

The Mother and Japan

The Mother's stay in Japan between 1916 – 1920 was not only of profound importance for her spiritual explorations, but might also have had a big influence upon the development of Auroville. In 1938, for example, she asked the architect Antonin Raymond, whom she had met during her stay in Japan and who designed Golconde in Pondicherry, to prepare the first plan for what Mother later described as “a first Auroville”. In 1956, Raymond accepted, via Pavitra, Mother's offer to conceive a second attempt to build an Auroville near Usteri Lake. Regarding the Japanese influence in Auroville, in 1965 Mother tells Huta that “The Mother's Shrine”, the forerunner of the Matrimandir, would be modeled on Kyoto's Rokuon-ji' (Golden temple). *Child, this is exactly what we shall have except for the shape of the roof – it must be a terrace and a dome, but the surroundings will be the same – lake, flowers, trees, rockeries, small waterfalls and so on.* (It may also be mentioned that as late as 1987, Roger's brief to the Matrimandir gardens designers was “symbolic gardens, in the Japanese way”.) None of Mother's earlier projects for Auroville bore fruit, but they indicate how profoundly She had been influenced by the Japanese aesthetic and the connections she had made while living there. Recently, Helena Capková, an art history professor at Waseda University, Tokyo, published an article in *Mother India* which threw further light upon Mother's stay in that country which we felt would be of interest to our readers. Here is an edited version.

Mirra (later known as The Mother) and her husband Paul Richard lived in Japan during World War One. Little is known of her life in Japan besides her being deeply immersed in a very intense sadhana, but there are some indications. As a trained artist, Mirra was extremely sensitive to the Japanese artistic sensibility, and the study of Japanese arts temporarily modified her artistic style and determined her long-term aesthetic preference. Her ideas about beauty and Japanese arts resonated with that of the American scholar, Ernest Fenollosa, who lived and worked in Japan for a number of years, and who argued that Japanese people had interwoven art into their lives so perfectly that it had become natural to them, and hence universal.

Many of Mirra's quotes have survived that capture her observations about art in Japan, such as: “For four years, from an artistic point of view, I lived from wonder to wonder,” “Beauty rules over Japan as an incontestable master,” “From the artistic point of view, the point of view of beauty, I don't think there is a country as beautiful as that”, and Japanese art teaches “the unity of art with life”.

A vast collection of Japanese objects, ranging from artworks to ordinary objects, surrounded The Mother in her Pondicherry living quarters throughout her long and productive life, and reminded her of the refinement and superior aesthetic experience that she found in Japan.

In Japan, Mirra also became involved in her elaborate exploration of flowers and their spiritual significances. According to her friend Nobuko Kobayashi, with whom she practiced ‘still-sitting’ meditation, Mirra started referring to herself as Fujiko (Wisteria). She was inspired by the wisteria flowers on the roof of an ancient Shinto shrine. Wisteria/Fuji is also a pun on “fuji” – “undead” or “immortal” and Fuji, the sacred mountain. Fuji/wisteria belongs to a canon of Japanese flowers that bear special cultural significance and symbolism. It is associated with nobility and is also understood to represent love, and within the Buddhist context, prayer. Mirra later called Wisteria, ‘poet's ecstasy,’ with the comment: ‘Rare and charming is your presence!’

Another friend of the Richards, Shumei Okawa (1886-1957), said of Mirra: “You know Mount Fuji . . . you can't appreciate it in full when you are very near, when you are too close . . . some distance is needed. . . . from a distance, ah! it is grand, it is breath-taking, it is sublime! She was like Mount Fuji, Mirra was. . . .”

The Richards and Japanese media

Shortly after her arrival in Japan, Mirra was approached by a journalist from the Fujoshinbun newspaper for an interview, but instead she sent the manuscript of *Woman and the War*, which was published on 7th July 1916. The article conveyed her ideas relating to feminism and women in society generally, highlighting issues she was passionate about, such as the natural equality of the sexes, the importance of collaboration and the need of inner spiritual growth. “Without inner progress there is no possible outer progress.”

She also sent a self-portrait painting, which was published in the same newspaper two months later, together with a text written by a journalist entitled *A Truly Dedicated Woman*. This image of the Mother was forgotten about until recently.

At some point in her stay, Mirra also gave a talk called *To the Women of Japan*. In this talk, notes her biographer Georges Van Vrekhem, “she emphasizes again the spiritual role of women. ‘True maternity begins with the conscious creation of a being, with the willed shaping of a soul come to develop and utilize a new body. The true



Self-portrait by The Mother published in a Japanese Newspaper

domain of women is spiritual. We forget it but too often.’

“Then she expounds Sri Aurobindo's and her view of the importance of the point in world history at which humanity has arrived: ‘We are living in an exceptional time at an exceptional turning point of the world's history. Never before, perhaps, did mankind pass through such a dark period of hatred, bloodshed and confusion. And, at the same time, never has such a strong, such an ardent hope awakened in the hearts of the people...’”

Van Vrekhem notes that then she briefly sketches the evolution “that is expected to culminate in the descent of the Supramental.”

For the first year, the Richards lived and worked together in Tokyo with Shumei Okawa, a university professor, Zen practitioner and an active sympathiser with the Indian liberation movement, who was also described as ‘the leading spirit of the Pan-Asiatic movement in Japan’. Okawa soon involved Paul Richard in the political circle called the Black Dragon Society. Together with Okawa, Paul edited the society's English journal, *The Asian Review*, and published several books on political science. His purpose was to analyze the contemporary world geopolitically, but it was heavily coloured by his idea of unifying the Asian peoples. They both sought to lessen British interests in Asia, particularly on the Indian subcontinent.

Paul Richard's influential works during this period include *Au Japon* (To Japan, 1917) and *To the Nations* (1917). In *Au Japon*, which was translated into four languages, he wrote, “Liberate and unify Asia; for Asia is thy domain. Asia is thy field of action and, if needed, thy field of war; thou knowest it well... Thine own share is the whole of Asia... Thou hast but to set her free...”

It is unclear how much Mirra was involved in her husband's political activities. Mother translated *Au Japon* from the original French into English, and Gilles Guigan points out that the liberation of Asia was one of Sri Aurobindo's ‘dreams’ and “As Mother and Sri Aurobindo's aims have always been the same, it is very likely that Mother shared the aims of Okawa and Paul Richard – without necessarily sharing the means to be used in order to achieve this aim.”

Paul Richard's work quickly proliferated among the Japanese intelligentsia, and placed the Richards on the cultural map of the Japanese capital.

Mirra's stay in Japan was also extremely important from the point of view of her inner work. Some of her remarkable spiritual experiences were noted in her ‘spiritual diaries’, like her identification with the soul of the cherry tree. However, Van Vrekhem points out that her inner life there was very far from placid, for she had identified Paul as an emanation of one of the four great Asuras, or anti-divine forces, and had vowed to convert her husband and, through him, the essence of his person, the Lord of Falsehood. Consequently, “her stay in Japan,” explains Van Vrekhem, was ‘a perpetual battle with the adverse forces’ – not a battle on the human scale, but a battle of superhuman, divine and anti-divine forces.”

But Mirra also had other battles to fight. In January, 2019, she contracted the ‘Spanish Flu’. She refused all medicine because she wanted to discover what lay behind it. ‘*At the end of the second day, as I was lying all alone, I clearly saw a being with a part of the head cut off, in a military uniform – or what remained of a military uniform – approaching me and suddenly flinging himself upon my chest, with that half head, to suck my force. I took a good look, then realized that I was about to die... Then I called on my occult power, I fought a big fight and I succeeded in pushing him off so that he could not stay any longer.*’

She explained this was a being who had been killed violently during the First World War, and who was now ‘vampirising’ living beings to suck out their life force. After Mirra had drawn on all her occult power to put matters straight, the epidemic subsided: in two or three days there was not a single case of flu in the city.

But the ‘hellish’ years of tension and struggle in Japan had left their marks. Later, in Pondicherry, she wrote, ‘When I came here [*from Japan*] I was not worth much,’ wrote the Mother, ‘and I did not give myself many months to live.’

The Theosophy connection

In Japan, the Richards also knew the founding figure of the Theosophy Society, the Irish writer, editor and educator James Henry Cousins (1873 – 1956). At this time, interest in esotericism and in nationalist struggles were closely related. Through the Richards, the ideas of Sri Aurobindo also became very influential in spiritual/nationalist circles in Japan, while Cousins and Paul Richard were strongly bound together as advisers for the Black Dragon Society's journal *The Asian Review*.

The connections between the Richards and the Theosophical Society were quite loose, and became a footnote in their own spiritual project, although evidence suggests that Mirra frequented Theosophical Society events in Paris and that she stayed in the Adyar headquarters in Madras before leaving for France in 1915.

The first Theosophical Society lodge in Tokyo was established in 1924, and for a few months it was led by Philippe Barbier St. Hilaire. Later that year, St. Hilaire went to Mongolia to learn from Tibetan lamas, and then, via Theosophy circles, to Sri Aurobindo's Ashram in Pondicherry, where he was known as Pavitra and became Mother's secretary. (They had not met in Japan as he arrived there just after Mirra had left.)

St. Hilaire was employed in Tokyo by Hajime Hoshi, the head of a growing pharmaceutical empire. Hoshi also commissioned a young architect, Antonin Raymond, to design the campus of his business. The monumental, concrete auditorium was greatly admired and still stands in Tokyo to this day.

The Pondicherry connection: Golconde

Mirra knew Antonin and his wife, Noemi, and they shared an immense admiration for Japanese art as well as a common interest in esotericism.

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# Ex Special Forces provide healing at Quiet Healing centre

A couple of months ago, a poster went up on Auroville notice boards advertising scuba diving lessons offered by ex-Special Forces soldiers of the Indian Army. Those interested were asked to contact Quiet Healing Centre. Auroville Today went there to find out more, and discovered a fascinating project which may lead to future collaborations between ex-military personnel and Auroville which is being planned for the older members of the community.

Major Vivek Jacob spent 14 years as an elite para commander in the Indian Army, of which over nine years were spent in combat in the mountains. One day, his parachute malfunctioned during a combat skydive and he suffered spinal injuries. While recovering in a military hospital, he formed a close bond with an Indian Air Force officer who had been permanently paralyzed from the waist down in a freak accident, and who had spent the past four years in the hospital in a wheelchair. When the officer expressed his desire to scuba dive, Vivek promised he would try to make it happen. It inspired Vivek to explore a whole new world of adaptive adventure sports and its potential to change the narrative around disabilities.

Vivek was already looking for a change in his life. "In Special Forces you are basically trained to hunt people. And we became extremely good at it. But I reached a point where I didn't want to kill people any more; I understood it was so stupid. After so many near-death experiences, I had learned the value of life, so now I wanted to focus upon creation rather than destruction. I locked my weapon and said I'm not touching it any more. It was when I was wondering what to do next that I met this guy in hospital, and that experience gave me a new focus.

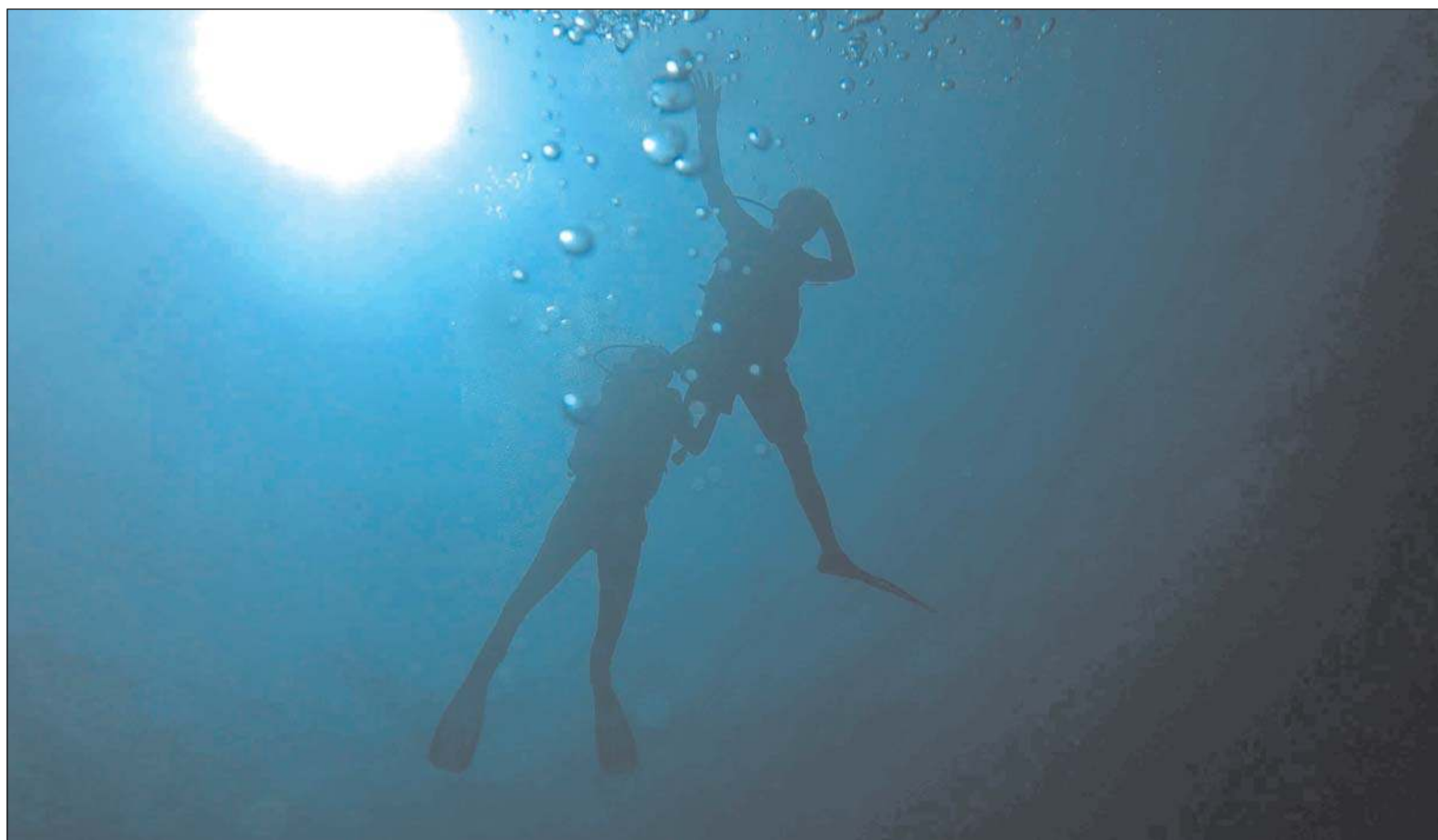


Major Vivek (ret'd)

"When I started focusing on helping that one person, I realized that for him to scuba dive while in a wheelchair he would need support from a lot of different people. Then I thought there must be so many other people like him across the world who may also want to do skydiving or mountaineering, and there must be more people like me who are trained and want to help out, so if I can connect people who have these dreams with people who can support them, we can create a win-win situation."

He resigned from the army and in 2019 he launched Special Forces Adventures with a focus to design and implement large-scale employment solutions for people with disabilities and those who are underprivileged. He was joined by others with a military background who were also looking for a different way to serve humanity. "We didn't have money but serving and ex-Special Forces soldiers kept coming to help because they were totally captured by the vision. They wanted to focus their energy on healing because they had been dealing with death."

One of them was Major Arun who had had a similarly transformative experience while hospitalized after getting injured in combat. "In India the most conservative estimates consider that seven crore people suffer from some kind of disability. Most of them don't have jobs, they



Freedom: assisting someone with disability to scuba dive

are not independent, and they are locked up inside their homes, out of sight. When I heard about this project I found it so inspiring."

Vivek explains that Special Forces have a particular mindset, which is that when you are surrounded by hostility, you find a way to survive. It leads them to believe they can do anything, conquer anything.

Interestingly, he learned that many people with disabilities have a similar mindset. "That is the mindset that is keeping them alive. They go through thoughts of suicide sometimes, but after that they make the decision to live. That's a very powerful shift. So we don't grow that in them. They already have made that shift; we are just unlocking it."

They soon discovered there was a big demand and over the past year a team of close to 200 volunteers, comprising both serving and ex-Special Forces personnel working pro bono, have trained over a hundred people with disabilities to scuba dive.

But what is it about scuba diving that is so beneficial to those with disabilities?

Vivek explains there are many factors. People with physical disabilities are bound by gravity on land, but in the water they can move freely. The pressure on the body increases as one goes deeper, and this causes the body's healing mechanism to work much more efficiently. "Also, when you dive you hear only your own breathing, and you are floating effortlessly while captivated by this wonderful subterranean world. So it's a

form of meditation, deep meditation, which heals the brain."

Everywhere, the team received help. People offered their swimming pools, diving shops loaned diving equipment. "I realized that if what you are doing is good for the universe, the universal will support it," says Vivek.

At a certain point, however, he became depressed. "I felt I was a slave to circumstances. I was constantly having to ask people, 'Can we use your swimming pool? Can you



Major Arun (ret'd)

give me this?' I wanted to get rid of the pity and charity because it's a wrong perception: the people who we were helping have as strong a spirit as anybody else. But how to demonstrate this to the world?"

He visited his mother in Kerala. One morning a vision crystallized. "I got the idea of creating three world

records. We, former Special Forces soldiers from across the globe, would support the largest group ever of people with disabilities to conquer land, sea and air. One group will dive off the Maldives, another will skydive in Dubai, and a third group will ascend the Siachen glacier, site of the world's highest battlefield. It's all about unity – participants and support staff will be drawn from every religion, class, nationality status – and shattering the belief that people with disabilities are the weakest sector of human society and need charity, because they will do what 99% of the people on the planet will not have done. And as it will be filmed and put on the Internet the whole world will watch."

The C.L.A.W. (Conquer Land, Air, Water) project was launched in January 2020. The triple world record attempts will happen in 2021.

The other part of the vision was to establish a facility for people with disabilities where everybody, rich or poor, could come to be rehabilitated, re-skilled and get the possibility of employment. It would also be a full spectrum research facility, where scientists from across the world would collaborate in finding ways to improve treatment of disabilities. "Ultimately, we want to crush disability," says Arun.

Where does Auroville fit into all this?

After Arun was hospitalized after getting injured in combat, he did a lot of reading. "I wanted to know why there is so little harmony in the world and developed a fire to find solutions.

I was searching the entire landscape of human knowledge about three years back when I came across a reference to Auroville. I stayed here for some months to find out more about the idea behind and realized that while it is facing challenges, it has the potential to bring about overall human unity and harmony."

He is also very inspired by the afforestation work, and for the past two years has regularly been coming as a volunteer to work in Revelation forest.

"I was mesmerized by the information he gave me about the forest as well as the larger Auroville project," says Vivek. "I realized that what's happening here is how human beings should think and live."

But when he finally got here he realized there was also another factor. "The energy is very strong here, you can feel it. It's a very different dimension from outside Auroville; there are possibilities that don't exist elsewhere. And there is so much knowledge here; I've talked to so many people with expertise in different domains. So it's an ideal environment for a project like ours. Our team is giving one form of healing, scuba diving, but there are so many other things that could be offered in Auroville to those with disabilities. So I feel we will flourish because we are associated with Auroville, and we will help Auroville flourish, too."

And the work has already begun. So far they have trained twelve people (six of whom have disabilities) in scuba diving in the Quiet Healing Centre pool and in the Ocean; participants have also enjoyed Watsu and massage sessions at Quiet.

"In the end," says Vivek, "it's all about freedom, helping those with disabilities to no longer be a slave of circumstances. And it's happening: they are acquiring new confidence and some of them have become instructors, training other people with disabilities. But it's not just about them. For me, freedom is a collective experience; it's about unlocking the human capacity of everyone. Either all of us are free or none of us are. That's the key idea behind everything we do."

Alan

For more information on the project: [contact@claw.global](mailto:contact@claw.global)



The core team



# On being a new parent in Auroville

Before I had a child, I used to think that Auroville was an optimal place to raise children. There are forests to frolic in, fresh air, clean food, a kaleidoscope of colorful personalities and passions, activities from horseback riding to *Awareness Through the Body*, and, of course, the delicate and beautiful subtle atmosphere here. All of these things remain true. But after three years of being a parent of a young child, the cracks have also started to emerge – areas in which we fail, as a community, to support parents and their kids. This is my experience and some suggestions for improvement, written in the early morning hours before my daughter wakes in the other room.

It began with my maternity leave package. Working full-time for Auroville and receiving a full-time maintenance, the Human Resources Department granted me a maternity package in summer of 2017, when I was due in November. They told me that they had constructed the package from an old maternity policy and one which was not-yet-approved by the FAMC. The package was for 1.5 years, with full-time maintenance given for the first six months, then part time, then quarter time. If I worked a few hours each week, I could maintain the full-time status throughout. At the time, I thought that was generous – especially since in my country of origin (USA), such a package is unheard of. But the Swede sitting next to me was appalled. “What is she going to do after a year and a half?!” she interjected. Turns out she was largely right, as after a year and a half I was a full-time mama and a part-time worker, working 1.5 jobs, trying to support myself financially, and losing my hair along the way.

At the time, each mother I talked to had a different maternity package, depending on where she worked. Fortunately, by now there is only one Maternity Maintenance. Unfortunately, it doesn’t include paternity leave. Its short time-frame also leaves us all unsupported after a year and a half.

But what about the Children’s Maintenance, you ask, couldn’t that provide compensation to cover your childcare? Oh yes, the Children’s Maintenance. It begins when your child is born and provides a bit of financial support for your little one. This is wonderful. Did you already know about it? Although I’m embarrassed to admit this, I didn’t know. I didn’t think to ask other parents about it and had no idea this is something that was available. In checking with the BCC, I was told that parents should first register their child with the Residents Service and then write an email to the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) to avail of this. Although my daughter was born in Nov 2017, her maintenance only began in Dec 2019, even though I never wrote that email. (I’m still not sure how this happened!) Do I feel utterly stupid about this? Of course. Even if I had known about it, where could I have found this information? Our wonderful midwife had informed us that a visit to the Residents’ Service was necessary, but who updates new parents on financial resources? After a search on Auronet, I find the “Work, Maintenance and Individual Contribution Guidelines 2018” buried deep in the Reference Documents (Reference



The author with her daughter Alba

Documents>Mandates & Policies>FAMC).

In other words, we need to increase the communication from the BCC and the transparency of these mechanisms for Aurovilians so that all of us are clear on the resources available to us. Or we could create a system that directs parents from the Residents’ Service straight to the BCC, or an automatic email when you sign up for maternity leave about the financial support available to you. Notably, the Children’s Maintenance eventually includes non-transferable money that goes to Nandini every month, money which would be helpful to obtain the occasional article of clothing. When I spoke to the Nandini staff, they admitted that many parents don’t know about this and their money doesn’t get used.

But why doesn’t Auroville support financially stay-at-home parents until their children go to school? There is no doubt in my mind that stay-at-home parenting is work, as it’s perhaps the hardest job I’ve ever had. (For anyone who doesn’t think that parenting is work, I challenge you to take care of a three-year-old alone for one week, and then call me after you’ve recovered.)

Two arguments are often heard here. The first is that people will take advantage of a system like this, in particular Newcomers who could come to Auroville, have babies and not contribute to the larger Auroville for some years. My response is that stay at home parenting is not for everyone; certainly we could create a flexible system in which support is given on a case-by-case basis for those in need. Second, it is often heard that Mother never said that Aurovilians should populate Auroville and that having children is not serving Auroville. In my opinion, nurturing our youth to develop into integral individuals is a tremendous work for our community. Isn’t that what our teachers are doing? Doesn’t the work start at home?

If Auroville is not ready to support stay-at-home parenting, at least it should put support structures in place to assist parents in getting out

to work again. For example, we could turn pre-crèche into a co-op in which some parents are required to “work” there several days a week, or provide jobs that offer childcare and safe space for infants to play on site.

After 18 months, I continued to stay home and worked part-time. Other parents did different things: some have their domestic workers watch their kids, some have immediate family-members baby-sit, sometimes one person stays at home. All of these options are OK, but I don’t fall into any of these categories, so I was struggling to work 1.5 jobs and largely failing at both. At the moment I’m holding down part-time work with the Water Group via the Internet and from my home desk by working from home, squeezing in work in the hours before my daughter wakes or in the moments, sometimes if I finish cooking lunch early, and occasionally when she happens to nap.

Eventually my daughter began at pre-crèche, which allowed me to start working half days. In starting to work outside the home, suddenly I could exercise a part of myself that hadn’t been used for some time. After giving birth, I had a deepened sense of empathy and commitment to future generations; diving back into work outside the home held new meaning for me. And as other moms have shared, “Working makes you feel like more of a person.” But upon getting to work, I noticed the Town Hall (arguably the most unsafe public building for young children in Auroville) would swell with children on school holidays. Don’t these kids have anywhere else to be? No, because their moms are working at Town Hall, and what other child-minding options do they have?

Recently I was nominated to the interim TDC. My first thought wasn’t that I was under-qualified lacking any capability for the roles, except maybe communications. My first thought was, “Do they provide childcare?” More than one woman has left Auroville to return to her country of origin due to the lack of support for young parents. I also know of a lot of qualified, brilliant women sitting at home who want to contribute to Auroville in other ways. They can be given a chance to contribute if they have childcare options supported by the collective.

## Recommendations

We could create an affordable Child Care Service. This is not difficult to do. Organize a group of people who are available and skilled at looking after children, train them in First Aid, find a location, and fund this through the Central Fund. There is even a potential income stream: use the non-transferrable contribution from the Children’s Maintenance going to Nandini that many of us are not using to set up Child Care. When I worked in Nepal, my friends there were amazed when I told them that in high school I used to babysit people’s kids in exchange for money. “We have that in Nepal,” they joked, “it’s called community”. Auroville falls into a gap in the middle – we don’t all have the strong community of a small village, nor do we value the work through collective support. Maybe there’s a middle way? Let’s find it.

Let’s make it easier for parents to attend meetings, starting with those of Auroville governance. How difficult would it be to organize a room on-site where young children can play and have a few caretakers to watch over them for

two hours during General Meetings? Admirably, the recent Citizens’ Assembly has done just that. They set aside a budget for childcare for participants. This step is a welcome one and should be replicated as a best practice throughout Auroville. As for the Selection Process, if we can condense the time of the process so that it doesn’t end at 7:30pm two nights in a row, parents wouldn’t need to decide between cooking dinner for their children or participating in Auroville’s governance.

A few final points on making Auroville more young-child-friendly. Going out could be easier; there could be high chairs and children’s menus in all the restaurants. (Extra points for those that have well-maintained play areas, like in Naturellement!). I’m not sure that it’s possible to have a sound-proof booth for parents to sit with their babies in the movie theatres, but you get the idea: we need to re-imagine how spaces can be more friendly for both young children and their parents.

This also includes creating more child-friendly public spaces. We hear you loud and clear when you tell us that you don’t like our infants running and shouting at the Matrimandir. But what are our options? If you look around, they are limited, and each space has its own challenges, whereas Matrimandir is safe, clean, quiet, and largely mosquito-free (let alone the sheer joy my daughter exhibits when she is there, which she has every right to express). Plus there is the child-friendly Garden of the Unexpected now. Create more spaces where kids can safely flourish. Or have days particularly dedicated to welcoming children, such as Matrimandir used to do for young ones on Tuesdays.

At this point, you may be thinking that this is largely my fault or my responsibility. You’re probably right, I’ve certainly blamed myself enough. I’ve wondered what life would be like if my partner didn’t work outside of Auroville for months on end, or how it would be if I had a vast network of child-loving friends who could look after my daughter at my beck and call (it doesn’t exist). I’ve wondered (a lot) what it would be like if we lived closer to my parents or my in-laws. I’ve also wondered if I am doing this wrong: maybe I should just hire a domestic worker and, for a little extra money, throw childcare into her list of tasks. And I could definitely learn a lesson or two in asking for help!

On the other hand, my decisions don’t seem outlandish: we want to raise our daughter by ourselves and have the opportunity to work part-time, with the occasional opportunity to participate in important Auroville events. I’m not even asking for a night out to dinner, or a few moments to sit quietly (both of which I haven’t experienced in ages). I just want to participate in the collective. As new parents, our voices and perspectives are also valuable to the greater good.

When I take a moment to pause, I recognize that I still prefer to raise my young one here than face the challenges of doing it in the West, but I still feel Auroville can do better.

In my 15 years in Auroville, I’ve learned to fend for myself a lot, but I’m exhausted in having to fend for my family now, and would like some support, if not for myself then at least for the next generation of parents. Are you listening, Auroville?

My daughter is calling, I’ve got to go.

Ing-Marie

## THE MOTHER

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Pavitra had also come to know the Raymonds well in Japan, and the connection continued after he moved to Pondicherry. In particular, he had an extensive correspondence with Noémi Raymond between 1927 and 1966. Unlike Pavitra, Noémi continued exploring Theosophy, but not exclusively, and she addressed questions to Sri Aurobindo, which Pavitra communicated and posted the answers back to her in Japan.

Until 1933, the architectural practice of the Raymonds featured only sporadically in these letters. The first significant mention dealt with a remarkable project, the Raymonds’ new summer house in Karuizawa, a project that garnered international interest.

Noémi also shared with Pavitra the ideological programme or philosophy of the Raymonds’ atelier, where it described the return to simplicity and the innovative usage of traditional Japanese building principles as inspirations for their work.

In September 1934, Pavitra asked for more examples of the Raymonds’ work so that he could show them to The Mother. Noémi was delighted to oblige. In 1935 Pavitra sent the Raymonds plans made by a Bombay engineer (under Mother’s

guidance) for a new building for sadhaks in Pondicherry and asked Antonin for his comments. Antonin was happy to help and subsequently took over the overall design responsibility.

The construction of Golconde began in 1937 and the Raymonds visited Pondicherry for some months in 1938 to supervise the construction process. According to their testimonies, they found in the Ashram a partner in their spiritual study, as well as in their ambition to design a new modernist structure that would be rooted in Eastern tradition, or rather that could overcome the duality between East and West and bridge them in a new, universal style.

Golconde was the first modernist building in India. In 1935, Antonin wrote to Mother, “I would not like you to be shocked by the appearance. We are laying the foundation of a new kind of architecture.” It is, however, very influenced by Japanese simplicity and perfection in detail (much of the supervising work was done by George Nakashima, the famous American woodworker, who had trained under Antonin in Japan). Mother was very enthusiastic. In a letter of November, 1943, after visiting the building for the first time, she wrote to the Raymonds:

My dear friends,

*I have seen Golconde – It is beautiful. Already from the entrance one is struck by majesty simple and grand. It gives a feeling of nobility and immensity. From each corner one would just have to copy to make a painting. Everything lies in the way lines join, without anything unnecessary.*

*I regretted that you weren’t here – you would be happy – and seeing this brought back to me some projects – great projects for after the war – after the war.... all these things that will have to be done!*

*In the meantime Antonin, I thank you from all my heart for the beautiful thing you have created.*

*With my most affectionate remembrance to both of you and my greetings for the New Year.*

Our blessings

This architectural success has received praise from an international specialist audience, yet its unconventional design cannot be assigned exclusively to the genius of its designers, but also to the contemporary intrinsic connections within transnational artistic and spiritual networks.

Helena Capková



A year ago, in February 2020, there was an attempt to survey a route through the Youth Centre and Bliss forest for the laying of a High Tension cable. The Forest Group and Youth Centre objected and proposed an alternative route following existing roads. The Town Development Council (TDC) requested an Environmental Impact Assessment to justify a deviation of the planned route as the HT cable ring project is Government of India funded. The EIA was completed in July: the conclusion was to lay the cable along existing roads rather than through the Youth Centre and Bliss forest.

A community process was initiated on November 2nd with all parties involved, including the Youth Centre, the Forest Group, the TDC, the Auroville Electrical Service, and the Government of India Grant Group. It was agreed by all that the TDC in consultation with the Bliss forest stewards will explore the alternative route along the roads and, if no consensus can be reached, a General Meeting followed by a Residents Assembly Decision process would be initiated. However, on November 9th, 2020, the Acting Secretary of the Auroville Foundation advised the Town Development Council (TDC) to clear all Right of Ways (RoWs) along the Crown, Outer Ring and all Radials on the basis of the Master Plan (Perspectives 2025); according to the Master Plan, the RoW for the Crown has a width of 30 metres.

In pursuance of this, contravening the ongoing community process, on 17th December the TDC issued a work order to clear a stretch of the Crown through Bliss forest and the Youth Centre and to lay an underground HT cable along this route.

Consequently, the Forest Group and Youth Centre have called for a General Meeting to be followed by a Residents Assembly Decision (RAD) to decide upon the route to be followed. In response, those residents who support the action of the TDC have written a letter to oppose the holding of an RAD on this topic, saying it is unnecessary and inappropriate to call for an RAD when infrastructure services are being installed upon Right of Ways already defined by the Master Plan.

Notwithstanding this, a General Meeting to be followed by a Residents Assembly Decision on this topic is being prepared by the Residents Assembly Service. While this is a specific case, the larger issue of city development that underlies it has divided the community for many years. In order to provide an overview, we invited an individual from each perspective to explain their position.

## Why be square about circles?

Bliss forest is a city park that is densely planted to be a forest. Aurovilians from South Korea may be familiar with a similar concept in the city of Seoul. Other Germans, like me, may have grown up in cities with forest parks.

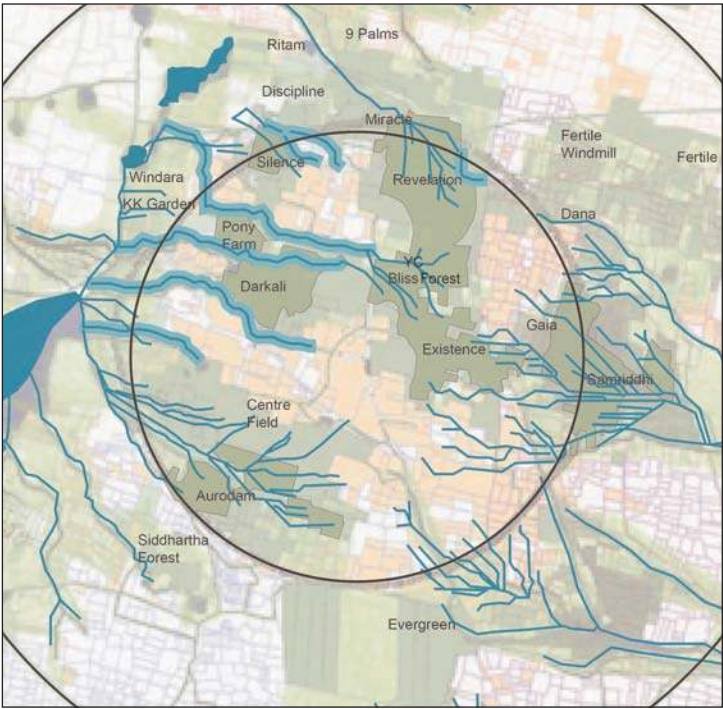
According to the Environmental Impact Assessment, the HT cable, if laid through Bliss, will require the destruction of 115 rare and native species of trees and shrubs, as well as an uncountable number of regenerating young, rare and native plants. Out of these 115 trees, only 18 are work trees and 10 are neem. In fact, this 30 year-old patch of forest is an excellent demonstration of the process called Ecological Succession, where the native evergreen canopy is by now dense enough so that pioneer species like the work tree no longer regenerate.

cables) are often discouraged by the repeated dismissal of alternative proposals (e.g. the Dreamcatchers' proposal, and the Land Suitability and Land Use Proposal of Suhasini) which incorporate the site's existing features into the Galaxy concept.

The Galaxy concept was created on a blank paper, not taking into consideration any of the site's natural and social features. It is the responsibility of a Master Plan to account for ground realities.

A galaxy has no perfectly circular border, it gradually merges into eternity, just as the map of Auroville Foundation owned land plots do.

The current Master Plan, with its emphasis on perfectly circular roads and large stretches of concrete buildings outlining the shape of the Galaxy, is a simplification that enforces a perfection that is in contradiction to the wholeness of the



Map 1: Showing greenbelt and city watersheds

The forested areas within the city are crucial for water management and have been located to support Auroville. Roads and buildings in these sensitive areas would be a destructive feature for the city.

Bliss Forest is located along a watershed and plays an important role in water management as it has very high soil percolation rates and aquifer recharge potential. Two major canyons in the city area originate here (see map). According to the Master Plan, both sides of the Crown RoW will have buildings for a total width of 70 metres and, if this goes through Bliss forest, it would have disastrous effects on water management all the way from Bliss Forest to Kottakarai.

The irony is that, even if the HT cable ring would be laid through Bliss Forest, it would still not be a perfectly circular Crown; adjustments have already been made to bypass College Guest House and privately-owned or temple-owned lands (see map 2). The perfectly circular RoW is an unattainable holy grail!

I personally am one of those who find the Galaxy vision for Auroville inspiring and meaningful, because it carries a dynamic and a sense of Wholeness – wholeness implying a space for diversity, imperfections and reality (the messy and shifting lives of humans and the environment). Aurovilians who wish to see the Crown marked in sensitive and diverse experimental ways (not only with roads and

Galaxy. This is a significant difference between the Galaxy concept and the current Master Plan.

Could the idea of RoWs marking the Crown be diversified to include other creative, beautiful and harmonious ways that merge with reality? Then we have a chance to actually manifest the Galaxy vision!

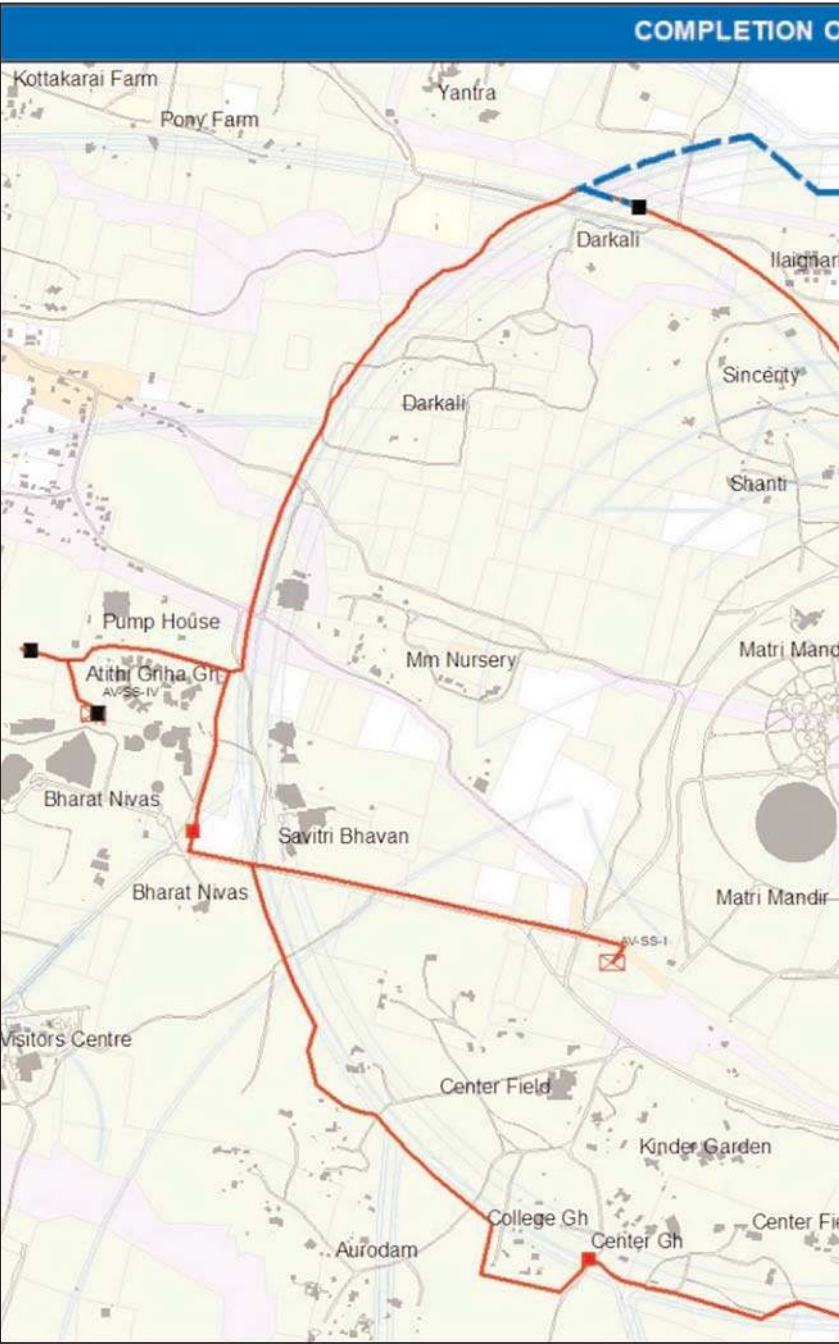
This is possible with wide community participation in discussions about town planning, instead of allowing such decisions to be solely made by a separate group or authority. In fact, though overlooked by successive TDCs, a participatory Environmental Management process is incorporated in the Master Plan.

Together we can indeed create “a form that is a universal symbol of totality, perfection, the Self, the infinite.”

*It is for Auroville to know what it wants. One has to take an inventive step, an urbanistic one that is part of Auroville's message. One should include contemporary life, human relationships, technology and the respect of nature, within a very creative context to show to the world that it is possible. [...] All new ideas are welcome. All new ideas can combine in a balanced and intelligent use of space, where life and our relationship with nature are all renewed. [...] I am not here to impose anything – it is up to Auroville to find it, to define itself.* (Roger Anger, Auroville Today, 1988)

Christoph

## The Right of



Map 2: Plan showing the overall route of the HT line and the a

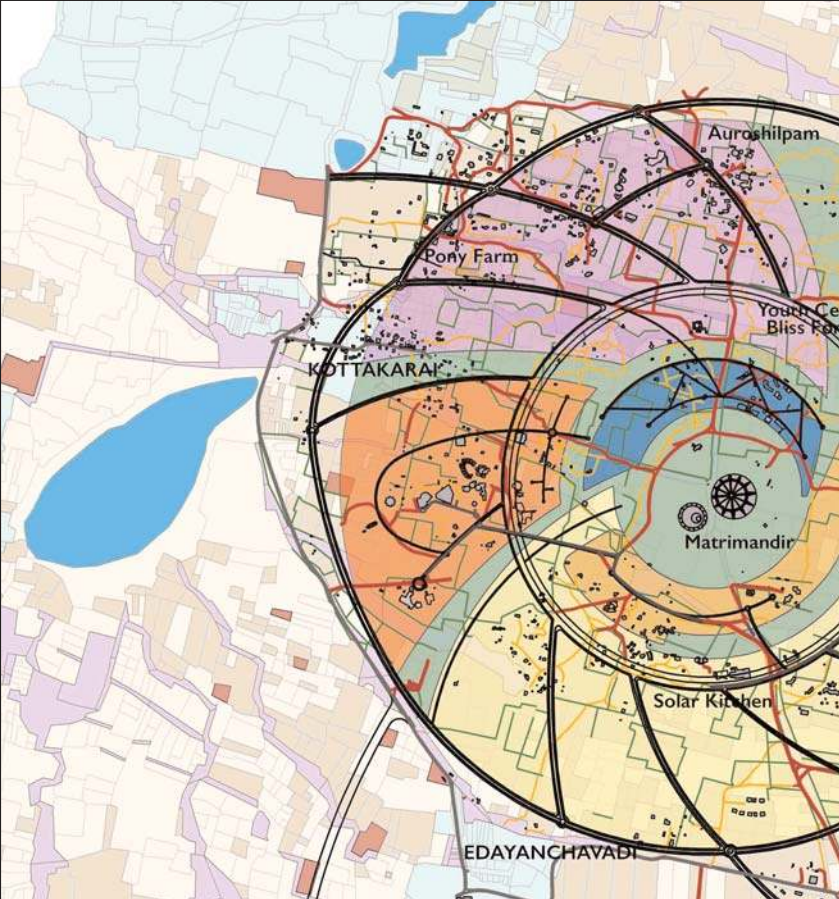
## What about the

Twenty six years ago, the youth were looking for a new home as Ami, which had been a youth community for many years, was no longer a welcoming environment.

After submitting plans, they were given a plot of land on a permanent basis by the planners. The plot was contested by a neighbour who wrote to L'Avenir. Consequently, the Cultural Zone Group were told by Roger Anger to move the Youth Centre project into the Bliss Forest, but this was not com-

municated to the youth at that time.

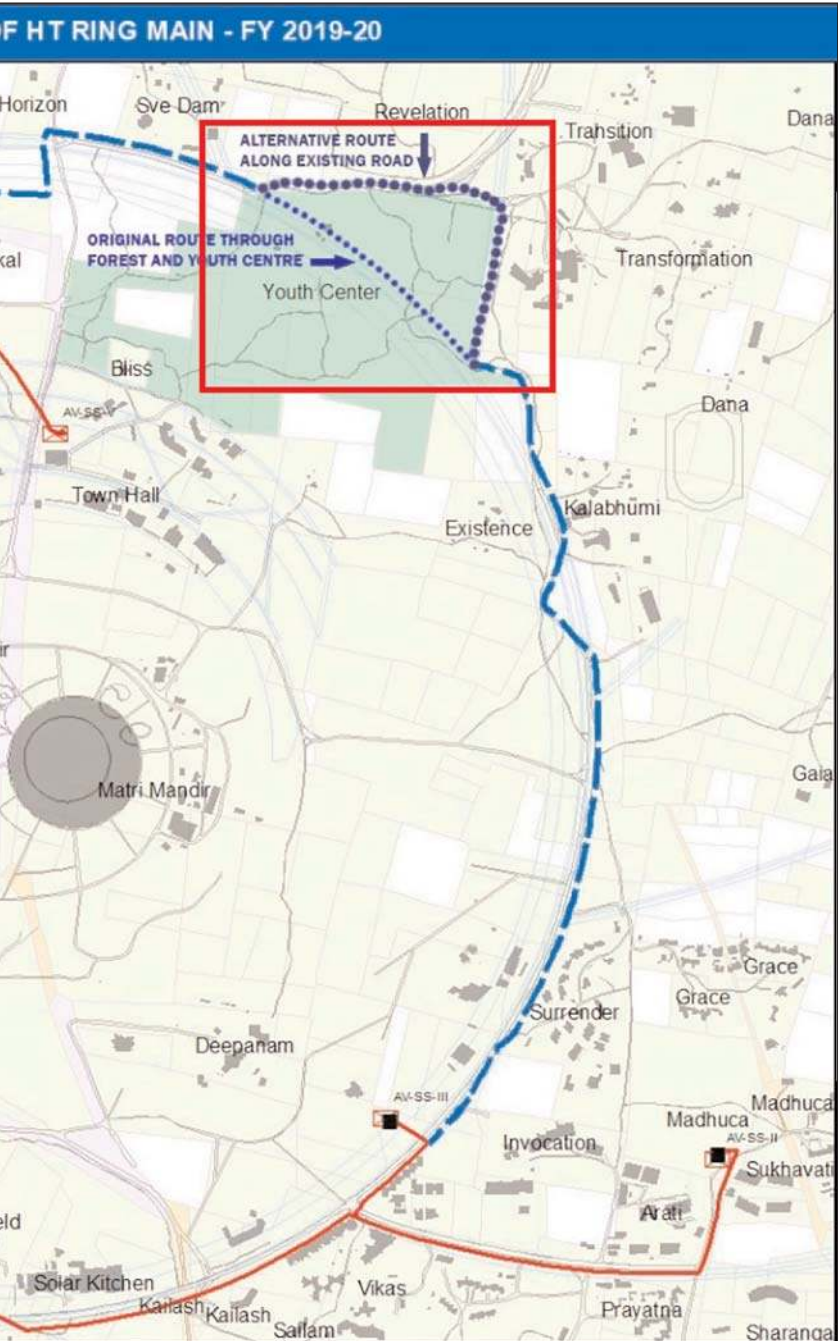
The youth fundraised, then fenced the land they had been allocated and constructed the first building. However, they were subsequently informed that there had been a mistake. The land they had originally been allocated was on the route of the future Crown road. They requested reimbursement of the money they had spent but when this was refused they decided to stay as they didn't have the financial means to begin again elsewhere.



Right of Ways according



# Way debate



Area of the Environmental Impact Assessment (red rectangle)

## e Youth Centre?

It is unclear if they were ever offered an alternative site. One of the Aurovilians who helped set up the Youth Centre says that, in spite of repeatedly asking for an alternative site, they were never offered one. In any case, they wanted to remain near the centre so they could be easily accessible. The fact that they felt marginalised and unsupported by the Auroville authorities may have been another factor in their decision to remain on the land they had originally been allocated.

The Youth Centre has not been without controversy. But for 25 years generations of Auroville youth have lived there and taken up responsibility for making this place a sanctuary for youth and a centre for their self-development as responsible members of the larger Auroville community.

They wish that the space they have created is respected and that the Right of Way does not pass through the Youth Centre.

Editors



to the 2025 Master Plan

# Why such a row over Rows?

If we stand by the Charter of Auroville then we must consider this: in January 1968, a city plan, commissioned by the Mother was approved. Two weeks, later She wrote the Charter. At the inauguration of Auroville, the city plan, soon known as the Galaxy Plan, formed the gateway to the Amphitheatre where the Charter pledged the city for humanity. The material and spiritual basis of Auroville, so established, gave it further dimensions as the City of the Future, at the Service of the Truth, a Town of Universal Culture, the City of Dawn, all on that same morning. It was a city born of a vision, for a purpose. We are only the participating custodians to see that Auroville fulfils its course both spiritually and materially. This is a recognition and respect for the givens we have been entrusted with.

The city plan has some key features: a Centre, four swirling Zones held together by the Crown circle, and the Greenbelt. Though born fifty-three years ago, the city plan is not something old but the ‘cradle’ that will hold Auroville’s evolution till the Charter is fulfilled and beyond.

Some people have problems with the inner circle, or Crown. It is interesting to know that when the architect brought the Mother a conventional, rectangular model, She barely looked at it, but was pleased with another model which had concentric circles and a centre. This would evolve to the swirling Galaxy plan.

Why is a circle so objectionable? As a form it is a universal symbol of totality, perfection, the Self, the infinite. Spiritually, it represents a Divine life-force in motion and in unity. The spiralling circle symbolises an evolutionary energy. Why would we want to distort all that?

According to our ‘history’, the chief architect, Roger Anger, left Auroville for almost a decade. On his return in 1985, the first thing he wanted to do was to mark the Crown, as the Matrimandir was already on its way. The Mother’s explanation of the Auroville symbol in 1971,

In the case of the Crown RoW, apart from two or three ‘flashpoints’ the infrastructure installation has been ongoing and only a last stretch remains. The Auroville Master Plan describes the Crown as a special zone where the four zones merge to form the town’s main urban centre. It has a width of 75m which includes the Crown circulation corridor, approximately 18 to 24m, plus the buildings on both sides. The Crown RoW includes circular pedestrian, cycle and e-mobility corridors. On both its sides the TDC has planned infrastructure service corridors. Documentation available shows that detailed service corridor plans for the Crown RoWs, radials and service roads were prepared and approved in March 2012 and updated in September 2016. It is obvious, even to a layperson, that underground infrastructure services are installed along the sides of the RoWs and not where they may end up under a building or other facilities.

There will also be trees (not forest) on both sides of the Crown (see map 3) or, on one side, if we opt for a solar tram, keeping the arcades along the buildings visible across the street. These arcades are pedestrian pathways shaded from sun and rain under which people can walk or skateboard all around town.

The real issue therefore is not about a cable but about implementation of Auroville’s unique urban centre, the Crown, part of its Master Plan. The HT cable just happens to be the first infrastructure service to be installed. Other services will follow. The proposal to shift the routing of the cable (and other infrastructure services) is in essence a proposal to do away with the Crown and distort the Galaxy.

The Auroville infrastructure services, including Auroville Electrical Service, Aurinoco, Auroville Water Service and even Auroville surveyors, face obstructions, always at the same spots and are forced to install underground services in a temporary, haphazard manner, as is being proposed again. This is unacceptable by any standard and results in a chaotic and unmanageable infrastructure,



Map 3. City Centre study (section)

DRAWING: ROGER ANGER, ANUPAMA

provides a hint why: “The dot at the centre represents Unity, the Supreme; the inner circle represents the creation, the conception of the City...”

So, let us look at some ‘historic’ ground reality. The first walkabout with the architect and Aurovilians to mark the circle was met with resistance at a few points where people were protective of their territory and saw it as a threat. The Crown became the evil road which would bring in the polluting traffic and the ‘outside.’ Thirty-five years down the line we have allowed just that to happen. Cars, lorries and motorbikes roar in from Kuilapalayam around the Matrimandir and different parts of town. We like speeding, motorcycles and cars too.

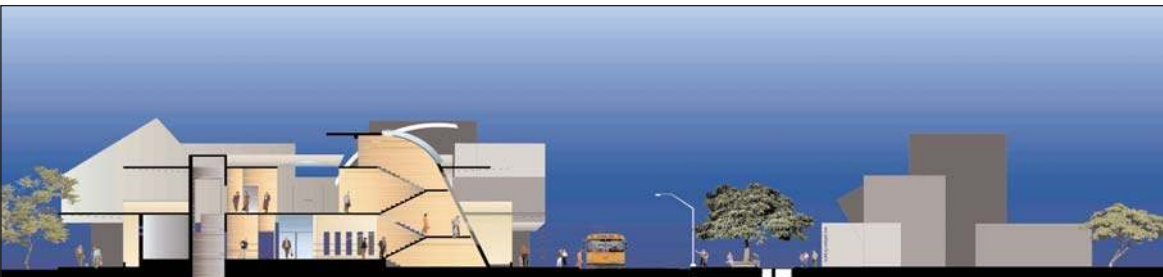
In the meantime our town planners began facing problems of houses deliberately built on the Crown, agreements blithely broken and trees planted to prevent the Crown from passing, none of which existed in the mid 80s. The blockages have resulted in missed opportunities to acquire land, rising prices the more we delay, divisions in the community, and by setting a pretty bad example to those outside who see how we delay, hamper and encroach our own city area.

difficult to trace and access.

How Bliss ‘forest’ came to dominate much of the City Centre and the Industrial Zone Crown is a mystery. A closer look at this area in the Galaxy Plan or the City Centre study detailed under Roger, clearly shows the Vocational Training area plus buildings along the Crown in between green corridors. Bliss ‘forest’ overrules all this without engaging with Auroville’s development plans nor its green network, which is ideal for an environmental and developmental collaboration as a pedestrian city centre with parks, gardens, urban farms, woods and water bodies that the Galaxy Plan indicates.

Recently, Sanjeev’s Auronet blog stated that in the early years those who planted in the city area knew that they were planting in the city and that this could not be a permanent green space. Planting was a way to safeguard the land and prevent erosion till such time when that part of the city was ready to develop. Keeping this in mind it would be best to plant TDEFs where no development is planned so as not to block the city but to work together for a beautiful and harmonious realization of Auroville. There is only one stakeholder in this evolutionary project after all, the Divine.

Anu



Cross-section of the Crown Road, including adjacent buildings with covered walkways, green reserve and cycle paths under which infrastructure services will be laid.

DRAWING: PINO



# Claire Iono's "Hidden Cities"

Claire Iono's solo exhibition "Hidden Cities" held at the Centre d'Art, Citadines, has painted for me a landscape of hope amidst the particular turmoil of our times – both within Auroville and abroad.

Each painting evokes themes of mantric meditation, with visionary landscapes of urban collectivization built upon clouds or islands in the seas. Both beautifully ethereal and densely urban, the built landscapes are reminiscent of ancient cities that emerge organically from the natural landscape, bringing together both natural environment and human organization. The great multitude of towering buildings transform at once into subtle, undulating hills of human occupancy.

Are they real cities? Dream cities? Sites of battle between human inhabitants or seamless co-habitation? It begs

the question in a particularly complicated age – of how much work we have to do in our inner journeys, seeking unity together as a civilization, before we may manifest outer cities harmoniously.

Bruno Taut of 'Die Gläserne Kette' (the Glass Chain Society) drew similar utopian cities in 1920 amidst the political turmoil of the post-WWI years in Germany. Kazimir Malevich made models and drawings of utopian towers representing mystical subjectivity in early 20th century revolutionary Russia. Both conveyed a kind of spiritual aspiration. Except Iono's work depicts not only ideal, visionary cities, but ones which are achieved inwardly through the Integral Yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Mother – bringing down Light through the inner transformation of meditation.

Do we have access to those realms and worlds beyond and above? Can our

work in the yoga take us to more peaceful places where the collective grows together as One? Or are these landscapes in the clouds and spiritual seas depicting the battles ongoing in the timeless beyond? One thing is for certain: If the towers in Claire Iono's Hidden Cities represent individuals gathered together into society at large, it is our inner journeys that reflect the rising sun of the ideal collective.

In a city like Auroville – which all too easily polarizes trees and buildings instead of focusing on a seamless co-evolution of nature and civilization – the common work of us all is that of the path of unity. When we sincerely seek unity through process, city-building can be as beautiful as the landscapes of Claire Iono. Let us celebrate that unity joyfully every day that we can manifest it together.

Lara



EDIBLE NATURE

## Foraging in Auroville's Wild Places

For the last two years, Aurovilian Nina Sengupta has been offering edible weed walks around Auroville. Every few weeks, participants venture out and discover parts of a hidden Auroville that are plainly in view.



Wild salad greens at Marc's Cafe Auroville: photo Mathilde Mir



Thuduvalai Rasam

Nina was encouraged to offer the exploratory walks by Aurovilians Anandi Zhang and Sarah Kundig who were inspired by Nina's book *Edible weeds and Naturally Growing Plants in Auroville*, which was published five years ago. The walks are typically limited to ten participants to minimize trampling and encourage greater participation.

Traditionally, women in India would sell seasonal uncultivated greens that they had foraged. Yet the knowledge and practice of eating weeds is dwindling in India, partly due to the stigma of weeds being perceived as a 'poor man's food'. But as Nina points out, weeds are full of micronutrients and can help tackle the malnutrition that currently affects millions worldwide, not just the

poorest people. She notes that small weeds have enormous life force as they have to survive, despite not being cared for. She feels we benefit from that life force when we eat them. "You do not need a lot," Nina states "a handful is often just enough to add to my meal. It's perfect for even a lazy forager like me."

During the lockdown, a small WhatsApp Group of wild green enthusiasts grew to 90+ people, who shared experiences and recipes. "It's eye-opening noticing how much abundance Mother Nature offers us," says Giovanni Parrillo, a newcomer who bought Nina's book and took part in a weed walk. "We could really live out of the wild edible plants which grow so richly all around us."

Solutide Farm's Krishna McKenzie encouraged Nina to put up a YouTube channel of videos in

which they explored different weeds detailed in the book. The weeds have also enriched Solitude Farm's weekly basket produce. "We used to give chicken spinach, some amaranth if we were lucky, or maybe Malabar or New Zealand spinach," Krishna explains. "Now in the basket we provide regularly from the farm to people they get Chinese violet (*Asystasia gangetica*), wild passion fruit leaves (*Passiflora foetida*), Alternantheras and wild Amaranths. We already used some of the greens in the café, but the book has heightened our conviction about what we were already engaging in. Today I had visitors from Hyderabad who have gone home with Alternanthera, Chinese violet and Brazilian joy-weeds to start planting in their farms. Local circle gardens are also planting them. So, one colour of Mother's

work manifests in a basket, then she manifests in food, Nina's beautiful artful recipes and in education."

Nina also points out that if we start recognizing and eating local, wild, seasonal greens, we can save on food miles. However, she advises us to learn more about the weeds before consuming them. Mostly they should be cooked before eating, barring some exceptions. Some need processing before adding them in our salads, soups or other recipes. "Weeds are the language in which the soil and the climate speak to us, if we care to listen," says Nina. They are an excellent indicator of climate change or soil condition, and they help conventional agriculture by attracting pollinators.

Nina's book profiles uncultivated wild greens from India, the tropics, and sometimes even beyond. It has

removable colour inserts to encourage readers to get closer to the plants they are discovering. Printed in an environment-friendly way, it was the first colouring book for adults published in India.

Although the first edition is currently out of print, Nina is crowdfunding through AVI-USA's website to get the book reprinted and to publish two more books in the series – on medicinal weeds and edible flowers. She also plans to initiate a training programme for educators and enthusiasts. She hopes that the focus on wild weeds will encourage people to continue deepening their connection with nature in art, food and awareness.

As prolific as the weeds she highlights, Nina is very active on social media: she has a Youtube channel, Instagram and Facebook groups, as well as a weekly podcast on edible weeds. With a Masters in Ecology and a PhD in Wildlife Conservation, her academic background combined with her years in Auroville have made her an ideal champion for deepening our awareness of and connection with our less well known and under-valued local flora.

Peter



Vanchina chaaru/soup and curry using wild uncultivated greens by cultural anthropologist Deepa Reddy.



Creations using wild greens by Priti Vadakkath, an artist, gardener, baker based in Kochi, Kerala.



Weed ID Stall in front of PTDC in March 2020 just before the lockdown



Weed Walk in AV



# COVID-19 Task Force dissolves

The Covid-19 Task Force, a temporary task force setup in March 2020 by the Working Committee to respond to the Covid-19 pandemic, has dissolved as the current situation in South India can no longer be considered as a medical emergency. Covid now is treated as any other medical condition. The various aspects of its work have been taken over by the Working Committee (correspondence and contacts with the authorities); Santé (all medical issues); and the Auroville food and grocery providers for home deliveries.

In its extensive report for the community, the Task Force recalled that its primary task was 'prevention' measures and the creation of 'awareness', followed by the organization of testing. A Covid bulletin was started to inform all in Auroville about the instructions and guidelines issued by the Central, Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry governments. About 160 people got tested for reasons such as having symptoms or being a primary con-

tact of someone with Covid. Until January 15th, only 18 people had tested positive in Auroville, while around 300 people have been quarantined for reasons such as having travelled domestically or internationally, or having had contact with positive patients.

Among the main achievements of the Task Force is the setting up of a temporary government Screening Center at Santé, following a directive of the district administration; creating a quarantine facility for Covid negative persons at the Tibetan Pavilion; and setting up an Isolation Centre for Covid-19 asymptomatic and mildly symptomatic patients at Sharanam, a building in Bharat Nivas complex. The Task Force also organized support for the patients staying there, such as arranging for their health checkups, medications, food delivery (breakfast, lunch & dinner), and setting up protocols regarding how food and supplies would be delivered without cross contamination.

A volunteer-based system was set up for delivering groceries and cooked food for people in quarantine and vulnerable categories. This assistance is still ongoing. An online platform for ordering groceries from PTDC, PTPS and HERS was set up for the community members to use with the help of the 'Taalam' team. Many volunteers came forward to help in coordinating orders, making up baskets and doing deliveries. This service was further extended for delivery of medicines for orders placed at the Auroville pharmacy.

Liaison with government authorities at all levels (central, state and local) was another main focus of the Task Force. In collaboration with the Working Committee, close contact was maintained with district and state government officials, including the District Collector, Tamil Nadu Health Secretary, the Vanur Block Medical Officer and the Kottakuppam Deputy Superintendent of Police, to understand and interpret the various government guidelines and to

report on various pending matters.

The Task Force warns that the pandemic is still very active and that Aurovilians have to learn to live with it by following the relevant precautions. The Task Force advises that Auroville should progress towards being a 'disaster-prepared community' by constituting a virtual 'disaster management group' that can be activated and called upon during any disaster and emergency situation, be it natural (physical) or medical emergencies. This group should have people with diverse experience such as (but not limited to) disaster management, medical/healthcare, finance, communications, volunteer management, with additional members as reserve and standby. The Task Force also advises to continue giving strict attention to the practice of proper hygiene in the environments in which Aurovilians interact, and to scale up Auroville's current hygiene programme in terms of human resources and the service provided.

## Auroville Foundation matters

The Working Committee reported that the minutes of the last meeting of the former Governing Board, held on line on November 7th, 2020, have still not been received for information to the community. The term of office of the former Governing Board ended on November 15th; the appointment of the Chairman and members of the next Governing Board is still awaited, as is the appointment of new members of the International Advisory Council (vacant for the last four years) and the appointment of the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation (vacant since July 2019). The Government of India also substantially reduced its normal grant for Auroville. In the financial year 2020-2021, a total amount of Rs 1.5 crores has been received while the Auroville Foundation had submitted a request for the usual amount of about Rs16 crores.

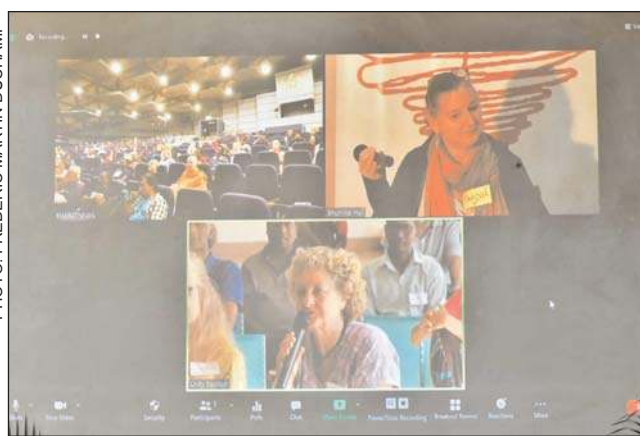
## Branch office of Auroville Foundation Secretariat

A branch office of the Auroville Foundation Secretariat in Pondicherry was inaugurated on January 1st, 2021. The space at 46, Marwadi Street, Kurchikuppam, Pondicherry - 605012 (Ph: 0413-2222007), made available by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, will serve as a liaison office.

## Land purchase

Auroville has purchased of 13.72 new acres of fertile agricultural land near Irumbai Lake across from the Irumbai Temple. This vital addition to Auroville's land area was funded by private donations to Acres for Auroville. Acres for Auroville write that we urgently need to secure valuable farmland for Auroville as the "basecamp for regenerative agriculture". Why? Auroville's farmers are committed to working for Auroville's goal of self-sufficiency in food. However, Auroville's financial support available for investing in land - and the associated needed infrastructure - food processing capacity, irrigation systems, solar energy, training and research etc. - is very limited. Auroville's regenerative work, research and outreach in regenerating poor soils in order to grow food, and its experience in practising agriculture with greatly reduced water use, are key elements for the future for food production not only in Auroville but also for India.

## Selection of working group members



The three venues could be viewed at each venue simultaneously.

Top: The Bharat Nivas auditorium (left); a participant in the Bhumika hall making a presentation.

Below: Questions were asked from the Unity Pavilion

The selection of new members of four main working groups (the Working Committee, the Auroville Council, the Entry Board and the Funds and Assets Management Committee) took place on January 21st and 22nd in accordance with a selection process that had been approved by the Residents' Assembly in December 2020.

An unprecedented number of more than 260 people participated in the selection process, which took place in three different locations - the Bharat Nivas Auditorium, the Bhumika Hall and the Unity Pavilion - due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Over 70 candidates had expressed their willingness to serve in one of these working groups, contesting a total of 26 vacancies. The event was organized by the Residents' Assembly Service.

Presentations from the working groups and by the candidates were streamed from the Bhumika hall to the other two venues. Participants could interact with the presenters via Zoom. In each venue, a facilitator organized the questions and answers sessions. Silent Presence Keepers held the atmosphere and supported on a subtle level throughout the selection process.

Although great care was taken by the Residents Assembly Service to organise a fair and transparent selection process, complications occurred when the selection cards for the Working Committee at the Unity Pavilion were collected. It appeared that in one of the three selection booths, 15 of the 18 boxes had been tampered with. The RAS subsequently annulled the selection of the Working Committee at the Unity Pavilion and organized a re-selection for the Working Committee by the selectors from the Unity Pavilion, on January 25th and 26th.

On January 28th, the results of the selection process were announced. It appeared that only 12 persons had passed the quorum of being selected by at least 50% of the total number of selectors, as was stipulated in the approved selection process. The Residents' Assembly will now be asked to approve that the quorum of 50% will be lowered to 30% in order to fill the 14 remaining vacancies in the Auroville Council, the Funds and Assets Management Committee and the Working Committee. The tampering of the selection boxes will be investigated. A follow-up article about this matter will be published in a future issue of Auroville Today

## Rains continue

The month of January 2021 has seen an unprecedented rainfall of 208.3 millimetres, against a monthly average (calculated over the last 44 years) of 12 millimetres. This is an increase of 1720.7%.

## Auroville International Potters Market



A quiet moment at the international pottery market

Hundreds of visitors and Aurovilians visited the 3-day Auroville International Potters Market held at the Visitors' Centre from January 24-26. Artists from all over India and Auroville displayed their pottery.

## Nursing for elderly parents of Aurovilians

The Auroville Health Services (AVHS), which provides social and medical homcare for senior Aurovilians, is often asked to extend this service to the elderly parents of long term Aurovilians who, for health reasons, need to be with their children in Auroville. AVHS has, however, stated that this facility is not available and that Aurovilians need to organise such homcare themselves or via a professional homcare provider.

## Patient conduct at Santé

After an incident with a verbally aggressive visitor, Santé has issued a public statement that Santé is an essential service to the Auroville community and it is intended as a place of healing and care, and not a space for conflict resolution.

## Art for Land

The 6th annual edition of Art for Land opens on 31st January at the Unity Pavilion. We invite you to join us as we celebrate a month of 'art with heart' by very talented artists, musicians and performers from all over. The entire month will be devoted to our enriched art exhibition and will include concerts, perfor-

mances, stimulating talks and other favorite events, including the Grace Lottery and the annual Generosity Fair!

Art for Land has already made a significant contribution to Auroville's land consolidation and is a recognized showcase for the creativity of Auroville's artists, and artist friends from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the AVIs, India and abroad. Each of the participating artists has generously donated works to support Auroville's land, and we sincerely thank them for their great generosity and the creative inspiration they share. In addition to the high quality of the artworks and the Exhibition, there will be weekly events, with several broadcast live from the Unity Pavilion. Works can be viewed and reserved at the Unity Pavilion (daily 10 AM to 4 PM) or online at artforland.in

## Housing matters

The Housing Board decided on the principle that assets that have been left after the passing of an Aurovillian ought to, where possible, be presented to the community as houses against recognised work (formerly pro-bono houses). Some exceptions will be necessary, for example where a house is very large, requires high maintenance etc. In these cases, any funds from the transfers would go into new housing developments. Initial assets identified as being suitable for this process include Roma's house & Roger's house.

## Auroville Board of Services

As agreed earlier, the ABS monthly meetings now take place on the second Monday of every month. The aim of the regular monthly ABS meetings is to hear and address the concerns and needs of our services, and to build together a flourishing Services and Prosperity economy for Auroville, as envisioned by The Mother.

## Citizens' Assembly film showings on water

The Citizens' Assembly and Auroville Water Group invited people to watch some videos of Aurovillian water players reflecting on our water situation. Throughout the months of February and March, videos presented in the recent Citizens' Assembly on water will be shown in the Multi Media Centre every Thursday at 4:30pm.

## Blind dinner

On 27th January Solitude farm invited people to participate in a food performance with live music. They were blindfolded at Solitude Cafe's entrance and guided through a localicious, vegan, seven-course meal of locally-grown food and fusion cuisine. This is a co-created event where, together with special live music, food, and facilitators, people were invited to open all their senses to the blessing of Mother Nature's nutritional gifts.

## Centre Guest House 'hangouts'

The 'hangout' is a space where people of all ages can come together socially, have some refreshments, chat with friends, read the newspaper, play games, learn Tai Chi or Quigong, enjoy regular dance nights and other such activities. It's an informal thing intended for having fun and increasing fraternity. The hangouts happen every Saturday between 2:30 and 5pm and everybody is welcome.

## Passing Bhavani Shankar



Bhavani Shankar Sardar passed away on January 3rd in his home town Kurnool, in Andhra Pradesh at the age of 83. He first came to Auroville in 1991, and joined a year later. He started working for the Auroville Electrical Service in Abri, becoming its manager, and was known as a quiet, humble and very friendly person who unobtrusively did his work. His dedication to Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and advanced under-

standing of the yoga, was apparent in his way of being. His visits to Matrimandir were many. He lived in Promesse community from his early days till 2011, when he left Auroville due to problems associated with old age. He returned to Auroville after two years and stayed in Inspiration Community until 2018, when he finally left Auroville due to age concerns.



# In Her Own Way

In this month's installment of our regular column about Auroville's neighbours, we meet Rashmi Gandaki, who has been living next to Auroville for the last six years. A theatre actor and director from Bangalore, Rashmi also works for Auroville Art Service, undertakes qualitative research, supports rescued women, offers workshops to youths, and runs a farm.

“Growing up in Bangalore, there were trees to climb, and we were forever playing on the mud road outside our house – the Auroville roads remind me of my childhood. My parents are very traditional, but they are also the most progressive human beings I have come across. My father expected me to wear a bindi and long skirts during puja time, but he also bought me my first jeans and taught me to ride a motorcycle, at a time when there were no girls riding motorcycles!

My first theatre role was when I was in sixth standard at school. In tenth standard, I started performing plays from the syllabus for people writing public exams. We always got the feedback that students understood the plot better and could write their exams well after watching the play. It made the whole effort meaningful.

I was doing a diploma in psychology in college, and I needed pocket money. I started doing market research, interviewing people and asking why they chose the toothpaste that they chose. I'm still doing this work, at a qualitative level now. It's fascinating to understand the thought process behind the choice. I also help the report writers do 'insight mining' into people's choices.

At 18, I went ahead and married. My upbringing had instilled in me a loyalty and trust towards my parents. I fought tooth and nail with them about many things, but I wouldn't do things without telling them. So when this man proposed to me, I said, 'You have to talk to my parents, and then we'll see.' And my dad, the beautiful being he was, just looked at it as the flow of life. He said, 'If this is what destiny has for you, if this is god's will, so be it.' And he got me married!

Evolving character in theatre and life

When I was carrying my first daughter, I joined a theatre workshop for college students, run by theatre pioneer KV Nagrajmurthy, who brought youth theatre into the foreground in Karnataka. I was the odd one out amongst the college students, married and with a child in the stomach! It was great fun. My first play with that group was *Thank you Mr Glad*, about a jailor and prisoner, where I played a pregnant woman. It felt very natural for me. That was when I probably learnt that I myself don't go on stage; it's the character that goes and does it. Rashmi becomes nothing. What they now call the emptiness or the zero ground came to me at that point unknowingly.

I went on to do many plays with Nagrajmurthy; a lot of street theatre, educating people about drug addiction and drinking habits.

I gave birth to my older daughter at the age of 19. I wanted the best for my daughter and to build a better life for her; I would do everything under the sun for her. Because I come from a traditional set up, everybody said 'Accept your life'. And I thought 'No! I'm made for better things! This is not how it's going to be!' So, I decided to raise my daughter alone. Again, the beautiful facet of my parents came forth. So my parents took care of my daughter, while I earned a living and supported them.

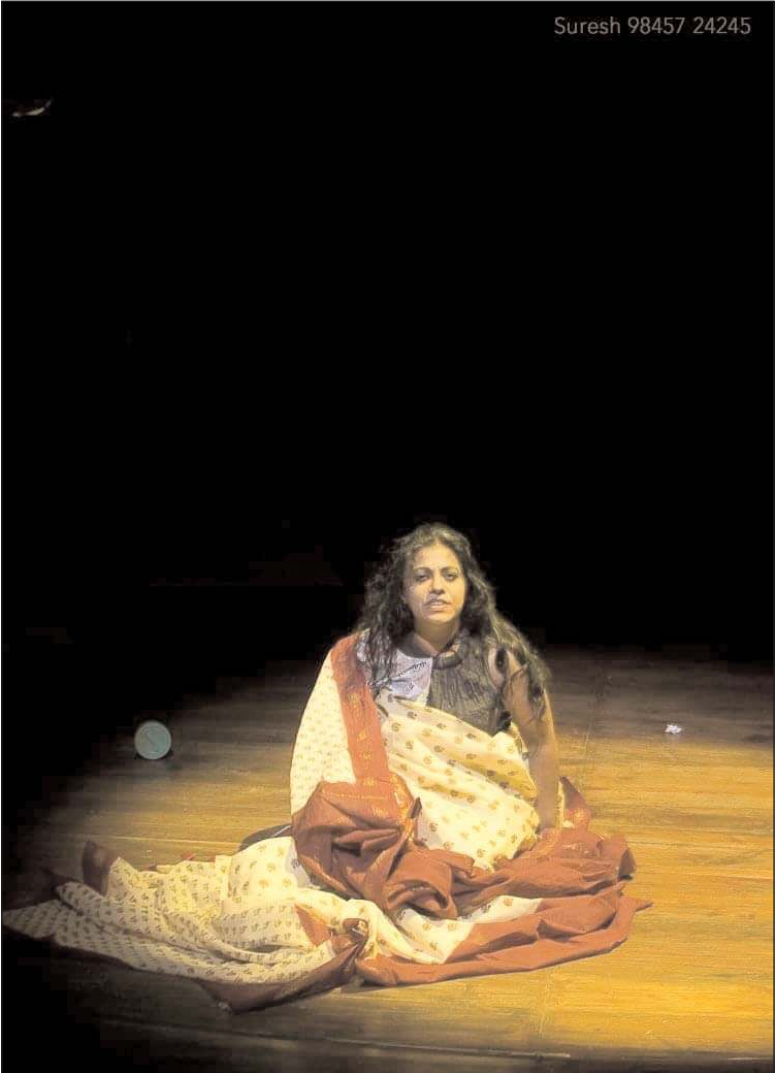
Then, I worked with an NGO to help street children rebuild their lives. I'd say, 'If I can do it, you can do it too'. Now my [mentored] boys run a printing unit in Bangalore, which has a monthly turnover of 35-40 lakhs. So, I think we all built our lives together – me and my boys.

And then in a play, I did the pathbreaking role of a tribal woman who gets violated by police. What connected me very strongly to this woman was that when the police say 'Where are your clothes?', she said 'I'm not ashamed of my nudity. I'm nude because you people violated me. If anybody needs to be ashamed, you need to be ashamed.' For me, that was an insight into strength, and I did that role for seven years.

I then became an associate theatre director with Professor CG Krishnaswamy, known as CGK, who helped me learn a lot about theatre. He did many women-centric plays and played with notions of gender. In his Shakespeare's *Othello*, Iago was played by a woman, as he felt that only a woman could bring out the nuances of subtle manipulation. In another play, he asked me to portray the character of a male mythological snake, saying 'When you go on stage, you are what you portray.' So that was path-breaking casting and a beautiful learning for me.

All those plays were in Kannada. I wrote and staged a play in English about Kannada culture for Bangalore Little Theatre – the first time this theatre group brought non-English culture into

PHOTO: PRAVEEN KV IYER



Rashmi on stage

English theatre. The play got a stupendous response.

Meanwhile, I did the first mega TV serial in Kannada. I was acting and doing associate director work with the director, TN Sitharam, who asked me to assist him on the script and oversee the editing. My character was a girl who falls in love with a man, marries him, and has a child. And one day, he disappears and she loses her mental balance and goes in search of him, only to discover that he was already married. She regains her stability, and pursues a case against him. People still sometimes recognise me as that character, after almost 20 years!

Life went on, and when my daughter was eight, I met a wonderful person and I remarried. And people's view of me suddenly shifted. I was now in a frame that was acceptable to them, even though I was breaking taboos – in the context I came from, remarriage was not known. And I inspired others. When a cousin lost her husband and was raising her daughter alone, she was inspired by the way I lived my life. A few years later, she also remarried. Her mother said to my mother, 'Seeing you get your daughter married again was an inspiration, so I also got my daughter married again.' I was unconsciously being a role model.

In between all this, I went and bought myself some farmland! At that time, I was becoming conscious of the poison in our food and the damage of pesticides. I thought I had to do something. I had this friend named Nagraj, who said, 'Don't worry, I'll buy you farmland', because I didn't have the money. This is the beautiful being whom I eventually married, and with whom I had my second daughter. I still remember the commissioner who gave me permission: he said 'Lady, you really have guts. Why don't you start a petrol pump or do mining?' and I said 'No, I want to do organic farming. Give me permission to buy the land.' And today my organic farm is 21 years old, and I have 51 cattle of native breeds and grow organic produce. [Laughs].

I was also doing rescue and rehabilitation of women. I give them social support. Often they come and live in my home, until I find them a lawyer or schools for their children. And thanks to my training in NLP (Neuro-linguistic Programming), I help them regain their balance. These women would come with their children to our house because they needed a safe space. In Indian society, going to an ashram or institution means you're no longer fit for society or you're no longer a family woman. So Rashmi's home became like a transition space for them.

Life in Auroville

I knew that Auroville existed, but I didn't know much about it. When our second daughter was in 10th standard, we gave her the choice to study the next two years in an unstructured school, but we asked to her to find a school where parents were allowed to be part of the growth. So, she got in touch with Future School in Auroville, and came for an interview, and she and I landed here.

In Bangalore, my days had been hectic as I was juggling four, five, six things: theatre, the farm, rescued women, and qualitative market research. And when I first came to Auroville, I had nothing to do, except drop and pick up my daughter. My life slowed down, and that was the first time I learnt to calm down. I learnt to sit and meditate, which was impossible for me before. That brought me a lot of focus.

In Auroville, I started exploring mudra chi and tai chi. I started working in a volunteer role with Auroville Art Service, and life went on beautifully. We at Auroville Art Service saw a hierarchy in communication between Auroville and the villages, and we came up with an idea of horizontal knowledge exchange. We had a beautiful interaction with village groups on the topic of water, and we've also been doing storytelling. I also work with the film festival group, putting up structures and talking to anyone necessary. I've always been interested in art as a medium to influence society and to encourage the individual to introspect. I have used art and theatre as my tools to work with prisoners, state police and rescued woman.

Dr Saif at Mattram [Auroville's psychological support unit] invited me to participate in research to explore cancer survivors' personality traits. I was to interview the survivors, and I thought this is a lifetime opportunity. Why people behave in the way they do is a magical world to me. This work enables me to use my diploma in psychology and my training in emotional balance. So here I am.

I started providing social support to women and the elderly in Auroville. I don't call this 'counselling' – it's more life quality coaching. We all have a debt to pay back to life, to improve the quality of life. Some of this work is in Tamil, and some in English. I speak Kannada, Tamil, Telugu, English, Hindi, and I learnt Nepali and can understand some Malayalam. [Laughs]. It's my time to boast! It's my Sanskrit background that helps me to understand languages.

I also offer a workshop in Auroville and Bangalore for youth to refine their life purpose, using my training in communication and emotional balance and lessons from my life. What I've seen is that emotions play a dominant role, and can have a high impact on our decisions and life quality. So, it's important to look at the conditioning and consciousness we're operating from, and consider how to move out of this. I offer youngsters support to break patterns and re-create themselves, and self-launch – that's what I call the workshop – into the world for the kind of success they're capable of. I started assisting my mentor Kichu Krishnan in this kind of work in 1996, and I've been doing it on my own for the last seven years. In Auroville, we can find more acceptance of other viewpoints through communication, which aids harmonious living.

What draws me to Auroville? The openness to explore. That's the way I have lived my life. And this is a place that actually celebrates that. There are many small beautiful things, like the fact that this Mattram cancer research is unconventional and progressive. This place is a coming together of two worlds; the east and the west, the future and past. This draws me here, keeps me here. And I still go back to Bangalore and my farm – I shuttle between these two places three or four times a month.

I'm very fond of the holistic method of education that Mother and Sri Aurobindo speak of. That is so much in line with my own belief system. It's not about just being a great scientist; it's important to be a great human being too. It's not just about how far you can see, but how deep inside yourself you can see. My day starts and ends with yoga, my meditation. As much as I go out, I also go in. That's what Auroville is for me.

I've been staying in a private housing compound in Aroma Gardens for more than three years. I want to live on Auroville land, and when I saw Siddhartha Forest, I loved it. Before corona virus, I made up my mind to become an Aurovilian. I saw that I could continue the work that I do and live with the highest level of integrity here. And then corona hit, and everything took a back seat. I have to start the Newcomer process again. I want to work with the cows on the farm in Siddhartha Forest, and grow some food. That's the plan. And I will continue with my Mattram work and Auroville Art Service work."

As recounted to Lesley

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