

Tamil Nadu and Auroville: an enlarged cooperation

Alain Bernard, a trustee of Auroville Village Action, introduces the Sustainable Livelihood Institute (SLI) project, a joint project of Auroville and the Government of Tamil Nadu.

A new adventure has started in Auroville: a large scale cooperation between the state of Tamil Nadu and Auroville for promoting rural development based on the principles of sustainable development.

This is an area in which Auroville can contribute a lot as much research and experimentation has already taken place. Pitchandikulam Forest, for instance, has already completed several sustainable development projects in Tamil Nadu and elsewhere. And it is Joss, founder and manager of Pitchandikulam Forest, who is the inspiration behind the Sustainable Livelihood Institute project.

Tamil Nadu's advanced development of technology in urban areas, in stark contrast to its rural poverty, malnutrition, increasing unemployment, shrinking natural resources, loss of agricultural land and a steady decline in farming. These tendencies are made worse by globalization and climate change.

Sustainable livelihoods are able to provide the means for a healthy way of life, holistic development, and overall happiness for individuals and communities, without further destroying the fragile environment.

The people behind SLI believe that to create such livelihoods is not a utopian dream, but a necessity and a realizable aim. The Institute aspires to be a bridge between Auroville and rural South Asia, confronting the challenges of globalization through dynamic localization, evolving solutions for people in a rapidly changing world by drawing from the wealth of traditional sustainable knowledge as well as new approaches.

With Auroville as its wider campus, the SLI aims to provide a place of learning, growing, teaching, research, experimentation and exchange in all aspects of sustainable livelihood. It will offer regular training programmes for government servants and communities, and platforms where new and pioneering approaches can be conceived and shared between practitioners, policy makers, community resource persons, and all those interested in solutions for a sustainable tomorrow.

The background

The ambition is huge. Needless to say, the problems are also huge. India's population will overtake China's around 2030, adding four hundred million to its present population over the next fifty years.

The Indian government tends to rely on industrial development and foreign investment as prime drivers of prosperity. The latter is probably indispensable in view of the huge needs for development. Nevertheless, it might be a mistake to rely mainly on big corporations to provide the millions of jobs necessary, for these enterprises depend a lot on developing automation. In fact, a recent report showed that the organized sector creates far fewer jobs than the unorganized sector.

It would also be a catastrophe to let the exodus from rural areas to the cities continue to increase, as many of these cities are already



Women self-help group (SHG) members from across Tamil Nadu learning to prepare herbs-based primary health-care products as part of the SLI programme

collapsing under the weight of uncontrolled growth. To prevent this it is necessary to revitalize the rural milieu and give a new impetus to agricultural development.

Actually, India has great agricultural potential. One remarkable fact is that India, although three times smaller, has as much arable land as China. The famous Green Revolution of the sixties made India self-sufficient in rice but at the cost of a considerable degradation of the soils due to the use of chemical fertilizers.

In contrast, there have been many experiments in organic agriculture which have given back life to the soil. For example, Pebble Garden, one of Auroville's experimental farms, has been a major source of inspiration for the ecological movement in India.

While agriculture is central to the reviving of rural sustainability, for a harmonious and sustainable development, the rural areas also need the addition of various sustainable activities and services in order to create a dynamic milieu in which personal and collective fulfillment can take place. In this context, the SLI wants to become a centre where those who have already made significant contributions in these areas can meet and share their experience of holistic development. The advice and inspiration of our close neighbours in South Asia will also be sought and welcomed.

Beginnings

SLI has started to function from temporary premises on the edge of Auroville. A team, under the direction of Ram Subramaniam, a recognized expert in this field, has already prepared and run some programmes.

From March to December 2015, programmes have been organized involving more than 700 women belonging to Women's Self-Help Groups from 25 districts of Tamil Nadu. Some 80 civil servants from the Department of Rural Development, Government of Tamil Nadu, have also attended programmes. Another Indian state, Odisha, has shown interest and has

already sent about a hundred officials here, while the Puducherry Government has expressed interest in the agricultural programmes.

The list of Auroville units which have participated so far in the activities of SLI [see box] gives an idea of the variety of areas studied. This list is going to get longer in future, as Auroville has much more to offer.

An example

Most of the women who come for these learning sessions want to increase their income. In the past, too many of them have been the beneficiaries, or rather the victims, of various programmes proposed by local authorities. They have been encouraged to undertake an activity, like growing mushrooms or making jewellery, only for the scheme to be abandoned, either because the official whose pet idea it was has been transferred, or because it has been belatedly discovered that there is no market for these items.

The SLI programmes are largely based on direct contact with practitioners. For a whole morning, I followed a group of about twenty women who had come to Auroville for two days from the region of Tiruvannamalai. We visited Solitude, an organic farm of about eight acres close to the Visitors' Center. The founder of the farm, an Englishman called Krishna who is passionate about nature and music, received the group and walked them through the

Several Auroville Units have been already involved in SLI programmes. They include Auroville Village Action, Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants, EcoPro, Pebble Garden, Annapurna Farm, Solitude Farm, Upasana, Bamboo Centre, Eco Femme, Svaram, Discipline Farm, Earth Institute, Sunlit Future, KOFPU, Mereville Trust, Naturellement, Ilaingnargal School and Aurosoya.

vegetable/fruit garden. Even at noon, under a very hot sun, their interest did not falter, so convincing were Krishna's demonstrations and explanations.

For example, he showed several different samples of soil. He explained that the key to healthy soil was the patient reconstruction of the soil through organic matter. He also showed them how the interplanting of certain vegetable species resulted in a natural synergy.

The session ended with a meal in the Solitude restaurant where the food, cooked in an imaginative, original and tasty way, consists only of what had just been harvested in the garden. The next day the women worked with Krishna in his farm.

At the end of their stay, some of the women spoke of the experience as having been "transforming". Actually, most of the feedback received after SLI workshops is very positive.

The future campus

The setting up of such a big project in Auroville has not been without its difficulties. Some Aurovilians don't like the fact that acres of precious

Auroville land will be leased to the Tamil Nadu Government for the construction of the SLI campus. Others are afraid that buildings without soul or beauty will be constructed, as happens too often with government projects.

Actually, this is a point upon which the Governing Board (which enthusiastically supports the project, believing it is aligned with the deep vocation of Auroville in relation to Tamil Nadu and India) has insisted upon strongly: "We don't want the current type of administrative architecture," said the Chairman, Dr. Karan Singh. This is why Joss asked several Auroville architects to work together on imagining a novel and ecological type of campus. This process, known as "Dreamweaving", has been going on for several months. The final plan will be presented soon to the Tamil Nadu authorities and one of the participating architects will take responsibility for executing the plan.

The unknown factors

Of course, an association with the government on such a project has its risks. Receiving government funds on time is rare and the support that one gets at the top is not necessarily reflected in that of lower level officials. Added to bureaucratic delays, key officials are frequently transferred. This is why the SLI would like an autonomous status with a guaranteed budget for the duration of the planned activities, and discussions are ongoing with the highest authorities to achieve this.

In short, this is an adventure into the unknown. But the positive experience of the last few months is promising and deserves Auroville's support and involvement. For the SLI could make a tangible contribution to harmonious rural development while offering a unique platform for Auroville to interact with India and beyond.

Alain Bernard

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2016

On Aurore, Auroville's internal internet, a clock is already counting down the days to Auroville's 50th birthday. However, not everybody is enthusiastically awaiting what is being planned for the event. Somehow, many of the projects and exhibitions planned so far seem to be missing something...

But what? When we look at what Mother said about anniversaries, it is clear that, for her, there is a much deeper dimension to some of them than simply marking a significant event in history or another year in one's life. Regarding birthdays, for example, she said:

"... it is truly a special day in one's life. It is one of those days in the year when the Supreme descends into us – or when we are face to face with the Eternal – one of those days when our soul comes in contact with the Eternal and, if we remain a little conscious, we can feel His Presence within us. If we make a little effort on this day, we accomplish the work of many lives as in a lightning flash. That is why I give so much importance to the birthday – because what one gains in one day is truly something incomparable."

She explained that when people came to her on their birthday, which she termed the "day of Grace", she worked to open their consciousness a little towards what is above so they could come before the Eternal... "One is so open and so receptive that one can assimilate all that is given. I can do many things (on that day), that is why it is important."

Of course, Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's birthdays were celebrated in the Ashram, as they are the inspiration and fountainhead of the yoga. But when

Anniversary thoughts

Indian Independence Day fell on August 15th, Sri Aurobindo's birthday, he saw this as being more than a coincidence.

"To me personally it must naturally be gratifying that this date which was notable only for me because it was my own birthday celebrated annually by those who have accepted my gospel of life, should have acquired this vast significance. As a mystic, I take this identification, not as a coincidence or fortuitous accident but as a sanction and seal of the Divine Power which guides my steps on the work with which I began life."

In the Ashram, other anniversaries are also marked. One of them marks the 'Day of Victory', the 24th November, 1926, when Sri Aurobindo experienced the descent of Krishna into his body.

Purani, one of the sadhaks present on that occasion, later wrote, "It was not as if a handful of disciples were receiving blessings from their supreme Master and Mother in one little corner of the earth. The significance of the occasion was far greater than that. It was certain that a higher Consciousness had descended on earth."

A similarly important spiritual descent happened on February 29, 1956, when The Mother had the concrete experience of the descent of the Supramental Consciousness on Earth. Just over a month later, she explained,

"The manifestation of the Supramental upon earth is no more a promise but a living fact, a reality. It is at work here, and one day will come when the most blind, the most unconscious, even the most unwilling shall be obliged to recognize it."

Mother called that day *The Golden Day* and said, "Henceforth the 29th February will be the Day of the Lord."

So how were important anniversaries like this celebrated in the Ashram?

Most obviously, when they were in their physical bodies, Sri Aurobindo and Mother gave darshan four times a year to mark their birthdays, the Day of Victory, and the day of Mother's final arrival in Pondicherry. 'Darshan' means 'seeing', more specifically, a 'vision of the Divine', and on these occasions the sadhaks would pass in front of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, who would transmit a particular force to each individual for their progress.

After Sri Aurobindo's passing, The Mother continued to give darshans four times a year. From 1963 onwards, these darshans would be given from the terrace of her room, as she gazed upon those who had gathered in the street below.

When it came to the occasion of Sri Aurobindo's birth centenary year in 1972, Mother made it very clear that it was to be celebrated in a very specific way. On the first day of that centenary year, she gave a message:

"Today is the first day of Sri Aurobindo's centenary year. Though he has left his body he is still with us, alive and active."

Sri Aurobindo belongs to the future; he is the messenger of the future. He still shows us the way to follow in order to hasten the realisation of a glorious future fashioned by the Divine Will.

All those who want to collaborate for the progress of humanity and for India's luminous

destiny must unite in a clairvoyant aspiration and in an illumined work."

Earlier, she had clarified how such an occasion should be marked.

"The best thing we can do is to study all that he has told us and endeavour to follow his example and prepare ourselves for the new manifestation."

On 21st February 1972, the first anniversary of Matrimandir was celebrated. The Mother sent the Message:

"Let Auroville be the symbol of a progressive unity."

"And the best way to realise this is a unity of aspiration towards the divine perfection in work and in feeling, in a concentration of the entire life."

In other words, The Mother took certain anniversaries seriously either because they marked an important spiritual breakthrough in the universal yoga; or an opportunity to state or restate an essential truth; or a unique opportunity for the individual or collective to make progress and rededicate themselves to their essential purpose.

Auroville is not the Ashram. It is, as Mother said, a more 'outer' experiment, intended to engage more fully with the outside world. In this sense, it is appropriate that plans for our 50th centenary should include celebrating our physical and artistic achievements and launching new community initiatives.

But this should not be our only, or even our main, focus. We should also use the occasion to find ways to express our gratitude to the Grace that supports this experiment and to rededicate ourselves, as fully as we can, to the great adventure that drew us here, which is nothing less than the creation of a new species, a new world.

Alan

Preparing for the 50th Anniversary

The preliminary planning team for the 50th anniversary will soon be completing its work. What was their task? Their vision? And how have they organized the work? Auroville Today spoke to three members to find out more.

Auroville Today: When did the planning for Auroville's 50th birthday celebrations begin?

Marco: We were discussing this in the Art Service even before the Auroville Retreat. We knew it would be a huge event and that to plan such an event you have to start early. The formal planning for the event began with the Governing Board setting up the Envisioning Committee in August, 2014.

Mariana: The new Working Committee offered its help to the Envisioning Committee and, with its approval, invited the community to submit projects. After receiving many projects, they came up with the idea to hold nine festivals or events in the year leading up to the 28th February, 2018. But they realised there was a lot of work to be done, and that's when they suggested to the Envisioning Committee that the Auroville Arts Service and Outreach Media take on the preliminary planning, as these teams had already worked together on organizing the Chennai festival.

Were you given any guidelines?

Dave: There were a few. They included that the Festival should focus on 'centring within', and that the youth should have an important role.

Marco: We discussed if we wanted to repeat the kind of festivals we had done in the past, but we were not very happy about this idea.

Mariana: We were not interested in a top-down approach. We wanted to do something more participatory, to reach out to the community and see what the community wanted to do. That's when we invited Dave to join us.

Dave: I was asked how I saw the organization of such an event. I sent the team an 'organogram' I have used in humanitarian response situations elsewhere in the world. This is a standardised set-up, with teams taking on certain organizational responsibilities. We decided to propose this structure for organising the coordination and the support needed for the projects under the overall programme for the next three months.

This part, however, was not participatory. What was participatory was the workshops. We held five workshops in different theme areas for people who wanted to present projects for the 50th. In addition, we held project clinics to help people write and clarify their projects, and recently there was an Expo where people presented their projects to the community.

By the end of this process, we had three major themes under which a whole range of projects were grouped. About half of the projects fall under 'Creative Arts', then we have 'Mind and Body' and 'Inspiring Spaces'. Organization is a separate category. Three groups come under organization: event

coordination, communication and liaison, and programme and support, which includes project writing, the financial aspects etc.

It's interesting as it is very decentralised and yet centralised at the same time. One of our ideas was to experiment with this process and see if we could learn some lessons for the future. As far as I know, it is the first time we have had so many projects – over one hundred at present – involved under one umbrella in Auroville.

What is the overall vision for the 50th anniversary celebrations?

Dave: The vision is to re-inspire our collective aspiration in order to contribute towards achieving the Auroville Charter and Dream. The desired outcome is a renewed sense of the *raison d'être* of Auroville by means of inspiring events and initiatives.

Marco: For me, the most interesting part has been the process. One of the challenges was how all these people with their different projects could work together to achieve something larger than their personal interests. I was surprised to see that for the artists this was quite easy. Immediately after the workshop they decided to have further meetings together and asked us from the Art Service to facilitate. I think the same thing happened for other groups.

Mariana: You are working with a group of people who come in with projects that mean the world to them, and then at some point the 'I' suddenly becomes a 'We', and everybody decides to work together to create something where all the projects are included but as part of something greater.

Dave: At a certain point in some of these workshops you suddenly felt that the IQ of the group had suddenly gone up above an individual's IQ. It doesn't happen often, but when the whole group is working together on a solution in a participatory way interesting things can happen, and we witnessed this.

Throughout the workshops Audrey's painting, which included the vision for the 50th celebration, was hanging in the room, and I think this was also an inspiration for everybody.

What about the quality of the projects being proposed. Is there any form of quality control?

Dave: Each project proposer has to fill in the 'planning hand', which is a process I have used with illiterate farmers in Africa. Basically, it means answering the five 'ws': *who* is going to do *what*, *why*, *when* and *where*? I think the key question in Auroville is *who* is going to do it because we have lots of ideas for projects but not so many people willing to take responsibility for implementing them.



From left, Fabienne, Dave, Marco, Krishna (seated) and Mariana

In addition, we tell the proposers that their proposals have to be SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, realistic and time-bound. The proposers are also asked to answer a number of questions about their projects like, How will your project contribute towards inner and outer growth, on a personal and collective level? How will your project move Auroville and the Aurovilians towards the ideals of The Charter and The Dream? Is your project economically sustainable? How does your project connect with Auroville's wider physical and social context?

These are self-filtering exercises. The idea is to try and ensure that there are common standards. We are also proposing there should be some kind of support function to help people implement their projects if they ask for this.

Who will take the decision regarding whether a project goes forward or not?

Marco: There is a misunderstanding in the community that we are the group that is deciding this. We are simply trying to put together what is coming from the community; we are not deciding anything.

Mariana: One of the things we have said and which we stand by is that this group will not select projects; we will help the project stand but we will not choose. The proposals will be submitted to the Envisioning Committee, which, after vetting them, will present them to the meeting of the Governing Board in March for its approval. Then the Board will submit the proposals to the Government of India, and ask for a special grant allocation.

What was brought to our attention by the Governing Board is that our proposal will only be as strong as the weakest link, so we need to make sure that all our projects are in good shape, and that there is a high level of probability for them to happen. To ensure this, we have brought in a separate team of Aurovillian reviewers to look at all the projects.

Dave: The review group is looking at financial capability, the capability of the people to manifest the project and the readiness of the project itself. There are some projects where the idea is good but the project is not fully developed. If it is a big budget project and somebody has never done anything like this before, then we have to figure out how we can support them.

With the infrastructure projects, one of the key questions is how the project holder is going to maintain the new building afterwards. A lot of them haven't really thought about this. Also, there are existing infrastructure projects that are not progressing at present, and yet the project holders want the second phase to be funded, but they will have to fix the first phase before they request more.

For all new projects, planning permission is a big factor. Our planning department takes an average of nine months to clear any planning permission. There are quite a lot of big infrastructure projects proposed which may not get permission in time to be ready for the 50th.

One consideration is the need for accelerated development – meaning infrastructure projects. At the same time, we need to be careful not to commit to infrastructure projects beyond the community's capacity.

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Are some people simply dusting off old projects and hoping to get them included in the 50th celebrations?

Dave: We have received a number of projects that have been stalled for one reason or another and now have been lumped under the 50th anniversary celebrations. In the end, we will present all the projects that we think are viable, whatever the budget, to the Envisioning Committee. After that, the ball is in their court.

Have you been given a figure of how much money will be available?

Marco: It's still very unclear. One hundred crore was mentioned, then fifty crore. At that point, a lot of people got interested! Then we heard it may be only a couple of crores.

Dave: At the moment, the total of the budgets submitted is more than this, but this is likely to be whittled down. The full list of projects with their budgets will be published for everyone to read by the middle of February.

Marco: It is interesting that several people approached me after the workshops saying that

whatever happened regarding the funding, they were very happy to have participated in the process and they would do something for the 50th, even if funding is not available.

Mariana: Even if no funding comes through, as a result of this process there is now a group of people with solid projects that they can carry out on their own. In this sense, this exercise has been an important leverage point for the energy of the collective.

Dave: Also, many projects have taken a phased approach and are preparing to source funds elsewhere.

Will the present team continue to organize the process?

Dave: No. Our team will finish its work, which is submitting the proposals to the Envisioning Committee, by the end of January, so the question is, who is going to take on the organization afterwards? Some people are interested, but there is nothing concrete in place yet.

It is very important that we get money for the organization aspect of the 50th celebration, with effect from the next financial year, because this includes fundraising and a team that will carry on the work of helping people to get their projects

ready and implement them. The new organization group should be ready to start work as soon as the Governing Board has given its approval to the programme. But it may be difficult for an organization team to keep up the energy and momentum for two years.

Mariana: Yet it is important that a group is holding the energy for a process like this, because this will encourage more people to join in.

One of the points raised in the community is why we should be spending so much money on 50th celebrations when we could use the money for acquiring land etc.?

Dave: But the two are completely unrelated. The money for the 50th celebration is coming from a completely different pot; the money cannot be used for other activities.

Another concern that has been voiced is that this is merely a PR exercise, and will not benefit the community itself.

Mariana: This is incorrect. The 50th is primarily in Aurovillian event. It will be internally-focused, Auroville-centric, although there will also be events involving our employees and people from the

surrounding villages.

Dave: The projects will run between February 28th, 2017 and February 28th, 2018. There will be a concentration of events in the anniversary week itself, and this may be when the Prime Minister or Chief Minister may visit. So how will we handle this? We have been told Dr. Karan Singh suggested that we could just have a concentration on the 28th itself. I think this is a great idea.

The most radical reservation is, why are we celebrating 50 years of Auroville when we are still so far away from achieving what Mother wanted of us?

Dave: But the outcome is about that, about revisiting the *raison d'être* of Auroville; this is the essence of the entire thing. We are saying, 'Let's take a moment to focus upon what we are here for and then set off again'.

Mariana: There is also a desire from the community to acknowledge what we have achieved so far, not to pretend that we are there but to acknowledge something has been done. There is a need to say thank you, to recognise the work that so many people have put into this work in progress, and also to thank India for supporting it.

From an interview by Alan

INTERNATIONAL ZONE

Focus on Youth at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture

While the topic of youth is getting a lot of attention in Auroville recently, the focus on youth empowerment has long been a mission of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. Even before the existence of the Tibetan Pavilion or its stated goal to "welcome the youth of Tibet," in 1971 The Mother invited 20 Tibetan children to stay at the Ashram under the care of Katak Tulku, a Rinpoche. They then moved to Douceur, and stayed at what came to be known as the "Tibetan Hut". At one point, Rod and Shradhdhan, who looked after the group, went to the Mother and reported that they were an unruly bunch of kids and challenging to handle, and requested that they separate them into individual foster homes. Mother denied this request, stating that the group should stay together and that they were there to preserve the culture of Tibet. When tensions with the Sri Aurobindo Society arose in the late 1970s, many suggested that the kids were no longer safe, and most of them left Auroville.

Today, the Tibetan Pavilion fosters engagement with Tibetan youth through a variety of programmes, which have blossomed since the second visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Auroville in 2009. It was his presence and



encouragement that inspired Kalsang, executive of the Tibetan Pavilion, along with her partner Namgyal, to focus on bringing young Tibetans to Auroville. "When His Holiness visited, it was the experience of a lifetime," says Kalsang. "I realized then that I wanted to offer my best to the young Tibetan groups that come, but also to have no expectations. I just wanted their experience to be the best."

The following year, the Pavilion welcomed the first group of students from the Tibetan Children's Village

(TCV) network, which was Kalsang's alma mater. TCV is an educational community, originally comprised of orphaned Tibetans, but now open to all Tibetan children throughout the Himalayas who are in need. It has branches from Ladakh to Bylakuppe, with over 16,000 students in its care. The students selected to visit Auroville are between 12 and 23 years old, and are usually chosen from those who have not travelled much before. Of the first group that came in 2010, not one student had travelled more than two hours outside of Dharamsala.

"TCV is very good, but it also functions within an insular Tibetan community," says Claude Arpi, also an executive of the Tibetan Pavilion. "Kalsang had the opportunity to come out of that system and see how the outside world functions. Now she wants to provide that opportunity and awareness of the outside to other young Tibetans."

The first visit of 16 TCV students in 2010 was stressful for Kalsang. Not only was she new to the job of working with groups, but also nervous about how to handle the students, most of whom came from diverse backgrounds. "I had a lot of fear," said Kalsang, "as all of the students are orphans and there were certain topics that I didn't want to touch." But that year was also eye-opening in many ways. The next year, Kalsang had gained in confidence and every succeeding year the programme has expanded and improved.

Since the first year, TCV groups have made an annual visit to Auroville over their winter holidays; this year twelve students arrived on January 20th. The focus of the TCV visit to Auroville is to expose young Tibetans to a different way of living and to encourage them to interact with the Auroville community. Service is a large component of their stay; in the past they have volunteered at the Solar Kitchen, Matrimandir gardens, Solitude Farm, Pebble Garden, and for

the Litter Free Auroville campaign. The group also always dedicates one early morning each year to volunteering for the Auroville Marathon. This year, they will be working at Annapurna Farm, engaging in a permaculture workshop, and going on a trek to Gingee. They will also visit the beach, and some students will see the ocean for the first time in their lives.

The TCV group also interacts with a variety of Aurovillians through guest speakers and interactive activities. Several Aurovillians volunteer their time and energy over the course of five weeks to teach English, Yoga, Arts and Crafts, Music and Math to the students. Students are also encouraged to take their own initiative. "You have a chance to pursue what you want," Kalsang told the group in their introductory meeting, "but nothing is compulsory. This time is for you."

This year's TCV group has just landed in Auroville, and their biggest adjustment seems to be the weather. Sonam Youdon, 16, who heard about Auroville from her friends, says, "Auroville is very interesting so far, but it is also very hot." Dorje Dujome, 18, who heard about Auroville from his elder classmates, has been looking forward to this trip for three years. "I learned of this trip when my elder classmates made a presentation about Auroville. They said that people in Auroville are happy. I'm looking forward to this time to improve my English language, and focus on arts and creativity. The weather is difficult to get used to, but I'm very happy to be here."

While Auroville provides a rich campus for learning and exploration, the relationship with these groups is also beneficial for the Auroville community. One memory that stands out was when a group of TCV students visited Last School. With over 80 people in the room, including one Chinese student then in attendance at Last School, the TCV students shared their life stories. For some, this included how they escaped from Tibet. The atmosphere was heavily emotional but the impact was powerful. Later, Last School students reflected on how important it is to hear someone's story from them directly rather than watching it in a film or reading about it. The one Chinese student who was there said how she had never been made aware of the Tibetan situation in school in China. Instead, she had been told that Tibetans were barbaric, uneducated, and violent. In the days after the meeting with the TCV students, she brought her family to the Tibetan Pavilion to begin to share with them what she had learned.

Each year, the TCV group's journey

ends with a presentation open to the public in which they share Tibetan songs and dance, and also reflect on their time here. In some years, the TCV students conclude their visit with a meeting with students from the Tibetan Students Association of Madras (TSAM). This is the second youth programme hosted by Tibetan Pavilion, and it has been running for the past five years. Each year, the TSAM group of around 25 Tibetan college students based in Chennai visits Auroville, where they host a Tibetan Café for a few days around Pongal and host a cultural show for the community. Their visit overlaps with the TCV group, bringing together two groups of young Tibetans to meet and inspire each other. At the conclusion of the TCV visit, the younger TCV students are escorted by the TSAM group, and integrated for a few days into college life in Chennai. This exposes the TCV students to university life, where they sit in on classes and sleep in shared housing. "They are exposed to what their future could be like at university," said Kalsang, "and this helps to expand their awareness of their life possibilities".

In December 2015, another group visited for the first time to attend a conference in Auroville. Sponsored by the Empowering the Vision (ENVISION) organization based in Delhi, the conference was called "Global Vision for Young Tibetans." The conference brought together 49 Tibetan college students from around the country for six days. While the mission of Empowering the Vision is to "promote and support youth empowerment", this conference focused on enhancing the leadership skills of young Tibetans. To achieve this aim, students engaged in workshops focused on communication, creative assertiveness, volunteerism, entrepreneurship, and the true purpose of education. While some trainers were brought in from the outside, others included Aurovillians Claude, Deepti and Krishna of Solitude Farm.

While TCV groups integrate more with the Auroville community, the ENVISION conference leaders specifically chose to host its programme in Auroville. Not only does Auroville provide excellent infrastructure, but it reflects the values of the organization itself: personal awareness and growth, as well as social justice. The work of Kalsang, Namgyal and Claude also provides support for the organization.

Through these three programmes, Tibetan youth from all over India are exposed to different possibilities for their future and allowed the chance to explore different parts of themselves. The Tibetan Pavilion buzzes with their energy as it works to fulfill its mission.

Ing-Marie

The story of Tsetan

"My name is Tsetan. Currently I am here in Auroville on a student exchange programme. I am studying in the Tibetan Children's Village Suja in Mandi District of Himachal Pradesh. I like reading and travelling. I was born on 10 Jan 1998 in the Dzongha region, between the border of Nepal and Tibet. Dzongha itself is a very happy place covered with mountains.

In the winter of 2001, my parents sent me to India with some strangers of different ages. Most of them were monks and there was one girl my age. Though we were strangers to each other, still they took care of me like their sibling. I don't remember how many days it took, but after a long walk we reached the Tibet Reception Centre in Nepal. Because of the snow it was a long journey. There were no proper transportation systems. On top of that we had no passport to travel. One time we had to creep in at night. The days were full of fear and stress and cold...

Fortunately we were not caught by Chinese forces. When we reached the Nepal Reception Centre and Dharamsala Reception Centre we met many children and adults who were like us. By spending days, weeks and months with them I came to know that all had faced similar difficulties and had the same purpose in coming there. After two months in the Reception Centre, I was sent to TCV Suja with some children of my age.

Ever since I reached the Nepal Reception Centre, I lost the connection with my parents. After seven years, I met a monk who is my uncle. Through his guidance, I reconnected with my parents. I came to know that my mother has passed away. But I can do nothing more except pray to the almighty God for peace and happiness for their souls.

Until now everything is fine in the school under the grace and guidance of the Dalai Lama and kindness of his sister. I will not forget their blessings, love and care. I will work hard in my studies and will never forget their kindness. When I grow older I will keep all these people in my heart and will surely make them proud. I am very fortunate to have this opportunity and I am very grateful to my school. Thank you all."

Tsetan

An accessible bus – for an accessible community?

Auroville now has one of the few buses in India accessible for the differently-abled. But does this reflect a wider sensitivity to their needs and to general public safety in the community?

The story began with a generous donation from an Italian lady, Luisa Gullino. Through her friendship with Susmita, who is running the Accessible Auroville awareness campaign, she became interested in funding something that could improve accessibility for less-abled people as well as general mobility in Auroville. At first she considered making a donation for a road as well-laid paths and roads are also components of accessibility, but finally she decided to fund an accessible bus.

Getting a bus

"Getting an accessible bus was a huge challenge," says Sauro, one of the people who helped realise the project. "It took us two years in all. In India they do not manufacture accessible buses, so we had to start from scratch."

"Without Raju from the Auroville Vehicle Service we would not have accomplished this," says Susmita. "He was the link with the various workshops." To begin with, Raju and Susmita visited the showrooms of all the minibus manufacturers in India and spoke with the managers. "I tried accessing the buses sitting in a wheelchair," says Susmita. It was, of course, impossible, so they decided that a conventional minibus would have to be adapted. They purchased a Tata minibus because the ground clearance was lower than other makes and it had a higher roof, making it more passenger-friendly and easier to adapt for their purposes.

Meanwhile, Susmita and Sauro had been trawling the internet, looking for equipment to make a bus accessible. They discovered an Italian company that made a platform lift that could be fitted to the back of a bus. Now they needed a design to adapt the Tata bus to accommodate the platform. This was provided by an engineer in Turin, Silvio Fabre, who is a frequent visitor to the Ashram and a friend of Susmita.

The next step was to take the bus to Karur, a small town in Tamil Nadu that specialises in converting buses. "In order to fit the platform



Raju demonstrates the platform lift

Using the bus

Now that the accessible bus is back in Auroville, how will it be used?

"It will be used as an ordinary bus for everybody," says Sauro. "After all," adds Susmita, "it is not just disabled people who will benefit from using the accessible bus. It is old people, pregnant women, people with heavy luggage. Everybody can benefit from this."

"Of course, you can't run a community service with only one bus," continues Sauro, "so there will be a transition phase during which we may ask another unit which is already running a service to take care of the bus for the time being. However, our aim is to have a small fleet of electrical minibuses that can run with high frequency in an economical way, and this bus will be part of that fleet."

"I think that all future buses in Auroville should be fully accessible, and this is the model to copy. We would also like to use this as a prototype to promote more accessible buses in India, and we plan to contact the Pondicherry Government about this."

But why are there no truly accessible buses in India? After all, there are many disabled people in this country and it must be a nightmare for them (and challenging for many others who are temporarily disabled by injury, or simply old or pregnant), to try to access Indian buses with their steep, narrow steps, high platforms and cramped seating.

"The reason is the

old mindset in India that disabled people are meant to stay at home and not go out," says Susmita. "This is why nobody thinks of making buses accessible."

Auroville and accessibility

But are we doing so much better in Auroville? Susmita began the Accessible Auroville project in 2009. Is Auroville a more accessible place today?

"There's been some small progress but not much," admits Sauro. "We made a kind of building code for accessibility in 2009 but it is largely ignored. In Europe you have a well established system, and a house or public building cannot be used unless it conforms to certain accessibility norms. I was in public administration in Italy when this rule started being enforced. It required an initial investment but now it is part of the common culture: people don't think about planning for accessibility anymore because it's

they are always ready to help someone who is old or incapacitated to reach the Chamber. However, often these people do not ask for help because they do not want to be dependent upon others. They want to preserve their dignity."

What do we need to do to make Auroville truly accessible?

"At present, we lack the mindset," says Sauro. "We need a general change of mindset to make Auroville safe and accessible even for ordinary daily activities like pushing a pram."

"It's particularly important to change awareness among the architects," says Susmita. "They often call me for advice but then, very often, they ignore what I recommend. But these are international recommendations concerning, for example, the height of a toilet or the width of toilet doors to ensure that differently-abled people can use them."

"There is a need to pull down mental barriers, so we should call together all our architects and others to sensitize them about accessibility. In Bologna, Italy, there is a special centre that does this work. People have to spend two or three days in a wheelchair and then they find out what is an accessible entrance, where the handles and switches have to

go, how wide the doors have to be etc. We should run similar workshops here."

already in everybody's mind. Here we don't have that culture."

Susmita and Sauro list some of the still problematic public places in Auroville: the Matrimandir Amphitheatre, Kala Kendra at Bharat Nivas, CRIPA. "And here we not only talking about problems for the differently-abled but also, potentially, for anybody using them," clarifies Sauro. "These are issues relating to general public safety, like unsafe footpaths, gravel paths, steps without railings, terraces etc. We have been used to building in a very organic way. Issues like safety and accessibility for wheelchair users have only recently started to be taken into consideration. Many of the newer buildings, such as Savitri Bhavan, the Unity Pavilion and the Centre for Indian Culture, have ramps."

And what about the Matrimandir? Is this an accessible building?

"Definitely not," says Susmita. She begins to enumerate the problems. "The first two sets of steps cannot be accessed in a wheelchair, the marble steps are slippery for people wearing socks, the handrails on the ramps are not round so cannot be grasped properly by some people, there is no handrail on the sloping path to the lotus pond underneath the Matrimandir..."

Raju recalls that the previous week the manager of an insurance company had brought his family to Matrimandir for a concentration. "His wife was unable to walk. I said I would help her up the steps but she said 'Let me do it'. In the end, she went up the steps on all fours. It really made me feel bad. I was ashamed that such an important place in Auroville should not be accessible."

"I have tried," says Susmita. "I suggested a chair-lift for the first set of steps but I was told that Matrimandir cannot be touched."

"Often, only small changes are required to make a building accessible, but this can change the lives of some people: it can restore their freedom to them. The managers of Matrimandir say



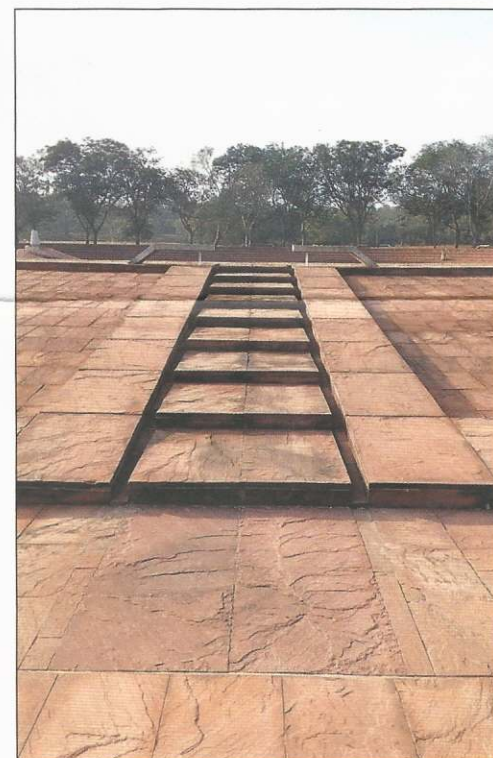
The Matrimandir: the main entrance is not accessible for differently-abled persons

we needed more space at the back of the vehicle, so we had to remove three seats," explains Raju. "We also had to have wide double doors fitted at the back and parts of the body changed."

However, fitting the platform lift itself could not be done in the Karur workshop as it was a specialised job. Susmita was told about another company that could do this. "We heard it was near Chennai," remembers Raju, "but we had to drive another one and half hours further on to a place in the middle of nowhere: it was like Auroville in 1970. It was a small factory in the wilderness – someone had to go six kilometres just to get us a cup of tea. But the workers were very experienced. They fixed the lift to the vehicle in only three hours."

"What made it interesting was that many of the workers were disabled themselves. It was a very nice atmosphere, like entering a big family."

The total cost of the project was 14 lakhs. The minibus itself was about 10 lakhs, the platform lift and work on modifying the bus made up the rest.



The Matrimandir amphitheatre: not accessible for wheelchair users

Raju had his own epiphany at the small workshop where they fixed the lift. "At the beginning of this project I had no idea why we needed this accessible bus, how it would change the situation in Auroville. But when I sat in a wheelchair and tested the lift, when it lifted me up and gently pushed me inside the bus, I understood why it is needed. I am running an Auroville taxi service and we often transport people who are in wheelchairs. Sometimes you cannot get the wheelchair in the car, so the driver has to do everything for them as the passenger cannot get out of the car. The accessible bus will definitely make a difference to these people: it will bring them much greater freedom when they travel; they will not feel they are disabled or dependent upon others."

"This experience has definitely made me more sensitive to the needs of these people. And I understood through watching those experienced and joyful workers at the workshop that there is no essential difference between able-bodied people and those who disabled. We make a difference but actually we are all the same."

"Accessibility means to give dignity and freedom to all, to create an inclusive society without any discrimination," concludes Susmita. "Isn't this what Auroville should be striving for?"

Alan



Kala Kendra at Bharat Nivas: not accessible for wheelchair users

Leaking roofs, lack of privacy, plenty of sound pollution

In the recent years, a number of new communities have come up. But residents of Inspiration and Maitreye I and II, all built by Auroville's Housing Service, complain about bad designs and bad quality of construction. How has this come about? And what can be done about it?

The main problem of *Maitreye I*," says Mandakini, "is that the roofs leak. It became a major issue in the last torrential monsoon, when the residents had to put buckets at strategic places." "For *Maitreye II*, the problem is the complete lack of privacy, both visual and audible," says Mariana. "The apartments' metal grill doors provide no privacy from passersby. Neither is there any sound protection. I can hear my neighbours to the right, left and upstairs." "*Inspiration* has similar problems," says Meera. "Hearing the neighbours is common, and our visual privacy too is highly challenged. There are construction defects – water dripping down through roof slabs and walls has flooded the electrical boxes, for example – and there are design problems, both in the building exteriors as well as in the apartment's interiors."

Maitreye I

"*Maitreye I* is quite a nice community," says Mandakini, who is house-sitting a ground-floor apartment. "There is a common laundry and parking place, the architecture is pleasant and the houses have fantastic ventilation and natural lighting. Sound pollution is there, but it is manageable if you have good neighbours. But the quality of the house construction leaves much to be desired. Many walls have cracks and a few residents have heard the floor tiles coming up and breaking, sometimes with a loud bang. Evidently, the ground moves."

But the main problem is that of leaking roofs. Ever since the community started in 2011, the roofs of all the ten top floor apartments have leaked. Requests to help out with fixing roofs were refused, as the Housing Service said it had no funds to maintain 'private' houses. The stewards then tried to fix their roofs themselves, spending a considerable amount of money, but no attempt has met with any long-term success. "We fear the next monsoon," says Mandakini. "The residents are in the process of



Apartments in Maitreye I. The roofs are leaking

collectively appealing to the Housing Service again to find a solution, as the problems are due to bad construction."

For there is another problem: many residents have exhausted their funds and cannot pay for the repairs from their Auroville maintenances. How will *Maitreye* be maintained in future? "We propose that *Maitreye* has a guest house or home stay facility, maybe a restaurant, whose profits will be allocated to the repair and maintenance of all buildings in the community," says Mandakini. "In fact, that would be an ideal solution for many Auroville communities."

Other main issues plaguing both *Maitreye I* and *Maitreye II* are the absence of waste water treatment and rainwater harvesting systems. A waste water treatment plant was promised, but did not manifest. The Town Development Council has been planning a centralised waste water treatment plant, not only for *Maitreye I* and *II* but also for a few other communities, but the land on which it was to be located could not be purchased. "So now we use a septic tank, which is an unsustainable solution. A decentralised treatment plant, similar to the one used by *Invocation* should have been built between *Maitreye I* and *II*, but the decision has still not been taken." Consequently, precious ground water, not recycled waste water, is used for gardening, and landscaping for the *Maitreye* communities is yet to be developed.

Inspiration

Meera lives in *Inspiration* community in a 'pro bono' apartment. "*Inspiration* has been funded

from a grant of the Government of India and the apartments were given 'for free' to Aurovilians working in services, and who were only having a community maintenance. "I got a studio on the condition that I became the building's caretaker because, as an architect, I would be able to understand the needs of the building," she says. She moved in while the building was still in the finishing stages. "In the meetings with the architect, builder and project coordinator I made many suggestions for functional improvement, but many remained ignored, possibly because the team was too busy with many other parallel projects," she says. "My requests for improvement were also answered with 'you get a free house, so you better be grateful.' It was like a slap in the face. Asked why they did not want to invite users' suggestions, the reply was on the lines of 'if we listen to the residents, we will go crazy'. It was, in my opinion, an unhealthy way of building community projects, as the richness Auroville is aspiring for wasn't used. User interactions would have guaranteed better results."

For much went wrong in *Inspiration*, she says. "The proportion of the public versus private spaces is skewed – too much government money has been spent on public areas, on corridors that do not offer any protection from sun and rain. You also can't use them for outdoor sitting as then you will be looking directly into your neighbour's private space. No attempt has been made to prevent sound pollution, even though the problem is well-known as so many Auroville communities complain about this. The apartments' doors and windows are designed in such a way that you don't have privacy: if you close them, you don't have cross-ventilation. The toilets are so high that, if you are short, your feet don't

touch the floor. Balconies had no outlet for rainwater: it flowed into the living room. There is no rainwater drainage design and my neighbour's apartment floods in every heavy rain. The building has no overhangs to protect from rains and sunshine. Electrical switches and sockets have been put in oddly risky places, such as next to the gas connection and touching

the sink tap, and the outside switches are exposed to the rain. The corridors have had no lighting for some years; Auroville's Electrical Service has said that it can't offer a solution unless we provide overhangs to protect these lights. The building's plumbing systems leak and choke and are difficult to repair as the shafts are non-accessible. I could go on..."

Does she regret having moved in? "I am grateful for having a free apartment," she says. "It is a great relief that I need not move around anymore. The buildings problems have brought me a psychological and physical earthing and have anchored my energy. But yet, something needs to be done."

For it's amazing, she says, that though Auroville is notorious for its bureaucracy – it takes on average nine months to get building permission – there are no checks on building and interior designs. "A peer group consultation could have prevented the proportional mismatch between public and private spaces and design mistakes. And a user-interface would have created a sense of 'belonging', which today is almost completely missing for some of the residents."

Maitreye II

Mariana is house-sitting one of the apartments



Maitreye II – no privacy and plenty of sound pollution

in *Maitreye II*. This one has a private living space, but she shares the kitchen and bathroom with her neighbour. Does it work? "Sharing the kitchen is ok, but not the bathroom, that's too private," she says.

Maitreye II's apartments are located along public walkways, which means that people keep passing one's front door. "There is no privacy as the doors are double mesh-grill doors. We've all hung a curtain across them, some people even have two curtains, but that cuts the ventilation, and still doesn't give a sense of privacy. Also the sound pollution is terrible. It isn't only that you hear everyone, but also everybody hears you. I don't even listen to music for that reason. It feels too exposed." The lack of consideration for privacy, inherent in the design of *Maitreye II*, has resulted in quite a few residents lacking the feeling of 'home'. "When you get home, you don't feel you can relax and replenish for the next day," says Mariana. "There is no 'resting' space for yourself, which is so necessary if you are serious about doing yoga."

Like *Inspiration*, *Maitreye II* was also built from a grant of the Government of India. It is especially intended to house Newcomers. "That's the feeling you get, that the building is designed so that people won't want to stay," says Mariana. "I wonder why this building was designed the way it has. What kind of lifestyle is it meant to accommodate? There is nothing wrong with basic housing – there are other types of basic houses that meet the requirements of good living. But this one is just too much of an in-between space, somehow not matching in terms of purpose and function. Yet, as *Maitreye II* is a very new building. I would like to think that it can still become a more apt and welcoming living space. So then the question is, can it be transformed?"

The problems of sound

Didier is Auroville's sound specialist. His main job, as main designer at the unit Sound Wizard, is building sound-specialised spaces, like music production studios, cinema theatres and auditoriums, all over India. Sometimes he is consulted by Auroville architects about the problems of sound



Inspiration: much went wrong

pollution. "In fact, rarely," he corrects. "Generally speaking, architects are not interested to consider the problems of sound pollution. Like most architects in the world, Auroville architects are mainly interested in the visual and structural aspects of their buildings. I have been asked for advice only a few times. But my proposals were not always incorporated, or only partially so they had little effect." Preventing sound pollution, he says, could be a costly affair, and disturb some of the aesthetics – and for



The view on the double grill door from inside the apartment

that reason such measures are not popular. "But with the projected density of the Residential Zone, the problem of sound can no longer be ignored. Town planners and architects have to become aware of the impact of noise and learn about ways to avoid or alleviate it."

Can something be done to remedy existing situations, such as in *Maitreye* or *Inspiration*? "It will be very difficult," he says. "If you include the prevention of sound pollution from the outset in your design, much can be done at low cost. To correct buildings afterwards is often not possible. If it is half done, it is ineffective; and well done, it becomes very costly."

But is it possible to include the prevention of sound pollution in the planning of the city? "Yes," he says. "Several simulation softwares have been developed for doing that work, like 'Terrain' or 'SON architect'. We would need to hire specialists since it is not exactly our field of work, but it can be done."

A proposal from the Housing Service

"The Housing Service is receiving more and more complaints from the residents of new housing and apartment buildings about the deteriorating quality of their buildings which have been built recently," opens a recent letter from the Housing Service to the Town Development Council. The Service, which is client and project holder on behalf of Auroville and appointed the architects and contractors for *Inspiration* and the two *Maitreye* communities, and as such bears responsibility, now proposes that a professional agency is recruited to do a detailed and time-bound study of the failures. To execute its recommendations, a monitoring system should be put in place "to ensure that a housing project is executed more professionally, up to the satisfaction of the clients". It also proposes that the builder and the project holder give a building quality guarantee for at least three years after completion of the construction.

It is a good start, but more will be needed. For the problems of *Inspiration* and *Maitreye* are not only due to construction mistakes but also to mistakes in architectural designs, and, presumably, to lack of guidance from the client, who did not include prevention of sound pollution and privacy protection in the architects' briefs.

A monitoring system, then, should include the vetting of architectural designs by peer groups, interior designers, acoustic experts, and possibly, a user's group. For questions of privacy and sound pollution can no longer be ignored. They need to be addressed if Auroville is not going to build the

Searching for the spirit of seva

Tapas Bhatt has long been associated with supporting the arts in Auroville and, in particular, with connecting Auroville to the world and the world to Auroville through the arts. How did she come to Auroville? It's a long story that starts with her grandfather.

Tapas's family comes from Rajpipla, Gujarat, a town that, in pre-Independence India, was one of the numerous Princely States of India. Her great-great-grandfather had been the Chief Minister, known as *Diwan*, to the Maharajah of Rajpipla.

Dr. Becharlal Bhatt, Tapas's grandfather, was the personal doctor of Maharaja Sayaji Rao Gaekwad of Baroda. One day, in the late 1890's, her grandfather asked the Maharajah of Baroda for help in securing ancestral land inherited from his great grandfather. The Maharaja referred him to his private secretary. This was none other than Sri Aurobindo, who gave him detailed advice about what he should do.

When Sri Aurobindo moved to Pondicherry, the grandfather also decided to move to Pondicherry in 1928, although often he would return to Rajpipla for work and family purposes. During his long stay in the Ashram, Dr. Becharlal studied Sri Aurobindo's Yoga under His guidance. He also served as the first doctor in the Ashram Dispensary. In fact, he became one of Sri Aurobindo's doctors and was one of the attendants who looked after him for 12 years after Sri Aurobindo suffered a fractured leg.

Tapas's father, Vibhuprasad Bhatt, also started visiting the Ashram from the age of fifteen because of his father's connection. The grandfather often asked Sri Aurobindo for advice about how he should deal with his son. Sri Aurobindo wrote to him that one his two sons, Vibhu, had an inner opening to spiritual growth, and it would be good for him if he stayed in the Ashram. However, he advised the grandfather not to impose any choice on his sons.

Although very devoted to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, Tapas's father decided not to join the Ashram. Instead, he decided that all his five children should grow up and be educated in the Ashram School from an early age.

"We came in 1956," remembers Tapas, "I was only four years old and we used to see Mother twice a day. My parents would drag my sister and me out early in the morning and we would wait under Mother's balcony at six for her to come out. In the evening after sports we would queue up in the playground and Mother would greet every child and give us a sweet or something."

Tapas recalls that the children would write to Mother and that she answered every child's letter. At one time Tapas wrote to her, saying she wanted to be an 'ideal child'. "She sent a reply to my prayer, saying, 'Please keep this with you. It will help you to overcome all your obstacles in life'. (I still have that letter in my pocket.) This was how we imbibed The Mother's atmosphere of always reaching towards something higher."

In 1958, the family had to return to Rajpipla to try to settle a property dispute, returning in December 1962. The Free Progress system of education began in the Ashram in 1964 and Tapas followed it until 1970.

In the mid 1960s, Mother was already beginning to talk about the concept of Auroville. In 1965, she appointed Roger Anger as chief architect for the project.

"Whenever Roger visited Pondicherry," remembers Tapas, "he would come directly from Mother's room to our class because he was very close to Tanmaya, our main teacher. I remember one exercise we did with Roger. He explained that Mother wanted to start this special project. Then he gave each of us a big sheet of

paper and asked us to draw our inner image of the central soul of the city. I don't remember what I drew, but it may have been a lotus."

Tapas became very interested in the project and often visited Roger's office to look at the maps and drawings.

For a month before the inauguration, the whole school closed down to allow the students and teachers to prepare the event. Every day for the week before the inauguration, Tapas jumped on the bus and joined Roger's team and worked all day with local village women making *kolams* in a pond near the Banyan Tree, a pond which Roger had designed. "I loved it out there where there was so much space and sky. I was following my naive passion for the unknown."

On the night of the 27th February, to her great surprise, Tapas received a letter from her School, informing her that she was to represent Syria at the ceremony the next day. "The entire ceremony was so well organized I felt carried, every second, on the clouds of a rainbow surrounding the red earth and bright blue sky, while humanity was praying for the dream of Auroville to become a reality!"

"On that day, for the first time, I felt that Auroville was to be my place."

However, between 1968 and 1970 Tapas did not return, except on picnics with friends in the Utility canyon. But when the Matrimandir construction began, Mother gave permission for the Free Progress students to work one day a week on the structure, and Tapas always went. She also began secretly sneaking out during school holidays to work at Matrimandir. Sometimes, with Shyamsunder's permission, she would stay in Matrimandir Camp, which is where the Matrimandir workers lived.

"I will always remember one occasion. On the evening of the 16th November, 1973, we finished concreting the last pillar. Patricia and I were up early the next morning to prepare breakfast, and then the phone rang. I picked it up and a voice said, 'Please inform everybody that Mother has left her body'. So Patricia and I went to every room in the Camp and woke people up to give them the news. It was a huge shock for everyone: nobody could believe that she had left."

That morning, a bus took the Aurovilians to see Mother. She was lying in the meditation room of the Ashram. "One of my aunts said, 'Don't worry Tapas, wait another four days. She has not gone; she will be coming back in her body'. I also would not believe that she had gone. But on the 20th November, they put her in the Samadhi."

Tapas's father was in Baroda at the time. The night Mother passed away, he had two dreams in which he heard The Mother's voice saying, 'Wake up, Vibhu, come back to Pondicherry now'. The next morning he put the radio on and heard that Mother had left.

When he arrived in Pondicherry Mother was already in the Samadhi. "He wept for a week," remembers Tapas, "he had been very close to The Mother and he could not stand the idea that he would not see her again. He kept saying, 'I have surrendered my children to you now, but now that you have left what will I do with them?'"

But, for Tapas, that early morning call in the Camp had been decisive. "I decided that I would stay in Auroville and not go back to the Ashram." However, her father ordered her to return, telling her that she had to complete her education.



Tapas

"The night before returning to Pondicherry - I had been weeping all day as I did not want to go back - I had two dreams. In one dream, I saw the finished Matrimandir chamber, exactly as it is today. When I entered, I sat next to the second pillar and next to me, meditating, there was a huge green python."

"In the second dream, I was sick and everybody came to my room to say goodbye for the last time because they realised I had to leave my body. Today, I realize it was symbolic of the fact that I really wanted to make a new step in my life by coming to Auroville. It took some years, but I think my new life started from that day."

It took some years because of her father's health. Tapas explains that traditionally an Indian woman cannot leave home until she is married. And while her father was enlightened in many ways, and was fine with the fact that her Aurovilian partner was French, he did not want her to go to Auroville without marrying him.

"I told him, I am not going to Auroville to get married, I am going to Auroville for Mother's ideals, and I'm going there to learn how to be an individual because in our Indian tradition of joint family system, the need for an individual space does for growth is absent, as one is taught to fit in to a collective body."

Finally, her father relented.

Tapas moved to Auroville on November 1st, 1977. In fact, because of the upheaval with the Sri Aurobindo Society, many of her Ashram friends had already moved there, including her friend Marc-Andre.

"When I came to Auroville, I began by house-sitting someone's house. It was the first time in my life that I had slept alone in a house and I wept like a dog, because in Indian families there is always sharing of space and we never sleep alone."

"Yet my early days in Auroville were the happiest of my life. We shared accommodation with Joy, Jean, Vivek and other friends until we got a place for ourselves, and even though we didn't have much food it was a very intense collective life in Aspiration community; we all had a strong aspiration to serve The Mother through Auroville."

"I learned so many things in Auroville. I learned how to cook, to weave, to do the accounts, adminis-

tration and translation work for the original Auroville Bi-lingual Review. I learned what it meant to take a conscious decision to live with a man. However, the extreme collectivism was so intense that at a certain point I started questioning who I was as an individual and as an Indian woman. I had developed something of my individuality in Auroville, but not enough."

Tapas had long had a dream to explore the world beyond India. In 1971, Tapas had tried to join a fine art school in Paris, but it did not work out. In 1983, after six years of living in Auroville, she was ready to take the next step and she moved to Paris.

"Paris was like jumping into the ocean and learning to swim. The Ashram and Auroville were bubbles, you were so protected. Paris was for my intellectual growth - for 12 months I had to work very hard to revive my mind - and for my independence." Tapas studied for a B.A. in Linguistics, and also got a part-time job teaching English Language in the École Nationale d'Administration. "I was teaching people who were going to become big politicians or part of the French Government administration."

Later she got a job in the Indian Embassy, firstly in the visa section and later as a cultural attaché. "That is when I discovered my Indian roots because I had to officially represent India vis-a-vis the French Ministry of Culture and the French Ministry of External Affairs. For the first time in my life, I had to learn how to dress in Indian style, give diplomatic presentations, go to ambassadorial receptions etc. It was six years of full discovery of India, at the historical, political, cultural and educational levels."

"During the time I stayed in Paris, I always saw Mother saying to me, 'You always wanted to do this, now you've got it'. I told myself that as long as I know I'm growing, I will stay. The moment I feel I have reached a stagnation point, I will come back to Auroville."

In 1992, after ten years away, she felt ready to return.

However, before she returned she did an arts management course run by the French Ministry of Culture. "It was a fantastic, very rich training by an institution which has the most advanced cultural policies in the world".

When she returned to Auroville, she put all the experience she had gained at the service of the community. Along with Paolo she worked in Kalamitra, a group to promote cultural events and workshops in the field of the arts. She also made Auroville part of an international network for the arts, and brought many artists and performers to the community, as well as setting up a residency project that would host artists to do research projects in Auroville.

When she came back, Tapas did not pay much attention to what was happening in the community because she was so glad to be home. But, gradually, she sensed that changes had taken place. "For example, I wanted to give my money to the farms and I thought I would get a house in exchange. But I was told, 'Don't dream about that happening. Hold on to your money'."

However, she felt the real changes began in 2005 when the Economy Group started closing down all the Auroville Services that they felt were not 'productive' or self-supporting. "Overnight, we got a message that the Kalamitra budget would be stopped. If we wanted it to continue, we had to meet the Economy Group and justify the projects we wanted them to support. I had just finished the renovation of the whole Sri Aurobindo Auditorium and had already planned many cultural projects for the coming year, and they cut the budget without even calling me for a meeting or explaining anything. That was really a shock. I felt this was a real attitude change in the community, that now everything was going to be put upon a commercial basis rather than emphasising the spirit of service, and I decided I had had enough."

Tapas returned to Paris and registered for a doctorate. Her subject, which she had begun researching before she left in 1992, was eco-feminism. For seven years she was back in an academic milieu, although every year she would return to Auroville for a number of months.

"When, in 2012, I came back for good I felt Auroville was drifting more than ever. But I decided to reintegrate and continue my work with the arts because I know that it is only when you put your hand in the mud that you can participate in making changes."

What changes would she like to see happen? The main one centres around the concept of 'seva'. "Seva has to do with voluntary work with the inner spirit of service. In the Ashram we were motivated from a very young age to work in the spirit of service to the Divine, and Auroville's early days were no different. There was so much simplicity, joy and sharing, and the dominant spirit was how to serve the collective."

"What makes me sad today is that, in our constant economic struggle to survive, we Aurovilians are becoming more and more commercial in our dealings with each other and losing the spirit of inclusiveness and service. To reach Mother's dream we need to experiment. Mother has given us this laboratory, she says, 'You do the research and I will look after you', so we should all consider ourselves as researchers and volunteers working in the spirit of seva."

"My innermost prayer to The Mother today is that she helps us bring back the key Auroville ideals as the central focus of our lives, and invokes in us the highest spirit of service and full faith in her adventure of the Unknown; that she helps us be ideal and perfect instruments for the manifestation of her Dream."

From an interview by Alan

The second Auroville Potters' Market



Gora, an awakened Indian mystic, was a potter. When his disciples grew in numbers and included kings and nobles, they told him to stop his pottery work as it was not appropriate for a master. Gora's answer to them is very significant: "Even with you all, I am doing the same, tamping from the inside and tapping from outside, moulding you." In fact, that's the whole art of pottery and that's also the whole art of creating oneself. There is nothing like pottery to make one centred within oneself.

So when the Auroville International Potters' Market took off, it was, for me, a regular visitor from Pune, the natural outcome of this spiritually-rich place. This centuries-old-connection between pottery and the inner journey seems to have got transmitted into the new generation as well. Ishan Lamba from Delhi, the youngest among the participants, summed it up for me, "You cannot hurry the clay or the process. It goes on and on and you wait till it completes. And as you wait, you can experience becoming quiet, and the silence within grows." This young man had experimented with different walks of life before the inner call took him to the much-coveted Golden Bridge Pottery Centre in Pondicherry. The four-day-long market, which began on 23rd January, is the brainchild of two ebullient Aurovilian women, Ange Peter and Sabrina, great potters themselves. The 2016 market is the second edition of the

show that they had started last year. Under a vast canopy of trees, the market spread out, like a typical village fair. The sheer fun of creation that was visible in both the potters and their works on display infected the visitors and buyers as well. I myself went on a splurge because I knew I would not get any of these pieces anywhere else. Here, each piece was unique, individualistic and spoke volumes to me.

For example, Kavita Ganguly's animal motif creations reflected joy and playfulness. There sat frogs in utter relaxation by the pool, legs in water... A perfect piece for your coffee table or for your study. Kavita hails from Anand in Gujarat. Ange Peter's mugs for life, which featured flowers from her own garden and the woods around, had that call of the forest in them.

Every stall had something quite unexpected, which made the browsing and buying all the more thrilling. At Supriya Menon Meneghetti's stall, everything centred around the underlying theme of *shankh* or conch. It was like standing by the sea. Yamini Dhall from Mumbai, the Economic Times journalist for whom pottery is a way of expressing herself, had brought some exquisite ware. Her works in blue porcelain with 22 carat gold etchings were a collector's item. So were Priya Sundaravalli's intricate designs with crystal rock effect. The secret, she told me, lay in getting the clay fired at a very high temperature. Kolkata-based Kabita Lindenmeyer's main pieces were all hand-

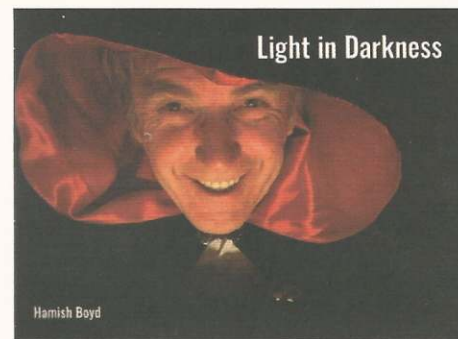
moulded, in varying shapes and in some rare, irresistible hues. Ranu Kawatra from Gurgaon, near New Delhi, liked to experiment with his medium, the result being some hitherto-unseen creations. One among them stood out: a stand in the shape of a hand, with struggling fingers. Amidst the glazed pottery, stone pottery and ceramic art, two stalls had a different look: with rust-red wares, the colour of the earth here in Auroville. They belonged to potters from nearby villages, like Pandurangan of Kottakkalai with his terracotta works. The children's section, where children could experiment with clay, was always crowded with enthusiastic little artists. I stood watching them as they worked in total silence, engrossed in the moulding. But there was another place which drew travelling guests like me: the packing station, manned by two next gen Aurovilians, Kiran and Tara, who made it easy for us to carry the breakable items safely. The banner above the station was typically Aurovilian: "We run on love and donations! [Hugs Accepted]" And how could I leave without giving them hugs, besides donations, of course?

The label of Teekshna Prasad's pottery is 'Clay Works'. It is a statement that applies to this market too. Clay does work. In both the inner and the outer worlds.

Rathi

Rathi is a professional journalist from Chandigarh. She lives in Pune and is a regular visitor to Auroville.

Light in Darkness: poems and photos by Hamish Boyd



Hamish Boyd's poetry is by turns witty, enigmatic, profound, joyful, funny, anguished, angry and moving, mirroring, perhaps, the many elements of his nature. Many of the poems in this collection are sensitive evocations of the natural world but often they are jumping-off points for deeper enquiries about the nature of the self and of reality. The connecting motif, however, as the title suggests, is Hamish's exploration of light and darkness, both of the world and of himself.

Sometimes the dark predominates – as in a poem about a caged tiger or in the anger that surges through 'Fashion Slaves', a poem about cows that will be slaughtered for the fashion industry:

*But we do not smell like Coco Chanel,
More like the sweat stench of fear,
The death reeking blood of the abattoir.*

Sometimes the darkness and the light are tightly interlaced. But, more often, the light finally surges through. Sometimes it is the reappearance of the sun:

*Yet my heart floods for all things that become then expire:
The forest, the mountains, the snow that melts,
The deer that run when they hear my footstep,
The carcass rotting on the ground not far from where I stand.
I look up and even cry for the sky
Then the wind abates, and with it gone,
Sun's smile flushes full warm on my face,
And I laugh like a madman, arms thrown wide in delight.*

Sometimes, the saviour is a loved one

*I have crawled in many caves alone and that has been the end
of me.
But you have always reappeared to pull me out screaming and
kicking
to remember what fresh air I like.*

Sometimes, as in 'Losar Fire', it is an elemental, mystic cleansing

*Cleansing by fire.
Absolution of hindrance.
No more delay for full dawning.*

In fact, the prevailing tone of this collection is celebratory, climaxing in the final poem in the collection, 'Yes'

*Yes is a powerful utterance.
It melts ice and hearts.
It blossoms butterflies.
Flowers flowers,
streams streams
and suns suns.*

Hamish's love of language, his glittering facility with words, is intoxicating, although now and again he overdoes it (of a mountain, "shivering its own epidermal bliss") or he falls into the prosaic ("But policing won't work with men and women").

He is, among other things, an actor and a medical clown, and some of this poetry seems written to be read aloud, even acted, which is precisely what he did one evening in a riveting multi-media show in the Tibetan Pavilion. But it is the simpler, quieter poems, those that call for an envelope of silence, which are often the more resonant. Poems like 'Source of Light'.

*Light?
Flight?
Wing bright pool of rest?
What need now for
Refuge,
Yidam,
Unbound expansiveness?
I sit here on the floor.
This plenum void.*

Hamish's photographs are a wonderful accompaniment and augmentation of the poems in this handsome collection.

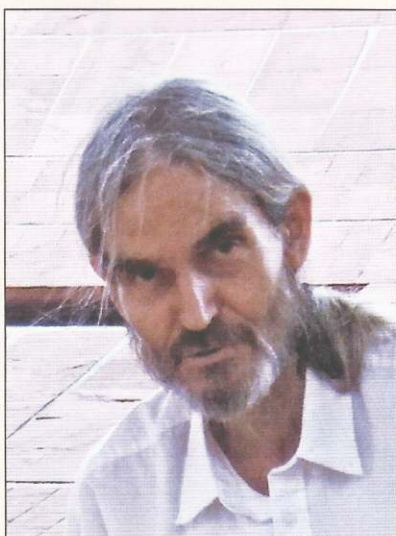
Alan

'Light in Darkness', published by Komali MeDi Clown Academy, 2016. All proceeds from this book will go to the Academy to train and support medical clowns to work in rural and urban India. For more information contact hamish@auroville.org.in.

PASSING

Georges Blanchet

On 2nd January, Aurovilian Georges Blanchet left his body at the age of 65 in PIMS hospital. He had suffered a general systems collapse caused by a long-festering lung infection, which had become only apparent a few weeks before. He was conscious about his approaching death and asked his visitors to sing him Mother's Mantra and read him Her *La Voie Ensoleillée*. Towards the end, he repeated the Mantra himself putting his hands on his heart, and departed saying, "All that we do is for the Divine"



Georges, who was known as a friendly, quiet person who lived a simple devoted life, joined Auroville in 2008. He lived in Vikas community and had been working in Pitchandikulam, at Verité and at the Matrimandir, where his particular care was the lotus pond. He also served the community as a 'silent observer' in the Auroville Council and as a member of the second Feedback Review Committee. More recently he worked at the Visitors' Centre bookshop. Georges has written various texts in French on gardening and also the book *Fenêtre ouverte sur le monde*, printed at Auroville Press.

Georges' body was taken to the Farewell House and buried on the afternoon of Tuesday, 5th January at Adventure's burial and cremation grounds.

NEWS IN BRIEF

AVC appointed knowledge partner

Auroville Consulting has been actively working with the Ministry of Urban Development (Government of India) in relation to the Government's Smart City initiative and has been appointed a knowledge partner for the city of Bhubaneswar. The unit supported Bhubaneswar with the design and implementation of citizens' participation mechanisms and the preparation of their Smart City programme application, with a focus on sustainable development of the city. On January 28th, the Government of India announced the first 20 Indian cities that have been selected for the Smart City initiative. Bhubaneswar was ranked first.

Architectural awards

In the third edition of the NDTV Design & Architecture Awards 2015, Auroville architects received two awards and one nomination. In the section 'House Award: Climatic Zone (Warm & Humid)', architect Fabian Ostner of White Ant Studio won an award for his "A House in Auroville", while architect Ganesh Bala from Studio One won a nomination for his 'Petite Ferme House'. In the category 'Socially Relevant Design', architect Sindhuja from Imago Architecture and Design received the award for her Sub-Post Office and Ration Shop design.

New film on Auroville

At the request of OutreachMedia, a new 15 minute introductory video has been made on Auroville by a visiting film maker, Serena Aurora. The video, based on Mother's Dream, can be watched on-line at Serena's site <https://www.youtube.com/user/AurorasEyeFilms>, click on 'A Dream Down to Earth'.

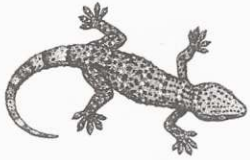
Juanita's ashes

Some of the ashes of late Juanita Cole, who passed away in July last year in the USA, have been interred at the Adventure Burial and Cremation ground at the request of her family, as for Juanita Auroville was "her place in the Universe".

On Geckos and Penguins

Imagine you're tapping away on your computer, diligently doing your work for Auroville. It's bucketing down rain outside, and your computer starts to assert its feelings about the monsoon humidity – stuck keys, a haywire cursor, documents that freeze and programmes that get stuck in never-ending sand clock icons... Just as your patience starts to disappear along with the sand sifting through the hourglass – the computer crashes altogether.

You phone Blue Light, Auroville's go-to tech guys. You assume they will instantly mount their chargers and gallop over and sort out your computer problem pronto. The only problem is, they're inundated with similar requests and are busy sorting out the myriad of colourful problems that confront computer users in Auroville, from crashed servers to fried geckos. Yes, fried geckos.



"Several times we found them inside the power supply unit part of the computer," says Blue Light's Phil. "Pow! With smoke and everything! We open it and find a fried gecko inside. Big ones! It is impossible for this big thing to go inside. So, they go inside when they are small, and spend their whole life there and eat bugs. And some day, they move too much, and then the computer goes pzzzzttt!"

His colleague Charles chimes in: "So what we do to avoid trouble is cover the hole with fine mesh – we make the computer gecko-proof!"

Charles and Phil are part of the Blue Light team, which provides computer support for the city services, schools and a few commercial units, totalling more than 200 computers.

While the monsoon in Auroville poses challenges for all units and services, Blue Light is particularly affected because computer technology is especially susceptible to weather conditions. "There are so many electronic failures," says Phil. Charles continues: "You get lightning on top of dampness damage, and we just can't support all that stuff. Most of the people are understanding. This is India, lots of things don't work some of the time! So people have that mentality to find a way to work around things."

Blue Light started eight years ago out of Future School, to address the lack of overall computer strategy and effective computer support in Auroville. "Each unit would buy computers from wherever and get whoever to install them and they didn't network together well, and the backups were patchy," says Charles. "To address this weak base, Blue Light came along and developed a standard package that it could roll out. From small beginnings, it's grown."

"There are other IT professionals inside and outside Auroville, and they all work individually, as far as we know," says Phil. "We try to work in a team, so when someone leaves, it does not interrupt our service. So far, it's amazing we're still alive, because losing three key people last year was really terrible, really bad news."

Charles says that the major challenge for Blue Light is retention of staff, because they are mostly volunteers. "A lot of good volunteers came and left. They'd commit for a year and we would spend a lot of time inducting them, but then they left after two months after getting disillusioned with Auroville. In the eight years of

Blue Light, there's only one person who's been here since the beginning, and that's Bharathy."

There are now six full-time workers and one part-time, with the current team consisting of Andrey, Bharathy, Charles, Daniel, Keerthi, Philippe and Ramachandra. Yet the team finds the workload a challenge. They fix well over 2000 computer 'issues' per year, documented in their Issue Tracker. "There's not enough of us to do the work," says Charles. "It's high tech. It requires a lot of knowledge, training and experience to do it well." And it's difficult to attract people with the required level of skills, given the attractive salaries on offer outside Auroville. "A good IT professional with ten years experience in Bangalore or Chennai, would be paid 10-15 lakhs per year," says Phil. "That's about ten times an Auroville maintenance. So the only realistic option we have is to invite some volunteers who are passing by for a short period or long term like us. They have to be enthusiastic and competent technically, and also completely idealistic to drop a salary that's so high in India and come here and get zero maintenance."

So why do Charles and Phil do this?

"We're stupid!" quips Phil.

"It's gift economy. Karma yoga. And plus, it's what we do," says Charles.

In order to address the staffing problem, the Budget Coordination Committee (under which

techies!" quips Charles. "We think it's a part of our karma yoga and we have to work on ourselves," says Phil more seriously. "With the kind of work we do, providing the support infrastructure, there's one big catch. When we do our job well, then everything works well, and people don't notice. Then they say, 'Why do we need these geek people? Everything's running fine.' When we hear from people, it's almost always a complaint, because something doesn't work. That's a big catch, the nature of the industry. So sometimes it's a bit frustrating."

Phil points out that while Auroville has different ideals around how its services function, individuals may have expectations about their computers that are more akin to a commercial arrangement. "Normal commercial businesses outside Auroville have a Service Level Agreement (SLA). It means that the computer support company has to provide a certain level of service to the client. The higher the level of service, the higher the cost. Here in Auroville, we're trying to stick with the idea that there shouldn't be an exchange of money in the work we do. When people can't work because their computers don't work, they shout at us, 'How am I supposed to work?!' This is completely right. But maybe their problem is only a small printing job that impacts one person. Meanwhile, a whole server could have col-

different skill levels – into something that is smart," says Charles. "And because we're busy supporting people in their day-to-day work, we may go a week without any time to spend on improving our systems. So the workload compared to the resources is one big issue."

Blue Light promotes and uses Free and Open Source Software (FOSS), such as the Linux operating system, the symbol for which is Tux, a healthy and peaceful penguin. The software is not only free of charge, but users are permitted to modify the software, as long as they give back those modifications to the community. Another group of FOSS enthusiasts can then pick up the modification and develop it in



another way, which is called "a fork" in the software's development path. It's largely a gift economy, as Charles points out, which is "akin to the ideals of Auroville."

"We're basically a bunch of open source enthusiasts", says Phil, "the concept of open source fits well in Auroville." While the team's focus is on supporting FOSS, Blue Light also looks after the Windows system computers in the Town Hall, because they inherited these systems when they took over supporting the Town Hall's computers three years ago.

Blue Light also offers website hosting, and currently hosts around 25 Auroville-related websites, such as those of Sadhana Forest, the Auroville guesthouses and for the Residents Service. It also formerly operated the internet browsing centre at La Terrace, which has now closed because people generally travel these days with tablets and smart phones and no longer need desktop computers to access the internet. In conjunction with the site operators, Blue Light still provides the Wifi Hotspots throughout Auroville, where guests and Aurovilians can pay to access internet on their own devices. For this operation, Blue Light rents a server in Germany, where Internet connections are more reliable and cheaper than India. However, Charles points that they want to offload this aspect of their business, despite its profitability, because it is not part of their core mission of supporting the city services.

While Phil says they'd like to overcome the pejorative connotations of the term 'geek' as it "throws a curtain" over their work and makes them sound like strange guys tinkering away in a dark room, Charles laughingly claims it as a "badge of pride: The Geeks!" They point out how creative and interesting much of their work can be. "Once you get past those negative concepts," says Phil, "you realise we are architects, masons, plumbers, garbage cleaners. We are all that, we do all that!" Charles chimes in: "After all, we have engineers who come to Auroville and turn into foresters and yoga teachers. So we need some foresters and yoga teachers to turn into engineers."

So, next time your computer goes bonkers and you pick up the phone, spare a thought for these technology warriors of Auroville who will come and heroically retrieve the fried gecko from your computer.

Lesley

For more info visit bluelightav.org or contact bluelight@auroville.org.in.



The Blue Light team. From left Keerthi, Daniel, Ramachandra, Philippe and Charles

Blue Light is classed as a 'service activity' recently gave the team some funds for their first full time employee from outside Auroville. "Keerthi is working out very well," says Charles. "The salary is an ongoing cost each month, but BCC was happy to do it, and maybe we can do more." The other team members are Aurovilians, with only three taking a maintenance. It is quite a feat that the bulk of Auroville's computer systems are maintained on such a small budget.

The shoe-string nature of the Blue Light endeavour is probably not foremost in the minds of Aurovilians when their computers play havoc during monsoon. So what is it like being on the receiving end of the phone when an electric storm has crashed many Auroville computers and everyone thinks their computer or deadline is more important than the next person's? How do the Blue Light team feel when clients get emotional after their computers fail and they can't get instant attention from the tech warriors?

"We don't do emotions ourselves! We're

lapsed elsewhere, and if there's a risk of losing data or a whole team can't work, that takes priority. In the commercial world, the big organisation pays more and is therefore prioritised. But we don't want to operate like a business unit and bill people for the level of support that we do for them. We haven't found a valid model to help us, which we can explain to our clients and help manage expectations."

Blue Light also spends a good portion of its time being proactive, monitoring systems and looking for things that can go wrong. "We watch to see if the hard disks are filling up," says Charles. "Before they fill, we contact the users and recommend solutions. We tell them if things are degrading. We take regular backups of the data anyway, and wherever practicable we copy the most important data off site. So if there's a disaster, we have the most important data. In this way, we try to avoid crises."

They would like to proactively build a more efficient service. "But we need time to transition from where we are now – which has grown ad hoc with a bunch of different people with

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