

## Summer Reflections



PHOTO: GIORGIO

Summer in Auroville is not the most popular time of year, yet it has its rewards. The pace of life is less hectic – there is time for real conversations with real people rather than the rushed exchange of nervy emails – and nature, as if to challenge the incessant assault of the sun, throws out its blossoms, flowers and scents in profusion.

It is also a time for reflection, a time to reconsider why we are here and what is preventing us moving faster towards our individual and collective goals. So it's appropriate that in this double issue we touch upon the deeper dimension of our lives through personal introspections, and we debate two of the subterranean fault lines which have divided us and hobbled our progress over the years, namely divergent attitudes to the Galaxy plan and to our economic ideals.

Our summer issue is also traditionally an opportunity to celebrate the arts in Auroville – in this case, the photographs of Giorgio – and to update progress in key areas of our activities. So we catch up with Village Action which, along with other Auroville productive units and outreach groups, is about to embark upon a major new project to promote small-scale enterprise in the bioregion.

Garden of Consciousness at Matrimandir

## "We are all part of something we don't fully grasp"

Deepti has been involved for many years with education in Auroville and at present teaches in Last School

### What was it that led you to come to Auroville?

I don't have a sense of ever choosing Auroville. I discovered Sri Aurobindo thanks to my parents who brought me here just after I had passed my school exams. My father, Krishna Tewari, had had a profound experience, as a senior officer in the Eastern Command during the Bangladesh war, and he brought the family to Pondicherry to see if this was the source. So Sri Aurobindo came into my life at the most opportune moment when I had finished one thing and I had to decide what to do next. Coming to Pondicherry, having Mother's darshan, 40 years ago in 1972, was like an answer to everything I had asked. It gave my life its direction.

Growing up in India, I grew up exposed to a living spirituality. But the answers provided were not satisfying. The spiritual aim seemed to be all about finding a solution outside of life. Then you come to Sri Aurobindo and he says that a life divine is not only a legitimate aspiration of a humanity that is a transitional species, but this divine life is an evolutionary inevitability on earth. This was just marvelous. He spoke to the kind of mind I had developed; a mentality that was encouraged to question things.

When I came to Sri Aurobindo, I was still a teenager. My sense was of coming to Pondicherry to give myself to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and there was no further idea beyond that. It seemed to evolve somewhat inevitably that as a young energetic person, I would move to Auroville rather than stay on at the Ashram. There is something very wonderful about the Ashram, but the future, the energy of

self-expression into an unknown tomorrow seemed much more compatible with Auroville.

I came to stay permanently in 1975. This was the time of the problems with the Sri Aurobindo Society; so I landed in the middle of a kind of "revolutionary" Auroville. It would seem I came to Auroville because an essential part of me was intended to be a part of a collective realization. Something within that has chosen to make an attempt to disappear as an individual ego and participate in an unfolding at this present moment in evolutionary time: the creation of a collective consciousness capable of holding the power of the future visioned by Sri Aurobindo's action.

### What does it mean to you to be an Aurovilian, in the deeper sense of the term?

My understanding today is that we are all part of something that we don't fully grasp. None of the

realizations of the past count in that wholeness of which each of us constitutes one element. We have entered a virgin forest; a territory never explored before as a species. In Auroville, we are part of something that is still to be created. Our individual work is to remove all shadows in ourselves. Mother says in the *Agenda*: one must stand in the Light of the Supreme Consciousness without casting a shadow. That is the demand of this new consciousness. The shadow is the individual egoism, and this ego is present right down to the most material physical. Hopefully, we have made a start on a very long journey. It's not as if this change is something we can bring about by our own effort. In Sri Aurobindo's yoga you are called upon to give yourself completely; the yoga will be done in you by the new consciousness creating the future.

It seems to me that everything Auroville presents itself as—an eco-village, sustainable on all planes, an international collective experiment evolving new forms of education, economy, governance—all of these are just means to that one end, which is to provide a material platform upon which that future evolutionary possibility can manifest.

### What kinds of effect has the community had on your personal development, how has it shaped you?

One of the things Mother says that I have used as a mantra for my own growth, is that when a blow comes, look within and see what the weakness is that invited the blow; then the blow becomes a bliss. I would say that in one way, living in this community has been difficult. When I first came to stay, I came from a

background that did not experience the 1960s the way Aurovilians from the West did. I grew up in an armed forces family, in an India subjected to three wars through my school years. Patriotism, love of your country, devotion, dedication, high ethical standards: these were the kinds of heroic values that I had around me. Then I landed up in Auroville, which was very counterculture, with an atmosphere of revolt and a breaking of social and moral patterns. So it felt a little like I had been hit on the head. I realised that I had been put by some deepest inner choice in a place where you have to shatter the mould: the mould of your ideals, whether they be mental ideas, moral-ethical ideas, ideas of aesthetics, or even your ideas of spirituality. In Auroville one has not been allowed the sense of settling into any kind of poise – the really good thing about Auroville is that it peels away all these protective skins. This can be painful or very positive; it depends on your consciousness at any given moment. I feel that Auroville has been dismantling me in many ways on many fronts; and one must embrace the process to be in a state of well-being. When you have freely chosen to subject yourself to this experiment, then you have no one else to complain to!

### What is your perception of the community spirit of Auroville?

I feel that there are a sufficient number of old-time Aurovilians with whom I seem to share a kind of inner bond which completely transcends outer connections: we are part of something inwardly that we have only just begun to touch

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# Letting go of all expectations

Anandi manages the Satchitananda Live Food Restaurant in Kottakarai

**What was it that led you to come to Auroville?**

Anandi: I saw it was my destiny. Nolini Kanta Gupta would come to meet my father at the Pondicherry Railway station where my father was a station master as well as a poet. Both took pleasure in sharing their poetry. I also went to Mother's last Darshan in 1973 and had a unique experience: I perceived that the Mother had called me. But it took another five years until I first visited her Samadhi. After that, for eleven years almost daily I meditated around her Samadhi. One day in 1991 I moved to Auroville after hearing the Mother's invitation through an inner contact.

**What does it mean to you to be an Aurovilian, in the deeper sense of the term?**

To me, when I read the Auroville Charter, or Mother's Dream, it excites me deeply. I recognized that I share Her dream. When I grew up as a Tamil kid, my parents raised me to be free of all the caste and creed systems, to commune with everybody, deep within, whoever they are, regardless of their forms, faiths, or religions that they follow. And the second part of that first point of the Charter, "But to live in Auroville, one must be a willing servitor of the Divine consciousness" was very attractive to me. It drew me and it sustains me until today. Everything rotates around that, it makes every experience a happy experience.



It has given me satisfaction that I could connect with all kinds of people here. My grandmother taught me to see the Divine in all, and that has been amplified here. That is something that Auroville contributes to me, and it has helped me to become a more loving person.

**Can you say more about how your experience in Auroville has shaped or changed you?**

It has been very fulfilling that I could find occasions to express my creativity. Food is the medium through which I express my love and

service to humanity. I was passionate about organic farming because I felt that chemicals were very harmful. When Sharanam invited me to manage the the Kottakarai Organic Food Processing Unit, I became fully immersed in promoting organic farming and this gave me an opportunity to express my creativity. When I started there were only five products, and then I added many more.

While working there I met a person from Canada who was eating only raw vegan foods. I wanted to learn more about it, and found a website for Dr. Gabriel Cousens from the Tree of Life Rejuvenation Center in Arizona. I applied for a 10 weeks course called Spiritual Nutrition, to which I went in 2008. The study and experience so deeply moved me that I wanted to transmit the same knowledge and experience to others and to help them benefit from it. To me the benefits are not so much in the gross physical, because I was already quite healthy, but in the subtle physical. Something happens to the core and the repercussions affect the periphery and vice versa. It makes it easier to meditate and commune with the Divine. There is a spiritual, emotional, mental acceleration.

Every step in this work was beautiful because I was able to connect more deeply with the Divine. I could make a big step towards consciously surrendering to the Divine, receiving the Divine guidance, and feeling the Divine Presence in me which governs me and rules

me. I could become more easily a pure instrument for it and see its play in me.

It also made me more detached. I wanted to raise funds to build a Live Food Centre from where I can serve raw vegan foods and educate. I had the opportunity to test out Mother's words that every true need will be fulfilled, but not greed. So I put my request, knowing if it was a true need, it will be supported by Her. It was a very lovely experience. So far, 60 lakhs have been received. Now, when I look back, I am totally amazed and happy that I could be an instrument to make an asset for Auroville.

I am letting go of all expectations about how things should be. People often ask me, "How is everything going for you?" I have to say, very well, because that is how it is, I feel I am well taken care of. Every moment is a clear proof that somebody is guiding and directing me. I just need to flow with the music. This is my personal journey.

**What is your view of the collective spirit of Auroville at present?**

I see many things which are not satisfactory which are happening in Auroville. A part of me is frustrated to see how Auroville is being misused but deep down I am convinced that what is possible for me right now is to change myself.

Larry

## "We are all part of something..."

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and grasp to some extent. As for work, I have been associated long with a group of people, and it is marvelous to work with them. There are times when, with other people, you don't quite comprehend what they are doing or from where their action arises. But on the whole it works just fine if you don't put labels on it. You say, okay, we're part of something together; it's a journey into a conscious collectivity we are making together. And one accepts not to understand!

Also I think Auroville spoils you for other situations. It has a unique flavor and taste constituted of this absolute freedom that Mother made the core of the experiment. The only pressure that really works here is the pressure of consciousness, which may depend upon your transparency before the forces of the future. Such an atmosphere, such an intensity of collective acceleration you don't find anywhere else in the world.

One of my senses of the new consciousness is that it is a consciousness of absolute harmony and equality. So if there is disharmony within or without, then you are certainly not in the new consciousness. We will touch the soul of Auroville when we touch all those highest truths that humanity has aspired for, whether it is Supreme Beauty, Supreme Good, Supreme Truth, Supreme Harmony, and Supreme Perfection.

The trajectory of Auroville is aimed very high. At the present point, I don't see either in my consciousness or in the collective consciousness, the élan that would allow us to evolve from our caterpillar human nature into the butterfly of the future even in a generation or two. So while my faith in arriving has solidified, so has my understanding of how far one has to travel. But Sri Aurobindo says it is the 'hour of the unexpected' and the last word on Auroville rests in hands of that unforeseen Grace that created it!

Larry

## To be an Aurovilian is to be who you really are

Shakti is an artist

**What was it that led you to come to Auroville?**

The first thing which touched me so much when I knew that Auroville existed was the possibility to have answers to the questions I always had. Questions like Why are we here? Why is there this life? Why is there this creation? Nobody could give me the answers.

Then my brother and I started reading some literature. We found Sri Aurobindo's *Bases of Yoga* translated into Russian on typewritten copies, not yet published, and we started reading it. We also read the *Bhagavad Gita* translated into Russian. It gave me answers but also more questions. But I felt, yes, something is there. We couldn't realize what Sri Aurobindo was writing about until later. Then *Sri Aurobindo or the Adventure of Consciousness* by Satprem was published in Russian and it was a big boon. It was like butter and honey on my heart. Then I knew what I was searching for.

Then in the *Pravda* newspaper I read an article about Auroville, that a place existed where everybody could live, and it didn't belong to anyone in particular but to the world as a whole. The correspondent for the newspaper said that all nations were there except for Russians. I started dreaming about this place with my girlfriend, and we would talk for hours, how can we go to this place? I thought I would give everything I had just to get there.

Then my brother went to Pune University and disappeared for one year. I was stuck in the Ukraine with many responsibilities. Then he phoned me after one year and said, "I am here, you can come." I couldn't come right away, but finally I came, alone, in 1994.

I had a strong preconception of what Auroville would be. For example, I was sure that all the Aurovilians would be going to the Matrimandir in the morning at 7 o'clock for meditation (laughs). What I saw and what I imagined were quite different. But what I felt when I first came was trembling golden particles in the air entering into our car and into our bodies. It was vibrating, something alive, amazing. I was so touched. And when I saw my brother Vladimir and where he lived and worked, I loved every-



thing about it. I had seen the red earth in my dream. Everything was incredibly beautiful. At the same time, I loved going to the Samadhi. It took me some time to collect all the different parts of myself. But I had found my dream and my aim in life: I came for Auroville.

**What does it mean to you to be an Aurovilian, in the deeper sense of the term?**

I like what Kireet Joshi said once: all of us who live here signed an agreement with the Divine long ago. Sometimes we don't want to do it, we cover it up, but we signed that agreement. To be Aurovilian is very different from being a Pondicherrian or an Ashramite. To be Aurovilian is to be responsible to yourself in front of the Divine, but not as a heavy burden. It comes the more you adventure within. It means to have a straight connection with the Divine. You have your own unique connection with the Divine and with all the other people who are living here as well.

It is a miracle what is happening here. We are working on ourselves and on each other. We are building the place where human unity has to happen. It is still far away, but it exists on some level. I feel it very well: it is not just a dream anymore. To be an Aurovilian is to be who you really are, more and more who you are, and to feel the Divine in each other and in yourself.

There was something which Sri Aurobindo said which I very much take as my guide to being in community: collaboration, empathy, and good-

will. Without these, no spiritual anarchy is possible. We have all the problems, economic, political etc. To solve them, it is very important for all these three to be together.

**Can you say more about how your experience in Auroville has shaped you or changed you?**

If I wouldn't have left Ukraine I would have died, I would have suffocated. My life was empty.

When I came here, my life started. I learned how to cycle. I learned all kinds of sports, I learned painting, I started playing music. It gave me all the possibilities to be what I am in my nature, and the instrumentation that my soul demands. I am full of joy to be here. I started seeing nature. I go to Matrimandir every morning at 5:30, and then the sun rises—bright orange, red. That's how Auroville is. It is very beautiful.

**Are there spiritual practices which keep you centered and grounded here?**

To be here is already a spiritual practice. If I was not looking for the spirit in myself and in everything, I wouldn't live here.

As for practices, whatever we do is dedicated to the ideal of the place—you live for the Divine, you give yourself to the Divine. If sometimes you do not remember in your outer mind, it is still in the background of your life. It is one decision we have made. I also do meditation and Iyengar Yoga regularly. It helps to keep the body in good shape, because the spirit wants a healthy body.

**What is your view of the community spirit in Auroville?**

The community is like a constellation of stars: we are all connected in some strange figure. But there are some people who carry the spirit more strongly, who are more bright and who radiate the light to others. I think that the spirit is moving in and among us and breaking forth in people. In some people, it is so solid, a completely different vibration. So when someone is in their presence, something is going to happen to them. They start to open more and more to that vibration.

Larry



# Auroville has expanded my consciousness

Ashesh works at Matrimandir and also gives introductory workshops on Integral Yoga

## What was it that led you to come to Auroville?

I came to Auroville in 2007 after living in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for 20 years. I was feeling very strongly that I wanted to express and share what I have learned and understood in ways which are not part of the Ashram's regular works. I wanted something which was a little more open and lifelike. It was a gut feeling, a very strong instinct. I waited for a long time to verify whether this feeling was correct or not, and felt that it was supported by the inner working.

## How has life in Auroville been different from life in the Ashram?

For the inner life, the Ashram and Samadhi for me are places to develop the experience of the known, while Auroville and Matrimandir give experience of the unknown. The Ashram life is more for the inner concentration. You accept the life circumstances, you may work on them, mainly to learn your inner lessons, but you do not try to mould them as you try to mould and give them a new shape in Auroville. In the Ashram you are given a life which was set by the Mother. Here she gave only wide guidelines. There is a vision, and there is this baseline that this is a place to practice Sri Aurobindo's yoga, but there are no rules. So that makes it more challenging, and also more interesting. Generally speaking, here you can feel the inner concentration, but you still have to work to maintain it because there is also the rush of the creative energies. Here there is a wide, rich possibility for extending this inner experience into outer life.

## What does it mean to you to be an Aurovilian in the deeper sense of the term?

To me, to be an Aurovilian means to be someone who deeply aspires, who burns to understand the vision and life of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and who learns it in daily life by practicing their yoga. So to be an Aurovilian in the first place would mean to work in the consciousness, and secondly, and perhaps

simultaneously, to work to manifest their vision as a city.

We know that in her last years Mother spoke of Auroville most frequently. She described Auroville as the only hope for the world. How people come together to work for the manifestation of this vision is going to make the occult difference. This means that our work here requires a lot of contemplation, a lot of expansion of consciousness, it means trying to understand other people's views, other people's ways of aspiring, and harmonising with them.

## How has your experience of life in Auroville shaped or changed you?

Auroville has truly expanded my consciousness. Having lived in the Ashram first, here I learned to project my inner life into the circumstances of daily life. I am still learning, and it is very challenging. When I read the Mother and Sri Aurobindo now, I can understand the larger context.

When I worked with visitors in the Ashram museum I was practicing seeing the Divine in the visitors I was receiving. Here I worked in the Visitors Center and in the Matrimandir and saw that it is the same kind of thing, but in a vaster, richer way.

It is easy to see that Auroville is a major hope for people. People from all over the world come here to learn about this new experiment, about the glow, the shine in people's eyes, but alas, they do not really find the clue. Young people visiting Auroville do understand that there is some deep substance here, but then they do not



know how to approach it. So I came to the conclusion that we need to talk to them.

This led me to give some lectures in Auroville on Sri Aurobindo's yoga. Later, I started giving Inner Work Workshops at Savitri Bhavan, which are open to all, to introduce Sri Aurobindo's yoga and Their overall vision. My wife, Vera, assists me in this and we use multimedia presentations, texts by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and film clips as a basis for discussion with the participants. We make it a point to introduce Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's books as a part of the workshop, because this remains our main support for practicing Sri Aurobindo's yoga and the idea is to emphasise the practice of yoga, not just to talk about theories. We want to let people turn directly to the living guidance of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo and not depend upon the teacher.

## What is your view of the collective or community spirit in Auroville?

I sincerely hope that our community is an occult laboratory of the Mother and is representative of all humanity. As in the rest of the world, we still have much to do for the discovery of our soul-rhythm, but we are fortunate to have the guidance of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

I believe that collectively, as we contemplate the Mother's vision of a universal township and implement her guidelines in our lives, and individually, as we use our energies in the practice of the Integral Yoga rather than trying to convert others to our views and ways, we will be nearing the discovery of Auroville's soul. Those of us who are here for the Mother's purpose are still evolving the collective tools needed to express the vision—intuition, silence, trust, mutual respect and supportiveness. I believe that as we turn more and more exclusively towards the guiding Truth, the ways of higher harmony will spontaneously emerge amongst us. I dream of being with Aurovilians who will be so intuitively perceptive that we will not need to discuss so much and will be able to recognise and appreciate the manifestation of higher inspiration anywhere and through anyone.

I feel that Auroville has to be introspective and watch out for three pitfalls—indulgence, restlessness and narrow idealism. Firstly, we have people who have joined Auroville for life's common purposes and these can bring Auroville down to the level of self-indulgence. Then, we have restless people who accept ideas and inspirations from the world without first developing a strong base of inner experiences and psychic qualities and discrimination. Having only a little glimpse of the inner life, they expose themselves and Auroville to all kinds of unhealthy influences and can make Auroville into an arena of sensational experiences. Finally, we have numerous thinkers and idealists amongst us who study the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, but then are tempted to impose their interpretation upon others. These can make Auroville into a dreamland but not "the dream of the Divine!" We must check these tendencies in Auroville and within ourselves and learn to go beyond them.

I wish that we all understood what a gift we have been given and what it means to study Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and to open ourselves exclusively to their living and direct influence.

Larry

# A big mirror facing you all the time

Anandi works in Pour Tous Distribution Centre and the Housing Service

## What was it that led you to come to Auroville?

Like so many people, I and my partner Joseba had read about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, and then we read an article in a magazine about this ideal city, and we were absolutely taken by this idea. So we came and visited in 1988. That first visit was a very strange experience; it was very disorienting, a bit shocking, seeing the difference between the ideal and the reality at that time, but at the same time it was so touching. From the very first visit, there was a recognition that this was our place, even with all its crazy situations and impossibilities. There was still that powerful promise and presence which made it for us such a wonderful place to come.

The first time we came to see the Matrimandir, it didn't have its gold cover that it has today, but when we stood in front of that big concrete thing, there was such an atmosphere. It was as if a spaceship from another planet had landed there, and it had a pulsating vibration: we were completely surrendered to it. We went to Bharat Nivas and spoke to the one other Spanish person who was here at that time, Saranam, and she told us more about this ideal city. It all looked very interesting, but very primitive, with everything still to be done. It seemed it was an open field for doing experimental things.

When we returned to Spain, Auroville kept coming back to our minds, it was like something had taken hold of us. So the next year we came back again. Again we had a very enriching experience, and it was then that we decided to start planning to come for good. But it took us some years to move to Auroville as some friends of ours convinced us to start an Auroville International group in Spain. So we started this group with other people who had visited Auroville before. We also opened a shop to sell Auroville products.



manifestation of Auroville. I aspire to become a channel of that Force that wants to manifest the true Auroville, the true Aurovilian in me. I aspire to surrender every minute of my life to that Force, and to progress, even if it is little by little.

## How has your experience in Auroville shaped or changed you?

Auroville has the capacity to constantly put us in front of our challenges, our aspirations, and that is what is unique here. You don't come here to sleep; you cannot forget things here. It is like there is a big mirror facing you all the time and questioning you. If you don't want to look, there is always something that shakes you. You cannot forget what we are called to do here, you cannot escape it.

## What does it mean to you to be an Aurovilian in the deeper sense of the word?

First of all, I don't consider myself an Aurovilian because what the Mother described as the true Aurovilian has nothing to do with what I am. I aspire to be an Aurovilian, and I am a resident and worker of Auroville. To me, Auroville is a big gift in my life. It means that I have received this great opportunity, this amazing grace, to be able to live here and breathe this atmosphere, and contribute a little bit to the

There is need for constant inner work, constant aspiration, even in conversations with people, in the work, in everything. That is what is great about this place, and that is what makes it a very different life.

Of course, I've also had so many experiences which I don't think I would have had somewhere else. There are so many little miracles that happen all the time. Why did I have any fear or doubt? Auroville is a miracle, and in spite of everything, it continues to be a miracle. But we don't deserve it; we are so unconscious. We are like children who have been given a golden gift, and we are playing with it as if it is a football.

## What is your perception of the community spirit of Auroville, that inner dimension of the collectivity?

There is something very deep that unites us. We are all a part of a big family that is spread all over the planet. Little by little, each one of us is coming back to being together and it is the soul in us that is bringing us here. But our surface personalities are so impossible. We find it very difficult to act collectively. Our highest ideal is human unity, and our biggest challenge is human disunity. We are working from the mud to the higher levels. Conflicts consume so much energy in Auroville. We have to decide things, but we don't know how. We seem to like anarchy much more than organization, probably because unity has to be found on another basis, by another way of approaching things.

But I know that deep in ourselves is this great unity, and that is what keeps us here—maybe fighting with each other, but still recognizing that we are brothers and sisters, part of that big family. So I honour every single person who is living here, because I know their souls brought them here, and there is a deep reason for their being here. I hope that little by little we will discover how to express this inner unity in our outer practical lives. I really pray for that, because we cannot continue with the dangerous luxury of being so disunited.

Larry



## The city is a means not an end

**F**ifty four years ago, the Mother foresaw the financial and environmental crisis in which humanity is presently engulfed: *We want to be the example of true living in the world. It's a challenge I am placing before the whole financial world: I am telling them that they are in the process of withering and ruining the earth with their idiotic system; and with even less than they are now spending for useless things – merely for inflating something that has no inherent life, that should be only an instrument at the service of life, that has no reality in itself, that is only a means and not an end (they make an end of something that is only a means) – well then, instead of making of it an end, they should make it the means. With what they have at their disposal they could ... oh, transform the earth so quickly! Transform it, put it into contact, truly into contact, with the supramental forces that would make life bountiful and, indeed, constantly renewed – instead of becoming withered, stagnant, shrivelled up: a future moon. A dead moon.* (Mother's Agenda, 04.10.58)

Considering that Auroville wants to be 'the city the earth needs' and the earth's present state, this text should be given as much importance as 'A Dream' because – though they both predate Auroville's launching – they describe two different aspects of the new and more ideal society our community aims at becoming.

The task The Mother undertook, first with the Ashram and then with Auroville, was to give birth to a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness. Our city has to express and embody this new consciousness but, as in all spiritual matters, the outer can only reflect the inner. So our focus has to be on the quality of our individual and collective consciousness, which will then be reflected in the quality of our society and, in turn, in the quality of our city. This logic is inescapable: however inspired and talented were their planners and architects, none of the world's would-be ideal cities has ever given birth to a more ideal society, whereas a more ideal society should be able to create a more ideal city.

Giving birth to a new and more ideal society requires two simultaneous transformations: that of the individuals, the Aurovilians (an inner development leading to the union with the Divine Presence), and the social transformation of their society (the establishment of an environment favourable to the flowering and growth of the individual) and, to this effect, three programmes for a new consciousness need to be carried out: 1) a new unending and integral education, 2) a new internal economy and, 3) a new organisation and system of governance.

### Is Roger's 'Galaxy' concept a means or an end?

In my view, the Galaxy model is a sculpture which conveys very well the image of beauty, harmony and dynamism which should emanate from Auroville. Considering the brief he was given at that time (March 1967), Roger did an excellent work –

BUT this brief changed considerably during The Mother's lifetime and circumstances changed it further since then.

Some Aurovilians affirm that the Galaxy is a 'vision' of The Mother which Roger conceived in close collaboration with Her and that hence it can only be modified very marginally. Such was not the case. Roger conceived the four models he presented to The Mother in Paris. He visited Pondicherry once in 1965, twice in 1966 and once in 1967. The Mother was very happy with his 'Nebula' model, happy with his 'Galaxy' model and I am one of those who believe that she would also be very happy with an evolution of the latter.

On 9th March 1966 Roger presented two concepts to The Mother: a rectangular concept which She rejected and a 'Nebula' model based both on Her sketch of the town and Her symbol, which She approved. The next day She wrote to Huta: "Yesterday I saw only the plans and models of the town that are simply wonderful, just as I wanted them to be." On 23.4.66, She told Satprem: "The city exists already, and what is remarkable is that I had sim-

which looks like a galaxy – hence its name. She referred to it only twice in Her Agenda – on 20th and 23rd April, 1968 – at one point referring to it as "one of the plans for Auroville".

### Faithful is better?

Some Aurovilians are convinced that the more faithful we are to the original Galaxy model, the better it will be. Others, like me, consider that the city (and any concept of it) is not an end but a means, that its dynamic shape should be retained but its plans should be modified whenever they contradict our objectives. These are 1) to build the home-cum-laboratory of a new and more ideal society expressing and embodying a new and higher consciousness 2) to provide the model of a truer and higher life, which is simplified so that its residents' higher qualities have more time to develop, while their society remains self-supporting, 3) to provide an example of a more sustainable development and, 4) to develop an International University, which The Mother described as the key to Auroville's reason for being.

Unfortunately, the Galaxy model does not further some of these objectives. For example, in its present form it is hardly an illustration of a 'simplified life' but reflects the optimistic outlook of the 1960s with its huge mass of reinforced cement concrete, its high-rise 'lines of force' (up to 15 storeys high), multi-level circulation system for vehicles and pedestrians and extensive network of water bodies and canals.

Also, as it was planned without any reference whatsoever to the site, the Galaxy doesn't show any concern for sustainable development and can only be perceived as an imposition on Auroville's natural and human environment.

In fact, for Auroville to become the city the earth needs and the town of the future it has to constantly re-assess the needs of the time and respond to them. And the reality is that since 1967 the world's population has more than doubled, natural resources are fast depleting, and pollution and other forms of environmental degradation are showing us clearly that by enjoying a western type of lifestyle, hundreds of millions of citizens of the world are destroying entire life-support systems. The western model of development, of which the Galaxy is a fine example, is definitely not the future.

I am convinced that, more than ever, the earth and humanity need what The Mother called the example of true living in the world and that, despite all our community's failings, Auroville is still the place on earth which has the greatest potential to become that, provided it implements more seriously the three above-mentioned programmes for a new consciousness rather than giving any particular shape to our city.

As Roger himself said in a 1972 filmed interview: "This city won't be build first and then occupied; it will be the inhabitants who will define the city's needs out of their experience."

Gilles Guigan



The Galaxy concept for the city

ply given the broad outlines to Roger while asking him if he was interested. Then, he went back to France and received my formation (My old formation that I had left dormant); over there, he received it. It interested me a lot..."

In early 1968 he presented to Her his fourth and last model

## Building a Cradle

*"The city will be built by what is invisible to you. The men who have to act as instruments will do so despite themselves. They are only puppets in the hands of larger Forces. Nothing depends on human beings – neither the planning nor the execution – nothing! That is why one can laugh."*

The Mother - September 1969

**I**n March this year a member of the Auroville Town Development Council drew my attention to the following quote by the late, Margaret Mead, who is admired by many:

"Artificial blueprints of new towns prove highly unsatisfactory: the most imaginative architects are still struggling to come up with fully satisfactory ways of embodying the process of living in the process of the design."

The person who sent me this quote was convinced that the Galaxy model of Auroville was outdated, is an "artificial blueprint", and that Auroville must grow "organically". This is not the first time that we hear the argument of the galaxy design being outdated. Someone else had told me that the zoning idea was outdated and that the four zones as given in a sketch by the Mother have no relevance in today's urban planning standards and approaches.

Another view often heard is that the town of Auroville can only be built when the present residents reach a certain level of consciousness, unity and consensus and that the city will be the expression of that consciousness, unity and consensus. Yet another view we hear is that Auroville needs to be a sustainable township that develops organically without fixed plans.

### Vision or Artificial Blueprint?

The Mother has seen Auroville and it took Roger hundreds of sketches and several models

before she confirmed that he had caught her vision. He then worked with her on developing those plans in what became known as the "Galaxy Plan". The plan for the Auroville township is not an "artificial blueprint" but the expression of a vision. Also, in the case of Auroville it is not an issue of "embodying the process of living in the process of design". In the context of Auroville the "design" has to act as a catalyst to change and transform the living.

The design of Auroville came down through a vision and will not embody the process of living as we know it today. Both the Auroville Charter and the Auroville Galaxy plan are evolutionary tools. It is not the Charter and the plan that need evolving. They evolve and transform us, while we hopefully rise to the level of consciousness at which they were conceived. The Auroville vision is timeless, has no date, and can therefore never become outdated.

### Consciousness first or town first?

In February 1971 the Mother was asked (about Matrimandir construction) whether "only Aurovilians will do the work or will there also be hired workers and other people of good will?" She responded: "It is preferable that the work be organised without paid labour so that it is sure to continue in all circumstances."

An Aurovillian was upset with the inclusion of more and more external labour into the building of Matrimandir: he felt that the Aurovilians have to inject the right type of consciousness into the Matrimandir building even if that would make the construction take much longer. He wrote to the Mother to request that only Aurovilians and voluntary workers should work at Matrimandir as they could put their consciousness into the matter. The Mother answered: "Build it, I will make it a very strong centre, but only those who are capable will perceive it."

On another occasion some Aurovilians were not happy when Roger told them that Mother had instructed that Matrimandir should be built by a contractor as the progress of work was too slow. The Aurovilians were convinced that Roger had "influenced" the Mother into saying that a contractor had to be brought in. Another regular visitor to the Mother was asked to verify with the Mother whether the instruction to engage the services of a contractor to accelerate the work were truly hers. When they approached him soon after his visit, they were told: to me the Mother even mentioned the name of the contractor. The work had to continue in all circumstances and be completed within a time frame.

The consciousness of the present and future residents may or may not change through the process of the building of the city. The Mother has her own plans for that city and those plans may become clear to us as we grow. Meanwhile let us deliver to the Mother what she had requested: a living laboratory of evolution that has the form and shape of a galaxy and is a town for 50,000. The Mother wanted the town to be built within a time frame (10 years) and she considered appointing contractors if funds could be found. It is still possible to build the town with a sense of urgency as the vision is timeless.

### A sustainable town, growing organically?

This writer is a strong proponent and committed practitioner of sustainability in the areas of energy, water, agriculture and mobility, to name but a few. Auroville today is not sustainable in terms of energy, water, agriculture, economy, human resources and forestry by any definition of that word. Nothing prevents us, though, from building a sustainable town on the basis of the Galaxy concept. The Galaxy Plan and sustainability are not two opposite propositions.

However, in the context of Auroville and the

vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, we have to also ask ourselves what needs to be sustained. Most sustainability initiatives in the world are aimed at making sure that life as it can be sustained without depleting natural resources or damaging the environment beyond repair. But in the context of Auroville, rather than creating an environment for sustenance we need to create an environment that transforms and goes beyond life as we know it today. Without that, Auroville would be yet another "eco-city" instead of what it was meant to become: a "transformer". The purpose of Auroville is not to sustain what we have and who we are, but to create the conditions for the transition to the next level of being, and ultimately the transformation of matter itself. Auroville will need to be a sustainable evolutionary tool for transformation, not for sustenance.

Sri Aurobindo's vision includes the notion that man is a transitional being and his yoga is aimed at a conscious hastening of the evolution towards a new species. The Auroville township is just one of the many tools and instruments that may enable this process of hastening of the evolution and the transition. Instead of all the time doubting the validity of this evolutionary tool, we need to help manifest it in both the physical and non-physical plane and become willing participants in the journey of change and transformation. Mother referred to Auroville also as "the cradle of the superman". Let us build the cradle instead of debating it.

On 23rd April 1968 the Mother proposed to write the following text under a photograph of the Galaxy model of Auroville: "The Divine Consciousness manifested through human unity".

Toine van Megan



# Auroville's ideals and free market system are not incompatible

Here is how The Mother envisioned the Auroville economic system, the way I understand it:

There are to be no compulsory contributions.

Every Aurovilian is to contribute voluntarily through work or in kind. Money is to be contributed by people with large savings and by those who have sold excess goods. Auroville provides the basic needs for all.

Auroville is to be self-supporting. (However, construction of Auroville buildings and infrastructure should be done with outside help to speed up the process.)

There must be no circulation of money among Aurovilians. By extension, this means that Aurovilians must not trade with each other.

There is to be no private accumulation of capital, no inheritance, no borrowing and no interest.

In essence, this means that all contribute in various ways and to varying degrees, depositing their contributions in a common pot. Then, all take out of the pot just enough to cover their basic needs. This can happen either directly and individually (e.g. through the Pour Tous system) or collectively through central planning (e.g. in the construction of roads).

## Problems with the theory

The first problem I see with this system is viewing the economy as a pool of resources that achieves nothing beyond the redistribution of those resources. This ignores the principle of "gains from trade": Trade does not simply rearrange wealth; it creates wealth. Even though trade does not add goods or services to the economy, their more efficient allocation results in greater wealth. When two people trade, both are better off — otherwise they wouldn't do it. Therefore, trade should be encouraged and made easier and more efficient. Instead, the proposed Auroville system systematically eliminates everything that could make trade efficient. For example, one of the greatest gains in efficiency comes from using money instead of bartering — a practice Auroville seeks to eliminate.

The reason many economists favour the market mechanism is that it facilitates cooperation among strangers. Nobody would suggest that all forms of cooperation require such a mechanism. For example, in a small group of



Financial Service

people — usually a family — the simple sharing of resources according to the "communist" ideal can work very well. This tends to work less well once one is asked to share with people one hardly knows. Aurovilians make an admirable effort to remove this barrier and treat each other as part of one family. While this can still work for a few hundred people, it simply doesn't seem realistic that every Aurovilian will care for thousands or tens of thousands of people the way they would for their close family.

The two main problems with communism fully apply to the Auroville economy: the incentive problem and the calculation problem.

Regarding the first, if you take from each according to his ability and give to each according to his need, you reward need and punish ability. This also tends to nurture a strong sense of entitlement where many goods and services are expected to be provided for "free". Moreover, this system rewards immediate gratification, because it prohibits or prohibitively discourages saving and the building up of capital. There is no incentive to work hard or efficiently or to produce anything that people actually find useful. This is because input is stressed and output is seen as less relevant. It is enough to demonstrate that you "put in an effort" or "serve the community" while there is little need to demonstrate the usefulness of your output.

By extension, this means that there is no incentive for training or for improving one's skills. Auroville also suffers from the so-called "tragedy of the commons": What belongs to everybody, nobody takes care of. Any misuse of resources is seen as "everybody else's

problem".

It is believed that the incentive problem can be solved through the practice of Yoga. A group of accomplished Karma Yogis may be able to ignore any given incentive structure and carry out their inner adesh. However, anybody who is not an accomplished yogi will — consciously and subconsciously — base their actions on incentives.

Concerning the calculation problem, without prices there is very little information on what is needed when and where, and how and where to get it. This also means that it

is very difficult for people to respond to shortages. Even if adequate information about such shortages was available, any commercial form of cooperation (including, for example, outsourcing) is prohibited.

It is said that a higher consciousness will be able to solve the calculation problem. Are we to wait for four to eight accomplished yogis to form a committee that perfectly administers the entire economic activity of 50,000 imperfect people?

## The System in practice

Unless the above problems are solved, Aurovilians will continue to respond to Auroville's economic reality in a combination of three ways: open violations of Mother's guidelines, covert "black market" activity and hypocrisy.

The first happens when an Auroville working group openly adopts a policy in direct contradiction to Mother's guidelines. Three examples would be: the Central Fund collecting interest on Aurovilians' savings, a withholding tax being collected under the name of "contribution" and the Economy Group calling for commercial activity useful to the outside.

The second consists of Aurovilians using market principles or processes in an underhand manner. One example would be Aurovilians privately renting out houses for which they are merely "stewards". There is also the danger of Aurovilians taking "free" goods and then selling them outside Auroville. In some cases, merely working outside Auroville may be frowned upon as not in accordance with

Mother's vision. Yet, in the current economic situation these practices are common, as many Aurovilians are dependent on outside sources of income to support themselves.

The third applies to instances of the first or second category when there is also an attempt to present one's activities as actually moving closer to Mother's guidelines. One example is the Financial Services account system which — while reducing cash circulation — does not reduce the circulation of money among Aurovilians; rather, it makes the circulation of money among Aurovilians more efficient. In fact, there are many examples in today's Auroville of preserving or reintroducing capitalism through the backdoor — often in a way that seems clearly inferior to a straightforward market system.

## Conclusion

To me the problems of the Auroville economic system, both as originally proposed by The Mother and as implemented by Aurovilians, appear insurmountable. Therefore, I believe that one of three things will happen: Aurovilians will continue to depend on outside funds, Auroville will go bankrupt or Auroville will adopt a market system.

According to my understanding, Auroville's goal is twofold: firstly, to achieve human unity and, secondly, to achieve or aid in a further step in evolution. Both are believed only to be able to happen as the result of the practice of the Integral Yoga. I believe that the practice of the Integral Yoga — including a collective attempt to practice it — is as much possible in a market economy as it is in a collectivist economy. I further believe that, until Aurovilians can fundamentally transform their economic behaviour through Yoga, the disadvantages of a collectivist system are not inherently preferable to those of a market system.

In summary, a better economy will come about through a change of consciousness, not through the attempt to arbitrarily impose certain patterns of economic organisation. In fact, every economy reflects the consciousness, values and priorities of its participants. A market economy simply does this more efficiently than any other system.

Daniel

(A longer version of this article appears on the Auroville website: [www.auroville.org/economy/reflections\\_on\\_av\\_economy.html](http://www.auroville.org/economy/reflections_on_av_economy.html))

## In search of the Auroville economy

Auroville is not primarily an economic project. Rather, it is an experimental project of a society in which a change of consciousness would gradually occur, if so chosen by its participants, and for which no pre-conceived model has been given — it has to be invented. But some of its elements are directly connected to the main pillars of economy: the absence of ownership of capital and the absence of internal circulation of money. The latter has two consequences: the disappearance of a market for goods and services and of a labour market. Of course, this appears to be a heresy, an impossibility, to any economist worthy of his title.

Economy is very much an activity of the Life-force and its different formulations would follow the ascent of the Life-force itself. There is thus an economy of plundering and pillaging, of pure domination and exploitation; there is, at a higher level, an economy of balanced trade for mutual advantages, then an increasing sense of mutuality and cooperation. In fact, we can see that in the world these different forms coexist at different levels. In a community based not only on mutual giving but on a spiritual aspiration of self-giving to a higher consciousness, a new definition would occur, changing radically the basic terms of economic life. It is up to us to decide to which level we choose to belong.

The economy of Auroville should be in tune with its ideals and the way they emerge and take form in our collective life. The present economic system of the world is based on egoism: each one is supposed to extract from others as much as he can at the least possible cost to himself. It is the foundation stone of economic thought and it is believed to bring prosperity and harmony. In

this system, money is indispensable for it is used to indicate how desirable is each good and service as well as to trade. In this system, the function of work is merely to earn one's living.

However, in a society like Auroville, where the aim is based upon giving and offering, where work is also an instrument of progress and self-perfection, money loses its main function because it cannot measure the quality and sincerity of the offering, nor the growth of consciousness. Our true need here is to find a work according to our nature so that we can grow through it, and for that to be possible a basic security has to be provided to cover the basic needs of bodily life (shelter, food, clothes, transportation, etc.). This security is necessary so that the work can be released from its economic necessity and finds its true place and true utility. This cannot be decreed nor mechanically organized from on top. But those who are ready for it should have the space and be given the support to experiment with it and make it grow into its fully developed form.

Among others things, money has the function to adjust the supply to the demand (through the market, which acts as a transmitter of information about expressed needs). In the absence of the internal circulation of money, how will this adjustment be realized? This is where we have to invent new processes rather than new structures of command and control. The collective must feel responsible to cover people's needs and anticipate them, and people must feel free to inform about what they need. Then solutions can be found in a spirit of mutual help and support. But this requires more human contact and exchanges. It requires another form of management... which is still to be discovered.

In our attempts at governance, we should never forget that we are here to explore and

experiment, not to "manage" people's lives according to a conceptual interpretation of the ideal. The emergence of an economy without circulation of money is therefore very much linked to our styles of management as well as to a redefinition of work within the perspective of constant progress and perpetual education. Governance, economy and education are part of the same system.

## Which masters?

According to the spiritual law, we grow by what we give more than what we take, and if Auroville is to become a spiritual community, this law would come more and more in front. As long as we belong to *artha* (interest) and *kama* (desire), we put ourselves under the necessity of serving those masters and the best we can hope for is a kind of intelligent bargaining of advantages between calculating egos. Probably our collectivity at present is somewhere in between those two paradigms. The present problem of our economic life is that we aspire to a spiritual life while at the same time resisting it. It is easy to blame the system for it, but it is basically a question of individual and collective sincerity. We cannot create a 'system' which is an expression of our ideals if those ideals have not become a living reality in our lives. But whatever the imperfection of our present state, there is an economy of giving and offering by which we live and grow, and which has made Auroville possible until now.

To institutionalize a return to ownership and a market economy regulated by money because we are 'not yet ready for our ideals' would be a confession of failure. The aim for the moment is not to achieve our ideals in their splendid totality but to keep open the way of experimentation,

learning and progress because it is by walking it that the path is created.

The real question is what is valuable to us and what price we are ready to pay for it. If progress in consciousness is highly valuable to us, how do we associate that with our activities of production and consumption? It might be that a significant part of our production and consumption is made up of intangible values. What cannot be billed is not invisible, however. A system where material needs become less demanding and where people focus on consciousness and self-perfection should be more efficient economically than the consumerist and capitalist system, because you should get more creative output at a lesser cost. However, at present we are collaborating grudgingly to the movement of progress required from us, thus missing the true collaboration of the vital being which The Mother described as follows:

*"But the true reaction, the pure reaction is an enthusiastic impulse of collaboration, to play the game with all the energy, the will-power at the disposal of one's consciousness, in the state one is in, with the feeling of being supported, carried by something infinitely greater than oneself, which makes no mistakes, something which protects you and at the same time gives you all the necessary strength and uses you as the best instrument. One feels one is working in security, that one can no longer make any mistakes, that what one does is done with the utmost result and—in delight..."* (Question and Answers, 2/1/1957)

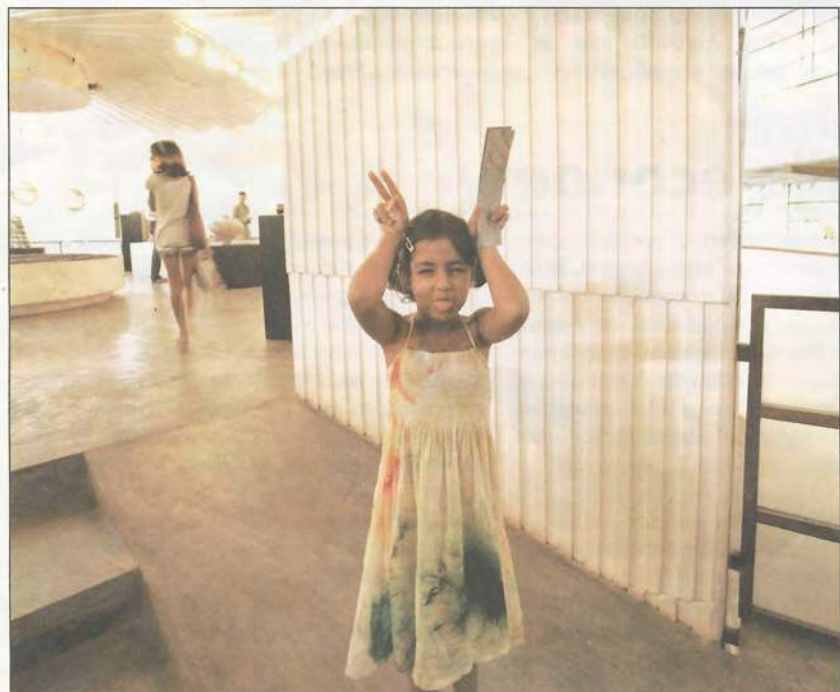
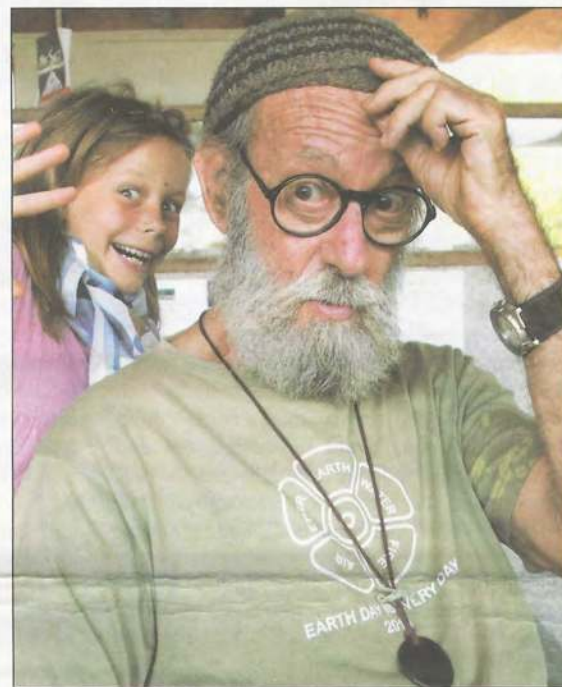
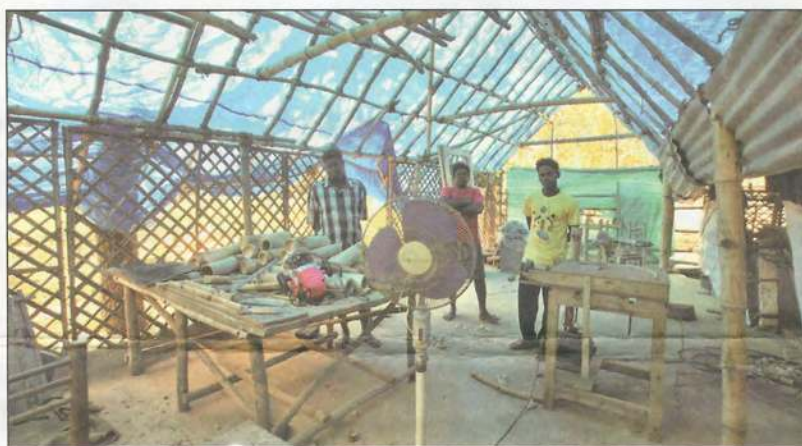
Reading this, I suspect that at present we are confronted with a consciousness issue rather than an economic one, and there is no economic answer to that.

Jean-Yves





## Giorgio's Auroville





# Mohanam Cultural Centre summer art camp

Based in the village Sanjeevinagar, a key aim of the Mohanam Centre is to act as a bridge between Auroville and the villages. During the second week in May, the Centre's annual summer camp took place. Children from three villages (Alankuppam, Kottakarai and Sanjeevinagar), aged from six to 14, were invited to the five day art camp which focused on human unity and environmental awareness.

On the first day, May 8th, 120 children experienced, for the first time, the Matrimandir. Their expressions, as they streamed out, ranged from 'It was always my wish to go inside the Matrimandir' to 'I never knew a place like this existed'. Ezequiel and Dror, two of the main volunteer organisers, said that for them 'the highlight of the camp was when the children filled the Matrimandir with their energy'.

This kicked off a journey of exploring, with teachers from many corners of the world through various forms of art in connection to the workshop themes. The children were told stories and shown films, and participated in games and workshops, which included many traditional Tamil arts regularly taught at Mohanam. Awareness through the body, bamboo jewellery making, drawing and dance, as well as percussion, pottery and the making of instruments and flowers and other objects out of waste were all introduced. Long-time Aurovilian Johnny gave a popular theatre drama workshop and stop motion film animation was demonstrated, too.

Whilst always inviting anyone who wants to



PHOTO: GIORGIO

Visiting Matrimandir

be involved, this year much of the planning was handed over to volunteers. Actually, because of the tight financial situation, Mohanam was facing the possibility of not being able to fund the 2012 camp. But when it was proposed that a camp could still be done with little to no money, Balu Sundaram, the coordinator of the Mohanam and the Auroville Bamboo Centre,

was supportive.

In addition to the Matrimandir and the Mohanam Cultural Centre itself, events took place at the Town Hall, Youth Centre and Eco Services. Transportation was an added challenge and this year's camp was greatly supported not only by people giving of their time and expertise, but also by the likes of SAIER

Transportation and Cyclone Relief, who provided transportation between sites.

As much as this was about creating a creative space for the children, the week also provided plenty of learning opportunities for the adults who embarked on the experiment. They had to manifest human unity though working together. It is not easy to work in such a very cross-cultural environment and people continually came up against communication challenges. Things did not always work out and at times chaos seemed to reign. However, in the end all involved felt that the objective had been achieved: a week of unique experiences for the children, pointing towards unity and expanded environmental awareness.

Sarah Freeman of the Mohanam team expressed a sincere thank you to all who gave of their time and resources. She added, 'At times working together can be a great challenge when you look to the higher goal that you are working for, then there is no doubt in your heart why you are doing it. One of the main lessons I learned through this experience is, if we all put some focus on the dynamics of working together, we might be able to co-create the dream as the Mother intended.'

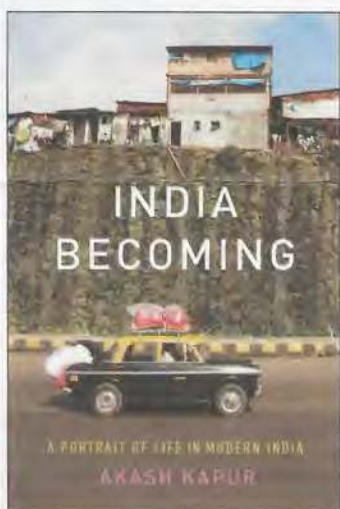
Balu was glad that the camp had gone ahead. 'I just hope that Mohanam and the Bamboo Centre will be able to put on an equally inspirational event in 2013', he summed up, with a smile.

Petra

## BOOK REVIEW

## India Becoming: a portrait of life in modern India

Akash Kapur, whose childhood was spent in Auroville and who has now returned to live here after studying in the U.S. and England, has written a fascinating book on modern India. The book came out of his wish to make sense of the rapid changes which have transformed the subcontinent over the past twenty years. Growing up, as he did, in the grey era of the 1980s which preceded the deregulation of the Indian economy, he finds the new spirit of entrepreneurship, risk-taking, social mobility and other manifestations of a society in creative ferment, "exciting, even intoxicating". However, as he digs deeper, he is confronted with the shadow side: the casualties and destruction wrought by the rush towards modernisation which Akash characterizes as the 'Americanization' of India. (The title, *India Becoming*, is based upon Einstein's observation that the American people were "always becoming, never being".)



an illicit weekend in Mahabalipuram. Only Veena keeps bobbing above the waves, full of confidence that she can handle anything and anybody, but when she suffers sexual harassment at work and then contracts cancer even she is forced to re-examine her life.

And then comes the recession. This hits Hari and Ramadas particularly hard. In one early memorable episode, Akash has observed Hari on a wild shopping spree in a Chennai mall ("Now's not the time for saving. Now's the time for enjoying."). But suddenly Hari no longer has a well-paid job and has to spend his day dodging his creditors. "Everything is blank for me. I have no future." Meanwhile the big buyers are no longer coming to the cow auctions and Ramadas is making fewer and fewer deals. His response, however, is different from Hari's. He decides that the future is in land and he decides to use his deal-making talents in this much more lucrative market.

In fact, by the end of the book, all of these individuals have reached either a new point of self-knowledge or are once more, if more uncertainly, climbing the slope towards India's promised land.

Akash's assessment of modern India is qualified optimism. In the final pages, he imagines the evening shift beginning on Rajiv Gandhi Salai,

Chennai's IT highway. "So much was being broken in the new India. But I knew, also, that in those office buildings, in front of those computers and behind those glass panes, something remarkable – something inchoate, something full of promise yet still, in many ways, frighteningly undefined – was being built. A world was dying. I resolved to hold on to this conviction: that ineluctably, if at times haltingly, a new world was rising to take its place."

This is a highly intelligent, at times very moving, book about the blessings and bane of modern India. The decision to ground it in ordinary people's lives also gives it a depth and texture which other books on modern India, which tend to focus upon the larger issues of the economy or politics, too often lack. I have one reservation and this concerns Akash's personal stance. When he writes, at the

end of the book, that "I was lucky to be part of the change, to be witnessing and living it every day...I was a privileged spectator, with a ringside seat at one of the greatest shows in history. The show was still unfolding. I resolved to sit just to sit back, stop trying to figure out what I thought of it – and enjoy it" it feels like an inadequate response to the moving, even heart-rending, stories which have been related to him.

In fact, Akash seems most comfortable in the role of an observer, of an outsider looking in. Even his crafted prose – and he writes beautifully – can be seen as a way of preserving his distance, of holding something at arms' length. I realize what I miss in him is a willingness to plunge in and examine the extent to which he personally is implicated in the complex process of India's modern unfolding. For while he has chosen to live here,

he is also one of the highly privileged, able to fly to Mumbai or even New York whenever he wants a change of scene. So how does that affect his relationship to modern India? / what responsibilities, if any, does he feel towards it?

Having said this, *India Becoming* is one of the most insightful, thoughtful and sensitive books on modern India that I know of. It should be required reading for anybody wanting to understand the promise, fault lines and underbelly of this complex subcontinent which is undergoing radical change.

Alan

*India Becoming. A Portrait of life in Modern India. Riverhead Books, 2012. \$26.95*

*Soon to be published by Penguin India.*

## PASSING

### Barbara

On Friday, 15th June, Barbara Heimlich (USA) left her body in the presence of her son, Akash, and John of Matrimandir. It happened in PIMS, where she had been taken for complications due to the colon cancer which she had been battling for some time. She was 68 years old.

Barbara came to the Ashram in 1969 and joined Auroville in 1972. Her dedication to The Mother's work and to the Matrimandir was absolute. After working for many years on the structure, she took up the vital task of keeping donors and well-wishers around the world informed of the progress of the project. Her regular newsletters were not only informative but also unfailingly uplifting, reminding us of the larger dimension of the work and of its importance to humanity. She was also, for the many people who could not visit or visit regularly, a wonderfully

warm and sympathetic link to what was happening here. She never seemed to forget a name, she unfailingly acknowledged all donations – always adding a personal note – and when individuals managed to visit, she would go out of her way to make them feel at home and highly valued.

Barbara avoided publicity: for her, the work was the main thing. She took to heart what The Mother had said, that work on the Matrimandir should continue without interruption, and all her efforts went into ensuring this. On hearing of her passing, a long-term friend wrote, she was "A true sadhak, servant and warrior for Mother. A true Aurovilian."



Barbara with Paolo Tommasi in 2007

This says it all.

Barbara's remains were cremated in Adventure on Sunday, 17th June.



# "Change is happening"

**For many years, the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) has been our main interface with the villages. It's an enormously challenging work. How are they doing?**

*Are there any new developments over the past year? When we last spoke, lack of funding was a big issue.*

Kathy: We have been reducing our activities for years because of funding complications. But now we and a sister organization of AVI Germany have raised the one crore rupees necessary to make an application to the German Government for a grant to enlarge our corpus fund. If all goes well, the Government will donate Rs 7.5 million (about 160,000 Euros). This is the minimum we need to create a sustainable business plan for the micro-finance programme.

Anbu: We are already working with about 200 Women's and 50 Men's Self-Help Groups and this money, if granted, will be used to provide additional small loans to the members. It will also enable us to start 50 new Women's Groups over the next two years. This project will help us cover the micro-finance components of AVAG, about 43% of our running costs, but it won't help support our other activities. However, we are about to participate in an Indian Government project called SEDAB ('Sustainable Enterprise Development in the Auroville Bioregion'), which we anticipate will cover another 40% of our costs.

Moris: In the SEDAB project we will work with more than 500 self-help members to promote enterprise development. Members will get training in a particular enterprise and then they will be supported to set up a production unit in their village. This is a three-year project, starting on 1st June, which will also involve other Auroville organizations working in outreach activities.

**One of the very crucial and sensitive areas that AVAG has worked on over the years is caste and gender discrimination. How are you doing here?**

Anbu: These are the main problems we are dealing with: casteism and gender inequality are huge issues. We have had to work very slowly and sensitively because our district, Villupuram, is one of the most caste-sensitive districts of Tamil Nadu, and caste-based politics are prevalent here.

Basically, our approach over the past 15 years has been to work with all the different caste and Harijan (or non-caste) communities to find ways of breaking down the barriers between them and bringing them together. Initially, we were very worried because we were not sure how the villagers would react. We began by talking about caste integration and gender issues in our AVAG meetings and seminars. Then we suggested that, as an experiment, two groups from different castes or genders could spend a day together to find out more about each other.

We decided to begin with the Women's Groups as we have worked more intensively with them. At first many of them were hesitant. Actually the Dalit groups had no problem with the idea of visiting a caste community, but caste women are brought up to feel it is a disgrace to visit a Dalit community and do believe that food cooked by Dalits is polluted.

At first, to help them get a new perspective on people irrespective of their castes, we took a group of women from different castes and groups to other organizations where Dalit women groups were active and had accomplished a lot for the development of their area. With this change in perspective we spoke of the exchange programme again with the women. Eventually a few Women's Groups volunteered. They spent a day together, during which they visited each other's houses, ate and played games together, watched documentaries on social issues and learned about the issues each group was engaged in. For some of the caste women it was the first time that they had ever visited a Dalit community, let alone taken food from them, yet it went very well.

Moris: However, during the AVAG labour crisis in 2004 we had to stop this programme because we were accused of being pro-Dalit and pro-women. It was disappointing because the



Members of Amudhasurabhi Women's Club of Annal Nagar (Dalit settlement of Alankuppam) greet the hosting club in Navarkulam (caste) village in a traditional Tamil way.

development workers we had trained and who were meant to be helping us implement this programme used it to try to turn the caste communities and politicians against us.

Anbu: After 2004 I didn't want to take up this activity again because during the labour crisis it was the most criticized activity. Post-2004, there was a big growth in the area of micro-finance, our loan portfolio expanded and we grew to 200 Women's Groups. Many women were very happy about this focus, but some of those who had been associated with the Village Action group for many years missed the other activities, including the caste and gender work. And I was also not at all happy with what I was doing; it was simply money-lending. So I was wondering what to do.

Then, gradually, after a gap of four years, we started to take up the exchange programmes again. It was difficult. We no longer had any funding for this activity, we had no experienced staff and we had to start from scratch with the new groups. We began by asking them to think about the aims and objectives of the self-help groups. Was it just to get loans or did they have something else to achieve?

Meanwhile, two donors provided temporary funding for the exchange programmes but this funding will end in August. We hope we find a new source because this work is so important.

**So the emphasis so far has been more on breaking down caste barriers than gender barriers?**

Anbu: No, the Groups are involved in both caste and gender exchanges. The gender exchanges pave the way for men and women to understand each other outside their routine domain. Actually I think there are many similarities between Dalits and women. Both are marginalized and both are treated as inferior and subjected to various forms of abuse.

**Regarding caste and gender issues in the villages, have you seen any change in attitudes?**

Anbu: I have a feeling that change is happening. For example, in one of our villages we have three Women's Groups. All belong to the same caste, but they come from different sub-castes, and one sub-caste feels itself superior to the others. Some years back a couple fell in love. The boy was from one sub-caste and the girl from another so it wasn't accepted by their families. They tried to escape from their families, but this led to murder and looting and from that moment on there was no communication between the different groups.

Of course, the groups would come to the AVAG office for functions, but then they would not sit together. Finally, we asked the group which felt itself superior if they would like to do an exchange with a Dalit group in another area.

As a group they said it was impossible. But when you asked them individually, they all said, "I don't have a problem with this idea but all the rest do!"

Finally we got them agree to try the exchange. We were worried: even on the morning of the exchange we were not sure if the group which felt itself 'superior' would turn up. But they did, and everything went fine: there was no discrimination, everyone mingled and we could see real happiness on their faces. The two visitors who accompanied us were so impressed that they became temporary donors for this exchange project. The same Group has since hosted a Dalit Group and not only did they treat them beautifully but they had the support of their husbands in this. These are signs of real change.

**Another big issue in the villages is alcoholism. Has there been any progress here?**

Moris: The Women's Groups are the ones who raised this issue because they are the ones who suffer most. We approached an Alcoholics Anonymous group in Chennai and they visited us and trained twelve of our men and women self-help members. They explained very clearly that alcoholism is a disease and has to be treated as such. They also offered treatment in one of their centres in Chennai for anybody who wished to stop drinking. Now a centre has opened in a local village and about twenty men have come forward for treatment. I don't want to paint a very rosy picture because it's a very small beginning, but at least treatment and expertise are available locally now.

**Is there a stronger relationship now between Auroville and the villages?**

Kathy: Actually, we are about to begin a Panchayat leadership training programme with the particular intention of fostering the link between Auroville and the village leaders.

Moris: We realized that generally the relationship between Auroville and the village leaders is issue-based: there is no effort in the villages to envision or work for the long-term sustainable development of the bioregion. So we thought we could take an initiative here. We have designed a programme for ten panchayats of villages close to Auroville (plus the local Member of the Legislative Assembly and Block Development Officers) in which, among other things, we introduce them to Auroville and Auroville groups who are doing work in the bioregion, and we explore the opportunities to work together for the sustainable development of the bioregion.

**There was an attempt to create village development councils before but this failed. Why? And**

**why do you think this attempt will be more successful?**

Moris: I was part of that earlier initiative. The problem was that at the first meeting we told the villagers we want to expand to 50,000 people, so they thought we would take over their villages. Also we asked them what they wanted us to do and they immediately came up with a big list. When we said we could not do all these things the villagers felt disappointed. That's why in this new initiative we will not discuss specific issues during the first meetings. Actually our hope is that the people who are interested in our approach will keep coming, while those who just want specific help will stop attending.

**Do you feel there is more support now from the larger Auroville community for the work that you are doing?**

Moris: The situation has improved, we don't feel isolated any longer, and now we have more contact with other Auroville groups. For example, in the SEDAB project we will be working with about ten other Auroville production units and outreach groups.

Anbu: The SEDAB project not only allows us to work with other Auroville units but it takes the Auroville experience and expertise to the neighbouring villages, something which I have missed in the past. It would be nice, though, if we had more Aurovilians working with us in Village Action.

Kathy: We've tried over the years to engage Aurovilians in activities like the Women's Day initiative but, on the whole, such activities have been very poorly attended. I don't think there's been a huge tidal change here.

**I think many Aurovilians look upon the work you do as a very tough challenge. There are no quick results for all your efforts. So what keeps you going on a day-to-day basis?**

Anbu: It's true I sometimes get burnt out and wonder what I am doing here, like when a particular woman who I trusted is found to have mismanaged things. But then I remember the positive stories. Like the exchange programmes, or when a woman comes and say she wanted to commit suicide ten days back because of family problems, but then she thought of Village Action and all the support she's received from the Groups so she changed her mind. Or when a deserted woman says she got her daughter married because of the support of the club and the Village Action Group. These stories make me feel happy, it's these stories that give me the energy to keep going. So while I have given a lot I have also received a lot.

Kathy: I came to Village Action because I was looking for mentorship. I had found myself knee-deep in a village project – the Thamarai project – without much sense about how to navigate the complexity of the work. So I started to hang out here to understand village issues more deeply, and in the course of conversations with Anbu and Moris the whole village development topic became more and more interesting for me. Also, while I'm not much engaged in fieldwork, I'm always struck by the energy of the women who come here. There's a light in their eyes and a real sense they feel they belong to something and are working together for something different.

Of course, I don't think village work is going to lead to big transformations quickly – I realize this is a very slow transformative process – but I believe in it. I'm not in it for the thanks, but more because I think it's a necessity. Auroville has to pay attention to what is going on in the villages, it's an integral part of our work here.

*From an interview by Alan*

*(If you wish to help, or for further information, contact [avag@auroville.org.in](mailto:avag@auroville.org.in))*



# "Experience a different culture and learn about yourself"

German volunteers speak about their year of service in Auroville

The 2012 annual meeting of Auroville International (AVI) Germany took place from May 17-20. Some ninety participants enjoyed the three-day programme of lectures, workshops, personal exchange and cultural performances. The atmosphere was joyful and relaxed, also due to the fact that more than a third of the attendees were former and future participants of the "weltwärts" volunteers programme who gathered to share their experience and expectations. This programme for young people aged between 18 and 28 is organized and subsidised by the German Ministry for Economic Relations and Development. AVI Germany has been accredited to send up to twenty volunteers to Auroville annually who all work in village-related facilities and services, such as schools or cultural centers like Thamarai, Deepam, Svaram and the Life Education Centre.

An in-depth preparation and supervision of the volunteers is one of the requirements from the Ministry, so four weeks of seminars have to be organized in stages. Before their departure they get a first insight into the Indian culture and receive their first Tamil lessons, taught by two ex-volunteers who study Indology. They are also given an understanding of Auroville's background, its multi-faceted functioning and practical challenges. To help them grow together as a group that will share an experience, which most returning volunteers describe as life-changing, the AVI Germany team has developed a wide range of games and exercises which foster group dynamics. Once they have arrived in Auroville, a support team of German Aurovilians helps them navigate their full year of service.

What are their main experiences? Since nearly all volunteers work closely together with local Tamil people or with Tamil Aurovilians they become aware of their own German or European mind-set, they discover the joy of becoming less dependant on known patterns of



Group of future volunteers

efficiency and directness and learn to sometimes just "go with the flow". Some of them not only work but also live in the villages, experiencing village family life, marriage celebrations, festivals and other events. Participation in a Tamil language course is a must, relations and friendships develop that often last beyond the year of service, so altogether the volunteers can be seen as good ambassadors in the villages for the ideal of human unity.

During this year's AVI Germany gathering one of the returning volunteers gave a little speech on his spiritual search, like two others had done in previous years. He described the big challenge of going from theory and ideal to practice, to the extreme confrontation with yourself, your mental, emotional and physical matrix – an experience Auroville more or less forces upon

you. Others spoke of Auroville as a place "that invites you to keep on searching", a place "where everybody is able to do and experience what his inner call tells him" or, very wisely, "Auroville is what you make out of it yourself". Only one big regret was expressed: that it is very difficult to get into closer contact with the corresponding age group of young Aurovilians, so the volunteers felt they spent most of their spare time in a "German bubble".

Shortly after the volunteers return to Germany they gather again for their last seminar. The "weltwärts" tutoring team of AVI Germany often experiences big changes in all of them. A growth in equanimity and flexibility helps to balance feelings of uncertainty concerning their professional future and gives them the confidence to "follow the inner call". So far, more

than a hundred volunteers have come to Auroville over the years but not one has ever expressed regret for having chosen to do service in Auroville. Many stay in contact with Auroville and AVI Germany, visit Auroville again and keep spreading "the message". As one of them expressed it: "Before I came here I thought I'm just heading off for a year of new experience and adventure, but after just a few months Auroville felt like my new home which I totally identify with."

The Auroville units and services offering places for the volunteers also give a positive feedback. They have benefitted not only from the volunteers' hands-on assistance but in situations of need, like the recent cyclone crisis, smaller or bigger financial aid was provided by the German Ministry.

And finally AVI Germany has also benefited, even though it requires a lot of administration and supervision to run the programme. Luckily, some of the ex-volunteers have engaged themselves in the work, helping, for example, in the selection of future volunteers: sixty to a hundred applications have to be assessed, the most fitting applicants have to be interviewed and finally selected.

It is always a big joy to experience the lively presence and energy of these young people in the annual gatherings. Our "weltwärts" activists Muna and Mira, who also run most of the seminars, have developed great skills in integrating all age groups in cultural and other activities. This year we enjoyed a musical programme prepared ad-hoc by the volunteers. Among other things, they sang a Michael Jackson song which they had reworded. Its refrain went like this:

Auroville is good for your karma  
Go there  
And if you only stay once  
It will remain within you for a lifetime.

Friederike

## "To have so much trust put in me is special"

Claudio is one of this year's group of weltwärts volunteers who are working in Auroville.

Here is his experience.

Claudio was born in Florence in 1991, to a German father and Italian mother. When he was three years old the family moved to Bonn, the former German capital. By the age of 19 he was keen to travel outside of Europe, to see something different.

During his final years of A-level studies, Claudio had decided to study medicine. But before embarking on that journey, he wanted to see the world. The *weltwärts* programme was recommended by a friend who had gone to Tanzania and it seemed to perfectly combine the aspects of travelling and doing something good for others.

Before applying, Claudio made a list of all of the countries included and then crossed out, one by one, those that were not of any particular interest. In the end one country remained: India. Claudio did not know much at all about India, so in that sense it was exotic, and it was far away.

Upon studying the projects on offer in India, he felt pulled towards Auroville. Not because Claudio had ever heard about the Mother or Sri Aurobindo, or had any particular interest in yoga or meditation. Simply, he says, 'the name sounded friendly, welcoming. To me, 'Auroville' was the name of a better place.' There remained only to fill in the application form and to wait.

Out of 80 applicants who wanted to go to Auroville this year, only thirteen could come. But a phone call from AVI Germany confirmed that Claudio was of them. This was in December 2010. In August 2011,

Claudio was to set foot in India for the first time.

It was during two preparatory seminars in Germany, in May and July, that he heard about Thamarai and chose this as his project. A project of the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG), the Thamarai centre is based in Edayanchavady village, a gateway village to Auroville. From



the outset, Claudio's intention had been to interact with local villagers.

"Thamarai" is the Tamil word for lotus. The name was chosen to inspire the work which was to foster the empowerment of the women, children and families of Edayanchavady.

All the *weltwärts* volunteers destined for Auroville arrived together. They were a close-knit group. Claudio and two others had already during the preparation seminars in Germany become good friends and wanted to

live together. Claudio and his friends eventually found a place to live in Alankuppam village.

In the beginning they felt a bit isolated. Not only were they in a new country, but Indian village life was a world altogether new to them. Alankuppam is located a little outside Auroville and the villagers seemed to regard the three newcomers with some uncertainty and suspicion. With time, though, there was real interaction with some of them.

Claudio had started to learn the local language, Tamil, before leaving Germany but in the beginning it was difficult to practice. The locals did not even understand that he was trying to speak Tamil. So he simply tried to understand the language. Now, to a certain extent, he can speak it.

Mixing with his Tamil colleagues was more straightforward. During his stay, Claudio has spent most of his time with Tamilians. Kathy (Australian) and Bridget (Irish) run the centre but whilst they do all of the important work to keep the centre running they have many other obligations and are not necessarily present every day. So Claudio has been taking care of the day-to-day running of the centre. This could mean that one day he would be gardening, and the next trying to get the electricity working, or reorganising the library.

Teaching was also part of it. Mornings would be focused on looking after the very young ones. In the afternoon children and youth aged four to 18 would arrive to do homework and other activities. Some young Tamil volunteers from Edayanchavady helped with this. On week-

ends, English classes were held for college students.

Claudio is sure that Thamarai is a good thing for Edayanchavady as the children who attend are from very poor families.

One of the experiences that Claudio most cherishes from his year here is the responsibility that he was given. It has helped transform his thinking as well as his behaviour. 'Having so many people depend on you and realising that it is up to you to make it all happen, being the one who is there morning and evening, is an incredible experience. To have so much trust put in me is something very special', he says.

Living and working in the villages as opposed to being within Auroville has also helped open his eyes. He admits that he still doesn't know much about the Mother or Sri Aurobindo. 'If I had seen the Auroville that it intends to be, perhaps I would have made the effort to read up about them.' However, referring to some 'ridiculously large Aurovilian houses with village servants', he says, 'I thought people came here to manage with less, but that is not what I have seen as a rule.'

He admits that he arrived with high expectations, but the way he believes many Western Aurovilians distance themselves from the Tamil culture and people he likens to the building of walls around one self. He doesn't want to criticize and admits to not having the answers. However, 'We are told that Auroville is in evolution and not perfect, but more than anything my experience here proves to me that people are the same all over

the world.'

Claudio adds that one Auroville community really impressed him: Sadhana Forest. To him, that is an authentic place. The sense of unity between people that he was expecting to sense in Auroville, Claudio found only here. He also very much appreciated the special space of the Matrimandir. In January 2012, he participated in a two-week Vipassana course in Chennai, something he would not have thought of doing before. Whilst he really struggled and 'only stayed because of the talk given by Goenka at the end of each evening', reflecting on it later he concludes that he loved it and will do it again.

Departing in August will not mean the end of his *weltwärts* experience. One week after the return to Germany, a week of seminars will help soften the shock that volunteers often feel when they return. Claudio is aware that he may feel like a stranger in his own country because he has gone through a transformative process which will cause him to look at it with new eyes.

Petra

### Correction

In our May issue we announced in his obituary that Njal had been cremated at the Adventure cremation ground. In fact, he was buried there. We regret the mistake.

Editors



# Living on gifts

**Ezequiel, a visitor, experimented during his stay in Auroville with living without money to promote a gift economy. He was helped in this by his friend Dror.**

If you were in Auroville this winter, chances are you met Ezequiel. Originally from Argentina he has been an unusual Auroville guest, hitching rides and begging meals. He found this opened him up to many new encounters, and you may have been one of those who received a Tetra Pak wallet in return for a meal or a ride. And if you met Ezequiel you are also likely to have met Dror, his gentle Israeli newfound friend and co-worker.

When I met Ezequiel and Dror on the Solar Kitchen roof I was intrigued because I soon found out that Ezequiel was a former corporate lawyer who, for the last two months, had been living without spending any money.

But let us start at the beginning. Whilst he was in Bodh Gaya during the Dalai Lama's 2012 Kalachakra event, Ezequiel met Dawid, a Polish photographer. The two of them started to give workshops making wallets out of used Tetra Paks for local children and eventually some 700 children participated.

The aim of these workshops was not only to generate environmental awareness in children by offering them a chance to learn by creating. It was also an experiment. Emphasising that it is important that the Tetra Pak wallets must be given freely and not sold, Ezequiel explains that these wallets help demonstrate the beauty of the 'gift economy'. As such, each wallet can act as a constant reminder to its recipient to consider what he or she does with his or her money. Will they use it to support good causes or spend it on products that harm the environment?

Further workshops on wallet-making were organised in Mumbai, Dharamsala, Darjeeling, and, finally, in Auroville. Ezequiel had read about Auroville some years before and had long wanted to visit. Just before coming to Auroville he ran out of funds but decided to continue the journey. And somehow he managed. Once here, Ezequiel found Alessandro from Italy, Aziza from 'everywhere and nowhere', Jeremy from the US and others to help co-ordinate Tetra Pak based workshops in Auroville. Additional volunteers signed up to be involved on a daily basis. One of them was Dror, an Israeli army educated facilitator of group work, who proved to be a great co-worker.

Dror had been working for an Israeli-Nepali NGO in one of the most poverty-stricken parts of Kathmandu for three months. Auroville had also long been on his mind. Born in the land of the



Ezequiel (left) and Dror on Earth Day

Kibbutz he wanted to visit and experience first-hand how people here were creating a life together according to a higher ideal. So when the cold hit Nepal, he continued south, intent on continuing to mix with the culture of local people along the way.

In all, more than 1,000 children from Auroville and the area took part in workshops to make Tetra Pak wallets. In the villages themselves, Tetra Pak board is still an exotic material as it delivers the produce (soft drinks) in too expensive a manner. In Auroville, however, several hundred Tetra Paks are emptied every week.

Whilst in the beginning Ezequiel and Dror had plenty of time to cut Tetra Paks and fold and tape them into wallets, in time they became involved in other things. Together with Mohanam staff and friends they helped organise the 2012 yearly Mohanam Cultural Centre Summer and also became involved with Earth Day activities.

Ezequiel has a great gift for spotting people that may contribute to his cause. That may have been part of the reason he began chatting to my husband, Tom, on the roof of the Solar Kitchen on that very first evening that we met him. Tom was already working in Last School and Aikiyam, in connection with a

rather than money exchange it is definitely easier on everyone that you do it while you are travelling. This way, you do not put too much of a burden on a few individuals. However, in the end, success will depend on how much each one is able to give of himself.

Tom and I were also subject to learning from Ezequiel's experiment, as we ended up putting Ezequiel up for two weeks. My feeling is that it is more interesting to be able to create and to share than just asking others to support you. But then again, this is precisely what Ezequiel taught people to do with the Tetra Pak wallet workshops.

For Ezequiel, the experiment to live without money was one of the best things that he ever did. 'It helped me focus on the present as opposed to chasing after material possessions. And it taught me that people are truly willing to give and share when there is a need. For this I am forever grateful.'

What is clear to me is that guests passing through Auroville can greatly contribute to the community, and not only through giving their material resources. I wouldn't have wanted to miss out on meeting Ezequiel and Dror for anything in the world.

Petra

## BIOREGION

# The garbage fires are burning again

During the past summers, thick clouds of toxic smoke have regularly wafted over the community and the neighbouring villages, causing the local inhabitants to suffer from headaches, nausea and sore throats. This was caused by combusting waste from the Karuvadikuppam Puducherry municipal landfill site near Auroville. In 2009 a group of Aurovilians came together to coordinate efforts to remedy this situation. They held discussions with the Puducherry Government. The Government responded by allowing a private firm to compost organic components at the site. Then, in 2010, they handed over waste management at the site to a private company, Kivar Environ Private Limited (KEPL). To execute the work, KEPL and the Puducherry Urban Development Agency formed a joint venture called Puducherry Municipal Services Private Limited (PMSPL). Their remit was extensive: they were made responsible for collecting and disposing of all Pondicherry's waste.

At first, as we reported in our recent April issue, the signs were promising. PMSPL ensured that the waste at the site was compacted and regularly turned over and they agreed to use EM to mitigate the smell. As a result of these remediation measures, the spontaneous combustion of the waste which was responsible for many of the fires and smoke stopped. However, PMSPL recently quit the project due to differences with

Puducherry Government, and these crucial remediation measures at the landfill site were abandoned.

The Pondicherry Garbage Control Group, made up of Aurovilians taking an active role in monitoring and trying to improve the situation, have contacted the local authorities and requested them to continue the simple remediation measures. The concern was that, without these measures, methane would build up at the landfill site and auto-combust, leading once again to the release of toxic fumes. In response, the Secretary to the Government, Local Administration Department, verbally assured them that he would ensure that the waste at the Karuvadikuppam will once again be compacted and turned over to prevent burning.

However, on the night of May 28th, there was a huge fire at the site. Fumes and smoke blanketed Auroville and the nearby villages and fire engines had to be called to bring the flames under control. The all too-familiar smell of smoke was in everyone's nostrils again as the site continued to smoulder for several days. The Auroville Town Development Council has sent a letter to the Chief Secretary of the Puducherry Government expressing deep concern about the fire and asking that an investigation be made. Even though, given the prevailing wind direction, residents of Puducherry were not as badly affected as Aurovilians, it is hoped that the local Puducherry media will take up this important

issue. The International Advisory Council also expressed their concerns on this issue to the Secretary of Auroville Foundation.

The fire on May 28th was a setback to the efforts of the Pondicherry Garbage Control team of Auroville, who were hoping for a smoke-free summer. However, they are determined to continue their campaign and now seek to solicit the support of concerned Puducherry citizens and local media.

On the legal front, on the basis of the petition (with over 3,000 signatures) that Auroville submitted last year requiring that the Puducherry authorities implement the orders of the Supreme Court regarding garbage management, a case has been admitted by the National Green Tribunal – a special fast-track court to handle the expeditious disposal of environmental cases – in Delhi and summons have been served to the respondents. The case should come up shortly before the Chennai Bench of the National Green Tribunal.

Meanwhile, in another development, a number of illegal dump-sites in the Kottakuppam area, close to the communities of Ravena and Forecomers, have also been burning. As this area is outside the purview of the Puducherry authorities, being part of Tamil Nadu, Aurovilians will meet with the President of the Kottakuppam Town Panchayat to express their concern about the illegality of these dump-sites and the ensuing health hazards and to discuss ways of remedying the situation.

Given the pace of India's development, proper waste management is a growing nationwide concern. Efforts at better waste management techniques are hindered not because of the lack of technological solutions or the lack of resources, but the lack of political will to enforce the laws on this issue. It is therefore vital to mobilize the local media and "awakened citizenry" – educated citizens and Indian-residents – to act on the issue by insisting on basic rights regarding public health.

Alan

**Pondicherry Garbage Control Group requires funding for its efforts:**

**For donations within Auroville:**  
Contribute to Financial Services Acct. No. 251089

**For donations outside Auroville:**  
Make a cheque or demand draft payable to:  
Auroville Unity Fund (specified for Pondicherry Garbage Control)  
Mail the cheque or demand draft to:  
Auroville Unity Fund, Town Hall, Auroville TN 605 101, India.

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◆ **USA:** Make checks payable to Auroville International USA and send to either:  
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◆ **The Netherlands and Belgium:** Auroville International Nederland, Athlonestraat 77, 6524 BJ Nijmegen, Triodos Bank nr 1984.20.927, IBAN: NL26-TRIO0198 4209 27, BIC: TRIONL2U,

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