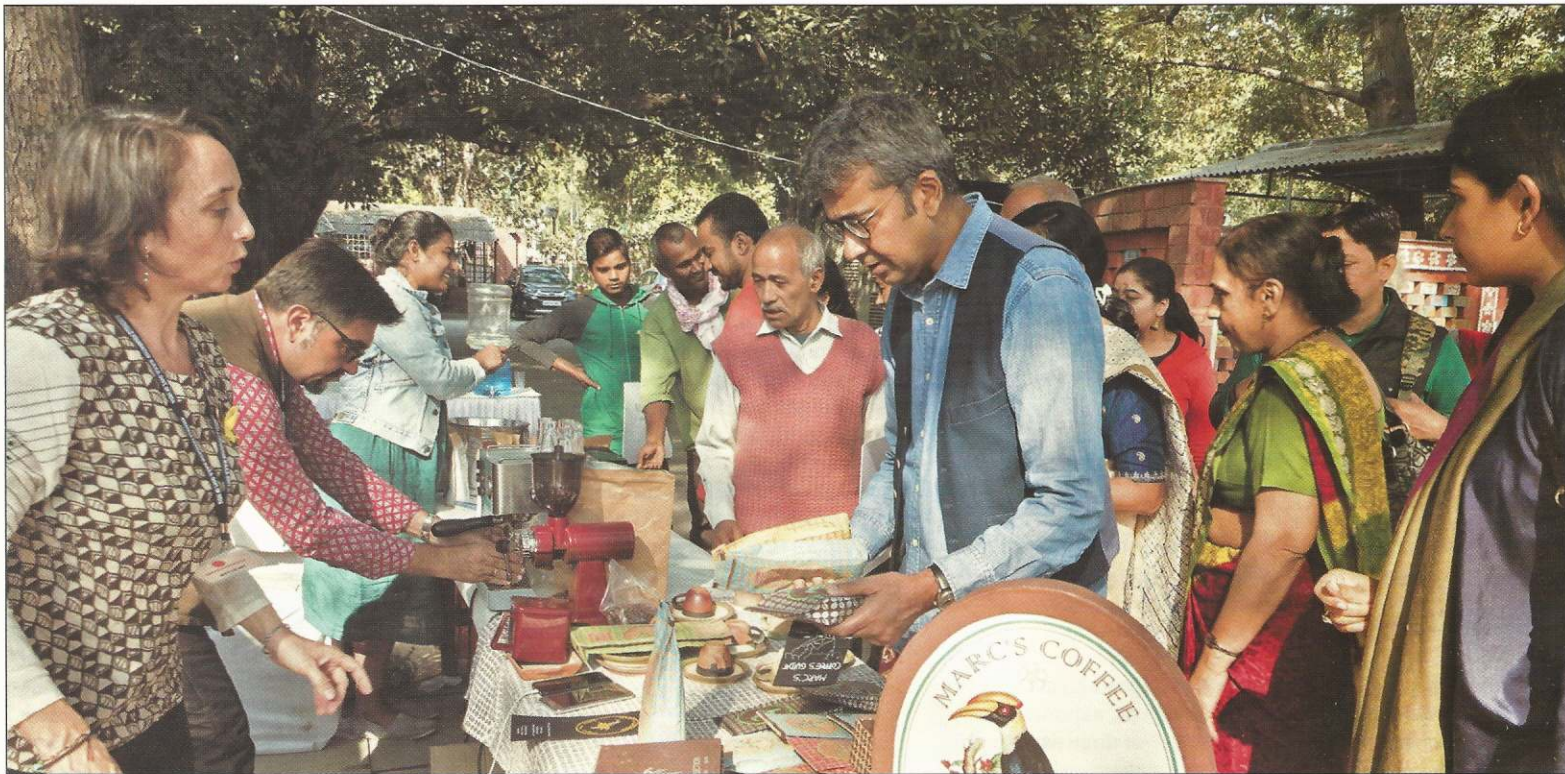
## UNESCO

The second event took place on November 24th at the new UNESCO building in Chanakypuri, New Delhi's diplomatic enclave. Here too, a panel discussion took place, this time on the theme of "Learning to Live Together: Translating UNESCO's Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4.7 into practice". This Goal states, 'By 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development, including, among others, through education for sustainable development and sustainable lifestyles, human rights, gender equality, promotion of a culture of peace and non-violence, global citizenship and appreciation of cultural diversity and of culture's contribution to sustainable development.'

Mr. Aoyagi Shigeru, Director and UNESCO representative, gave the welcoming address. He mentioned that over the years the General Conference of UNESCO had passed 4 resolutions on Auroville (in 1966, 1968, 1972 and 1983) and said that the fifth resolution had just been passed a few weeks ago. "Auroville and UNESCO are born for each other and have to continue to support each other."

Dr. Karan Singh, who is India's representative on UNESCO's Executive Board, clarified that the fifth resolution on Auroville had been adopted with full consensus. The official text is still awaited, but is likely to be identical to the draft resolution which he had sent to Auroville earlier. [see News in Brief, *Auroville Today* # 340 of November 2017].

Picking up on the theme of the panel discussion, Dr. Singh expressed his regrets that the work of Auroville in education has not yet found its way into the mainstream of education in India. "All the great Indian thinkers have their own systems; Sri Aurobindo and The Mother developed 'integral education'; Rabindranath Tagore was able to express his educational philosophy in educational experiments at Santiniketan; Mahatma Gandhi's educational philosophy is followed in some schools in India; Jiddu Krishnamurti's at his Rishi Valley School. But those philosophies have remained peripheral to the Indian educational system. As the Government of India is working on a new educational policy, I hope that Auroville can present its experience and ideas to the relevant government committee."



Coffee Ideas and Mason & Co offering tasty coffee and chocolate for the event

The panel discussion that followed was facilitated by former Governing Board member Ms. Ameeta Mehra. The panelists were Dr. Anantha Kumar Duraiaappa, Director of the Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development (MGIEP); Ms. Smita Vats, Convenor of ITIHAAS, an NGO active in the area of inclusive heritage education in New Delhi; and Aurovilians Frederick and Inge.

"How do you see the future of education, how do you see it evolving in the coming years, keeping in mind the idea of education to bring about harmony, sustainability peace, collective and individual, and a growth of consciousness?" asked Ameeta to the panelists.

Inge replied, speaking of her own experience of growing up in Auroville. "It is important to acknowledge that there are two sides to every human being, and by providing an environment of light rather than of shadow and the right tools we can move in the right direction. The main challenge of the future is to provide an environment to the children conducive to find their own inner beings." Frederick concurred. "Auroville is about directional living which has as core value a learning to become. The Mother's 'Are invited to Auroville all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life' is the educational directive of Auroville. And these are not just words. What Auroville is trying to live is not uniformity, not even unity: it is a fierce burning oneness."

The experience of Smita Vats and Dr. Duraiaappa is very different. "I work with 500 children every day and I see a lot of division, anger, and moving away from secular ethics," said Smita. "What goes on in them is so different from what we are thinking – in fact it is very worrisome. We have found that connecting minds and hearts is much more important than subject leaning. We try to move children towards dignity, respect for natural resources, respect and understanding for each other, and acceptance of gender equality. We try to teach them compassion and dignity. But in Delhi, these are depleting values." She stressed that the financing of education is a problem. "We need the best minds in education and we need to

pay them well. Jobs in education should be the first choice of one's career, not the last as it is at present".

Dr. Duraiaappa expressed his personal frustrations with the system. "There is such a dichotomy between UNESCO's SDG and the ground reality. In India, we have a school system that pushes competition at the expense of the other – I always say we have one of the best predatory training systems in the world, right from the start. The people we are taught to admire are the ones who make the most money: we do not celebrate our scientists, our intellectual giants. Our priorities are all wrong. The aim of India's education is twisted. Right now, education is seen as a means to create a rational producing economic agent, and hopefully a good human being as well. We need to flip it: the goal is human and societal flourishing, with the economic agent as a side product. The idea is not just to build intellectual intelligence, but also finding a balance between intellectual and emotional intelligence and mainstreaming this within schools."

Can that be done? "At the MGIEP we have understood the need to educate empathy, mindfulness, compassion and critical inquiry. We have the experience that children who have been given those courses have a higher productivity in maths and sciences and are very well-balanced, and that their bullying and stress levels have gone down. But we estimate that this may take three generations or 75-100 years if we start now seriously. And that's the problem with UNESCO's SDG. It doesn't ask the question what type of education should be given. But education should be 'learners-central'. Every child learns differently, and we can provide boutique education because we have the technology to do so. It just needs leadership to do it."

In the discussion with the audience that followed the question of 'identity' came up. "An identity is a necessity in a social system," said Smita. "But identities create similarities as well as differences. We need to teach children to focus on similarities, not on differences." How can that be done? Dr. Karan Singh provided the answer: "All of us have multiple identities. The idea that one has only one identity is no longer valid. If you have an inner spiritual centre, you can have many identities around it and flourish. But if you do not have one, you become conflictual and eccentric." The crux then is to promote the individual's inner development.

## Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch

The third event took place at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi Branch, where the exhibition materials were presented for over a week, however without interactions with the students and their parents. "This should have been better planned, so that a few of us could have stayed back and been present," admits Inge. "The students at The Mother's International School [a public secondary school which is run by the Sri Aurobindo Education Society, an agency of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, eds] would definitely have enjoyed the interaction with Aurovilians. When we were setting-up the exhibition materials, we were already surrounded by students who carefully read all the panels and asked questions. This interaction we need to do in future, as these students are fully aware of the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and may be very interested to join Auroville in future. It was a missed chance."

## Evaluation

Was it worth it? The question troubled the organizers and the Aurovilians who had come to Delhi to man the stalls and interact with the public, as the overall attendance of not more than 500 people had been limited. "Delhi is a very competitive space," explained Dr. Karan Singh. "There is an overload of events, there are huge traffic congestions, and if you are not absolutely interested, you won't go. A limited attendance is common to many events. But what matters is not how many people attended, but how many people have learned about it." With more than 10 reports in national newspapers and with offers from various places in India to host the Auroville Expo, the aim to create awareness on Auroville seems to have been achieved.

Carel



All those present in Delhi. From left, standing: Ameeta Mehra, Jürgen, Priya, Hillary, Janmajay, Dr. Karan Singh, Amisha, Jean, Anu, Ranjith and Balu. Seated, from left: Clapton, Frederick, Carel, Mathilde, Inge, Serena, Kalsang, Kalvi, Tahir, Mark, Mohan Chunkath, Srinivasmurthy



# Is assessment contrary to Integral Education?

*"In this place, children would be able to grow and develop integrally without losing contact with their souls; education would be given not for passing examinations or obtaining certificates and posts but to enrich existing faculties and bring forth new ones."*

These words of The Mother, from *A Dream*, often form the basis of an argument against examinations and certificates. Does this affect the status of New Era Senior Secondary School (NESS), affiliated with India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), as an Auroville school?

Started in 1992 as After School, NESS now serves 123 students in grades 9 to 12. Of these students, 28 are Auroville children. The school offers two academic streams – science and humanities – for grades 11 and 12. Apart from academics, NESS students participate in the daily Dehashakti sports programme as well as other organised sports, such as volleyball and football. Art and music are offered as co-curricular activities. Students participate in programmes on reproductive health, in debates on educational reform and in field trips on ecology and culture. All in all, NESS provides a fairly well-rounded education for its students.

The question of whether this education is "integral" or not is based on two assumptions. One assumption is that a CBSE school must, by definition, be a cram school. The other is that assessments are inconsistent with the idea of Integral Education.

Any school that is affiliated to an examination board will be tempted to "teach to the test" in order to improve its exam results. But there are many affiliated schools, in India and elsewhere, that take a much more progressive approach to education. Perhaps Auroville's Future School, where students take the Edexcel International GCSE (grade 10) and International Advanced Level (grade 12) exams, is an example of such a school (Edexcel is a brand owned by Pearson, the world's largest education company).

While there may be shortcomings in the way the CBSE curriculum is implemented in many schools, the programme itself is based on an educational philosophy and approach that is holistic and child-centred. The key document that describes this framework is the National Curriculum Framework (NCF) of 2005. Considered to be one of the most progressive educational policy documents anywhere in the world, it addresses the "deep disquiet about several aspects of our educational practice: (a) the school system is characterised by an inflexibility that makes it resistant to change; (b) learning has

Rod Hemsell, who was instrumental in getting the CBSE affiliation for NESS, wrote a very interesting essay in 2011 titled, *The National Curriculum Framework 2005 (NCF) and Integral Education*. In this essay, Rod makes the compelling point that the educational approach described in the NCF can be linked directly with the writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on education. For example, he compares the constructivist approach to education described in the NCF with Sri Aurobindo's writings as follows:

"In the body of NCF, after an elaborate description of the problems of a memory and examination-based system of education, the constructivist approach is stated explicitly: 'Child-centred pedagogy means giving primacy to children's experiences, their voices, and their active participation (p. 13). ... Learners actively construct their own knowledge by connecting new ideas to existing ideas on the basis of materials/activities presented to them through experience (p. 17). ... Active engagement involves enquiry, exploration, questioning, debates, application and reflection, leading to theory building and the creation of ideas' (p. 18).

In Sri Aurobindo's writings, the first principles of a child-centred pedagogy were stated succinctly, very early in the process of educational development which, we may perhaps say, is now in its completion phase, and these are the most oft-quoted of his statements on the subject: 'The first principle of true teaching is that nothing can be taught. The teacher is not an instructor or task-master, he is a helper and a guide. ... The second principle is that the mind has to be consulted in its own growth. The idea of hammering the child into the shape desired by the parent or the teacher is a barbarous and ignorant superstition. It is he himself who must be induced to expand in accordance with his own nature. ... The third principle of education is to work from the near to the far, from that which is to that which shall be. The basis of a man's nature is almost always (in addition his soul's past), his heredity, his surroundings, his nationality, his country, the soil from which he draws sustenance, the air which he breathes, the sights, sounds, habits to which he is accustomed ... and from that then we must begin. ... The past is our foundation, the

knowledge areas discussed above can be totally integrated and presented to children in the form of learning experiences of the environment. This should include an enriching interaction with the natural and social environment, working with one's hands, and understanding of social interactions, and developing one's aesthetic abilities. These early integrated experiences of the natural and social environment would later become demarcated into science and the social sciences in the middle school years.

The upper primary or middle school period maybe the place for the emergence of better defined subject areas, taking into consideration the above-

able to find good positions and earn a lot of money. For them study has no other purpose, no other interest. To learn for the sake of knowledge, to study in order to know the secrets of Nature and life, to educate oneself in order to grow in consciousness, to discipline oneself in order to become master of oneself, to overcome one's weaknesses, incapacities and ignorance, to prepare oneself to advance in life towards a goal that is nobler and vaster, more generous and more true... they hardly give it a thought and consider it all very utopian. The only thing that matters is to be practical, to prepare themselves and learn how to earn money. Children who are infected with this



A teacher development workshop in progress

mentioned forms of knowledge. At this stage it should be possible to create spaces across subjects in which children engage in the process of data collection, natural, social, mathematical or linguistic, to classify and categorise, and also analyse the same through certain knowledge areas such as ethical understanding and critical thinking. The creation of a space for explorations into social issues and knowledge without boundaries could at this stage go a long way in encouraging rational thinking.

By the time children reach the secondary stage of education, they have acquired a sufficient knowledge base, experience, language abilities and maturity to engage with different forms of knowledge in the full sense: concepts, structure of body of knowledge, investigation methods and validation procedures. Therefore, the subjects could be more closely linked with the basic forms as listed above and the disciplines as they are recognised in higher education today."

With its lofty vision and detailed guidelines, the 159-page National Curriculum Framework has become required reading for anyone interested in educational reform and practice in India. The NCF also addresses the question of assessments, which leads us to the second assumption that gives rise to the question of whether a school such as NESS can provide Integral Education – this is the assumption that assessments are inconsistent with the idea of Integral Education.

In 1946, The Mother, replying to a question about regrouping classes based on student ability, said, "I consider an examination as quite necessary. In any case there will be one in French." Later in

1965, she said, "It is not by conventional examinations that students can be selected for a class. It is only by developing in oneself the true psychological sense. Select children who want to learn, not those who want to push themselves forward." Clearly, The Mother was asking us to use evolved assessments, not conventional examinations.

Her most direct statement regarding examinations comes in 1960: "And the thing that becomes most important for them [students] is to prepare themselves to pass examinations with success, for with diplomas, certificates and titles they will be

disease are out of place at the Centre of Education of the Ashram. And it is to make this quite clear to them that we do not prepare them for any official examination or competition and do not give them any diplomas or titles which they can use in the outside world."

The Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, commonly known as the Ashram school, follows the above guideline. However, "when a student successfully completes the Higher Course, a Certificate to this effect is given to him, if he requests it." This is a pragmatic approach in the short term, keeping in mind that most institutes of higher education require a certificate of school completion.

How does CBSE address the question of assessments? Of course, there is an end-of-school board examination. But there is great emphasis on Continuous and Comprehensive Evaluation (CCE). The CCE Manual for Teachers says, "If properly understood, evaluation or assessment will not be perceived as something administered by the teachers and taken by the learners on the conclusion of a period of learning. When evaluation is seen as an end of the learning exercise, both the teachers and the learners will tend to keep it outside the teaching-learning process, rendering assessment broadly irrelevant and alien to the curriculum. Further, such a perception associates anxiety and stress with evaluation for learners. On the contrary, if evaluation is seen as an integral part built into the teaching-learning process, it will become continuous like both teaching and learning. When evaluation is subsumed into teaching-learning, learners will not perceive tests and examination with fear. It will rather lead to diagnosis, remedial action and enhancement of learning." The Manual goes on to say, "The major emphasis of CCE is on the continuous growth of students ensuring their intellectual, emotional, physical, cultural and social development and therefore it will not be merely limited to assessment of a learner's scholastic attainments."

Reading the NCF and the CCE Manual, it becomes quite clear that NESS, if it is able to implement the guidelines from these documents, can be a school that provides valuable education. And its affiliation with the CBSE might actually provide a scaffolding for the school to become a centre of true Integral Education.

What challenges will NESS face in its attempt to become a centre of educational excellence? Perhaps teacher quality and funding will be the most pressing challenges. But if these are solved, it is not impossible to imagine that the combination of Integral Education, the Auroville context and the CBSE structure might even help NESS influence change in the larger educational context of India.

Manas



Conducting a programme on reproductive health

become an isolated activity, which does not encourage children to link knowledge with their lives in any organic or vital way; (c) schools promote a regime of thought that discourages creative thinking and insights; (d) what is presented and transmitted in the name of learning in schools bypasses vital dimensions of the human capacity to create new knowledge; (e) the 'future' of the child has taken centre stage to the near exclusion of the child's 'present', which is detrimental to the well-being of the child as well as to the society and the nation."

present our material, the future our aim and summit."

Apart from describing the educational philosophy and its epistemological foundations, the NCF provides comprehensive guidelines on stages of learning and subject-based pedagogy. For example, here is how it describes the stages of learning:

"At the early stage of learning, from pre-school to the primary school years, an important place must be given to language and mathematics in all activities across the curriculum. The division into subjects is not very significant, and the



Roger Harris was a founding member of *Auroville Today* and for many years attended its weekly meetings. It was an interesting experience for all of us. Seemingly unaware of the importance of deadlines or the correct use of the comma or the dash, he nevertheless garnished our prosaic meetings with wit, peppering conversations with irreverent asides and arcane references from his wide reading.

In truth, *Auroville Today* was something of a straightjacket for a free spirit like Roger. For while Roger was perfectly capable of writing a good overview of Auroville's afforestation programme, his real interests lay elsewhere.

One of the things that fascinates him is the presence of other realities that can, at times, break through and transfigure the world as we know it. Hence, his interest in Ireland's legendary past, in the Greek myths and, more contemporaneously, in crop circles and Rupert Sheldrake's theory of morphic resonance. Above all, it seems to be what drew him to India – "an underlying rhythm of which one can only catch a fragment, a fragrance" – and, of course, to Sri Aurobindo and to Mother with their stupendous vision of a transformed humanity.

In fact, the necessity of and urge towards transformation is one of the leitmotifs of his writings, often couched in terms of alchemical transformation, the conversion of base metals into gold. "Can a key still be found to release man from both his devils and his gods?" he asks.

It is in this sense that he is drawn to the 'dark angels' – Villon, Genet, Satprem and, closer to home, Kenneth Fator – who, out of their darkness, sing of the light. It also explains his interest in the 'marginals', the outcasts and travellers upon dusty roads, for they may be vouchsafed visions unknown to those who choose to tread the regular pathways.

The best writers give voice to a new way of seeing, of feeling. Roger is in no doubt that Auroville is a 'singularity', an attempt at human transformation that that never existed before, and he attempts to forge a language that could convey the cosmic context in both its struggle and its splendour.

Yet another note that sounds through some of his poetry is that of a melancholic lyricism. It is a reminder that Roger is not simply an observer. He has battled loss, darkness and alienation which, characteristically, he attempts to transmute into something of beauty: "I'm dancing with my pain," he writes.

Some years ago, Roger suffered a serious accident that almost cost him his life. Since then, he has written little. But in one piece, written after his accident, he refers movingly to his own 'mutation'.

Since 29 February 2012, the "Golden Day" anniversary marking the supramental manifestation on the physical plane on the planet Earth and many universes, my mutation has become miraculous, beautiful, and strange. Before, I used to suffer from depression, but now I wake up every morning just happy to be alive and I thank sweet Mother for that.

This compilation, put together by his friends, is a reminder of the unique voice of a "vagrant heart", a latter day troubadour, wanderer of the roads of life, always seeking that final, fierce transmutation.

The compilation was released on 20th November in the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. Here are some extracts.

Alan

*Mutation Alchemy and Grace* by Roger Harris. Published by Auroville Press Publishers, 2017. Available from the White Seagull Bookshop and auroville.com. Rs 450

## Mutation Alchemy and Grace

Twenty years ago, on 28 February 1968, these bare, concise, and yet such far-reaching words, which constitute the Charter of Auroville, were read out by The Mother in Pondicherry and broadcast live to several thousand persons gathered in an amphitheater on a barren, almost treeless plateau in South India. They were gathered for the foundation ceremony of Auroville. Nearby a lone banyan tree stood in an expanse of dust and sunbaked earth, like some ancient Vedic symbol, its roots reaching from its branches down to earth. As the soil from 123 nations was placed, by students from those countries and states, in a raised two-meter marble urn, a dream – like an answer to the call of countless ages – was born on Indian soil.

Twenty-one years later, hundreds of people, many of them children and teenagers, born in intervening years, sat, gathered in silence, and watched the flames of a large bonfire leap, dance, and throw themselves like a challenge against the last vestiges of a night sky that slowly faded into the grey half-light of dawn. As the first orange glow of sun appeared through the low clouds on the horizon, it illuminated the dominating skyward-arching curves of a massive grey structure, the Matrimandir, soul of the city to be, which seemed to break out of barren red earth like a pod to God in stone. After twenty years of struggle, of controversy and hope, a unique adventure, an experiment born of an extraordinary woman's dream and her luminous vision of the future, calls our beleaguered species, our threatened ravaged earth, not merely to survive, but to come of age.

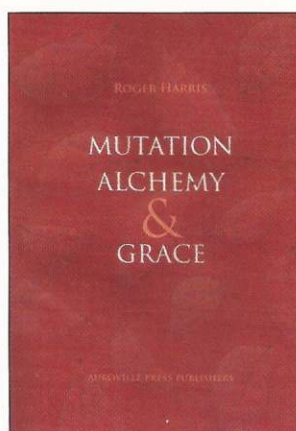
(from *Auroville: A Township Takes Shape. Late 1980s*)

On 13 September, two days after the day [9-11 eds.], it felt that time, like those clocks that stopped forever, had come to an end, and I flew from Paris to Shannon. Charles de Gaulle airport had a surreal pre-apocalyptic feel to it. Plain-clothes security outnumbered stranded or flying passengers, and the computer screens and arrival departure panels listing all the flights to or from the U.S. as cancelled made the ramifications of the unimaginable act of horror that had just occurred even more immediate. That evening in a crowded pub in a small village in County Clare I observed a white-haired man trying to explain to a young girl the meaning of the terrible footage being rerun on every news channel. His task could not have been an easy one. The next day was a day of mourning throughout Ireland and all shops and businesses closed down. I spent three minutes of silence at 11 A.M. gazing from across the street at the Irish flag at half-mast in the middle of a small park that contained a memorial to the local Republican dead from 1916 on. The feelings of a shared sense of shock, grief, and sympathy for those affected by the attacks in New York and elsewhere cut across all boundaries and perhaps even united the island for a brief while in a common surge of humanity.

For what had occurred was quite simply an attack against humanity, and it is perhaps in the response that it generated in a majority of people of all colors, creeds, classes and persuasions, that those intent on spreading fear faced their most massive defeat. People lost their sense of complacency as freedoms and even just simple pleasures, long merely taken for granted in Western societies, had suddenly not only to be valued, but cherished and upheld. Back in Paris in the Marais district suddenly everyone, from the clochard to the young skateboarder, from the post office worker to the bourgeois, had a role to play and played it by simply being themselves. There was tension in the air, but also an unaccustomed sense of fraternity that for a moment cut across all social swathes, and proved stronger than fear...

Sri Aurobindo foresaw what he called a religion of humanity – a term first used by the nineteenth-century political philosopher Auguste Comte – as being a common binding force that might unite the human peoples at the onset of a spiritual age. Perhaps the challenge that faces all of us now is to free ourselves from old mindsets, whether personal, political or religious, valid in their time, or at a moment of our lives, but now a hindrance through their very rigidity to the forces of acceleration and change at work throughout the world today, whether on a personal or a global scale.

(from 'Common Dignity': Ireland after 9-11 *Auroville Today*, February 2002)



Dropping in on Kenneth, which I did every six weeks or so down the twenty years I knew him, would most often lead to an invitation to step inside, and a two to three-hour session in his small, cluttered kitchen. Once we'd settled in and become relaxed with each other's company – "How are you doing, don't give me the macho bullshit, the last few weeks it's just getting worse and worse" – our conversation, fueled with brandy and cold coffee from his

rusting fridge, would ricochet. Once he described a play he had started writing, called "Roll On, Shelley." Its characters included Rooftop Julie (a woman leaving on the bus for Iowa), a man with balloons, a prisoner and a guard coming out of a man-hole who end up exchanging roles, a couple of wino derelicts and two lovers carrying a park bench around. I'd say this was fairly typical of his surreal and often ribald sense of humor. Our conversation would then range from Tennessee Williams and Marlon Brando's performance in a "Streetcar Named Desire" and "On the Waterfront", to the Sumerians, Niburu (the rumored twelfth planet of our solar system) and extra-terrestrials. It would be punctuated with relevant asides such as how Al Capone was a great fan of Louis Armstrong and used to go to his gigs in speakeasies in Chicago. Frequently he would reminisce about growing up in New York, his travels through the South and a youth spent in and out of jail. "I was in solitary confinement when the supramental came down," he liked to point out.

(From *Heading South like Ambrose Bierce: Remembering Kenneth Auroville Today*, Oct. 2002)

"I can feel ancient presences greeting us," my friend tells me as we join the path just outside the village of Ogbourne St. George in Wiltshire, England, which leads to Avebury.

The wind ripples through the grass and the green stalks of wheat of the Marlborough Downs, as dappled cows and sheep graze by prehistoric burial mounds. The silence is pervasive, almost mystical. We pass the ancient Roman fort of Barbury Castle and join the Ridgeway, the oldest walking path and pilgrim route in Europe. Clumps of trees frequently situated above prehistoric burial mounds line the ridge at regular intervals. Sarsen stones dot a nearby field, and suddenly two deer leap out from a grove and bound off down the hillside. One feels part of an ancient ceremonial landscape that is both feminine and healing, and the descent into Avebury is always impressive, even initiatory.

Part of the village of Avebury is surrounded by a large embankment and ditch that used to enclose what was perhaps the largest ceremonial bronze-age temple site in Europe. Some two hundred standing sarsen stones, alternately diamond and oblong in shape, quarried from the nearby downs and weighing up to thirty tons, were arranged within the embankment in a large outer circle. This in turn enclosed two inner circles, one dedicated to the sun and the other to the moon. Two serpentine megalithic avenues, one of which still partially exists, once led to the stone circles of Avebury. A cow path leads from the stones of Avebury to nearby Silbury Hill, an earth and grass covered six-tiered pyramid that is estimated to have taken some eighteen million man-hours to make and whose original use remains a mystery.

Beacon fires on hills were used to once guide pilgrim traders and tribes along the paths that led from Glastonbury to Avebury, beacon points that were sacred to the Celtic variant of the Roman God Mercury, messenger of the Gods and guide to the souls of the dead. His symbol, the caduceus, a rod with two serpents entwined, can be seen as representing the kundalini energies as well as the spiraling helix pattern of earth energies whose grid of pathways the ancients marked out with barrows, mounds, megaliths and stone circles.

Scientists and researchers who have studied standing stone formations have found that ultrasonic pulsations, spiral energy patterns and electromagnetic sound waves become measurably activated around the sites of standing stones, particularly during equinoxes. Dowsers have also recorded spiral patterns of energy connected with the lunar cycles coming from standing stones and, according to modern geomancers, two different lines of earth energies – one masculine and the other feminine, known respectively as the St. Michael and St. Mary lines, which traverse England – cross each other at a point between the inner and outer ring of one of the stone circles of Avebury. It might be no coincidence that

the area of Avebury, one of the most sacred sites in prehistoric Europe is, in an era of awakening earth energies, becoming activated again....

Could the phenomenon be an inter-dimensional one? Forces of a subtler realm using the grid of earth energies both to send us messages and to stabilize our wounded earth? Perhaps the formations can be considered messages of sorts, communiqués from a yet-unknown source, perhaps nature herself, in a language of symbols and archetypes that are preparing us for an era of impending changes. A transition or passage from one way of being in the world and seeing it, to a new one.

(From *Symbols in the Fields or Holding the Earth in Place Auroville Today*, June 1996)

It was my turn next (to meet the Dalai Lama). I was ushered out to a patio in front of a large garden by Tenzin, who was to act as interpreter, and then into a large room where, before I knew it, I was approaching a short and sturdy man in red and yellow robes, who was standing waiting for me in the middle of the room and looking at me inquisitively. I presented him my scarf draped over my two hands and then greeted him with a namaste – the traditional Indian greeting. He responded immediately by shaking my hand heartily, and then showed me to where we were to conduct our interview. I sat down on the couch next to him in the armchair, briefly noticing the thangkas and the image of Avalokiteshvara above a cabinet on the far wall, and after a few introductory comments, began the interview.

"I met the Lady once," he says as I take the tape recorder out of my bag and place it on the coffee table. My first question sounds awfully solemn, but within a few minutes the ice melts and a sense of warmth and even friendliness sets in. I ask him questions about the political situation in Tibet today, but we end up talking about the Buddha and how people will have to want to change – it won't be done for them – and about the need, he feels, of a balance between people's inner and outer lives, "fifty-fifty," he says.

He speaks broken English, frequently punctuated (particularly when he wants to make a philosophical point) with bursts of intense Tibetan that Tenzin then translates. I imagine the years of debating one has to go through to be a monk, not to mention a Dalai Lama. A number of times he breaks into a hearty laugh. Once, seeing him look for words, I ask him if it's perhaps hard to express himself in English, whereupon he retorts, "No, not in English as a whole, but in MY English!"

I am struck by the powerful simplicity of his similes, feeling in some way his presence behind them and realizing how unused we are to such a state of being – we, who are in love with outer complexities and contradictions, children of an age that is dancing out its last dreams in a ballroom of destruction. He does not have the mystic, piercing gaze I might have imagined the Dalai Lama to have. Rather he has a wide, benevolent one, and a strongly anchored physical presence, not an otherworldly, spiritual one. He is sitting in his armchair next to me, red and yellow robes draped over a pockmarked arm and, although I'm concentrating on his questions and following his answers – periodically checking that the tape has not run out – the contact is there. We are talking from our different viewpoints, but behind that there is something else.

"A human being – if you show him something – you will feel sometimes that, at a superficial level, the other side will not accept it. But deep down something happened there." And something did.

We are one whether we like it or not, I suggest, and he goes on to use the image of the human body to bring this fact out. "It's like one's body, between one's head and one's shoe, I mean one's foot, there is quite a long distance and big differences, but still it's part of your body and you must concern yourself with every part of your physical. In the same way, the world is one. You simply cannot neglect or ignore another part of the world. You cannot solve one problem, localize it, and solve that alone. And under these circumstances, the key point is human universal responsibility, a genuine sense of brotherhood, sisterhood, with warm heart and clear realization, clear deep realization as one human family...."

As I listen to him, my gaze travels down his body to his feet and, shining out – immaculately polished – beneath his robes, are a pair of walking shoes identical to my own, and I have the distinct feeling that my own pair of revamped shoes are having a spiritual experience.

(From *The Dalai Lama's Shoes or "The Buddha can't do much!"* 1986)



# Into Great Depth of Your Being

## City of Peace

City of peace and God's unguarded light,  
City of silence, and the rich unfolding word;  
City of love and the laughter of the gods,  
City of man, his labor born of dream.  
City of harvest, born of canyon soil,  
City of rich acres, sown with strong-eyed toil;  
City whose song the soul enraptured sings  
City of lost boundaries,  
Province once of kings  
City whose deep calm at sunset does recall  
Ages when the earth stood golden,  
Heaven-tall;  
City on night's borderline,  
Outpost of dawn's light,  
City born of promise  
And a conqueror's delight.  
(Matrimandir meeting, 1983)

## Ballad of the Open Road II

Some men hit the road for love  
Some men for a wrong,  
And some men that lonesome highway  
Is where they sing their song.  
And the road is for the naked  
The road is for the alone,  
The road is for the prophets  
Who've seen the midnight home.  
And our language roams the silence  
Of a gesture or a gaze  
As we contemplate horizons  
In our roadside night cafes  
And red lights burn reminding  
Of all we've thrown away  
Until another dawn comes binding us  
To another day.  
And there is a song on the highway Lord  
That has no human tune,  
A song heard seldom but by a few  
Under the cold new moon.  
A song of terror a song of hope  
A song of freedom dire,  
That gives to those who will not tire  
Lost eyes of gypsy fire.  
And I've seen the highway ramblers  
I've seen the sun-fired eyed  
I've seen the highway gamblers  
Out on their last ride  
And so much more besides.  
And so much more besides.  
(Boston – Montana, 1977-1978)

## Mother of Bengal

Oh dark and holy mother,  
Who dances through Bengal,  
A rapture is your presence  
Compelling is your call.  
Your laughter harsh and vehement  
With joy cuts through our cares,  
Your eyes shot through with frenzy  
In maddest pity stare,  
Upon a world whose anguish  
Calls for you to come,  
And dance your love's destruction  
So that the work be done,  
And all our earth's lost splendor  
With man again be one,  
A rapture and a splendor  
And a golden age begun!  
(Auroville, January 1978)

## Banished Now the Bastille Blues

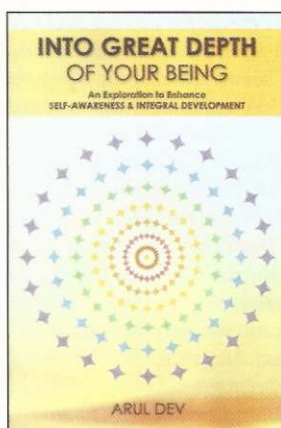
Banished now the Bastille blues,  
That once led me astray,  
This exile in a land of half-forgotten truths;  
The battle for brotherhood leads through speckled  
labyrinths  
Of betrayal and disguise;  
A moonlit clearing, radiant and dark,  
Reflects these scattered dreams  
Silver sparks of slivered light wound the fallen flesh  
As sudden moments, fresh as morning dew,  
Stun my dreaming mind,  
Surprise my restless soul.  
Awakenings, banish slumber;  
And embodiments of light reveal  
Another world:  
Light torn and slivered wounds the stubborn flesh  
Heavy falls the mood of an ancient joy  
Sister of the moon.  
Footsteps and grey corridors, a glance in the metro;  
Beauty now breaks through disclosed:  
Her Burning beauty now disclosed:  
In each and every face,  
In every heart: a rose.

I'm not a big fan of 'How to' books. I find they either talk down to me, oversimplifying to the point of absurdity, or, conversely, they assume such a high degree of knowledge that I am floundering after the first few pages (I'm particularly thinking of computer manuals here). I'm also somewhat allergic to books which offer immediate enlightenment, wealth or invincible success in the business world or relationships because, given the millions of copies such books sell, the world should be stuffed full of successful people by now...but I never seem to come across any of them.

However, Arul Dev's book, *Into Great Depth of Your Being*, is something of an exception. Although the sub-title, 'An Exploration to Enhance Self-Awareness and Integral Development' suggests it is aimed squarely at a New Age readership, and it contains references to fashionable Neuro-Linguistic Programming among other techniques, it is, in fact, a practical guide to some of the fundamentals of the Integral Yoga. Some would say this is unnecessary, given Sri Aurobindo's books and his letters to sadhaks as well as Mother's *Entretiens*, but a surprising number of people – and I include myself here – still find something of a gulf exists between the ideal and the preliminary steps upon the path, particularly when it comes to dealing with the challenges of daily existence.

In fact, one of the strengths of this book is that it translates the language and concepts of the Integral Yoga into the language and experience of daily reality: this book is aimed at a much wider readership than sadhaks. "This book is written for individuals who aspire to evolve," writes Dev.

The book sets out to explain the different parts of the being and their interrelationships, not through academic analysis but through encouraging the reader to experience these aspects directly. This is done through



exercises but also, most interestingly, through 'resonance'. "The goal of the book," he writes, "is to touch and nourish your being layer. It is written by meditating on each part of the inner presence and presenting it in such a manner that the essence of the being is touched and experienced in you as the reader."

While the book follows a familiar approach, dealing first with the physical, then emotional, mental and spiritual parts of the being (here termed physical, life energy, mind, deeper self), it doesn't adopt a strictly linear approach to each part but dives in at certain points to circle back in more detail later.

But experiencing each part of the being is only the beginning. Dev also attempts to show how the defects often associated with each part can be purified, transformed, so that the different parts perform their proper function and assume their correct relationship to other parts of the being, all of which are to be organized around the guiding energy of what he terms the Deeper Self.

As a writer, I was fascinated by Dev's explication of the 'sadhana' of communication. After clarifying that words have the capacity to create their own reality, he emphasises how important it is to be fully conscious of the way we use them.

"What word we choose to utter or express consciously creates the quality of our actions and reality. Every word we consciously utter reinforces the intent and energy behind it and thus strengthens its reality."

"The first prerequisite is that we are actually aware of our word and can discern its contents and quality of consciousness before the word is uttered. The second prerequisite is that we have the capacity to choose whether or not to allow the word to go through our mouth, writing or communications."

A third prerequisite, of course, is that we develop the ability to find the exact words to communicate and realise our intent.

Another strength of the book is the way that Dev clarifies that the mind is not just one entity, as many of us assume, but has different aspects: there is the 'objective' data-processing mind, the 'idea force' that envisions and creates, and the 'pure mind' which grasps the essence of different views and can synthesise them from a higher perspective.

Dev notes how the pure mind prepares the being for access to higher forms of consciousness, if we can 'wait in the upper chambers of the mind,' but he does not explore the plane of the supramental, nor does he talk about the stupendous work of physical transformation that occupied The Mother's final years. For sadhaks of the Integral Yoga this is an important lacuna: indeed, the Integral Yoga cannot be fully understood without reference to the aim of supramentalising the physical.

Dev also follows the traditional yogic approach that begins with the purification of the physical and works 'upwards' through the levels, but he doesn't emphasise the need to attempt to call down a higher force as assistance when working on the purification and transformation of the lower levels, preferring a 'boot-strap' approach with all its attendant difficulties.

Having said this, Dev is writing this book for the general reader, so he may have considered that the yogic disciplines of aspiration and surrender, not to speak of Mother's work upon the cells, might prove a bridge too far for neophytes.

But that general reader certainly deserves a decent index, which the book lacks.

Based on his own finely observed experience Arul Dev has written a very readable and practical introduction for the general reader to understand and work with the different parts of the being. For those inspired by this book, it provides yet another doorway into the Integral Yoga.

Alan

*Into Great Depth of your Being: An Exploration to Enhance Self-awareness and Integral Development by Arul Dev. Published by Auropublications, 2017. Available on amazon.in: Rs 450*

# 50 Poems from Auroville

Vikas Vickers of AVI UK has selected 50 poems by 21 poets as a gift and tribute to Auroville on its 50th birthday. This collection is the only the second collection of Auroville poetry, and the first in over 30 years.

This is a thoughtful compilation. There is the quiet lyricism of Marta Guha's *The Indian Shawl*:

*Now darkness falls like rain  
And the hands of shadow  
Throw over the shoulders  
Of even the poorest  
A shawl studded with stars*

Or the plangent simplicity of Gordon Kostange's *The News* and of Meenakshi's *Thousands of Kingdoms*:

*Thousands of kingdoms  
Within my body,  
Thousands of ages  
Within my living cells -  
Am I a tiny bubble  
Captured in TAMIL casket?*

And the vigour of Celestine's *I am an active, Living Dynamo*:

*I am active, Living Dynamo  
If you truly make One step  
toward me,  
I will leap Nine steps to grab  
you,  
Stir you up..."*

There are many good poems here which can be enjoyed in their own right. But, given the title, one inevitably wants to know how far these poems evoke the experience of living in Auroville.

The 'Auroville experience' is, of course, elusive and highly subjective, but in this context it is

interesting to compare this collection with the previous collection of Auroville poetry, *Dust and Dreams*. This slim anthology was published in 1985 and represents, as the editors described it, "a sampling of the ideas, aspirations, and expressions of the members of this international community."

Unlike Vikas's new anthology, *Dust and Dreams* was clearly for internal consumption. There is no attempt to give a gloss to the presentation, and the poetry and prose of the twelve contributors is in their native languages.

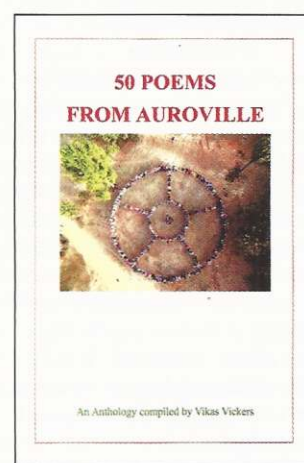
Yet, in the former compilation, something of the authentic Auroville note can be heard time and time again in the sonorous or raw intensity of expression, aspiration:

*Auroville is a prayer and a  
curse  
A suspicious sidelong  
glance  
An explosion of silent  
love...*

Roger

*Je souffre d'absence  
je souffre de présence à  
demie  
j'ai mal de ne pas être vous*  
Monique

In comparison, many of the poems in *50 Poems from Auroville* are more 'finished', more 'poetic'. In some ways, this makes them less evocative, per-



haps, of the 'dust' of Auroville and the struggle to transmute the raw ore into the gold of a new world.

This shouldn't be overstated. That indefinable note can be heard at times in the new collection, for example, in Kevin Myers' *Where is the Straight and Narrow Path?*:

*The sun has sunk a ray  
Inside my flesh  
And trapped by bone and  
skin  
It roars in deep frustration*

Or in Anu's *Transfer 2*:

*Here is the deep  
ground  
The level land  
Where the heart  
burns  
Like a crater at dawn  
Through the quiet  
ache of the hours.*

No doubt, as Vikas explains himself, the contrast between the 'feel' of the two collections reflects his sensibility and preferences in poetry. It may also reflect the fact that, unlike the contributors to the previous anthology, not all of the poets in *50 Poems* have actually lived in Auroville.

While some of the poems in *50 Poems* date from the same period as *Dust and Dreams*, others are more recent. So a further possibility is that the contrast between the poetry in the two collections actually reflects a certain shift within Auroville itself: from the somewhat anarchic, free flow expressionism of the 1970s and 1980s to the more ordered discourse of today.

This is not a judgement. Both periods provided their share of good poetry, as this compilation proves. But if there is some truth in this perception, it demonstrates how sensitive poets are to subtle changes in the community's energy field.

Vikas has done a great job in putting together this compilation. Let us hope that we don't have to wait another thirty years for the next dip into Auroville's poetic culture.

Alan

*50 Poems from Auroville. An Anthology compiled by Vikas Vickers. Auroville Press, 2017. Price: Rs 450. Available soon from Auroville bookshops and from auroville.com*



# Auroville and Publicity

From comments on Auronet and casual conversations, it is evident that quite a number of Aurovilians are not looking forward to the 50th birthday celebrations. Their unease seems to be compounded of a number of factors. One, of course, is the inevitable disruption to daily life that will be occasioned by the visit of VIPs and the flood of visitors. But there are other concerns. Among these is a suspicion that the activities planned for the general public (or a selected audience) – the exhibitions and seminars – will be essentially a propaganda exercise, a way of showing to the world how great we are, rather than a truthful exposition of the far more complex reality that is Auroville today.

Concerns about how Auroville should be presented to the world are nothing new: they have been there from the beginning. Even before the Inauguration, the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) and its associates were busy lobbying UNESCO to pass a resolution and organising conferences to publicise the concept. Initially, Mother seemed to support this approach. She originally wanted Auroville to be built within 10-20 years thanks to massive funding from the world's main powers and, clearly, this would require the concept to be widely publicised. The inauguration ceremony itself, apart from its spiritual significance, was obviously designed to introduce Auroville to the world in a special way.

However, even early on it seemed that Mother began to have misgivings. On 3rd February, 1968, she tells Satprem that there is going to be a three day conference of 'all nations' in Delhi to present Auroville.

"They have prepared texts – always lengthy, interminable: speeches and more speeches."

It was then that she had a profound revelation regarding the *raison d'être* of Auroville.

So then I asked, I concentrated to know what had to be said. And all of a sudden, Sri Aurobindo gave me a revelation. That was something interesting. I concentrated to know the why, the how and so on, and all of a sudden Sri Aurobindo said... (Mother reads out a note:)

"India has become..."

It was the vision of the thing, and it instantly translated into French words.

"India has become the symbolic representation of all the difficulties of modern mankind."

"India will be the land of its resurrection – the resurrection to a higher and truer life."

And the clear vision: the same thing which in the history of the universe made the earth the symbolic representation of the universe so as to concentrate the work on one point, the same phenomenon is now taking place: India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that the... cure will be found. And then, that is why – THAT IS WHY I was made to start Auroville.

It came and it was so clear, so tremendously powerful!

So I wrote it down. I didn't tell them how or why, I told them, "Put this at the beginning of your paper, whatever it is; you can say whatever you like, but put this first.... And as that whole power was in it, I said, "Put it." We'll see – they won't understand anything, but that doesn't matter, it will act."

Clearly, Mother's view of how Auroville should be presented to the world was very different from that of the SAS. Rather than identifying, as she did, the spiritual underpinnings (and embodying it with her Force), a 1968 brochure put out by the Society described an ambitious research programme for the city to be. This included "Removal of the causes which create disharmony between countries and hinder the growth of the consciousness of human unity," and removal "of the root causes of population growth."

A later brochure announced that Auroville "will explore the unfathomed depths and unattained heights of human psychology and the latent capacities and faculties of the individual. It will expand the frontiers of science, medicine and technology at the service of man. It will solve... the problems of management and labour, production and marketing in industries and agriculture..."

Mother became very concerned by this kind of inflation. In a 1971 conversation, Satprem quoted to her the following passage from one of Sri Aurobindo's letters:

... I don't believe in advertisement except for books, etc., and in

propaganda except for politics and patent medicines. But for serious work it is a poison. It means either a stunt or a boom – and stunts and booms exhaust the thing they carry on their crest and leave it lifeless and broken high and dry on the shores of nowhere – or it means a movement. A movement in the case of a work like mine means the founding of a school or a sect or some other dammed nonsense. It means that hundreds or thousands of useless people join in and corrupt the work or reduce it to a pompous farce from which the Truth that was coming down recedes into secrecy and silence. It is what has happened to the 'religions' and it is the reason of their failure.

Mother immediately responded, "That passage should be typed and put up in Auroville. It is indispensable. They all have a false idea about propaganda and publicity. It should be typed in big letters; at the top, 'Sri Aurobindo said,' then put the quotation and send it to Auroville. Say I am the one who's sending it."



The International Zone exhibition at the Visitors Centre

Actually, most of the early Aurovilians, in contrast to the SAS, had little interest in publicising the project: they were far too busy learning how to survive in an alien environment. When they did write about what they were doing, it was not for an outside readership but to improve communication within the community. This was the intention behind the launching of the internal weekly newsletter, *Auroville Notes*, in December, 1973.

Today, removed from their immediate context, many of the contents of the *Notes* seem trivial – meeting announcements, firewood availability, etc. – but they provided the residents of the time with factual, unvarnished information about what was going on in the various communities. Reading them now gives one a unique feeling of the 'texture' of Auroville life in those early days.

The first book written by an Aurovillian for a somewhat wider readership was Savitra's *Auroville: The First Six Years. 1968-1974*. In contrast to the glossy brochures put out by the Society, this was a very simple publication: the text was simple typescript, the photos black and white, the cover Auroville earth-red. And the approach was very different. Savitra chose to write about life as it actually was in the fledgling communities of Auroville rather than simply publicising the ideal and the dreams. Consequently, along with the early achievements, he also noted the difficulties and failures, like the collapse of the first Forecomers dam.

His next book, *Auroville: Sun Word Rising*, continued this down-to-earth approach for it described, among other things, the messy details of Auroville's conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society.

Today these two 'streams', the ideal and the reality, are more often combined in our public presentations of Auroville. The various exhibitions at the Visitors Centre are a good example, providing information about the ideal, the Integral Yoga and the next stage of spiritual evolution but also presenting our achievements in education, alternative energy, afforestation, outreach, etc.

Yet, even here there are elisions that subtly distort the reality. For example, there is little or no reference to the struggles involved in manifesting these undoubted achievements, or to our many failures to realise the ideal as exemplified, for instance, in the contradictions inherent in our present economy.

In other words, we continue to project a somewhat idealised view of ourselves to the outside world.

One argument is that we should only present the beauty, the fineness of Auroville, as this is one of our highest aspirations. Another justification is that by emphasising the positives rather than the difficulties, we gain support for the Auroville project rather than providing ammunition for those who would like to see us fail. But in a world where almost everybody has the means to be an investigative reporter, seeking to project Auroville as a modern utopia is a forlorn hope. Moreover,

our undoubted achievements in many areas actually gain from an understanding of the challenges they had to surmount.

And isn't there inherent value in telling the truth?

But there are other concerns about the way we tend to project Auroville today. The essential *raison d'être* of Auroville is to be an experiment in the working out of a new form of consciousness; Auroville "wants to be the cradle of the superman" said Mother in 1969. This aspect is not always mentioned in our publicity – perhaps because we are afraid it will be misunderstood as a new version of the master race, *herrenvolk*, philosophy, or because we do not want to be accused of creating a new religion.

However, even when it is mentioned, the link between the spiritual *raison d'être* and the various activities we are engaged in is often not made. The danger then is that these activities – commercial activities, afforestation, sustainable architecture, arts and crafts, renewable energy initiatives, etc. – will be seen as ends in themselves rather than as means to develop and embody this new consciousness.

A further danger is that we may succumb to our own publicity and begin believing the simplistic labels – eco-village, green city, etc. – that we sometimes employ to make Auroville more understandable to certain audiences.

Perhaps, finally, the problem is with trying to define Auroville at all, beyond The Mother's words. For the truth is that, at a fundamental level, we have very little idea about how Auroville really 'works'. Auroville is a complex mix of people from very different backgrounds and levels of consciousness subject to the play of vast forces of which we have very little understanding.

Yet we can sense that, at this deeper level, Auroville does not seem to function in any kind of linear, logical way. What we perceive as 'deformations' or chaos may be the first shoots of a new order; seeming failures can be gateways to new opportunities; a small movement in one individual or area of community life can trigger a cascade of seemingly unrelated consequences; and even the most negative manifestations may be necessary, at a certain stage, as a 'purge' or to allow them to be transformed.

From this perspective, the picture is never sharp: it is always fuzzy, always changing, very unlike the simplified, linear view of our development projected by our press releases and exhibitions. Actually, the concept of an evolving

Auroville was a familiar one to the early Aurovilians (and one that put them on a collision course with those who wanted to impose fixed structures or concepts). Savitra sounds this note in his introduction to *The First Six Years*. "Decisions evolve from within Auroville as does the organisation of individual and collective disciplines, rather than arbitrary imposition from without. This is a basic element in the theme and fabric of Auroville's experiment... The way is in the making, defining itself through its efforts as it goes along."

Ruud Lohman, writing in May 1974, gave this another dimension. He noted that the city already exists in a subtle dimension but its materialization depends on the consciousness of the Aurovilians. "To bring the city down, several conditions must be fulfilled.... Maybe we must bring the collective psychic being to a certain level of awareness..." This, of course, is a fundamental tenet of the Integral Yoga: that change proceeds from within to without.

As an Aurovillian put it in the Auroville Notes of 21st November, 1978, "All the problems are only external problems, and merely reflect, manifest, our inner imperfections. The outer progress will automatically follow the inner progress."

This note is not heard much these days. Perhaps we find it too obvious. Or perhaps, with our regulations and office orders, we have lost the sense that the outer Auroville is plastic enough to reflect the evolving consciousness of its inhabitants. Or, most worryingly, perhaps we have reversed the process by putting greater emphasis today upon manifesting the outer reality than upon our inner development.

Ultimately, of course, it is a cliché that Auroville has to be experienced. As an early Aurovillian put it, "Finally, all that one says, all that one has said and that one will say, is nothing but an extremely clumsy and limited way of expressing something which can be lived but never described."

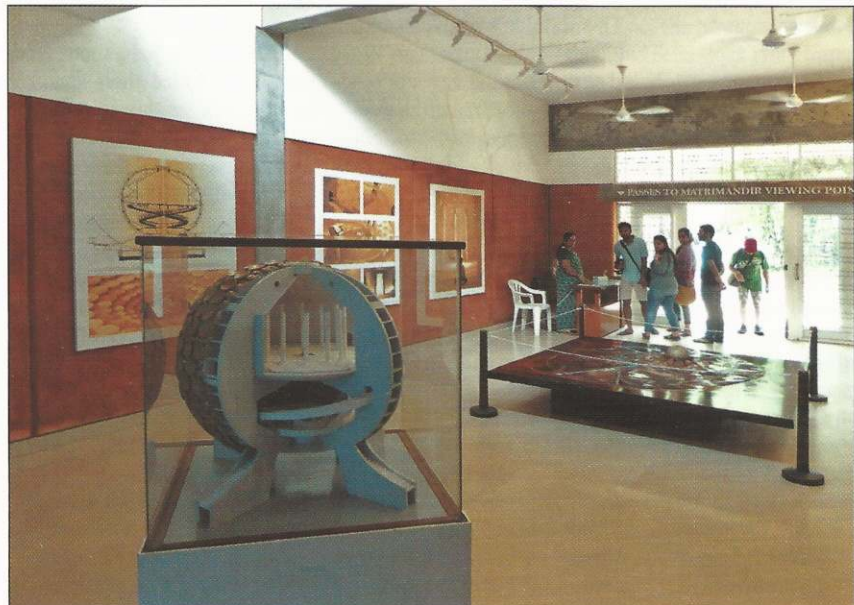
In fact, back in the 1970s Ruud Lohman suggested that, "One of the main languages of Auroville of the spiritual age will be silence. The deeper the silence in our hearts and minds the closer we come to the real Auroville."

It's a note that resonates still. A few weeks ago, an Aurovillian suggested on Auronet that the most appropriate way to celebrate the 28th February, 2018 would be to spend it in silence and introspection. It received an overwhelmingly positive response.

This, then, is the challenge for those disseminating information about the project (for we cannot avoid doing this: Auroville, as Mother made clear, is in the world, for the world). How to find a language or means to communicate not just the vision but also the texture of the challenge to embody a new form of consciousness? How to present, as part of that larger story, not only our achievements but also our failures, stumblings and inconsistencies? For, in many ways, the quest, the journey, is as important as the achievements.

It won't be easy to pack all this onto a few exhibition boards or to capture it in a 20-minute video. But, after 50 years, isn't it worth trying at last to convey the richness and diversity, the madness, contradictions, dreams and aspirations, and, yes, the silence at the core, which make this such a great adventure?

Alan



The Matrimandir exhibition at the Visitors Centre



# Can't you be more normal?

Sometimes I feel like I'm living in a fish-bowl. I go for a jog in the Greenbelt and tourists follow me around on their overburdened scooters, blowing exhaust fumes in my face as they ask for directions to the "main ro." I take my kids to school and almost get run over by a parade of taxis. I go the Visitors' Center for a cup of tea and find myself standing in a line while cologne-doused shoppers order cakes and cookies.

They're all here to see the new world – to visit the "Golden Globe" whose ubiquitous image now adorns tourist brochures and taxi placards all over the region; to peer at these strange creatures ("Aurovilians!") who live such interesting lives. "You Aurovilians think in such a different way," friends I meet in the real world often tell me – and it isn't clear at all that different, in this context, is intended as a compliment.

When I moved back to this community, in late 2003, after a little over a decade away, it was just about possible to still inhabit the old Auroville. Sure, the world was crowding in. The signs were ominous – in the tin-shack developments coming up from the village, in the increasing number of vehicles kicking up dust on the roads – but there was a residual sense of emptiness and stillness, a feeling of getting away from it all. Things were noisier, but there were still corners of silence, and a sense of continuity with the Auroville in which I had grown up.

Most of all, what I came home to, and what I cherished, was a feeling of space, both within and without. In Auroville, it was possible to imagine leading an inner life: a life of contemplation, of yoga, of spirituality, whatever you want to call it. After so much time out in the real world, I was looking forward to a little more balance – more perspective, freedom from all the exigencies and mundanities that so straitjacket life out there.

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I understand that time moves on. I know we can't – mustn't – stay stuck in the past, and that it's important to be open to the world. (But, why, actually? Maybe I'm just a curmudgeon, but there's very little I see in the world these days that seems worthy of inviting in.) I understand, too, that Auroville's economy is in crisis. (Hasn't it always been?) I'm told that industries have closed, that tourism is the new lifeblood of our fledgling alternative society. All those sweaty visitors who know little and care nothing about Auroville, who drive around staring and pointing at me like I'm an animal in a zoo? They're paying for our maintenances, our schools, our roads. (Then again, we wouldn't need so many roads if there weren't so many sweaty visitors on them). All those shops and souvenir stalls selling commodified versions of the yoga; all those restaurants whose pizzas and desserts attract eager, hungry consumers from distant metropolises: I guess they're necessary to sustain the dream.

But I look at pictures of the old Auroville – those classic photos by Dominique Darr, Anita Reichle, Barun Tagore. Black and white, open, limitless landscapes. I remember those vistas well, I can still feel their freedom, and the stunning silence. These days, I can't help but reflect on the fact that we began from a blank slate. We really had a chance to create something radically different, something fundamentally new.

Human nature is so persistent. I fear that what's emerging from that early tabula rasa is a dreary archetype: the interesting, slightly offbeat, multicultural, artsy tourist town. Bali, Ibiza, Goa. Not long ago, a friend of mine asked a young visitor what she liked about Auroville. "It's such a nice place," the visitor said. She was the friendly, chirpy type. "We like to come here because it's cheaper to party than in Goa."

And so they flood in from around the country and the world: eager to party, to eat organic food, to take a selfie or two against the Golden Globe. The really adventurous ones are even a little curious, interested in sampling – but only sampling – a different way of living. They spend a few nights, maybe a few weeks or months; they volunteer (and all the while, of course, they party, cheaply). Then life resumes and Auroville is like a set of rented clothes, worn for a time before slipping back into a more familiar costume. A story to tell back home. A box to check. A gap-year experience before that job in banking or consulting or marketing.

The world is what it is. There's no point railing against the system. (This is how beaten down we are: once we believed we could change the system.) And in a way, we only have ourselves to blame. We were the ones given the blank slate, and we chose how to fill it. For so many years, even after the land

had been planted and the desert heroically conquered, there was nothing to see in Auroville. Tourists don't come for forests; they're not interested in taking selfies with homes, schools, people working silently, patiently, humbly. But silence and humility – quiet achievement – weren't enough for us. We wanted to build a showcase: apartments, boulevards, parks, cultural centers (so many cultural centers!) – a real city. And so we steamrolled all cautionary voices with appeals to purported divine sanction. We responded to resistance with government grants and funds that "must be spent." Architecture is always ego. This slow, depressing mauling of our landscape: we've invited it on ourselves.

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February is always the cruellest month. It's cooler, easier for the visiting hordes to experience Auroville without having to sweat or endure power cuts. Then there's that week, packed with activities and workshops, a chance for people to experience the spiritual life through pilates classes and reiki readings. Tourists in February dress in white kurtas and walk around with beatific stares. They have piercing blue eyes. Sometimes they look at me and I'm dressed in scruffy shorts and an old T-shirt, maybe stressed out by some everyday trifle, and what I see in their eyes is... pity. They feel sorry for me that I haven't achieved the same level of serenity and self-awareness, that I'm still, after all these years, just an ordinary, harried human being. The thing is, I'm not on holiday. I'm probably late to pick my kids up from school, rushing to get my groceries before the shelves are empty – or just desperately trying to avoid the hordes.

This February promises to be worse than ever. Casual tourists, VIPs, journalists, movie stars, celebrity chefs, reality TV personalities, sports heroes, all sorts of people with tenuous connections to the place: they'll descend upon us, and for weeks and probably months we'll be at their mercy. I get it. Auroville is commemorating fifty years – a remarkable achievement by any standard – and we feel we need something to show the world. The world wouldn't recognize what we've actually achieved in these fifty years; it's afflicted by a particular blindness. There was a time when we called out that blindness, when what we were trying to do – at least this is how I understood it as a child – was open the world's eyes. Now we cater to the blindness; we play the game on the world's terms.

Is it too late to change course? Can we roll back the tides of development and commerce and normalization ("You Aurovilians are so strange, can't you be more normal?" my friends in the real world sometimes ask me?) I showed an early draft of this article to a friend. She told me I was being too negative. I thought maybe she was right. I had just endured a bad few days. The usual motorcycle missiles coming at me on the roads, the serenity of a visit to the Matrimandir shattered by a VIP security cordon.

So I went for a walk behind my house, through the green Aurodam forest, under a canopy of work and palmyra and banyan. It had been raining and the trees were dripping and the soil was muddy. It was invigorating, inspiring. That forest is a treasure. It reflects decades of exactly the kind of hard, patient work we so undervalue: a real, tangible achievement, Auroville's gift to this warning, melting, self-destructive planet. Then I walked onto the football field – one of the last expanses of open land in the community – and the sun was setting behind the palmyras, and I sat on the muddy ground, and it was quiet, and for a moment the world felt at bay.

Then I remembered. A plan is circulating to build a huge concrete structure over this field, right up to the edge of that forest. The Petra Project: office space, a shopping arcade, a massive new visitors' reception center. Many in the community have expressed their opposition, but the machinery – and the lobbying – is well underway. Fundraising is in process, architects and consultants are developing plans and models. Many of them don't even live in the community; but Auroville is always fertile ground for another line in a CV, a feather in the cap for the ambitious and ruthless.

That field will be dug up and concreted. The forest will be littered with plastic. The visiting hordes will grow, and they'll spend more, eat more, consume more. It comes down to this. Inner space needs outer space. Inner work needs an external supporting infrastructure. We say we're here to do the yoga, but we give the yoga no room to breathe. We say we're here to do something different – but we're stuck in this mad headlong rush, so persistently and stubbornly, so blindly, to just build the same damn thing.

Akash Kapur

The population table published in the previous edition of *Auroville Today* contained a serious mistake. At the end of the population table on page 7, column 1 was mistakenly copied into column 3. We publish here the correct table, age profile and the original article. We apologize for the mistake.

Looking at the age distribution of Auroville's residents, two things are immediately visible: there is an unusual contraction in the age group 20 – 29 and there is a sizable proportion of the population who are above 60 years of age. If we consider Auroville to be a developing society, the contraction in the youthful age group is very unusual. Developing societies tend to have a "youth bulge," which fuels the growth of the society, especially in economic terms. The youth bring fresh energy, innovative ideas and a certain amount of irreverence that forces society to question its old habits. One explanation of the low proportion of youth in Auroville, particularly in the 20 – 29 age group, is that young people leave for further education and work. It is possible that many of them come back to Auroville at a later stage. But a recent survey of ex-students of Auroville showed that less than half of this population actually comes back. Many youths continue to live and work outside of Auroville, mainly in Europe and North America.

Another likely reason for fewer youth is our failure to attract young people to Auroville. Many youngsters find Auroville to be too expensive, especially during the Newcomer period. Housing has been a problem, but might be getting better with the new Humanscapes and X & Y projects. Solving the youth demographic challenge might be one of the most important things for the community to address if it wants to be "a city for the future."

Along with the challenge of youth is the challenge of an aging population. Almost 20% of Auroville's population is above the age of 60 years. Over the next few years, many of them might choose to slow down and reduce their work commitments. Some will need healthcare support and assisted living. Although Auroville is a place of "youth that never ages," the reality of an aging population must be addressed, and conscious support systems developed.

About 47% of the population is between the ages 30 and 59, which perhaps explains the large proportion of children in Auroville, who make up 17% of the population. How well is Auroville's education system serving these children? Are they growing up with a sense of commitment to Auroville's ideals? Will they participate in the unfolding experiment, or will they look for better opportunities elsewhere?

In terms of population growth, 2017 has been a good year. The number of residents grew by 211 people, which means an 8% growth over 2016. This is certainly because of a liberal Entry Policy, which was in effect for a few months towards the end of last year. That policy is no longer valid, and it is unlikely that we will see the same kind of growth in the coming years.

The number of nationalities have grown to 54, with new residents from Macedonia and Portugal. Six countries have clocked double-digit growth, with Israel leading the pack at 21%. Russia, UK, South Korea and China are the other countries that have added significant numbers of residents. In terms of absolute numbers, the French have always been the leaders from Europe – this year, 21 French nationals joined Auroville. The number of Indians grew by a whopping 123, taking their proportion in the population from 42.1% in 2016 to 43.3 % this year. Is it possible that this was one of the factors that prompted the rethinking of the Entry Policy?

Algeria, Czech Republic, Ecuador, Egypt, Finland, Kazakhstan, Poland and Romania continue to languish at the bottom of the table. Clearly, Auroville is not very attractive to these nationalities. What makes the Swedes come to Auroville, but not the Finns? Why the Spanish but not the Portuguese?

It might be more fruitful to look at the demographic challenge than to look at national representation. Does it matter if Africa and South America have poor representation in Auroville? Or should we look at policies and programmes that might change the shape of Auroville's age profile? Perhaps it's time for Auroville to get a youthful bulge rather than a middle-aged pot belly.

Manas



	Country	2016	2017
1	India	1080	1203
2	France	377	398
3	Germany	244	249
4	Italy	150	152
5	Netherlands	95	98
6	USA	87	91
7	Russia	65	72
8	UK	51	57
9	Spain	51	55
10	Israel	38	46
11	Switzerland	41	41
12	Belgium	35	38
13	South Korea	32	37
14	Sweden	25	27
15	Canada	23	23
16	Ukraine	20	20
17	Australia	17	16
18	China	12	14
19	Japan	13	14
20	Austria	13	13
21	South Africa	12	11
22	Argentina	9	9
23	Brazil	4	7
24	Hungary	7	7
25	Nepal	5	6
26	Slovenia	6	6
27	Taiwan	2	6
28	Mexico	5	5
29	Belarus	4	4
30	Iran	3	4
31	Latvia	4	4
32	Macedonia	0	4
33	Columbia	2	3
34	Denmark	2	3
35	Sri Lanka	3	3
36	Tibet	3	3
37	Bulgaria	2	2
38	Ethiopia	3	2
39	Iceland	2	2
40	Ireland	2	2
41	Lithuania	2	2
42	Moldova	2	2
43	Norway	1	2
44	Philippines	2	2
45	Portugal	0	2
46	Rwanda	2	2
47	Algeria	1	1
48	Czech Republic	1	1
49	Ecuador	1	1
50	Egypt	1	1
51	Finland	1	1
52	Kazakhstan	1	1
53	Poland	1	1
54	Romania	1	1
Total		2566	2777



# "If everyone says no, who will say yes?"

**Srijita graduated from the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (the Ashram school), worked on prevention of human trafficking in France and moved to Auroville in 2009. She works at the Offerings Desk in Matrimandir and is also the police liaison for Auroville. This is her story.**

It was 1985, and I had gone with my mother to seek admission in the Ashram school. Paru-di, the Registrar, looked at me and said, "Mother had said that after the age of 14 we do not admit students because their mental formations are already made." I asked Paru-di, "I have a question for The Mother, although she is not physically present – if the mental state of the child is towards this life, what then?" I still remember she had tears in her eyes. She hugged me and said, "I have no answer for this. Go back, we take your application. Let The Mother decide."

I had rebelled against the national system of education from the age of eight. I did not want to learn by rote and I thought there must be another way to learn – but I didn't know what. I was growing up in a family that encouraged values based on humanism and rationalism. My ambition was to become a barrister-at-law. By this time, I had become quite difficult to be managed by my parents, and I asked to be sent to boarding school. I really wanted to leave home – not because I was not loved, but because I was looking for something else.

We had first visited Auroville and the Ashram when I was four. My mother had met Sisir-da, who was then the Registrar of the Ashram school. She had asked if she could leave one of her children in the school, to which Sisir-da had reportedly replied, "We will see when the time is right." What I loved was the system of education. I had read *On Education* by The Mother when I was 14, and I thought, "This is where I want to be." But my family said, "Finish your studies, then we will see."

This is how things continued till I was 15. I would attend the playground meditations in the Ashram, and on one such day I got up from the meditation and told my mother that I was going to apply for the Ashram school. She was shocked, not knowing what to do. But she accompanied me to that fateful meeting with Paru-di.

The next six months passed like a blur. I was sure I would be admitted, though everyone at home thought that was impossible – I was already in the 9th grade. But this is where decisions are made at a different level – intellectually and emotionally everything was fine, but there was something else I was looking for. Then we got the news that I was admitted. I was ecstatic! For my parents, it was very difficult to let go and my mother came to drop me to the school. I still remember 9th December, 1985, the day I arrived in the hostel, as the happiest day of my life.

The boarding school in the Ashram is like a family. So, my dream of going to boarding school was realised in a very particular context. It was a beautiful experience, but there were challenges. The biggest challenge was learning French, which I did not know at all. I am very grateful to all my teachers, especially Lata-di, who gave me their time and energy. I had nine hours of French every week, and within a year, I had come up to the level of my batchmates. All that training came to good use later because I majored in French, moved to France and wrote my post-graduate thesis in social psychology in French. When I look back, all this wouldn't have been possible if I did not have the strong foundation that was laid by my teachers in school.

What the Ashram school gave me was a complete experience of education. We had physical education seven days a week, where we learned not how to compete, but how to increase our endurance, overcome physical difficulties and have a healthy body. I wasn't a great sportswoman, but I enjoyed playing every sport. Academically, I majored in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy and in languages. One of the most interesting things about my schooling was that I was one of the first girls in the Ashram school to join the mechanical workshop. I was very interested in repairing motorcycles and cars and worked long hours at the Atelier. It was a wonderful opportunity to integrate intellectualism and the practical aspects of life. I would be reading *Essays on the Gita* for two hours and then spend two hours under a tractor. This is one of the specificities of the Ashram school that I have not seen elsewhere.

When I graduated from the Ashram school I knew eight languages – English, French, Italian, Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit, Tamil, and Gujarati. I had learned Indian classical music, and had performed in Bengali, French and English theatre. This was Integral Education at its best. It did not make me a master of any one thing, but it made me appreciate all the different facets of life.

After school, I wanted to stay back in the Ashram, but my parents thought that I should be financially independent. So, I joined Pondicherry University for a master's degree in philosophy. One morning, in my second semester there, we had a discussion on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. I thought the Professor was not respectful of Sri Aurobindo, so I got up and left the university for good.

I took a two-month break in the Andaman Islands, came back to Pondicherry and took up various jobs, including teaching at the

Franco-Indian Vocational Training Centre. These were very challenging years – I was young, and I was teaching a bunch of school dropouts between 18 and 30 years of age. I also travelled to France to get my teaching degree – my thesis was on vocational training for French nationals in India.

In 1997, I applied and was accepted for a master's degree in philosophy at Sorbonne University in Paris. I didn't have a scholarship, so life was very hard. I barely had enough to feed myself. It was also the typical university program where you sit in a lecture theatre and take notes. I dropped out. Luckily, I had many friends in Paris from my earlier work in vocational training and they encouraged me to find a job.

I went through a six-month professional course in bi-lingual (French and English) executive secretary skills. I did my practical training in an organization called the Nest Movement that worked in the area of human trafficking and prostitution. After my training I ended up working full-time for them. I became their Prevention Officer for human trafficking.



Srijita

But before I could prevent, I had to understand what I was preventing. I started my fieldwork by visiting the red-light areas of Paris. What I saw was horrendous. I came back with a headache and I gave myself two days to decide if I really wanted to do this work. At the end of those two days I said to myself, "If everyone says no, who will say yes?" For the next five years I not only worked at the French national level, but also became the Executive Secretary of the International Abolitionist Federation, which fights human trafficking internationally and at the United Nations in Geneva. I organised several congresses for the Federation and attended several policy conferences.

I began to understand the difficulties of victims of trafficking, conflict, and rape. It was trying, and my way of moving forward was by writing. I wrote a diary almost every night after I came back from the field, which later became the material for my thesis. I travelled all over Europe and met many victims of trafficking and prostitution. Sometimes I spent Christmas with them because they had no one to be with. My view is that prostitution is never a choice. The solution does not lie in legalising, but in education and prevention. And I think I have given my best. I have also received a lot from these victims, who are often very humane, sensitive and loving.

After some years, I was approached by a professor at the Sorbonne asking if I would like to do a master's degree on human trafficking and prostitution because there wasn't much research in that area. I accepted. This three-year course was very innovative in its approach. In the first year we were asked to write an autobiography detailing all the events that had led to our present work. This was therapeutic for me. I had come to this work not by chance, but because of my sense of justice and wanting to work for a cause. It was the result of the values that had been inculcated in me by my parents and the result of my education in the Ashram school, which had made me fearless.

During this time, I also started training social workers to deal with human trafficking. This expanded to working with victims of domestic violence – there seems to be a link between domestic violence and prostitution.

I had met my fiancé in France, married and was about to have my child. I wanted, very consciously, to have my son in India. I came back to Pondicherry to be near the Ashram, and I visited Auroville every week. My son was born in 2004, and after four months I returned to France. In 2005, I started work with an organization called Metanoya, which helped create a network among social workers, the police and

the judiciary. The purpose was to be more effective in receiving and helping victims of trafficking and sexual crimes. I completed my thesis and became a professional social psychologist. My approach blends social psychology and criminology. I learned international law, not to be a lawyer, but to use it as a tool in dealing with victims and former perpetrators. It was very interesting for me to work with the latter group, because they are not just perpetrators, but also human beings.

In 2008, someone very close to me passed away in very difficult circumstances as a victim of domestic violence. This was an uncle (yes, men can be victims too) who in many ways had brought me up. He was the one who had really understood me, how different I was from other children. He would always tell me, "Go to Auroville." I would visit Auroville every time I came to India. My main reason was Matrimandir – I am very attached to it, just like I am attached to the Ashram. When I came to Auroville after my uncle passed away, it was very different and very special. I went to Matrimandir one day and came out with a clear decision – "I am coming back home." It was not easy for my family in France to understand my decision, but they finally relented. My son got admission in the Auroville Kindergarten and I started the next phase of my life.

Living in Auroville was a big change from Paris. Earlier, I had visited Auroville mostly during the day, and living in Adventure was literally an adventure. It was also very beautiful. I had come from a work life which was full of conflict and violence. Here was a place that was peaceful and quiet. I was grateful for the work I was given as the Project Holder for the R&D section of the Centre for Scientific Research (CSR). I did not have very heavy responsibilities, so I could really breathe in the atmosphere of Auroville. It was also wonderful for my son – we lived in a keet hut and he grew up surrounded by nature.

I started to work in Matrimandir in the Access Team. After about a year and half, Barbara asked me to take up the work at the Offerings Desk. I worked for three intense months with her before she passed away. From 2012 onwards I worked full time at the Offerings Desk – fundraising for Matrimandir, receiving donors when they visited, and giving information to people on how to make offerings. There is one thing that is very particular about this work: like Barbara, I enjoy sending hand written notes to donors all over the world.

All this while, I had not talked to too many people about my background in working with victims of trafficking and violence, but slowly Aurovilians came to know about me. Then requests started coming in for me to provide counselling in situations of domestic conflict.

In France I had worked with The European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Cooperation (Europol) and with Interpol. I had enjoyed this collaboration with police and judges, and somehow, I had a knack for understanding international law. In fact, when I was teaching social workers, one of my focus areas was making the law accessible to victims. In Auroville, on several occasions I accompanied people to the police station – very informally, just as an Aurovillian. Over time I developed a rapport with the police.

In 2011, I was called by the French Consulate in Pondicherry, who knew about my background, to train all police officers in Pondicherry to deal with human trafficking and prostitution. In 2015, some of us sent to the Working Committee a set of recommendations on how to improve the security situation in Auroville. We met the Working Committee, and in April 2016 the new team of Auroville Safety and Security was set up. I now have the specific responsibility of police liaison.

There are many challenges in our work – Indian police are not easy to work with. You must be very strong and firm, yet polite. Also, the stations are not very well equipped. My approach is always to have them participate and collaborate with us. I always say that we are here to help you help us. Today the local and district police are cooperating. From our side we need to show appreciation, not just blame them. However, what we lack today is a liaison with the judiciary.

Another challenge is that we have many different nationalities, and people have very different ideas about what to expect in a police station. I try to sensitize them to local realities and I also try to focus on what is improving. That's what keeps me going – the small steps. For example, just the introduction of the walkie-talkies, jackets and torches for the security team have prevented a lot of incidents.

I see my role evolving into the role of a facilitator who ensures that everyone in the team is heard. We are looking at setting up a legal cell and will perhaps start liaising with the judiciary. But more than anything else, I can feel the presence of The Mother very strongly. I am here to participate in realising Her Dream.

*As told to Manas*

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