

Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Auroville's Greenbelt under threat!

An earthmover clears yet another two acres for more private development.

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Dealing with conflict

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Have you ever felt like giving someone you know something they need, anonymously?

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Striving for social empowerment

Auroville Village Action needs help!

The VFAVR, the sister organisation of Auroville International Germany, which has been set-up to help the development of Tamil villages around Auroville, wants a 1 crore expansion of the microfinance corpus fund used by the Auroville Village Action Group. Can you help?

Amongst the most successful projects of Auroville Village Action (AVAG) are the micro-credits, given from its corpus fund. This has proven to be an excellent way to improve the lives of the rural poor," says Anbu. "AVAG has also been stimulating the Self-Help Groups to start their own micro-financing activities," says Anbu. "The members club together their savings and jointly take all decisions, such as the interest to be paid on deposits, which member to give loans to and what the conditions for loan repayment are."

Loans are offered for repayment of extortionate loans given by village money lenders (often at 90% interest per year!), for business development, agriculture, education, housing, family functions, and health. The annual interest rate is between 12 – 18% which is comparable to current bank lending rates. While the members control repayment, the accounts of each micro-financing unit are done by AVAG.

A SHG member can either borrow from the SHG's fund or get a loan from AVAG by submitting an application through his/her SHG to AVAG. These requests must be processed and approved by the Federation before they can be sanctioned by AVAG.

AVAG also helps SHGs to get financial assistance from various government schemes, such as for installing toilets and creating housing, or helps SHGs to obtain loans from banks.

That the micro-financing activities are successful is proven by the figures. Up to March 2011, the total amount saved by the SHGs was over Rs 20 million. With additional loans from banks, in the financial year 2010-2011 over Rs 55 million was circulating among the groups as loans. Monitoring is done by AVAG, which keeps track of all the financial transactions of the SHGs. With the help of this monitoring, the microfinance activities have been very successful, with a loan repayment rate of a virtual 100%: only two people have defaulted over the past 15 years.

But there is a pressure to increase the number of SHGs and there is an increasing demand for more credit from existing SHGs. AVAG is not able to comply as all its available funds have been loaned out; banks too cannot help as they are limited in the amount they can lend to a SHG.

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A section of Self-Help Group members in the Women's Seminar at the Auroville Village Action building, Irumbai.

For almost 30 years, Auroville Village Action has been working in the surrounding villages, focusing on empowering men and women and on promoting the social, economic, psychological and environmental transformation of the villages.

"Auroville's Village Action (AVAG) works through Self-Help Groups (SHGs)," says Anbu, who, together with Moris, is directing AVAG's activities. "They have become a vital and integral part its work. Our programmes are only effective because of their cooperation." The figures confirm her statement. Since 1995, when the first Women's Self-Help Group was formed, the number of SHGs has expanded steadily. Today, AVAG works with 3,726 women organised in 197 Women SHGs, and with 701 men in 42 Men SHGs. They cover 80 villages and dalit hamlets with a combined population of 90,000 people.

The SHGs are organized into two federations. In 2000, the Women's SHG Federation was formed, followed by a Men's SHG Federation in 2007. "The Federations share responsibility for collective decision-making and give us feedback and suggestions on the planning and implementa-

tion of our programmes. We have developed a symbiotic relationship with guidance and advice freely exchanged, even though we maintain a formal oversight over the federations," says Anbu. "Their formation marks a crucial step in handing over responsibility and decision-making to the local beneficiaries of AVAG's programs. The Federations have become another key factor in the successful performance of the programmes of AVAG."

What are these programmes? "We categorise them into four main groups," says Moris. "These are community development, economic development, capacity building and psychosocial services. All programmes correspond to the direct needs of our target population."

Community Development

"We work on a number of community issues," says Anbu. "One of the most important projects is to bring together women and men and groups from different castes." The purpose is to try and rectify prejudices that are endemic to India, such as fear of Dalits (formerly 'Untouchables') and other 'Scheduled Castes', as well as India's particular forms of gender discrimination. Participants learn to see each other as unique human beings. "These programmes have led members from different groups to form friendships. Some villages have developed inter-community relationships and

groups got inspired by hearing of another group's projects and activities."

Another project is encouraging people to take collective responsibility for improving and maintaining their village infrastructure. AVAG organizes one-day work camps for doing small projects, such as removing trash on the roadside or fencing a children's play area. It also does micro-projects that may take a week to complete. "AVAG's Micro-Project and Work Camp programme has attracted the attention of neighbouring NGOs who want to copy the model," says Anbu.

A third activity is the health, eye, veterinary and awareness camps that are carried out in the villages. AVAG facilitates the contacts with hospitals, NGOs, and government departments who send people to the villages to treat people and conduct awareness camps on social issues.

Lastly, AVAG helps the villages to get access to government resources and schemes, such as the Life Insurance Corporation, scholarship programmes, and toilet and housing schemes.

Economic Development

The economic development programme comprises three components: the Micro-Finance Programme [see accompanying article], the Livelihood Training programme and the Social Enterprise Creation.

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The Greenbelt under threat

The children laugh in Johnny's school, hidden in the shade of Fertile Forest. They play in lush green landscapes, surrounded by indigenous flora and fauna. The plants and animals are finally returning after decades of careful green-work implemented by some of Auroville's earliest pioneers. This is unending education, a youth that never ages.

Half a kilometer away, an earthmover claws at the stumps of recently burned trees, clearing yet another two acres for private development. Fertile Forest – already home to a spa, a politician's holiday "farm house", and an eight acre "eco"-resort – will soon add a hotel and bus shed to its local landmarks. This is the future.

Standing at the intersection of Johnny's cycle path and the *peramboke* road running past Dana, one becomes acutely aware of the devastation the area faces. Workers employed by the owner of the temple lands leveled one corner of the temple land, rerouting the Auroville cycle path in the process. A wide clearing through the same plot of temple land provides access to a dormitory of corrugated metal sheets, illuminated in the darkness by the kerosene lanterns of out-of-state workers. They are here to build a hotel. A narrow sliver of Auroville-owned forest separates the hotel plot from a larger clearing, again made accessible through temple land. This private property will become a bus shed for the half-dozen buses used to shuttle students to the nearby college (also built in the greenbelt) every day.

The largest contiguous portion of the 148 acres of temple land controlled by the Mailam Swami connects eight different Auroville communities: Fertile, Fertile East, Aurogreen, Two Banyans, Udumbu, Samridhi, Meadow and Dana. In the July Forest Group meeting, stewards commented on the use of this temple land; of its value as place to walk, cycle, ride horses; and of the danger of it being cleared – especially to give access to the surrounding private lands.

"If development happens within that swami tope area, then the connectivity of those pieces of Auroville land is lost, and even more development will come. That'll just spoil the whole atmosphere," Paul Blanchflower explains. "So many people want to buy land on the edge of Auroville because it's now such an attractive place, and now we also have development inside."

He's right. Across town, 68 acres of land for real estate have been developed within the outer boundaries of Auroville's gazetted Master Plan. A private owner cleared his plot near Silence and promises to develop a metal-plating factory. Near

PHOTOS: CATHERINE



An earthmover clears the forest for a new development.

The Greenbelt also serves as a site for organic farming. The Auroville Farm Group envisions a community that has easy access to affordable, sustainably-grown organic produce. For this vision to manifest, Auroville requires either partnerships with organic farmers in the bioregion or large contiguous areas of Aurovilian-owned land. "If you have a farm far away, you're going to be surrounded by pesticides; if you have a farm in the Greenbelt surrounded by non-Auroville land, you'll be surrounded by pesticides," explains Gilles Guigan, a member of the newly created Town Development Council (TDC) and the Land Coordination Committee. "If you want to do organic farming you have to consolidate the land; it's absolutely obvious."

The buffer provided by the Greenbelt is also crucial to protecting Auroville's core mission. "There are important historical reasons for the Greenbelt," explains Cristo Mabilat, a member of TDC and the Green Group. "Auroville is an intentional community. If you have neighbours who live in ways that are so contradictory to the way of life

But Gilles, sitting across the table, offers another perspective. "Why should one thousand people own so much land in India?" he wonders. "We have difficulty holding the land we have today, and it would have been even more difficult to hold more land then."

"The problem is that the Auroville population has not yet come," Gilles adds. "It has been the same story from the beginning. If you ask for money for land, people outside will ask, is Auroville happening? Is Auroville a big circus, or is it the place where there will be a big change of consciousness?" He shifts in his chair, visibly frustrated. "And what do you see if you come to Auroville? You see the tea shops and such where the tourists are hanging out."

Given the financial crunch facing Auroville at the moment, finding more funds for the farmers and foresters, or for buying land in the Greenbelt, or for fighting development seems unlikely and – according to some – unnecessary. "Let us be clear, the project here is a city," Gilles says. "Sri Aurobindo and the Mother did extraordinary work in the middle of a colonial township, Pondicherry. So it can be done; it's not a big deal."

In fact, Greenbelt or no Greenbelt, Auroville already has an unusually green future planned. Flashing the maps in Auroville's Master Plan, Toine explains the ratio of green space to developed land. "Even if we could only realize half the Greenbelt, the ratio of city to green – of built-up to not built-up – is something like one to four. I can't think of another city in the world that has that ratio."

In the meantime, the Land Coordination Committee continues to buy land in the Greenbelt when it becomes available at a reasonable price. The focus, however, remains largely on obtaining ownership of the city area and of nearby Greenbelt lands. "After that there is the question of land usage; it has to remain green. Whether it's owned by Auroville or not doesn't matter," Gilles suggests.

In fact, many groups are exploring ways to keep the Greenbelt green even if Auroville does not own the land. In this context, the Town Development Council, composed of people from the former l'Avenir d'Auroville, the Working Committee and the Governing Board, may have an important role to play. "This is one more step in the protection of our area," explains Gilles.

To protect the Greenbelt, Auroville's TDC in collaboration with the Green Group is immediately moving to create a realistic land use plan for Auroville and to identify byelaws for the Greenbelt. The TDC and the Green Group have invited urban planner David Stein and landscape architect Achva Benzinberg, both of whom love and want to protect Auroville, to assist them in this. Yet while TDC and others explore legal protec-

tion, the number of plots in the process of development continues to grow. "As time goes by, more and more land is lost or gets developed and the problems get more and more intricate," says Paul. For Paul and many others, the solution is exchanging outlying Aurovilian-owned lands outside the Master plan area for privately-owned plots inside that would consolidate larger pieces of Auroville land. "Exchange is the only tool. It's not an easy tool, but it's the only tool," he says. "All the significant pieces of land we've got since July 2005, when the former Secretary Mr. Sharma left, have come through exchange."

Land exchange in Auroville has been a heated debate for many years. The recent exchanges of Auroannam and Service Farm, both still in process, have fostered strong resentment in the hearts of many – especially some Farm Group members. "Land that has been cared for by Aurovilians has a special energy and it is good that this land extends beyond the boundaries of the magic circle, the Master Plan as set out on the map," explains Priya Vincent, a farmer.

The Future is ours to shape

"The real thing we need to do is manifest Auroville's ideals. This is the only way," Gilles insists. "There is an occult protection, an occult help if we manifest these ideals."

Occult Protection. Exchange. Policies. Partnerships. Purchase. The ideas for protecting the Greenbelt are many; the action is often too little, and too uncoordinated. "People have to do what they feel they can do. The danger is you feel someone else is doing something so you don't feel you have to do something," says Paul. "The only way to engage people is to get them involved. The Greenbelt Protection Squad is a good start."

The Greenbelt Protection Squad is a growing group of more than a dozen "ordinary Aurovilians" with an interest in saving the Greenbelt from undesired development. Organized by the Green Group, the project aims at creating a grassroots movement that collects important information, raises awareness, supports the Town Hall groups in working to protect the Greenbelt, and ultimately fundraises for a variety of purposes.

"Since I've been living here in Adventure, I have seen around me the progressive destruction of this area of Greenbelt. Now Adventure is a green island in a sea of new developments and of village housing," groans Manohar, a member of the Squad, after its first gathering. "I am so happy to see new enthusiasm in facing this challenge, which for me is one of the most important in Auroville."

Paul laughs. "That's the whole point of Auroville! It's not what we've done; it's what we can do."

And we can save the Greenbelt. As long as we believe it. As long as we want to. As long as we put our energy into it.

Catherine



A new hotel in the Greenbelt

the Visitor's Center, a giant billboard with a shiny Matrimandir in the background heralds the sale of plotted land to anyone interested in living near Auroville.

Given the rapid growth of India, the increased development is hardly surprising. But a Greenbelt riddled with development would be a significant loss for the community.

More than land and atmosphere

According to the Auroville Master Plan, published by the Indian Government in Delhi in 2001, the City is to be surrounded by a Greenbelt that would house innovative experiments in afforestation, land development, water conservation/aquifer recharge, rainwater harvesting, building technology, community participation and energy, among other areas. The Greenbelt would serve as "an important environmental safeguard" and "is an integral part of Auroville's development and its proper use is crucial to fully achieve the objectives of Auroville."

you try to manifest in Auroville, then this is certainly going to create endless conflict. We need a buffer; we need some protection from the outside world."

At the same time, as Toine van Megen points out, "It's not just a Greenbelt for Auroville; it's a green zone for the whole region."

To Buy or Not To Buy?

In the face of rising land prices and the rapid growth of surrounding India, it's hard to understand why Auroville didn't buy all the land decades ago.

Cristo offers one version of history: "A decision was taken by a group of people in 1990 to concentrate only or mainly on purchasing land in the city." He pauses to gaze out of the window, soaking in the urban forests in the distance. "Charlie from Aurogreen sent a letter saying this was the most short-sighted decision ever because it was by buying the land in the Greenbelt that we would protect the city. And today he has been proven right."

"Be true – not violent"

A pilot project 'Be true, – not violent', aiming at teaching children awareness of patterns of violence and how to deal creatively with them, is being introduced in three Auroville schools.

A book called "Be True – Not Violent" has recently been introduced to Auroville. It was compiled by two women, Rita Erben and Astrid Kummer, to teach children, youth and adults around the world how to solve their conflicts peacefully. The book is intended for schools and social institutions and can be used to teach children as young as the age of six.

Work on the book started during the ceasefire in the north of Sri Lanka in 2004. At that time, the idea was to write a Peace Handbook for Tamil children in Sri Lanka. During the 20 years of war in Sri Lanka, these children had never known anything other than violence. Because the ceasefire failed and war broke out again, work on the book had to be stopped and all the international

NGOs had to leave the country. In 2008 the forgotten manuscript was revived and completed with the help of an international team and the international *Federation Terre des Hommes*. It was decided at that time that the book should not only be written for Tamil children, but also for children and adults of all nationalities.

"Be True – Not Violent" has since been translated into six languages (English, French, German, Portuguese, Spanish and Tamil) and translation into other languages is under way. The book is structured so that it can be used for children living in trouble spots, in developing countries, and also in Western countries.

The book is divided into three different parts.

Part One contains the theoretical basis for the work, written for adults, parents and teachers. It provides an understanding of how conflict and violence evolves and how it can be solved. It encourages the reader to reflect on their feelings and perceptions of conflicts as well as on their own conflict behaviour. One of the chapters deals with the UN Convention on the Rights of Children, gender equality and, finally, with the most important thing in life: true friendship and love.

Four different categories of violence are defined: physical violence, psychological violence, verbal violence and violence against things. It is explained that violence is the expression of an underlying sentiment or frustration; this can be anything from anger, disappointment, fear, helplessness to a lack of attention. In order to



Rita Erben presents her project to the children of Udavi school

prevent and transform violence, the root-cause has to be discovered, then methods have to be employed so that the children can express their feelings safely.

Part Two demonstrates how to teach this information to children. It provides the material for 33 group sessions. With the help of different games, the children learn how to recognize their feelings and to express them in a healthy and positive manner. In this way, they become sensitized to their limits and boundaries and learn to think about the feelings of others. The group sessions with the children are nearly always done

in the same way as children love structure which helps them to feel safe.

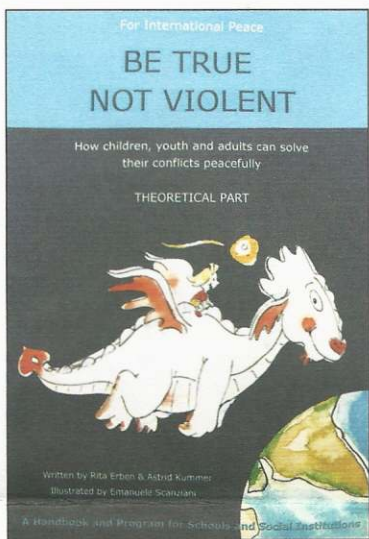
Every lesson begins with a game to bring the group together and get playfully into the session. There are a large variety like movement games, trust games, role plays and theatre as well as games for the senses. The topic of each lesson is introduced with a story and then there is activity or role play in groups, reflecting actively on the story. Every session concludes with breathing exercises and relaxation to slow things down and bring the children back into the present.

Part three is a beautifully illustrated comic-style book by Auroville's Emanuele that takes the child through "The Adventures of Papui, Draggy and Something Else." Through numerous colourful illustrations, the three friends fly around the world and contribute to peace on earth.

The pilot project of "Be True – Not Violent" is now being tried out in three Auroville Schools – Udavi, New Creation and Transition – as well as in schools in Peru, Mozambique, Haiti and Columbia.

"We want the book to be Auroville's gift to the world," say its creators.

Dianna



Dealing with conflict in Restorative Circles

"...[We start] from the premise that conflict is natural, normal, and recurrent in community life. When conflict occurs, it doesn't mean anyone has failed. In fact, we need both community and conflict to reach our full potential as human beings. Much as we value individual choice, we are formed in community and work out the ramifications of our individuality in relation to others. And though we may resent it when our preferences, practices, or beliefs are challenged, we would never grow without conflict." Ron Kraybill & Evelyn Wright

On July 13th at the Town Hall a presentation on the principles and practice of Restorative Circles was offered by L'aura and Jason, followed by a question and answer session. Over the years they have been excited about living nonviolence and learning about processes that help communities create cooperation and harmony. So last November they attended a Restorative Circles workshop in the US, and spending time with Dominic Barter, the founder of the process, was rich and rewarding. They returned both moved and impressed, and are now motivated to share the practice with Auroville and interested people in India. A group of Aurovilians is meeting weekly to practice the skills with the possible intention of one day creating a restorative justice system in Auroville.

When Dominic moved to Rio de Janeiro 17 years ago after falling in love with a Brazilian, he had no background in handling conflict. He found himself moved by the imbalance of power between those who lived in the slums and those who didn't, and he began to talk to people. He noticed they frequently wanted to discuss the conflicts in their lives, and expressed that they felt disempowered and unable to handle them. So for the past 15 years, Dominic has been working with Brazilians to develop this process, so that they could trust their communities to handle their conflicts without needing outside authorities to intervene. At first he thought of himself in the field of 'conflict resolution,' but he has come to realize that conflict is part of coexistence and that, rather than trying to fix conflicts, he wants to encourage them to fully blossom. For this, Dominic refers to creating dedicated 'fight rooms' so that everybody involved can take responsibility for finding the roots of the conflict and empower themselves to create solutions.

Also, the way most people perceive conflict is overly simplistic: one victim and one offender. Many people may be affected by a conflict and



Jason and L'aura

many of them may be experiencing themselves in a state of 'victimhood' – that is, the power to affect their wellbeing is out of their reach. In a Restorative Circle, all the parties participating in the process get a chance to express themselves and be heard not just for the words they speak but for the meaning they want registered. It's not about who's right or wrong – it's about understanding how people feel now about what happened and what their motivations were when they chose to act. Ultimately, it's the recognition of a shared humanity. From that foundation, the Circle can try to find a way forward which serves everybody.

So, how does it work?

A Restorative Circle brings together the three parties in a conflict – those who have acted, those

directly impacted, and the wider community – within a specific context to dialogue as equals. The first step is for a person experiencing conflict to contact a facilitator. The facilitator then holds a Pre-Circle with that person to identify the act in question and to understand how the person feels about it now. The facilitator then makes sure that the person understands the Circle process and asks if he or she wants to go ahead. If yes, the facilitator asks who else needs to be present in the Circle. He or she then proceeds to have Pre-Circles with all of the other parties, and invites them to describe the conflict and how it impacted them, and asks them who they think should participate in the Circle. Finally, the facilitator invites everybody to the Restorative Circle, where they get the chance to

share how they feel about the conflict. From here, the focus of the dialogue shifts to understanding the underlying causes of people's actions. The Circle ends when the participants reach a practical, time-framed action plan which they believe will start to restore trust and meet the needs of everybody involved.

A Post-Circle is scheduled after the action plan's completion date, and the parties get a chance to discuss how these actions impacted their wellbeing. If needs have been met they can be celebrated and if there are still unmet needs, new actions can be agreed upon. Dominic describes the intended outcome of the Circle as each participant being more willing to co-exist with the others than before they entered the Circle.

During the question and answer session, one of the participants was inspired to share a story of hope about handling conflict. While walking in Australia, he and his wife were witness to a scene of violence involving an Aboriginal man who ran after them enraged, threatening violence. His wife turned and walking directly to the man, took his arms and said: "When you bleed, it's red. When I bleed it's red. Do we have to hurt each other?" The man replied, shocked: "Do you really mean that?" And she said: "Yes, I really mean that." He ended his story sharing: "Arms went down, and he went away, and we went away."

We don't have to be afraid of conflict – it can be a way of uniting us and helping us to enjoy each others' differences.

At the end another person asked, "Due to all the diversity, pain and history in Auroville, do you believe it will work here?" L'aura responded, "It would be foolish of me to promise yes – but, I trust this process and I'm willing to try."

For more information on Restorative Circles visit www.RestorativeCircles.org. For more information on initiating a Restorative Circle in Auroville contact RestorativeAuroville@gmail.com.

Elaine and Alan

Striving for social empowerment

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The Livelihood Trainings teach skills in tailoring and embroidery that can be performed in between household duties, providing women – especially those who live in extreme poverty and those who are dalits or widows – with some income.

The Social Enterprise Creation Programme is of a more recent date. Since late 2009, AVAG has been working on creating social enterprises to provide livelihood opportunities to women SHG members and to generate income to support the work of AVAG. Under the slogan 'Affordable Eco technologies for a better future' an EcoLife Store has started, where eco-friendly products can be bought that are suitable for rural communities. The products include CFL bulbs, activated EM, low-cost water filters, different kinds of solar torches and solar lights, crank lights and solar mobile phone chargers. The EcoLife Store is now ready for the next phase: training interested SHG members as retail entrepreneurs to become EcoLife sales representatives.

Eco Femme, another project, focus on menstrual hygiene management, a poorly-addressed area of public health that involves social, cultural, economic, environmental, health and gender issues. "Eco Femme is AVAG's attempt to pro-



Sample of Eco-Femme pads

duce a cloth menstrual pad which is washable, reusable and thus eco-friendly," explains Kathy Walkling, an AVAG executive. "So far, three prototype pads have been designed which we found to be appealing to the women in our area. The women find the pads attractive and say they generate a feeling of dignity, unlike the old cloth they normally use or the disposable pads which are growing in popularity. They appreciate that there is no waste and understand that such a product can save a lot of money. The appeal and acceptability of this product will now be tested in partnership with NGOs working with rural and urban marginalised women. If the product is found to be acceptable it will have a huge potential impact. Women SHG members will be able to stitch these simple tailored products and in the process generate a sustainable livelihood."

In parallel, AVAG is preparing an educational training programme for NGO staff to expose rural women in India to the topic of menstrual hygiene management. Using stories and group-based activities, this educational package will deeply explore the myths and taboos that result in lifestyle restrictions and feelings of shame and impurity.

Capacity Building

AVAG's Capacity Building Programme aims at expanding the social perspectives and technical abilities of SHG members. "We organise what we call 'mixed-gender exposure trips' in the surrounding regions to foster solidarity and increase awareness of essential issues," says Kathy. "On each of these trips men and women from different villages get a chance to be together for one full day and this experience helps them to understand each other. We also conduct workshops covering subjects such as gender and caste analysis, domestic violence, environmental awareness; and train people to develop leadership skills so that the leadership of each SHG can rotate every two years."

In so-called 'cluster meetings', representatives from 10 – 15 SHGs meet twice a year to discuss common issues such as roads, transport, water and needs relating to other shared infrastructure. "Cluster meetings are also an opportunity for members to know women from different clubs and to advise and suggest strategies for solving problems that arise within the clubs. These meetings are another opportunity to foster solidarity among women beyond their own club," says Kathy.

Psychosocial Services

According to the report 'Accidental Deaths and Suicides in India – 2008', the suicide rate in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry is among the highest in the country. The number of suicides per one

lakh population (a population of 100,000), was in 2008 46.9 in Puducherry and 21.7 in Tamil Nadu, against a national average of 10.8. The overall male : female ratio of suicide victims for the year 2008 was 64:36.

"We became aware that in our area, on average 6 to 8 SHG members a year had committed suicide and that around the same number of women had attempted it," says Anbu. "This motivated us to look for ways to offer psychosocial support to the SHG members. We are happy that, as a result of this and other interventions, in 2009 and 2010 there were no suicides among the SHG members."

One of these interventions was the Energy Healing activity. In 2010, two counsellors from the USA, trained in Somatic Experiencing, provided individual sessions and trained interested women. Traumatized women were also offered individual sessions. Also a group from Langara College in Canada offered trainings to staff, Federations and SHG members in Energy Healing. "We find that these trainings in self-healing and stress reduction are a great help in addressing emotional problems," says Anbu. "This, together with the counselling we are offering to individuals who have difficulty in coping with their life situation or who are victims of human rights abuses, has helped to reduce the high prevalence of suicide."

AVAG's counselling work is increasing in importance. "Knowing of the possibility to get counselling, SHG members come to AVAG on their own or are brought here by other members," says Anbu. "Family members and sometimes non-members of the SHGs also utilize our service." Depending upon the case, they are sometimes helped to contact other organizations.

Another intervention is AVAG mediation between disputing parties. "We are called upon to mediate disputes between SHG members, between husband and wife, employer and employee, etc.," says Moris. "In 2010, interestingly three men – two alcoholics – approached us to settle problems with their wives. It shows that AVAG is more and more seen as a neutral organization capable of giving support to people, irrespective of their gender."

Alcoholism is one of the biggest threats to the health of the families and community. It leads to violence, indebtedness, abuse of women and children, stress and trauma. Because of alcoholism, village communities also lose many potential contributors. And in quite a few cases the families lose the bread winners.

"We are discussing this issue extensively with both women and men SHG members as we have been requested to try and find some way to help," says Kathy. "We have made contacts with Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) members and different de-addiction centres. Last year AVAG organized three seminars for men and women SHG members with the support of the de-addiction centre 'Concern,' based in Chennai. The response from the members was overwhelming. Both Federations are now planning to make the reduction of alcohol abuse a priority for the next year. AVAG has meanwhile trained 15 members from different SHGs in counselling alcoholics and acting as contact persons between the de-addiction centre in Chennai, AVAG and the village."

The funding.

The most critical challenge AVAG is facing is funding. "We lack sufficient funds. In fact, we are eating into our capital," says Moris. "At the end of March 2009, the institutional funding for our activities ceased and in spite of our efforts we have not been able to find another donor. Funding is now a critical priority, not only to continue our work, but also to be able to expand. We are under pressure to add 30 Women and 20 Men SHG groups, which would mean 800 new beneficiaries. But we don't have the means." One way in which AVAG would be able to enhance its income, he says, is by enlarging its micro-finance corpus fund [see accompanying article]. Funding may also materialise from the Ministry of Rural Development for the project 'Sustainable Enterprises Development for the Auroville Bioregion.' This project, which aims at providing livelihood and enterprise possibility for the people in the bioregion, would also alleviate some of the financial pressure AVAG has been facing in the last few years. But the approval for this project is still pending.

"We are constrained, but we are confident that the funds will be raised for us to continue our work," says Anbu. "It is important for the villages and it is a necessary component of the work of Auroville. Therefore we trust that people will respond to our call for help."

In conversation with Carel

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From top: Women Self-Help Group members clear a site in Vasanthapuram during a Work Camp; Women Self-Help Group members participating in a group discussion in Puthurai; An eye-checkup done during a health camp in a mobile tent; Indian Bank's mobile bank doing business at the Auroville Village Action building in Irumbai.

The origin of the concept of microfinance lies with Professor Muhammad Yunus, a former professor of economics in Bangladesh, who in 1974 started a new system of banking for the poor in rural, semi-urban and urban areas, providing tiny loans for self-employment at low-interest rates so enabling them to raise their income levels and improve living standards. Yunus started the now world-famous Grameen Bank, initiating a concept which has now spread all over the world. The World Bank estimates that there are now over 7000 microfinance institutions, serving some 16 million poor people in developing countries.

Auroville Village Action needs help

continued from page 1

This pushes SHG members to access other, more expensive, sources of credit, like chit schemes, pawn brokers or the local money lenders.

"We need to increase AVAG's corpus fund," says Moris. "This would have an immense impact. AVAG would be able to expand its work by admitting more SHGs; villagers could start new social enterprises and businesses; farmers would have increased loan possibilities for agriculture; children – girls in particular – would be more likely to attend school and pursue higher education; housing conditions will improve. Last but not least, there will be a large community impact, as the SHGs are actively involved in work benefiting their villages, such as school maintenance, infrastructure care and distribution of food to the needy."

The possibility of enlarging AVAG's corpus fund has now come with the help of the VFAVR (Verein zur Förderung der Auroville Region – Association for the Promotion of the Auroville Region) a sister organisation of Auroville International Germany. In 2008, the VFAVR was successful in obtaining a large grant for an extension project of the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology from the Federal Ministry for Economic Co-operation and Development (BMZ). This project was successfully completed last year. This year, the VFAVR wants to submit a project to enlarge AVAG's corpus fund.

"The conditions are that the VFAVR as the German project holder should contribute 10% and AVAG, as the Indian partner, 15% of the total amount requested," says Helmut Ernst, the

chairperson of VFAVR and board member of AVI Germany. "AVAG needs to enlarge its corpus fund with at least Rs 1 crore (about €160,000). BMZ would donate Rs 7.5 million (about €120,000) if AVAG and VFAVR together contribute Rs 2.5 million (about €40,000)."

By the time this issue went to press, AVAG's part of €24,000 had been secured. Another €16,000 (US \$ 22,500) is still required as the 10% contribution of VFAVR.

"This is a fantastic opportunity," says Moris. "For if it materializes, it will not only benefit all the existing and new SHG members, but also guarantee that AVAG can continue all its other activities and expand."

In conversation with Carel

Donations for the AVAG microfinance corpus expansion can be made either to the Auroville International Centre in your country (see box on page 8) or to: Verein zur Förderung der Auroville Region (VFAVR)

Bank für Sozialwirtschaft

International transfers:

Account No IBAN:

DE3410020500003289300

Bank ID BIC: BFSWDE33BER

Transfers within Germany:

Account No: 3289300

Bank ID: 10020500

Donations should not be sent to Auroville

How the Self-Help Groups and Federations function

The function of a Self-Help Group

To be member of a SHG, a person should be aged between 18 to 55 years, be a resident of the village where the group is based, and not be a member of any other SHG.

Each group can have 12-20 members. The group has to choose its own leaders i.e. an animator and two representatives. The position must be changed every 2 years, in order to give the opportunity for everybody to grow in capacities.

The group meets at least twice a month to deposit the savings, pay back loans, decide upon new loans and discuss other issues.

Each SHG decides on a monthly savings amount (usually between Rs. 50-100 per month) which each member deposits. Each SHG opens a bank account to deposit the monthly savings. When a group is accepted by AVAG, it is asked to join the Women's or Men's Federation and pay the annual subscription, which is Rs.50 per member. The group receives from the federation a set of registers to maintain the group's accounts.

AVAG encourages new SHGs to give out loans gradually, increasing as each member proves his/her capacity for repayment. Loans are offered for a wide variety of needs. Members can easily access loans as long as they are supported by the SHG, funds are available, and the SHG is confident of the member's repayment capacity. Members are encouraged to give priority to each member's needs, rather than dividing the borrowed amount into equal shares.

Relending does not depend on the completion of a previous loan, but rather is encouraged only when there is a genuine need. This system ensures group members will not reapply for a loan immediately after the previous loan has ended.

Twice a year every SHG participates in a cluster meeting with other SHG groups of the same panchayat (local government area). In these meetings participants discuss the community development activities undertaken during the last year and share community problems facing SHGs, such as community development, human rights and other issues, in an attempt to arrive to a collective action to

solve them. Cluster meetings are also an opportunity for members to know men and women from different clubs and to advise and suggest strategies for solving problems that arise within the clubs. These meetings are another opportunity to foster solidarity beyond their own club.

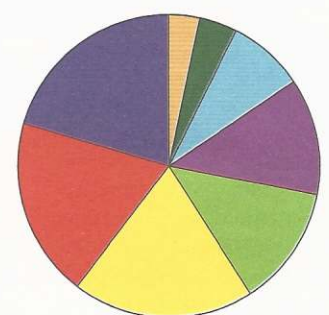
The work of the Federations

A major function of the Federations is to gradually transfer the micro-finance loan administration from AVAG to local people.

Though most of AVAG's staff live in the organization's target area and have extensive knowledge of conditions on the ground, the Federations have their fingers on the pulse of village life. By employing beneficiaries in the microfinance process, AVAG can be confident that financing is being used for real village needs.

At the moment, the Men's Federations administer the internal lendings of every group and maintain links with the commercial banks and the Governmental credit schemes. AVAG's role is more advisory than controlling, although the organization does hold veto power over any decisions to avoid incidents of abuse and to prevent corruption.

Purposes of loans provided



| Purpose of loan given | Rs in 2010-2011 | % |
|--------------------------|-------------------|---------------|
| Housing | 12 435 000 | 22.39 |
| Repayment non-SHG loans | 11 983 200 | 21.57 |
| Social functions | 10 871 300 | 19.57 |
| Agriculture | 7 154 000 | 12.88 |
| Education | 5 904 800 | 10.63 |
| Business | 4 572 500 | 8.23 |
| Medical | 1 779 500 | 3.20 |
| Others | 852 050 | 1.53 |
| Total loans given | 55 552 350 | 100.00 |

Seeds of change – the kitchen garden project

A number of months ago Snehal, the proprietor of Kofibar, partnered with Ilumalai to start a new green initiative called Heal the Soil, (HTS) a Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA) project. It was Snehal's need to buy locally-grown, fresh organic produce for his restaurant that planted the seed for this initiative. The two co-founders put together a strategy to develop and provide workshops using experts in the farming industry to train volunteers. The volunteers, along with the experts and CSA staff, approach the local villages and teach the villagers to design, implement and maintain kitchen gardens using the methods of permaculture farming. The principles of a permaculture garden are based on an evergreen tropical rainforest; the organic waste along with the layers of manure, leaves, and plant cuttings provide the soil with the needed materials and micronutrients. "An organic permaculture garden requires very little work once the design and beds are made, it's pretty well self-sustaining" says Snehal.

The first step was for Ilumalai, a local with over 27 years experience of planting trees and medicinal plants, to convince friends and family to start a garden in their yards. With the help of the volunteers and with the provision of free organic seeds and saplings of different vegetables and fruits, the project was a success. It wasn't too long before the neighbours began to express interest in having a garden of their own. So Snehal gave presentations in the villages of Kottakarai and Chebrole in Andhra Pradesh and by the end of the month around 30 families from Kottakarai village were interested in taking part in the project. Already there are over 50 households in two villages and the numbers are growing. Some of the gardens have already started producing food for the families, which saves them money.

"We saw the potential of expand-



AVAG members preparing a kitchen garden for use as a demonstration garden for the villagers.

ing this project, so we approached Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) because they have such a rich network in the villages around Auroville and in the bioregion," says Ilumalai. "They supported the idea and it led to Snehal doing a presentation and assisting some families in the village of Rayapudupakam near Alankuppam."

Each project begins with a presentation to the villagers, and then 4 to 5 families form a team and work together. The volunteers and experts go to

the village, choose the site, analyze the soil and start building the garden beds, applying layers of compost, mulch and cow manure. This is followed by the planting of seeds. The use of gray rather than fresh water is recommended. "One idea will be to train the local women to make soap using ingredients from the medicinal plants in the gardens. The women will learn a new skill and it will give them additional income for their families. But that will happen in another phase of our project," says Snehal.

Since the seeds, implementation and training are free and land is available, the interest is increasing: 4-5 additional houses are involved every week. Compost is an essential part of the garden so organic matter, such as kitchen waste, is added to the raised beds. Nothing organic is wasted; in fact a continual supply may be the most difficult hurdle to overcome. The use of organic waste made the villagers aware of the importance of separating their waste. "At the beginning they were mixing all the waste together. Now they

see the benefits and want to save time, so they no longer mix the plastic and non-organic waste," says Snehal.

Snehal takes me over to his garden bed which is approximately 4 feet wide and 20 feet long. The plants include turmeric, tomatoes, pumpkin, squash, ladies fingers, papaya, tulsi and maize. Diversity of crop and a healthy soil is the key to pest and disease-resistance, as monocultures risk losing the whole crop to pest or disease.

Once the seeds have been planted, the garden owners are taught how to maintain their gardens. This involves a follow-up from the members of the Heal the Soil, CSA team.

As the number of gardens grow, the supply of healthy food will increase and the surplus can be sold locally to restaurants and shops. The demand for organically-grown food in Auroville is high and the supply at this stage is inadequate. So, the next phase of the project will involve setting up a co-operative marketing and distribution model, using a reward system. The families producing the most vegetables, medicinal herbs or greens will be rewarded monetarily and supported by the CSA team. This approach will also empower the villagers, encourage others to participate and eventually boost the local economy.

The money to support the free services, transportation, seeds and material come from the fees charged for the workshops given by the HTS and CSA teams as well as from donations and consulting fees. In the near future they are hoping to introduce the CSA model to over 60 villages, working in collaboration with volunteers, farming experts and AVAG.

This project is not only good for the environment, sustainable, and saves and earns money for the local people; it is also taking the local people back to the land "one seed at a time."

Anyone wishing to learn more about permaculture or volunteering, go to: htsauroville@gmail.com

Elaine

REFLECTION

Exploring the Auroville thought-field

Aurovilians are once again discussing how to select the next Council and Working Committee and this gives us yet another chance to observe some of the predominant thought-forms of this community. For, over the past 44 years, the personalities and experiences of individual Aurovilians along with the experiences of the community as a whole have created a kind of collective thought-field which profoundly influences the way many of us approach issues. This thought-field is all the more potent because it is largely unacknowledged and, therefore, unexamined.

This is not to suggest that all Aurovilians think the same: a brief visit to the community is more than enough to explode this fiction. But what is striking is that, whatever the issue we are dealing with as a collective, certain attitudes and reactions to these attitudes tend to surface, and it is these, rather than any specific proposals being made regarding housing, the economy or whatever, which often constitute the real ground of our debates.

So what are these attitudes? Here are some preliminary soundings, subject to the limitations of my own understanding. Firstly, there is a certain distrust of the professional, the specialist. Visiting experts who offer advice are often met with the knee-

jerk response, 'That wouldn't work here, Auroville is different', and even Aurovilians with qualifications in a particular field are frequently not accorded the respect they would get elsewhere. This is tied in with a general distrust of the 'mental' and the elevation of spontaneity and intuition. As a corollary to this, some hold the belief that almost any Aurovillian can do any job in the community.

Secondly, and related to our problems with specialists, there is a profound distrust of authority. This can be seen in the aversion to putting Aurovilians in what are perceived to be positions of power and the efforts which are made to limit any power achieved.

Yet another aspect of the thought-field relates less to specific attitudes and more to the way that they are held. For in Auroville there is an excess of dogma. I'm not talking here about the "Mother said" syndrome which, thankfully, seems to be abating, but rather the way in which Aurovilians cling to certain beliefs – as if their very lives or the future of Auroville depends upon it – regarding issues like the shape of the Crown Road, the role of the Residents Assembly, the status of the Banyan Tree, the need to empower the local Aurovilians etc. One consequence of this tendency is that if an individual's stance is criticized it is taken not only as a person-

al attack but also as an attack upon Mother or the fundamental principles of Auroville. Another consequence is that our discussions tend to be 'hard-edged', polemical, rather than exploratory.

Such thought-forms and the way we hold them do not arise by accident. They are the product not only of individual culture and experiences but also of collective experiences. It's not surprising, for example, that authority issues loom so large in a community which felt itself threatened by a takeover from the Sri Aurobindo Society in the 1970s and which still is deeply conflicted regarding the continuing role of the Governing Board and the Secretary of the Foundation in its affairs. And it has to be conceded that individual Aurovilians as well as work groups have abused power. At the same time, the distrust of authority and pervasive sense of powerlessness, of victimhood, reflected in a recent comment that "All the important decisions today are taken in the Town Hall rather than in meetings of the Residents Assembly", also reveals a lack of faith in one's own and the community's ability to effect change, as well as in the Force which holds this whole experiment together. Perhaps, most profoundly, those who have difficulty with those in authority positions are simply projecting on to them the way that they themselves would handle power if

given the opportunity. For in Auroville, as in similar situations the world over, those who oppose the people in authority are often seen to be as intolerant and as ready to impose their particular vision as those they seek to remove from office.

However, all this does not fully explain the persistence of certain thought-forms in this community. We get closer to the mark when we see that attitudes like the opposition to authority and the distrust of certain forms of expertise are actually pale reflections or distortions of an ideal, an aspiration, we hold in common. The belief that professionalism is suspect, for example, is the refracted expression of the truth that intuition is a far surer guide than mental knowledge. However, in a community where intuition is still not well-developed while sub-rational impulses are common currency, it is foolhardy to reject the mind as 'outmoded'. The same is true of the rejection of authority. 'Divine anarchy', where each individual answers to and is moved only by the inner guide, is undoubtedly our ideal. But to elevate anarchy above present authority structures when Aurovilians are still struggling to conquer the mental realm seems, at best, unwise.

In fact, such distortions are examples of what Ken Wilber termed the pre-transformation or

'pre/trans fallacy'. Wilber's point is that infra-rational states of consciousness are often mistaken for supra-rational states because both are non-rational, and this causes some people to "elevate all pre-rational states to some sort of trans-rational glory."

This confusion also points up another of our potent collective thought-forms, and that is that Aurovilians are in some way exempt from the normal progression of *sadhana*. In other words, there is a certain assumption that the very fact of living here allows us a short-cut to transformation: there is no need to do all that messy work of conquering the nether planes, we can leap straight towards supermind. Hence the distrust of the 'mental' and the impatience with anything which smacks of an interim arrangement, of a graduated progress towards the ideal, whether in our individual or in our communal lives.

This, of course, is not the full picture. The Auroville thought-field is also made up of a healthy dose of idealism, of a drive towards perfection and, increasingly, a desire to integrate seemingly conflicting positions. All these help counteract the more negative elements. But if we are to free ourselves of the doubtful dogmas which continue to circle in this community, it's time we start to examine them, one by one.

Alan

Bhavana

Bhavana passed away at the age of sixty seven on May 11th in Vérité community. She was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in January, 2011, and had a major operation to remove the tumour, which proved to be malignant. Having studied the success rate of chemotherapy for this particular type of cancer, which is very low, she decided not to have further allopathic treatment.

In fact, while she was attending JIPMER Hospital, Bhavana did research on alternative cancer treatments. She presented these to the doctors who were completely unfamiliar with alternatives to surgery and chemotherapy. In her last blog she spoke very strongly about the 'cancer industry' and how it suppressed alternative cancer remedies. While exploring alternative treatments, she accepted this last journey as her true Yoga, preparing for a conscious transition to the next world.

"I have had 67 full and good years and now it is time to depart," she said with characteristic frankness. Seventeen years ago she nearly died of cerebral malaria when she had been in a coma for two weeks. "Death is nothing to be afraid of," she told friends afterwards. Her experience last year of caring for her 92 year old mother in Florida had made her reflect on the ageing process.

"This experience made me open to a relatively early death before sight, hearing and mobility breakdown," she said on her return. She had spent many years practicing Vipassana meditation and had run meditation courses in Vérité, passing on her knowledge to guests and Aurovilians. A few years ago she spent one month meditating alone in a cave which, she said, was a remarkable experience.



Bhavana had founded the Auroville Village Action Group in 1983 and was held in great affection and respect by thousands of Tamil villagers. She had also organized 'drop in' talks to introduce the concept of 'Auroville, the villages and human unity' to Aurovilians, guests and visitors. It was often their only contact with village life and made a deep impression.

When young Tamil men visited her in JIPMER hospital she would introduce them to the surprised doctors as 'My Tamil sons.' When she was lying in state for the three days after her death,

hundreds of villagers came to pay their last respects. There were so many visitors that they had to be organized into groups. Some came twice a day.

She had let people know of her state, inner and outer, through a series of 'Notes to my Friends' which she posted as blogs on the internet. In one headed 'The Inner Story' she wrote: "But the most interesting for me has been the inner journey which this diagnosis triggered. My first reaction was actually, 'Oh, good, I will get to prepare for my death and depart consciously.' This seems just like Integral Yoga to me and more and more I found that the cancer seemed like a blessing, acting as Death-As-Guru overcoming my resistances to spiritual progress and goading me into intensified practice. The most important of these practices has been listening to Shradhdhavan's reading of Savitri on CD. Not only do I listen to it during the day but I sometimes play it all night long, dozing off, then waking to listen. Savitri is mantric, and when listened to has a deep effect."

In her final 'A Note to my Friends' she said; "With all this time of 'just being,' so many of my friends come to mind and I feel the special quality of love which friendship bestows. We all just radiate love and that's how the world holds together. So friendship is something which gives us a possibility of noticing the radiating of love. Friendship comes by grace, there's just a rapport and chance to notice the love. And each connection is so very unique! It is already quite a painful accomplishment for me to write this good bye epistle. I love you."

In her Living Will she wrote under the heading, 'My wish for what I want my loved ones to know':

"Know that I love you, and that I know you love me. Love and Oneness is all there is to know...Please forgive me for whatever I may have done to hurt or harm you, intentionally, or unintentionally. And know that I also go on holding no grudge or blame."

Dying is not so bad for the dying one, it's much harder on you survivors. Please take care of yourselves and let this experience deepen your sense of the meaning of life. Don't make a big fuss over the funeral, but a simple ceremony that celebrates the transition and gives others a chance to contemplate the phenomena is a good thing."

Bhavana's body was not placed in a coffin but laid on a traditional Tamil bamboo stretcher and carried by her 'Tamil sons' and then lowered into the earth. People strewed flowers until her body was covered with roses and marigolds. Charles read the passage from Savitri he had been reading to her as she lay dying, and letters from her brother and sister were read out.

As her body was lowered into the earth Subash from Isai Ambalam School read out lines from Savitri:

"Whirled, sinking, overcome she disappeared,
Like a leaf spinning from the tree of heaven,
In a broad unconsciousness as in a pool;
A hospitable softness drew her in,
Into a wonder of miraculous depths,
Above her closed a darkness of great wings
And she was buried in a mother's breast."

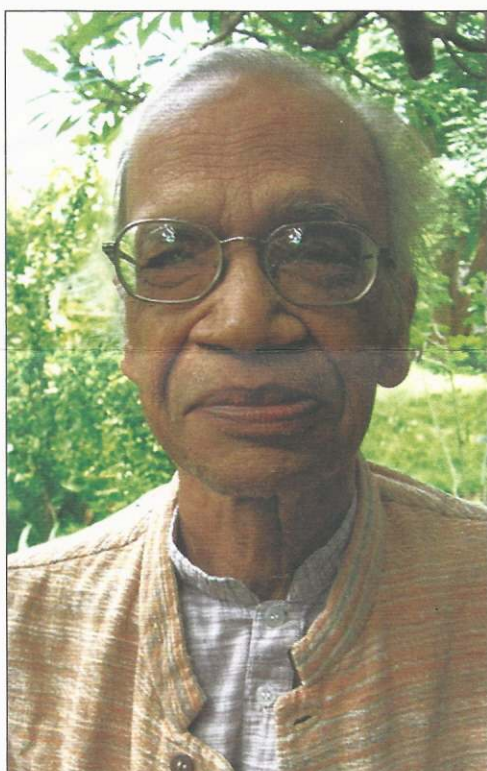
"This funeral was a celebration on a truly collective level," said one person. "We met each other in a very different way. Everyone's heart was softened and opened and old grievances melted away. It was a special occasion."

Dianna

Shyam Sunder

On July 28, Shyam Sunder Jhunjhunwala passed away in his house near the Sri Aurobindo Ashram at the age of 84. Shyam Sunder played a central role in the unfolding of Auroville in the early years when, in 1971, The Mother made him Her secretary for Auroville. "I said 'no' at first, when She asked me to do this work," he recollected. "But when She mentioned that I would then see Her three or even four times a day, I had no choice." "You will have lots of difficulties, but I will be with you," Mother had told him, and added that She would hold him morally responsible for what happened in Auroville. "I began to get an idea what this meant when, some time later, She gave me a good scolding for something which had happened but which was beyond my control. I began to understand that I had to be a medium for Her." His work involved all aspects of Auroville, from sanctioning expenses, channelling gifts and donations, being in charge of transport, doing land purchase, and managing the office, to dealing with all the internal problems of the Aurovilians. He also started Auroville's first 'Entry Group' together with André (Mother's son), Roger and Navajata. The group would see a person and then make a recommendation to meet The Mother. It was in this capacity that some 'early' Aurovilians still remember him, "beaming a big toothy smile" when he promised to submit his positive recommendation to Mother. His book *Down Memory Lane*, written in 1996, contains his reminiscences about his life in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and the daily guidance Mother gave him on Auroville.

When problems between Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Society arose in 1975-76, Shyam Sunder got into a difficult position. As he said, "I was blamed by everybody for everything. All emotions, all actions emanating from the Ashram, the Society or Auroville were all attributed to me. And I was only there because of that sentence of Hers, that She held me morally responsible, that She had given me the responsibility for Auroville, and that I should never give up that responsibility on the grounds of incapability. At that period, I was completely isolated, Mother was my only support." It was a difficult period in which all sides made mistakes. "I committed mistakes too, and I sometimes wonder that if I had acted differently could I have averted what happened? But then I see that even then we might have committed the same mistakes." Asked if he ever would like to speak again about that difficult period in his life, he said "No. The less we speak about it the better; otherwise the story-telling will start again. Let us rise above it." In later years he was quietly active for Auroville in fundraising for the Matrimandir and in giving advice on fiscal and legal matters.



Shyam Sunder was deeply immersed in Sri Aurobindo's teaching. His book 'En Route', containing his correspondence with The Mother between 1967 to 1970, shows his intense state of *sadhana*. He also authored booklets on the *Mahabharata*, on the *Ramayana* and on the *Bhagavat Gita* and made compilations of Sri Aurobindo's writings on Agni in *The Immortal Fire*. He translated some of Sri Aurobindo's works in Hindi, and translated the French book *Wu Wei*, a book based on the philosophy of Lao Tse, into English, "as The Mother referred to this book in her talks of August 15 and 29, 1956." His last prose work, *Some Socio-Spiritual Perspectives* is a compilation of his selected editorials from *Sri Aurobindo's Action*, the monthly journal of the organisation set up by The Mother, of which he had become the Chairman before becoming Mother's secretary for Auroville.

Carel

Mark Reuters

On June 17th, Mark Reuters was found dead in his home in the Netherlands. He would have been 45 years in November. Mark had been living in Aspiration, where he was an active and lively part of the community. From the time of his arrival in 1997, he reached out to people in need, while also working at the Abri workshop and later at the Residents Service as liaison with the RRO in Pondy. He left Auroville five years ago.

Alumelu

After a long life of service to her family, Aurovilian Alumelu, mother of Ellama (of Pour Tous) and grandmother of Velu, Bhavani and Prabhu, passed away on July 21st at the age of 80 in the family home at Kuilyapalayam. Thanks to her steady presence in the home, Ellama was able to work for Auroville while her grandchildren grew up to be the young adults they are now.

Indra Poddar

In the early morning of July 3rd Indra Poddar, who had been living at Promesse, passed away at the age of 67 in the Care Centre of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram after a short stay in JIPMER hospital. Indra Poddar had joined the Ashram school as a young boy, and was in later years involved in the purchase of lands for Auroville for the Sri Aurobindo Society, in which position he played a considerable role in the city's early years.

Baby Cassius

Cassius René (son of newcomers-to-be Nicole and Satyavan Alexander, who grew up here between 1972 and 1977), passed away due to sudden breathing complications in his mother's arms at JIPMER Hospital, on Saturday, July 2nd. During his brief three-month visit here on earth, Cassius touched many lives and was loved deeply by family and friends.

Amal Kiran

Amal Kiran passed away on June 29th at the Ashram Nursing Home at the age of 107. The next day his body was brought to Sri Aurobindo's Samadhi, after which it was laid to rest in the Ashram cemetery.

K.D. Sethna, known in the Ashram and Auroville by the name Sri Aurobindo gave him - Amal Kiran (A Clear Ray) - was born in a Parsi family in Bombay on November 25th 1904. A brilliant student of Philosophy and English Literature, he joined the Ashram in 1927 at the age of 23. His passing, after a short illness, marks the loss of the last physical link with the earliest days of the Ashram.

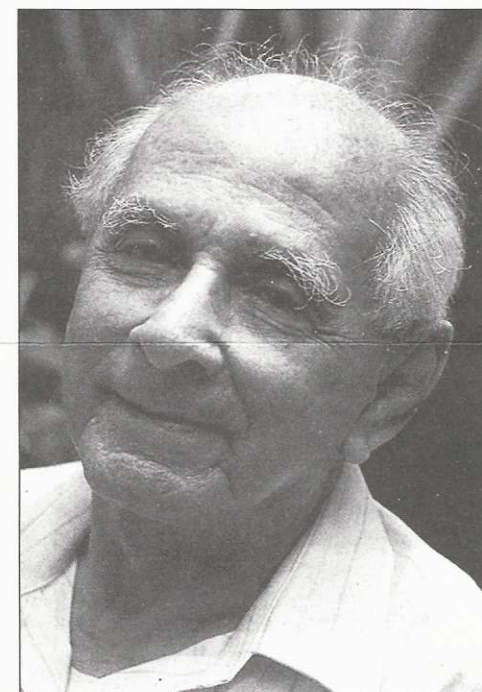
Amal Kiran corresponded at length with Sri Aurobindo, particularly about poetry. Amal himself was a born poet, whose talent blossomed into genius under the influence and inspiration of Sri Aurobindo. Their correspondence on Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri* gives us invaluable insights into Sri Aurobindo's intentions and methods in writing the poem. [This correspondence is now published in two volumes by the Clear Ray Trust].

Amal also authored over 50 books in prose, and was a prolific writer of articles and letters, many of which were published in the journal *Mother India* - the monthly review of culture which he founded in 1949 with Sri Aurobindo's blessings, and continued to edit for more than 50 years. In 1993 he visited the Matrimandir. In a diary note he wrote:

As soon as we got there I felt a sudden stillness and a sense of inexpressible mystery. They seemed to draw me in with a silent welcome of enfolding love. Spontaneously there arose in my mind a line from Savitri I had quoted to the Mother more than fifty-five years ago as an ideal experience for me: All was made wide above, all lit below

Now it appeared as though the Yogic state caught in these words had been given a concrete exteriorisation in the inner chamber for all aspirants to get an inkling of a double divine action by which heaven and earth would both be equal components of an all-round self-manifestation by a Supreme Presence.

For nearly twenty minutes I sat in the inner chamber, facing the mysteriously gleaming crystal globe poised unmoving in an atmosphere of what I



can only call intimate remoteness. When I was carried out into the common world again, I felt washed clean of all impurities and given a new birth. Indeed, as promised at the very initiation of the Auroville project, here in the inner chamber was the Soul of the "Dawn-City", with the creative consciousness of the Divine Mother at concentrated work in harmony with the world-regenerating Power at the heart of Her Pondicherry Ashram.

Amal was partly crippled by poliomyelitis as a child, but never allowed his handicap to hinder his adventurous spirit much, until two successive hip-fractures, in his 90s, took him to the Ashram Nursing Home, where he spent the last 10 years of his life.

Today I imagine this ever-youthful spirit, freed at last from the load of his body, joyfully winging to meet his beloved Mother and Master. He would have been 107 on November 25th. He will be remembered with affection and gratitude by many people whose lives were warmed and enriched by his clear and smiling Ray.

Shradhdhavan

The Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy

Dear Friends,

I have been meaning to share with you that the idea of the Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy (AGC) is working out, in small steps and very quietly. To refresh your memory, I started this channel for anyone who wants to make an anonymous gift of money to someone they know is in need. This was to:

1. Avoid creating a relationship of dependence between the giver and the receiver.
2. To generate goodwill by giving, however small the amount, to someone we know and appreciate to help out in need.
3. To avoid the idea that the giver is wealthy and can give again and again, as that may not be the case.
4. Just to make it easy to give without damaging friendships and other relationships between people.

Basically I offer two ways to give.

First, I opened an account called the 'Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy' at the Financial Service. This account can be used to transfer money to someone without the person knowing who it has come from. The money is transferred to the account, and I get a note by email or on the phone from the giver. I then transfer the money on to the person who it was intended for. In this way the gift stays anonymous.

The account number for 'Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy' is: Financial Service # 252090. And yes, those not living in Auroville can also contribute to this account.

Please make a note of this for the time when you feel naturally, spontaneously, like giving someone you know – be it a neighbour, friend, or just someone you respect, something to help with their needs.

The second way is to give cash in an envelope. You contact me by phone or mail, and let me know that you have an 'envelope' for someone. I meet you at your convenience and take the envelope from you. I then forward this envelope through the hands of one of the volunteer 'Angels' who takes it to the receiver, and hand it over. This second option is the one that people have been using in the last months, since I first introduced the idea. I am happy to say that there have been a number of envelopes that have reached people in need and generated goodwill.

People also take the idea and improvise on it! Friends create interim accounts to make a collection for someone anonymously. Then the amount is passed through the AGC onto the account of the receiver with a description of the purpose for which it is intended. The receiver only sees the AGC account and not the names of the different givers. So, it moves away from being exclusively an act of kindness by an individual to being an act of kindness by a group. I think that's pretty amazing!

Giving like this reinforces the goodwill that links all of us here in Auroville. The receiver of today may very well be the giver of tomorrow. I can state this from my own experience. I have received so much through the Grace that connects all of us, children of the Mother, I cannot count the number of times and ways it happens. Today, by the same Grace I may be in a position to give. And giving continues the chain of faith in Her and in the Spirit of Auroville.

We are all aware that wealth is not distributed evenly in Auroville. The Anonymous Goodwill Conspiracy becomes an amazing opportunity for those of us who have or who generate funds to look after those who provide invaluable services to our community.

The best part is that an act of giving out of goodwill has a thousandfold larger value than when the giving is done because guilt and coercion are applied by the authorities. Everywhere in the world systems run on coercion. The authority squeezes people for a large part of their income, in the form of laws. But this is not what we are here for in Auroville. We are an experiment on all levels, and experiments need to take leaps of faith. Can we keep this in mind, rather than trying by hook or by crook and by abandoning goodwill to copy a system that exists and stifles societies in the world around us? Let us recognize that the Past seeks to endure, and that it is our job to make sure we manifest the Future!

Ange

PROFILE

Being Jesse

"I first came to Auroville when I was three years old but left after I developed pneumonia and moved to live with my mother in New Zealand. Years later I returned to Auroville, aged nine, to find that for some children here, life can be tough. In the lithe, fit world of Auroville's Jungle Book, newcomer kids face a steep learning curve before they reach Mowgli status.

It was tough for me being back in Auroville after New Zealand. It was like living in the jungle. There was no school, no structure of any sort. The kids were wild, athletic and brown and I was fat (relatively speaking), slow and clumsy, and they were hard on me. I felt alone and disconnected and was more than happy to heed my mother's call to return to Sydney, Australia when I was fifteen.

In Sydney I studied ballet and theatre and later went to the University of Sydney, where I joined the Dramatic Society. The University eventually gave me a job organising entertainment, theatre, and, on occasion, gigantic parties. It was a life and work that I loved, but I always wanted to return to Auroville.

I returned for two weeks when I was 18 and experienced a completely different Auroville from my childhood. The tough jungle kids had turned into friendly young adults and I saw Auroville in a totally new light and loved it. Later, back in Sydney I kept thinking "Gotta get back", but somehow it took me eight more years before I did.

Sydney was a hard life to leave. I had always seen Sydney (or any place for that matter) as a hypnosis that creates its own seductive reality. Whenever I made plans to leave, some fantastic opportunity or great deal would emerge to make me delay my plans for another year. Finally, I realised I had to return to Auroville no matter how attractive the offer or insurmountable the obstacle. So I quit my job, sold my car, gave up my flat, put all my stuff in storage and headed for India.

My plan was to arrive with a 100% positive approach – I would give, give, and

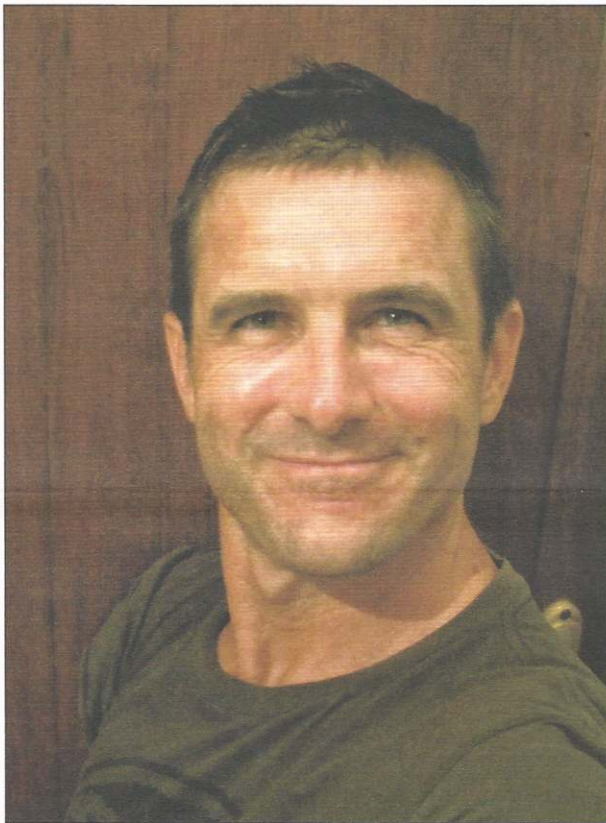


PHOTO COURTESY JESSE

if that wasn't appreciated, leave and never come back. After years of running Theatresports (improvised theatre games) at Sydney University I thought I would give it a go in Auroville and it proved very popular. The people that responded with the most enthusiasm were the kids, and now we have a highly-seasoned, highly-skilled bunch of young improvisers that take the stage solo without fear.

It was around 2000 that the brilliant Paul and Wazo created the legendary super-simple, semi-improptu, *lunghi* and *mumpty*-loving Genius Brothers. At the time they were performing with Johnny and Auroson. They invited me to join and I was honoured to accept. The audience loved to laugh at the fun and jokes we made of daily Auroville situations, especially when they recognized the people involved. We ran it for three years until we gave it a break as we had started to head in different directions.

Five years later the show returned, reincarnated as Genius Incorporated. The new concept was high-tech, multimedia and more inclusive in terms of other performers. We

experimented with video recorded live or broadcast live during the show projected on a big screen/backdrop. We relished rehearsals, but feared performance. Each show represented an overwhelming effort of will as we fought to live up to our own expectations and our expectations of what the audience wanted.

The technical setup entailed the equivalent of a Mount Everest climb in terms of the amount of equipment we had to lug up and down flights of stairs. We were very lucky to have the skilled support of Auroville lighting designer Mahi, cameraman and video editor Christoph, sound engineer Herve, and videographer Claire, not to mention the excellent Shakti and the very professional team at the Visitor's Centre where all our shows were performed. We were also very grateful for the support we received from the community and beyond, including funding received from the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier.

The show's experimental nature is a product of the Auroville spirit and environment. We have been able to work experimentally on an artistic project whose output is not monetary.

It shows that ideals can be manifested, that people can express themselves in ways that are not primarily designed for income-generation. Anywhere else in the world this show would have been near-impossible.

Now I'm working on a short movie with my father, Johnny, starring the students from his school, The Learning Collective (TLC), in Fertile. The project was part of the School's Tamil Week – the script is entirely in Tamil and deals lightly with local themes that include arranged marriage, electoral incentives and *baksheesh* (bribes).

Last term I taught Theatre and Performance at Future School to a very gifted and enthusiastic group. They were a joy to work with and their final showcase performance was a thing of beauty. I took the Shakespeare and scripted dialogue component of the course and wonderful and witty Erin took the improvised theatre section. This term I teach English literature at the school.

Two years ago I was invited to join the Auroville Council, which deals with the community's inner goings-on. It taught me a huge amount. It was an education about Auroville's

administrative structure. I learned much about what goes on in our little town – the good and the not so good. I was naively surprised to discover that not all of us equally value the pursuit of truth. I enjoyed very much working with the team, but the work is largely thankless. Many people refer to the 'power' of being on a working group, but there is no power, only very difficult problems to solve. I am relieved to have finished my 'tour of duty'.

Now I'm working with the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS). We're a five person team (Elvira, Mauna, Partha, Selvam and I) and we see our role primarily as enabler and facilitator of community participation in decisions made about the growth of Auroville. Towards this end we have called two General Meetings so far that have taught us a great deal. At the first meeting it became patently obvious to us that while there are administrative tasks that we must as a community work together on, ultimately we want to meet in friendly, explorative and open ways; ways that remind us that we are a caring community.

We have begun to experiment with methods to achieve this. We began our second meeting by greeting as many people as possible individually, shaking their hand and making eye contact. We then followed with a short video (which Mauna found on the Internet) of a cat sitting on a chair, fighting with a printer. We made a joke how the printer was like a working group and the cat like the community, each struggling to understand the other's perspective. In the end the cat falls off the chair. Ostensibly we were making a point about effective communication. But really we just wanted people to laugh. And they did.

We plan more meetings that intersperse serious inquiry with fun, light moments in an attempt to better prepare ourselves to put our hearts and heads together in an attempt to take this experiment forward.

How do I see my future? More of the same. I enjoy communication and there's great scope for communication in Auroville. Many problems can be avoided simply through developing an understanding of how similar we all are. We all share hunger, sadness, joy, and this connects us. In some ways we're all just the same person living different lives. I am you and this could have been your story."

In conversation with Dianna

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