

COVID-19: a wake-up call

In the last few months, the world has been turned upside-down. Half the world's population has been in lockdown, the global economy has collapsed, millions have lost their jobs and thousands have died, all as a result of a new and very infectious corona virus: COVID-19.

A few months' ago, who would have predicted that the world's airlines would be grounded, that Western democracies would be following totalitarian regimes in instituting lockdowns and surveillance of their populations, that free-market economists would be advocating forms of universal basic income, and anti-big government politicians embracing state control?

In fact, the pandemic has impacted so many spheres – environmental, social, industrial, economic, geo-political – that it's understandable why Sunita Narain, editor of *Down to Earth*, should describe it as "the most tumultuous, most catastrophic and the most defining epoch of our lifetime".

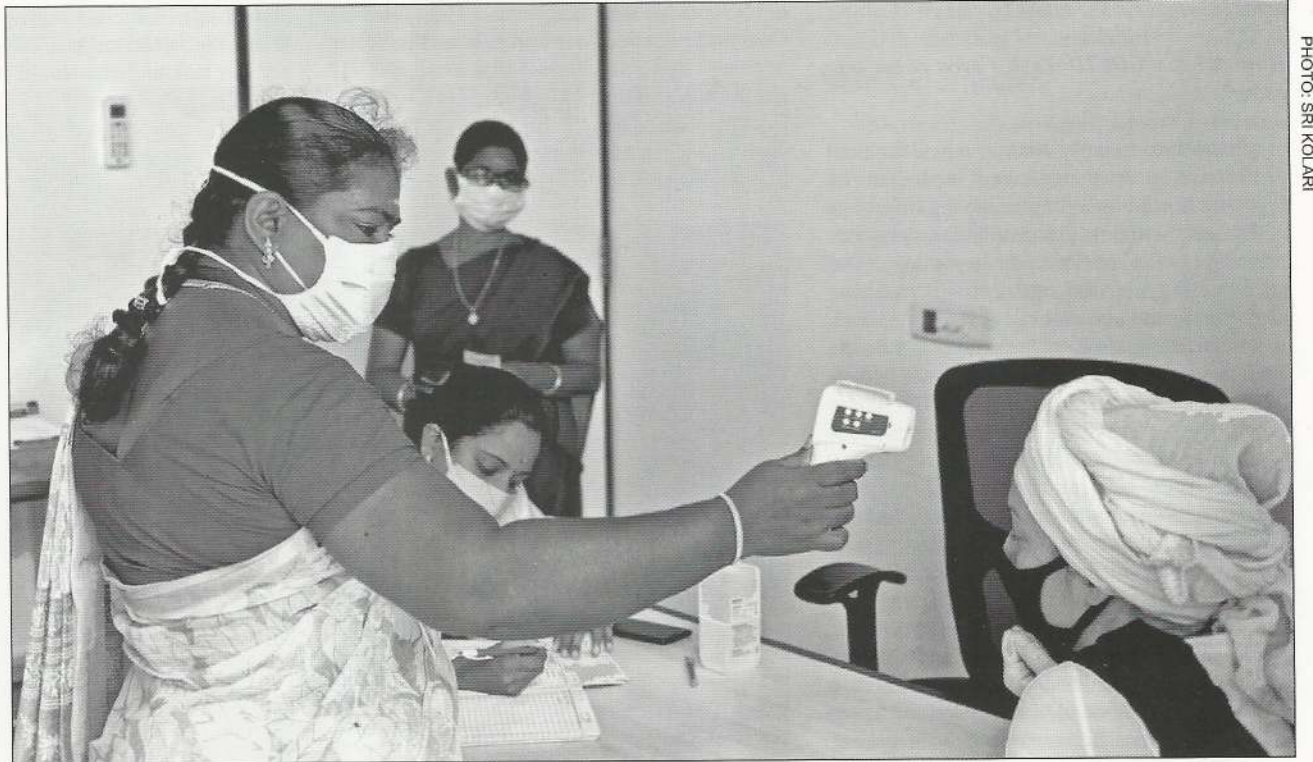
Downside/upside

The downsides are relatively obvious. In addition to the thousands of deaths and the huge suffering inflicted, particularly on the impoverished millions through the loss of their jobs and income – the International Monetary Fund expects the biggest economic retraction and fallout since the Great Depression of the 1930s – populations have been subjected to unprecedented levels of surveillance. In fact, the virus has acted as a global stress test, which most countries have failed. It has thrown into relief huge social inequalities, inadequate health and social services, poor city planning, as well as the environmental destruction and industrial animal farming practices which facilitate the transmission of zoonotic diseases like COVID-19. In some countries, political leadership has been found sadly wanting as has the ability of global capitalism, with its inability to think beyond short-term profits, in dealing with a crisis like this.

Socially, the lockdown has led to record levels of domestic violence and an 'epidemic of despair', there has been a spike in various forms of discrimination, and the lack of understanding about the nature of the virus has resulted in a proliferation of conspiracy theories and pseudo-medical advice, aptly described by the WHO described as an 'infodemic'.

Rather than acting together, countries have strengthened their borders and turned inward, while competing with each other to obtain essential medical supplies. Meanwhile, the U.N. has been proven to be completely ineffective in responding to the crisis.

As former Indian national Security Adviser Shivanshankar Menon puts it, it seems "we are heading for a poorer, meaner, smaller, world."



Government doctor and nurse at Santé screen a tourist

But there is also an upside. Medical professionals and volunteers have risked their lives to serve the public, and people everywhere have banded together to help each other, and particularly the elderly and vulnerable. The environment has recovered as pollution levels in the air and water plunged and the stress of human exploitation lessened. Cities are unveiling new schemes to promote walking, cycling and public transport, while Amsterdam has decided to embrace a framework for sustainable development which balances the needs of people and protection of the environment.

There is renewed interest in concepts like a basic wage for all and universal healthcare while human ingenuity has worked overtime in attempting to come up with a vaccine in record time. Perhaps most important of all, people are rediscovering through the rigours of lockdown the importance of relationships and communication with friends, and contact with nature.

The choice

The question now is what happens next, for the world is at a potential bifurcation point. As Peter Baker put it in *The Guardian*, "Times of upheaval are always times of radical change. Some believe the pandemic is a once-in-a-generation chance to remake society and build a better future. Others fear it may only make existing injustices worse."

Either we can pour billions into trying to resurrect the old order, 'business as usual', or we can take the opportunity to build a new kind of society. Either the world embraces increased surveillance and more government control, or it explores decentralisation and strengthening grassroots action. In pursuit of a neo-liberal agenda, or we "forge a new, more compassionate normal", as Charles Eisenstein put it. "It offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves," writes Arundhati Roy. "Nothing could be worse than a return to normality."

But do we really have a choice? The virus may have permanently shifted certain geo-political realities, as China emerges stronger and the U.S. weaker. Moreover, as the internationally-acclaimed virologist Dr Ian Lipkin warns, "We can absolutely have another pandemic if we don't change how we interact with our natural environment. We are going to have this problem continuously."

In fact, as another writer put it, "When we emerge from the lockdown, we must be ready to confront new political and social realities. The global institutional architecture of the 1940s cannot help humanity face the challenges of the 2020s."

Indeed, while COVID-19 may be the biggest crisis facing the world in the last 80 years, it is dwarfed in magnitude by the long-term threat of climate change. Both of these challenges "will require unusual levels of global cooperation," writes Baker.

"Exceptional times call for exceptional thoughts", says the Kerala Chief Minister. But will the world rise to the occasion? Or will Amitav Ghosh's gloomy prediction prove correct? "The history of epidemics shows that while they are raging people imagine that they will rethink everything. But when they are over they quickly go back to their old ways."

How has India fared?

While the pandemic took longer to spread in India than in the Far East and Europe, partly because the government imposed international travel restrictions quite early on, it has now taken hold, with the number of confirmed cases rising steeply every day. On June 3rd, the number of confirmed cases was 2,16,735, with 6,077 deaths. However, health professionals say the actual figures are likely to be much higher as the number of people being tested is small and many cases go unreported.

Concerned that a huge increase would overwhelm India's health resources, to reduce the infection rate the government imposed a nationwide lockdown from 25th March for 21 days.

continued on page 3



Aurovilians sanitize one of the community kitchens

- **Stepping up to the challenge:** the work of the Covid Task Force
- **The new food regime:** "Bring your own tiffin! Sanitize your hands! Wear your mask!"
- **The challenges facing Auroville's commercial units**

pages 2-6

- **Lockdown muse:** A sample of poems, pictures, paintings, prose writings, music, dances, videos, films and other creative outpourings made by Aurovilians during the lockdown.

pages 7-11

- **Education during the pandemic:** how schools are reaching their students after closures
- **Providing a heart connection**
- **The Gratitude Cake project**
- **Passings:** Ushi Ernst, Viyayamala Ganapatrao, Jan Pieter Derksen

pages 12-13

- **COVID and the local villages:** the response of Auroville's Village Action Group
- **More than a number:** the work of Coast India Initiative for migrants from Jharkhand
- **In memoriam:** Roma Hira

pages 14-16

Stepping up to the task: the work of the COVID Task Force

The COVID Task Force, along with the Working Committee, has been the group that has been coordinating Auroville's response to the lockdown. What has their work involved? What were the challenges? And what are their hopes for the future?

How did the COVID Task Force come into being?

Prashant: In early March, when the pandemic was getting underway in India, the Working Committee began having meetings with major working groups to make preparations. Auroville was already being looked at very carefully by the authorities because so many foreigners and tourists were staying here. At one meeting, the Kottakuppam DSP and the Block Development Officer came and told us they wanted detailed information about where everybody – Aurovilians, guests, volunteers – was staying as well as their recent travel history.

This would be a lot of work, so Arul (from PTDC) and I suggested to the Working Committee that they form a core group to take up this responsibility as well as the overall coordination of the response to the pandemic to support the Working Committee.

Angela: In the beginning we had no idea how it was going to develop and how we would manage. For example, it took a long time to get the data that the officials expected. There were about 700 guests and volunteers in Auroville at that time, but not all were officially registered so, with a lot of help from the Guest Facilities Coordination Group, we had to track each one down. We had to find out which Aurovilians had returned recently from abroad and ascertain if they needed medical screening. We also had to provide data on Indian nationals who had travelled outside the State and outside India.

Tejaswini: Our main focus at the beginning was getting all that data, but we also looked at the urgent areas that nobody else was dealing with. For example, our health services are very basic in their facilities, with limited human resources and budget, and had to be upgraded as far as possible. Our essential services were also facing difficulties because, after lockdown, their workers could no longer come, so we asked them what kind of help they needed to continue. Another area was the food outlets for Aurovilians and Aurocard holders. Initially, they were overwhelmed because some people were panic buying, afraid that the stock would be finished, yet they were only allowed to stay open for shorter hours and were expected to ensure social distancing. And, very importantly, we had to make sure that the food supply from Pondicherry continued. The Working Committee was in touch with the Pondicherry administration and police to ensure our food supplies vehicles were not stopped at the border.

Angela: We also had to provide everybody with essential equipment, like masks and sanitisers. The pharmacy ran out of masks very quickly, but units like AIRE, Miniature, Colours of Nature and Upasana stepped in and started making masks.

Then we needed to protect the vulnerable sections of the community. From our Residents Service database, we compiled a list of people over 60 years – there were 759 of them – and asked them if they needed help.

Induja: Some of them, particularly the 'younger' old ones, wanted to volunteer yet, according to government orders, they were meant to stay indoors and this was tough for them.

Tejaswini: We were working in close coordination with the government authorities, but another problem was that every day the official announcement about the lockdown provisions changed. For two weeks we were always on edge. One day we would be told by the Central Government that this is what the lockdown means, so we would make plans to implement it, but the next day the Tamil Nadu Government would announce something different, so we would plan again. Then the third day the district authorities would come with a different announcement again. For example, the Tamil Nadu government said shops could be open until 9 pm, but the district decided that everything would close at 1 o'clock.

Prashant: For the first four weeks we and the Working Committee were completely

burned out. We were working 14 hour days, exchanging emails from 7 o'clock in the morning till 11 o'clock at night, responding to new information from the authorities.

Tejaswini: We were hoping to have no COVID positive cases in Auroville, but we had to be ready for the worst. The Working Committee obtained permission from the Acting Secretary that Swagatham Guesthouse, the VIP guesthouse at Bharat Nivas, could be used as an isolation centre in case it should prove necessary, so we prepared an isolation camp there. Two guests who were showing symptoms were



From left: Induja, Tejaswini, Prashant and Angela

taken to Indira Gandhi Medical College and Research Institute for testing. They tested negative, but when they returned to Auroville they still needed to be isolated for 14 days as they had been in the hospital isolation camp, so we did that at Swagatham. They were the only ones to be kept there so far, but it gave us the opportunity to put a system in place for that situation.

What is the protocol for testing?

Tejaswini: The Block Medical Officer suggested that Auroville provide a location where official screening could take place. It was agreed to use one of the patient recovery rooms at Santé for that, as it has a separate entrance. The officials came daily to do the required screening and the Santé team provided logistical support. This lasted for six weeks, but when no new cases for screening came up, it was agreed that Santé itself would conduct the screenings. The doctor there can then decide if people need to be sent to JIPMER for further testing. So far, five people have been sent for testing in JIPMER – two Aurovilians and three guests – but they have all tested negative.

Induja: We were worried that if one case emerged in Auroville, the whole of Auroville would have to be shut down, so we did a community clustering mapping exercise.

Prashant: The idea was that we would divide the whole of Auroville into smaller clusters of communities and request people to only move and interact with others in their cluster. Then, if we had a case in one community, the lockdown would only be in that cluster, and other people would provide them with the necessary support: it would be a selective lockdown of part of Auroville. But in the end the idea was dropped.

All this seems like a huge amount of work and responsibility for such a small task force.

Angela: But we had a lot of help. We collaborated very well with the Working Committee, with whom we met almost every day initially via video calls, and they took on huge tasks, like the repatriation of visitors and volunteers, as well as dealing with the authorities to issue permits for our food vans and travel permits for essential workers etc.

Tejaswini: The security service and the ambulance teams silently did a wonderful job. Our hats go off to them because they were really

the front-liners in this emergency.

Prashant: But we couldn't have managed without the volunteers who helped in the running of so many of our essential activities. Initially, when we made a call for volunteers we got an amazing response: more than a hundred people signed up. Amy did a great job coordinating them. We would tell her we needed a volunteer for this task and she would go through the list and allocate someone.

Tejaswini: Most of us are managing things over the phone and in meetings, but the volunteers are in the field all the time and they are so

Is Auroville better prepared today for an emergency like this than it was a couple of months ago? Or are there areas where more work still has to be done?

Tejaswini: There are so many unknowns in this whole thing we will never be able to say that we are well prepared.

Prashant: We were lucky that nothing happened in the early stages of our work because we were certainly not ready. Now we are better prepared for certain eventualities. For example, we have a quarantine facility where we can support people if they have to be isolated. However, we are not a disaster-ready city when it comes to a medical emergency. We simply don't have the medical facilities, so we would still have to depend a lot on places like JIPMER and PIMS hospitals in Pondicherry.

Were there lessons learned during the lockdown that you would like to see acted on in the future?

Tejaswini: We became very aware of certain gaps that I would never have known about without this emergency. For example, we have only one pharmacist for the whole of Auroville, and our only pharmacy is not even located in the city centre.

Prashant: It was amazing to see how Auroville groups can work together effectively in an emergency. But we definitely need to improve the database of residents, and all guests and volunteers should be registered so we always know exactly how many guests and volunteers there are in Auroville.

We also need to upgrade our hygiene and inspection systems. At present we are a self-regulating society but we found this is not enough. We should make hygiene inspection mandatory and certification and other hygiene protocols need to be put in place and followed. At the moment, Auroville Health Services has two inspectors who are doing an amazing job, but we have many food outlets and food processing units so we need ten of them to do the work.

We also need to see how we can improve our food productivity and be self-sufficient in grains, etc., to lessen our dependence on outside suppliers. We should have a tiffin service for senior Aurovilians, patients and people who have difficulty moving around.

Then there are planning issues. For example, how do we control the many roads and pathways into Auroville? We managed to shut some of them during the lockdown. Can we continue to do so afterwards?

Finally, are we going to go back to being dependent on the tourist economy? I've heard that 50-70% of our present economy is based on the tourists. This is a chance to look at it again and to make a course correction.

Angela: One of the major experiences was that the Aurovilians re-appropriated Auroville. As the workers were not coming, each of us had to step up and do our part to keep our communities and Auroville functioning. It created a sense of belonging; that this is our place again. We should keep doing this and not lose it.

What about our relationship with the bioregion? Did the emergency create a renewed appreciation of the need to work more closely with the villages?

Prashant: Absolutely. In our Task Force we didn't focus beyond Auroville because of our limited capacity and resources, but there was an incident that was a real eye-opener for me. We were passing through a neighbouring village when we saw a huge group of people jostling to get supplies at the ration shop. There was no social distancing, many didn't wear masks. So I realised that we are only as strong as the weakest link. We may take all the necessary precautions in Auroville, but if the people living next to us are not doing this, we are as vulnerable as anywhere else.

The medical thing is, of course, something new, but otherwise food security, water, agriculture etc. are all areas that we need to work on with the bioregion. We need to be more serious about regional planning; we can't only focus upon our situation in Auroville.

continued on page 3

COVID-19: a wake-up call

continued from page 1

This has since been extended a number of times. The Government also launched a contact tracing app which must be downloaded by all government and private sector employees.

The lockdown reduced the rate of increase in infections, but caused the Indian economy to go into freefall. Many lost their livelihoods, in particular millions of migrant labourers who were forced, in what has been described as “the most heart-breaking migrant crisis since the Partition in 1947”, to make the very difficult journey back to their distant villages with no money, transport and little food. They, along with others in the informal workforce, make up the backbone of the Indian economy. If many of them do not return to work in the cities, it is difficult to see how the industrial economy can be speedily revived.

In addition, 60% of farmers, many of them marginal, suffered yield loss as a result of the lockdown.

The Government helped the poorest by transferring funds into their Jan Dhan accounts and instructed all employers to keep paying full wages during the lockdown. On 12th May, the Prime Minister announced a huge relief package to help the poor (including free food for migrants), farmers and small and medium scale enterprises get back on their feet.

Meanwhile, Coast India, a national network of NGOs and philanthropic institutes, has been working for the welfare of stranded migrant workers. Aurovilian Bindu along with other volunteers formed the Tamil Nadu team of Coast India, which is focussed on the welfare of 98,000 migrant workers from Jharkhand stranded in 37 districts of this state.

Success rates in dealing with the pandemic have differed from state to state. Kerala, with its efficient public health services and strong *panchayats* (local councils), has kept infections and deaths to a minimum. However, along with Maharashtra and Gujarat, Tamil Nadu is one of the top three states affected. The majority of cases are in Chennai. On 30th of May, five of the biggest cities in India accounted for 60% of confirmed cases and 53% of deaths nationally. Vanur district, where Auroville is located, has also reported a few cases. Fortunately, to date there have been no cases in Auroville or the nearby villages, and since the middle of May there has been a partial relaxation of the lockdown here, allowing many of our employees to return to work while observing social distancing and hygiene regulations.

Auroville

How has Auroville dealt with this unique stress test?

On the whole, it has done very well: typically, we seem to derive strength from adversity. Those strengths include the extraordinary dedication and spirit of service displayed by those in our essential services (food, energy, economy, waste disposal etc.) to keep the community functioning efficiently; the long hours spent by Security, Health, the COVID Task Force and the Working Committee in dealing with the authorities and ensuring that the tough lockdown conditions were adhered to; a huge upsurge in volunteerism from people of all ages; and, in spite of the rigours of the lockdown, a pervasive good humour and willingness to observe the unfamiliar practices of social distancing, mask-wearing and sanitising by the residents. Support was provided for the older and more vulnerable members of our population through a new food delivery service and psychological counselling, while Auroville Village Action Group provided emergency aid to the most vulnerable in the nearby villages. Meanwhile some of our units rejigged their production process

to make much needed masks and sanitisers.

Weaknesses

However, the stress test also revealed weaknesses. When the authorities required exact information about Auroville residents and guests, it was found that key information was missing or outdated, and the new hygiene regulations exposed the fact that we lack a uniform code to cover our restaurants and food processing units, some of which needed to upgrade their practices. The lockdown also emphasised existing inequalities. For example, e-learning when schools are shut down is only useful when you have access to a computer

months. It enabled them to offer nutrition support to children as the schools are closed, and temporary emergency maintenance for those Aurovilians who had lost their monthly income.

Opportunity

The outlook seems dire. Yet, as Albert Einstein put it, “in the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity”. The lockdown has jolted us out of our habitual grooves, and now we have the opportunity to experience Auroville anew and to examine the economy, governance system, institutions etc. we have created, as well as the lifestyles we have grown accustomed to.



Many entrance roads into Auroville were closed except for emergencies

and a reliable internet connection.

Perhaps the most obvious consequence of the lockdown, however, was its disastrous effect upon our economy. That economy was already in a weakened state due to reduced government grants and the likelihood of increased taxation, but now many of our commercial units, without access to materials and the enforced shutdown of movement, could no longer operate and contribute to community coffers, yet were expected, according to government regulations, to continue paying their workers. As there were no visitors to buy Auroville products and e-commerce was blocked, we suddenly realised how dependent our commercial sector is on the tourist trade. Exacerbating the situation even further, Varuna, (Varuna Energy and Water Pvt. Ltd., a company created to serve the future energy and water requirements of Auroville) which had been providing free electricity, announced that henceforth it could only cover some of Auroville's electrical costs.

Unless commerce picks up very fast again, which seems unlikely – some units may be forced to close for ever – there will be big cuts in community budgets (this has already begun) and possibly in maintenances, meaning that those who are wholly dependent upon that source will be in serious financial difficulties and the material development of the community as a whole thrown into question. Realizing that many people and units may require financial support during this emergency, the FAMC and BCC have offered various support options, including temporary emergency maintenance, the reduction or suspension of contributions, and the restructuring or suspension of loans from Auroville finances.

Meanwhile we are dipping into our reserves. At the beginning of the financial year, City Services only had a buffer for three months, so the Financial Service has opened a new account to which Aurovilians and the AVI centres were invited to contribute. Because of the very generous response (by mid May the emergency account had received 30 lakh rupees) and a major reduction in the recurring budgets, they reported in May that now they had enough to keep afloat for another six

months. That lifestyle, we realise, is heavily dependent upon employees, on income derived from tourists, on high-end products and services, as well as government grants. There is also quite a strong culture of individualism. Often we prefer the food that appeals to our palate, even if it comes from far away, rather than that which can be grown by our farmers, and rather than sharing infrastructure and expertise, many of our managers and architects prefer to work separately so they can make their own decisions.

The crisis has also given us the opportunity to explore new areas we could develop – like distance learning or hygiene products – as well as to envisage how we could put some of our existing practices and institutions on a new basis.

The two areas which have received the most attention so far are the economy and farming. Chandresh feels this is an opportunity to move from a maintenance system to a ‘basket-of-needs’ system, where the basic needs of all residents are looked after by the larger community. “This is a once in a 50 year chance to begin on the right footing”, he writes. The overarching goal would be a self-supporting and sustainable Auroville economy which would involve, among other things, the centralisation of resources and funding and a rededication by the Aurovilians to “offer their energy, time, expertise for the furtherance of Auroville only.” Overall, “it is best to encourage and absorb as many Auroville human resource talents as possible for core community needs.”

Food, of course, is one such core need. While Auroville has been able to access food from outside during this period, the lockdown has focussed us once again upon the urgent need for greater food autonomy. “As an international community, dedicated to a spiritual goal, there has never been a more poignant and urgent moment for us to come together and explore the question of food sovereignty,” writes Krishna, one of our farmers.

Aurovilian Noel Parent made suggestions about how we can be more self-supporting regarding our food needs. He noted that we need to drastically increase production from existing farms, land needs to be identified for new farms, while we also need to

develop many home and kitchen gardens. Regarding the problem of farm labour, he suggests that all able-bodied members of the community should work a minimum of one day a week on an Auroville farm or in food supply. And farmers need much more economic support because “farming is the engine of a healthy and strong economy”.

In fact, attention to our food production is only one aspect of a renewed awareness of all things local which the lockdown has initiated. With more time on their hands, people are rediscovering community, the joy of walking in their gardens, and the satisfaction and ‘rootedness’ that comes with doing their own gardening and housework.

What kind of future?

Above all, the lockdown has given people time to think about why they are here, how they want to live and how they wish Auroville to develop. “What if we built our city prioritizing the needs of cyclists and pedestrians?” wondered one. “Why not house Aurovilians, Newcomers and volunteers in our guest houses rather than tourists?” wondered another. “We need to take better care of each other and strengthen the service sector,” wrote another. Universal maintenances and healthcare, and collective food distribution were some suggestions as to how to achieve this.

In other words, the lockdown has precipitated many ideas about how we could change, and these are being collected in a community-wide survey. But how to manifest change? The experience of The Retreat suggests that while we are adept with coming up with new ideas, we are poor at implementing them.

Why is this? Some ideas, of course, are impractical or don’t command wide community support. But even those proposals which have wide assent have a tendency to disappear into drawers or to eke out a half-life, periodically resurfaced in meetings before vanishing again. There is, of course, huge inertia in the system which makes any kind of radical change difficult to effect – “How to change things without getting bogged down in new, gargantuan bureaucracies like we already have?” wrote one frustrated resident – but the proponents of new ideas often don’t help their cause. Too often they feel that having the vision is sufficient, so they don’t have the perseverance or put in the hard work of detailed planning that will anchor it and bring it to fruition.

But underlying all this is the fact that we are still very much an individualistic culture, a place where individual needs often trump the needs of the larger community. This makes it very difficult for us to move together. “It seems to me,” wrote an Aurovilian, “that to affect a change – in habits, consciousness – we need to understand what stands in our way. I believe this is what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother meant when they referred to ‘education of the vital’. Without overcoming these habits it is not so likely a real change can happen.”

In other words, while the lockdown has given us a wonderful opportunity to reassess ourselves and come up with a new direction for our lives here, unless there is a change in our consciousness, meaning the beginning of a realisation of our essential oneness, we are liable to look back on it, just as we did on Cyclone Thane and The Retreat, as yet another opportunity missed.

Sri Aurobindo made the same point in his essay ‘1919’. Written just after the First World War, when so many pre-war institutions had been destroyed and there were hopes that a new world was about to be born, he noted:

The physical shock of war and revolution can break down stifling obstructions, but they cannot of themselves create either the kingdom of good or the kingdom of God; for that a mental and spiritual change is needed to which our slowly moving human nature takes time to shape its customary being.

Alan

The work of the COVID Task Force

continued from page 2

Do you think that when the emergency is lifted there will be a strong impulse in Auroville to return to ‘business as usual’? Or will fundamental changes result?

Tejaswini: I strongly believe that something will change after this. During these weeks of lockdown people were thinking a lot about their lives, their work and their contribution to society. I want to remain positive and to believe that we, as a community, will adapt to the ‘new normal’ in an innovative way.

Induja: There was a lot of time for introspection. I realised that just going to an office from 9-5 is not important. It is what you do that matters most, not where you do it from. And certain habits may have been broken. As the lockdown eased, many of the Auroville volunteers could go back to their regular work, but one

of them told me she would try to keep doing what she’d been helping with during the lockdown, at least for some hours a week, because “I don’t want to go back to the old normal”.

Angela: I see this is an opportunity to make changes but already I see signs that we are happy to go back to the old ways, which is what happened after Cyclone Thane, so I’m a bit frustrated. I wish we could do certain things, like not basing the economy on tourism but the reality is that it supports our lives here. I think we are so entangled in commitments and responsibilities that although we have a chance now, I don’t think we have the courage to make big changes.

Prashant: You can’t generalise. Several people will learn a lot of things and change but I think many things will go back to normal, like dependency on our tourist economy, because it would be really a bold step to do something different. So I’m not sure that any fundamental changes will happen.

Angela: I wonder if the virus has shaken us enough for us to make fundamental changes.

Prashant: I don’t think it has. Compared to some other parts

of India, we’ve had it fairly easy here. If we’d had a case in Kullapalayam and the village was locked down, it would have been a different experience. We wouldn’t have been able to go to the bakery, PTPS, Dental Centre, Health Centre, pharmacy – we would have had to go to JIPMER for all our medical supplies – so maybe that would have given us more of a shock to push us into making changes.

But surely it won’t be easy for our economy to return to normal as we are embedded in a larger global system which is in freefall.

Tejaswini: I agree. The economic impact on Auroville will be huge, which is why we are recommending that this is one of the priority areas for the new team which will succeed us. Other groups, like the BCC, FAMC and ABC are already working on this. We’ve put certain things in place, now it is up to the new team to carry the work forward.

From an interview by Alan

The new food regime: "Bring your own tiffin! Sanitize your hands! Wear your mask!"

In 'normal' times, Aurovilians have a great deal of choice when it comes to dining in cafes and restaurants, or buying groceries to cook at home. But what happens to this system under lockdown? How are Aurovilians currently feeding themselves when they cannot dine out or move around freely to obtain food? What adaptations have Auroville's food units and services had to make? And what are the long-term implications and learnings for Auroville's food security? Are people becoming more conscious of sustainable food choices?

Tiffin wallahs

"Please bring your own tiffin! No cash! Sanitize your hands at the entrance! Maintain social distance of two metres while waiting! Wear your mask!" So read the signs currently posted at Auroville's restaurants and cafes, reflecting the shift from 'dine-in' to take-away systems that adhere to new hygiene and social distancing regulations. A "no mask, no tiffin" policy has been implemented at some eateries for people queueing to collect their meals. The early lockdown days were the hardest, unit managers say, due to the initial uncertainty around what regulations the Indian government would impose. Once the lockdown restrictions were clarified, Auroville's eateries could move ahead with the challenging task of reconfiguring their operations.

When the Solar Kitchen closed its dining hall to its regular 600 daily diners in mid-March, it continued to shoulder the load of feeding many of the community's hungry mouths under lockdown, dispensing 280 tiffins per day. Other cafes – Neem Tree Café, Aurelec, Visitors Centre Cafeteria – offer pre-ordered tiffin food, and cafes such as Dreamer's or Garden Café offer take-way food from an à la carte menu that can be collected or delivered to the home. Indeed, when Aurovilians can dial up home delivery of croissants, quiches and coffee from Dreamers' Café, life doesn't seem so hard under lockdown, for some at least.

For the workers behind the scenes, the reconfiguration of their operations has involved substantial work. For example, the Solar Kitchen's revised system is much more time-consuming than previously, because of new hygiene measures and the increase in tiffins from 200 to 280 per day. The Solar Kitchen's Angelika explains that each of the 280 empty tiffins must first be washed in hot soapy water for 30 seconds, followed by two more hot water rinses. Given that each tiffin comprises six sections, this means that about 2000 pieces need to be washed before being reassembled. Only when this process is finished by late morning can the tiffins be filled. "Day by day, everyone gets more used to the upgraded hygiene requirements," says Angelika.

Supply of produce

To meet the needs of those community members who prefer to buy produce and cook at home under lockdown, Auroville's food outlets have made significant changes. Because of state government orders, grocery outlets (PTPS, PTDC, HERS) have reduced their opening hours. Auroville Bakery's shop closed while it continued providing its fresh bread at the community's grocery outlets, but it has recently re-opened for takeaway.

Foodlink – the unit that receives and distributes produce from Auroville's farms – experienced a five-fold increase in customers at its small outlet in the Solar Kitchen complex. The sudden influx of 150-180 customers per day created long queues in their small space, and raised challenges for staff. "People initially wanted to store as much organic food as possible in their fridge, because they did not know what would happen," explains Vivek from Foodlink, about how the lack of clarity in the early days of lockdown sparked a surge in buying. "The big increase in footfall was difficult for us. Our storage space is limited. We only have one spot to do the weighing and billing, so people had to wait a long time. We had five times the usual amount of work. We had to clean surfaces constantly. Another challenge was to make people aware that they couldn't just do what they were used to doing before, like going to the fridge, taking items with their hands, and not using a hand sanitiser."

Sumathi, Vivek's colleague, describes the first month of lockdown as being the "most challenging" of her 22 years at Foodlink/Farm Group. "It's been more work and responsibility than before. There's more tension and it takes longer to finish the work. There are lots of new volunteers, so I have to explain a lot. But I enjoy doing this job."

In the early lockdown days, Foodlink also noticed there were often 80 or 90 people in the Solar Kitchen complex at one time, obtaining groceries from Foodlink or PTDC, or collecting tiffins at the kitchen. "Basically they were all doing the same thing – getting supplies for themselves," says Vivek. "We noticed that some people came regularly for very small purchases, such as half a kilo of rice. They told us, 'This is the only time I can go out of the house!' This individualist approach to getting supplies didn't make sense. We had to adapt."



Waiting in queue at the Pour Tous Distribution Centre

So Foodlink closed its market and initiated a new supply system that aimed to "meet Auroville's needs in an overarching way, not an individualist manner." The new system also aimed to reduce the amount of people congregating at the Solar Kitchen complex, and to avoid having two produce outlets open so close to each other (Foodlink, PTDC). So Foodlink firstly made available fresh produce through the community's grocery outlets. This required a new level of hygiene practices. "Before lockdown, we used to clean the baskets, but now we have to clean them with disinfectant. All over the world, people are starting to do things they weren't trained for, the job of a health professional. We saw that volunteers came with good will and skills, and were willing to develop themselves to do something they'd never done."

Foodlink's second major initiative was the implementation of an online-ordering and home-delivery service for grains and dairy products at a very early stage of lockdown, which had the desired effect of reducing the numbers of people coming to its market. The delivery has been taken up by seven volunteers and Foodlink staff, who deliver orders with two-wheelers, some of which were provided by Auroville electric mobility unit e-Kinisi. Vivek and his colleague Sumathi emphasise the number of people who volunteered to help unconditionally. "They're there every day 8.30 am on the dot, taking care of online orders for delivery," describes Vivek. "That human element was surprising – people going beyond looking for their own supplies, but looking to supply others. In a time of crisis, they came to extend their help."

So far, the supply of produce from Auroville's farms has not been affected under lockdown, according to Vivek and Sumathi, as the current yield is from crops that were planted in January or February before lockdown began. While there may be a change in supply from Auroville's farms in future months, they suggest that the main problem will be the size of the population in Auroville this summer. "Usually in summer, the population of Auroville shrinks by one third," says Sumathi. "This summer, our population is almost 100 percent as residents are not able to leave Auroville for cooler climates. There will be much more demand than any other year that I remember in the last 15 to 20 years. We will see."

Apps for home delivery

A positive outcome of the lockdown has been the development of an app for PTDC members to order delivery of fresh produce and grains online – a "first" app of its kind in Auroville. The app has been created by the Talam team in CSR, Auroville, which creates tech platforms that support community life and progress towards the dream. Talam had already created the *Consciously* dashboard for PTDC, which details consumption patterns of members with the aim of encouraging them to shift them to more conscious food choices. While the Talam team already had the idea to create a purchasing app for PTDC, the lockdown accelerated the process. "We felt we had to do it now, so it happened fast," says Shankardevy. "We liaised a lot, to understand customers' needs. It was a collaborative effort." Shankardevy's colleague Divish points out that the team needed to "act much faster" than Auroville's usual "slow" pace. "I called Min at 4 pm and said I can give you a demo in two days, and at 9 pm, there were seven people on a conference call, planning," he says. "I don't see this sense of urgency usually. Everyone took ownership of their own task. Within a week of our first conversation, we were ready with the first prototype. Everyone understood the need and rose to the occasion."

Talam did a small pilot with 15 co-op members over two days, and then made some adjustments to the app before making it available to the wider community. PTDC staff have also provided feedback on the vendor-side of the app, so the technology could be streamlined to reduce the amount of time staff spend in managing the order. The app currently receives about 18 orders per day, of about 20 items per person. When items are not available, the customer receives an automated message that informs them, saving time again for PTDC staff. Auroville transport unit ITS has provided electric vehicles for deliveries, which volunteers drive to do the home drops.

"Feedback has been really great," says Divish about the app. "We got a lot of messages of gratitude for starting this quickly, and members gave good feedback about what to change. It didn't feel transactional at all – everyone was really involved in it. Somehow, the whole community came together this time."

Shifting attitudes to food in the long-term

So, given all this rapid adaptation under strange times, what have been the learnings so far about our produce and food security? Will the experience transform the way in which Auroville approaches food consumption and supply in the future?

Foodlink's Vivek asserts that food will become a major ongoing issue after lockdown, because the economy will have changed and there will be "huge inflation" on food coming from outside. "Outside farmers are hurting a lot right now, and they'll have to cover their costs," he says. In contrast, Auroville's farm produce operates on a unique system that does not depend on the market prices, which means it can absorb some inflation and its prices remain fixed for one year, even if their costs increase.

The other shift that Vivek predicts is a greater appreciation for Auroville's organic food, and an increased acceptance of the concept of food baskets, where consumers do not choose the contents but instead receive what is seasonal from the farms. Vivek points out that over the years and with increased choice of goods in Auroville, residents' shopping practices have been increasingly shaped by individual preferences: "choosing bigger eggs, the vegetables with brighter leaves... shopping in the same manner as they would do outside the community." But this approach does not sufficiently support what can be grown locally. For example, bananas and papayas are easily grown in Auroville, but grapes are not possible due to the climactic zone, soil quality, and need for a cool or moderate climate. And because some Aurovilians like grapes, they will buy them from outside providers who have shipped the grapes from distant places – inadvertently supporting food with high 'food miles'.



A food basket at Solitude Farm

Going local

Following Foodlink's creation of an online list of Auroville farm produce and dry goods, an outcome of lockdown is that many residents have become aware of the great variety of produce that Auroville grows, and will now buy local – that is, food with more sustainable 'low food miles'. "They didn't know of some of the minor grains and millets, or that they can make bread out of it," says Vivek. "Now they're requesting it because they're aware of it."

Krishna from Solitude Farm has also noticed community members' increased appreciation of local foods under lockdown, demonstrated by the leap in orders for the farm's fresh produce baskets, from 21 baskets per week before lockdown, to 51 baskets in recent weeks. While some of the vegetables might be new to residents – such as sundakkai (often referred to as turkey berry or wild eggplant), green papaya, banana stem and chicken spinach – they're being embraced with enthusiasm. "People getting the baskets are saying, 'Wow, I love the sundakkai!'" says Krishna. "Because of this openness and willingness, and this sense of urgency, people are willing to explore. We have a WhatsApp group for recipes."

Krishna points out that the industrialisation of food that's taken place globally over the last few decades has also affected what's usually on people's plates in Auroville. "We're often eating wholegrain organic pasta from Milan and luxurious olive oil from Italy, and the popcorn we buy in the bazaar in Pondy is from Argentina, and the black gram urad dal in the dosa we eat comes from Bangladesh. Our potatoes come from Ooty, and our wheat comes from Punjab. We're so profoundly disconnected from nature, we don't even know where our food is coming from. In America, they calculate the average plate of food has about 1500 food miles. That's ridiculous! We're constantly hurting the earth through our ignorance."

"Masanobu Fukuoka, who is the inspiration for all my work, has a famous phrase: 'The society that does not know where its food comes from, is a society without culture. That society will perish.' That's exactly where we are. Exactly. Everything is crumbling. Auroville has no income to pay the schools, to subsidise the Solar Kitchen. So people are realising now that we've got all our eggs in one basket – an economy based on tourism. It's become focused on very ephemeral values, with monetary gain as the prime focus. People are starting to say: 'What's going to happen because there's no money?' So they realise the first thing we have to start valuing is food. Now, even if everything goes back to normal, people have woken up."

In contrast to foods with 'high food miles', the fruit and vegetables in the Solitude Farm baskets are all local, which means they have specific characteristics, says Krishna. "They grow easily, they use less water to grow, they have a very high nutritional and medicinal value, they're seasonal and, most importantly, they have no carbon foot-



Planting a circle garden, guided by Krishna (centre with turban)

print – that is, no ecological cost to the planet, because they're local, and you don't need a lorry to bring them to your plate."

Circle gardens

15 communities in Auroville have also been creating circle gardens under Krishna's guidance during lockdown; transcending community differences to dig and plant each day. "Those efforts are extremely humble, yet they will make a big change. They connect people to the divinity of the soil." While Krishna initiated circle gardens in Auroville some years back, they didn't take off to the extent he'd hoped at that time, because people were too busy. "But now, everyone has time," he laughs. "They don't have other things to do under lockdown. There is no money to make! So they're back to the basics. That's the blessing of the moment."

Krishna emphasises how individual people's ignorance of local foods contributes to climate change, which is "one manifestation of the problem. The virus is another manifestation." He stresses that when the movement of people and goods slows down to become more like the essence of nature, these problems disappear.

"I can't see how things can go back to normal. I think there will be much bigger challenges ahead of us. If our society is not going to be based on money, what is it based on? We have to work that out. The Auroville pioneers all lived on millets when there wasn't anything much. So there is that consciousness in our experience in Auroville. When people honour local food, that is profoundly spiritual. They are honouring Mother Nature, and it's not separate from the Mother. We can align ourselves more deeply with the devotional aspect of Sri Aurobindo's yoga by eating local food."

Serenity is one community that has recently initiated a circle garden under Krishna's guidance, with Rekha, Marion and Stefano and other community members growing summer-friendly produce inside a natural fence that keeps cows out. "I strongly feel that we should be 'fooding' Auroville right now," says community member Marion, "in the same way that we have already done the greening of Auroville."

Auroville farms

Vivek from Foodlink hopes that this recent increased appreciation for local food will lead to more recognition for Auroville's farms, and for Foodlink's unique role as a farmers' cooperative that charges farmers' prices and doesn't add overheads. "Before the lockdown, Auroville had overall gone in the direction of most cities, and people have forgotten about the work of farmers," says Vivek. "This pandemic will enhance their understanding. Someone asked me if they have to wash veggies from Pondy in disinfectant, because people have touched it twenty times. We didn't get these questions before. Auroville food products come straight from the farm to here, and so it's only changed hands three times, but food from Pondy has changed hands hundreds of times, with many people involved, which is more of a problem for infection."

Vivek argues that Auroville's farms should be seen "as an engine for the growth of the whole city." While the community's 378 acres of farms currently provide about 18-20% of Auroville's food supply, Vivek argues that this percentage is low because a lot of residents want to eat food that cannot be grown in the local soil. "If people are more flexible and start changing their food habits – like they've done recently – so that their food choices are in line with what we grow, they can have more from Auroville farms and can use that better. Auroville farms do grow a lot of veg and fruits, and also supply dry goods and dairy products. If the community consumes more of these, Auroville farmers can increase the percentage of food produced in Auroville."

He points out that labourers' wages will increase after the lockdown, as many workers will not want to work on farms, because the wages elsewhere may be more lucrative. "So, it's inevitable that there is going to be an impact on the whole food system." As the lockdown has highlighted the need for Auroville to supply more of its own produce and not rely on outside provisions, Vivek argues for the need for Auroville to invest more in the community's farms. "In 2010, we made a five year plan for Auroville farms, but it never kicked off. Everyone thought, 'We can survive somehow'. With the pandemic, what's churning more in people's minds is how to have more supply in Auroville. The farms produce a good amount, but can expand their capacity if the community gives extra support and uses the food we can grow. We have to invest in irrigation, open pond systems and water conservation. Foodlink needs extra storage capacity, for example, large cool rooms to conserve the vegetables and fruits. I think the one-year plan we will make now will have a big impact on the next 5-10 years."

Talam also hopes that the app created for the lockdown will have an enduring effect. The feedback has been positive, and Auroville's COVID Task Force and others have expressed interest in Talam setting up more apps. The Talam team believes there's now more impetus for them to further develop their *Consciously* platform,

which enables PTDC members to see the impact of their personal consumption, for example, the percentage of organic foods, the percentage of Auroville/non-Auroville products, and the amount of plastic packets consumed. "People were shocked to see they used 100 or 200 plastic bags in a month," says Divish. "Everyone underestimated their plastic consumption by a huge margin."

Just before the lockdown hit, the Talam team was planning to expand the *Consciously* platform so that Aurovilians and guests can easily connect to sustainable Auroville products and their units. As the increased consumption of Auroville products in recent weeks has shown, "there is an increasing interest and need for connecting Aurovilians to food producers within Auroville," says Shankardevy. He explains that Foodlink does not store the entirety of Auroville's farm produce, and farmers would like a way to connect with customers about the additional produce that's available. Talam also wants to make it easy to connect people with different units or organisations in Auroville and the bioregion that are creating conscious products, "to help them build that relationship." While Talam had previously tried to create this bridge, he believes the time is now ripe for a platform where consumers and farmers can communicate directly, with Foodlink as the intermediary. "A lot of people are asking for it. If we get the same support for it as the recently-introduced app, we can do it. We want to collaborate with other people creating conscious products, and help their work to grow with our support."

Goodwill

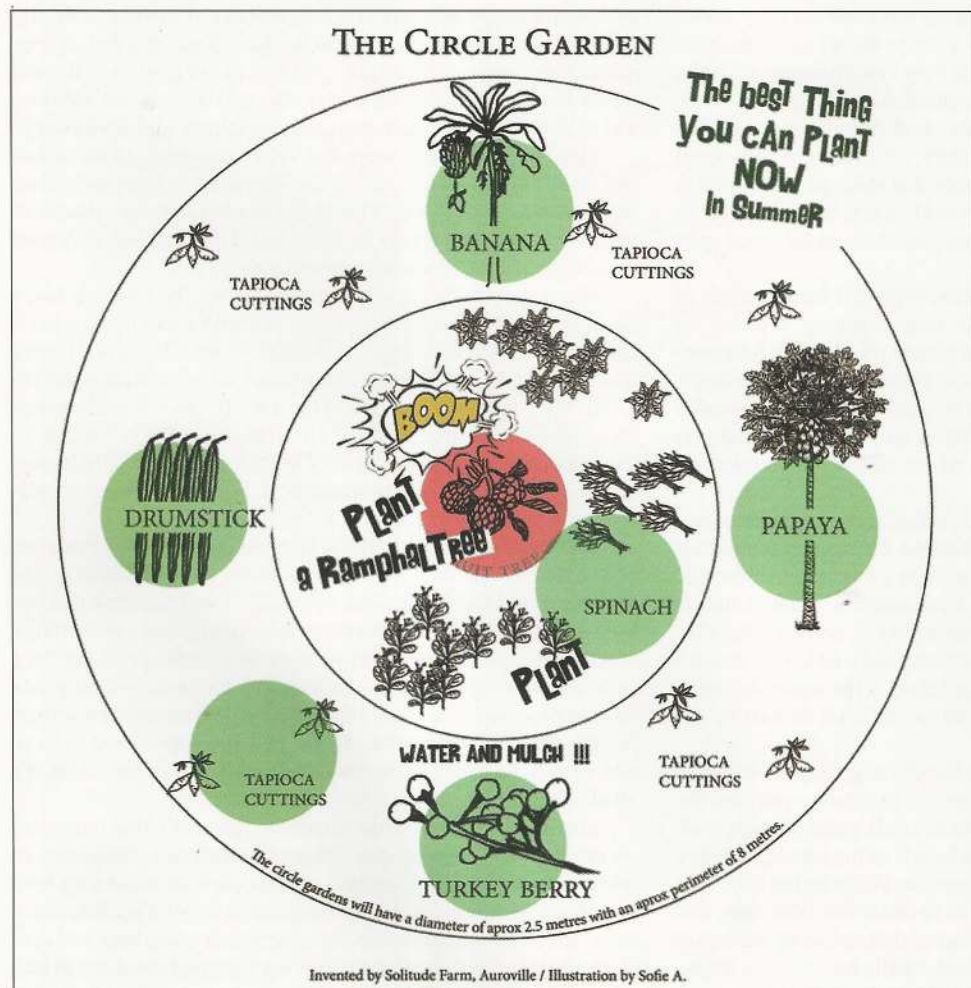
All the food 'players' interviewed for this article emphasized the collaborative spirit and goodwill and energy contributed by community members and volunteers to help their operations during lockdown. "Usually during a crisis, people show their true face a little more," says Angelika, whose Solar Kitchen team "managed well" with its usual team and no additional members. "So some Aurovillian team members have grown spontaneously into their new tasks and most of our employees have shown full dedication to continue to work, even with the initial threat of Auroville being the potential hot spot for the virus. We'd experienced something similar during Cyclone Thane."

The Talam team describe PTDC's response as being "unimaginably good" at a critical time. "It's a group of people who are really motivated or committed to change something," says Divish. I think involvement and co-creation is really important. A lot of times, people give suggestions that it would be good to build something like that, but they don't want to put their time into it. Those projects don't move beyond a certain level. But if a group is really committed to their project and feel technology could play a role in making it better, we'd be happy to engage with them."

At the Garden Café, staff were given the option to stay at home, but all staff chose to continue working. The café's production section of Naturellement jams and spreads etc. substantially reduced its output due to difficulties in getting raw materials and the drop in demand, so unit executive Martina decided to offer the products for half-price in Auroville's outlets "as a gesture of goodwill" and kept staff busy with cleaning duties so that no one would lose their jobs.

For Foodlink, the experience "allowed us to realise that we're here to develop ourselves as different human beings," says Vivek. "There were moments we lost our patience because some consumers took supply of certain foods for granted but, overall, the experience allowed us to see what patience people have, as we all dealt with a new system. People joined without hesitation. Volunteers said they were thankful to learn. This is remarkable, in a time of crisis." Vivek and Sumathi also highlight the goodwill and humility of pioneer Aurovilians, many of whom are now over 70 years old. "They said, 'Don't serve me first, put me last on your list. If you don't have enough of something, give it to others.' They don't have a sense of entitlement, and wanted to be the last priority. The way they come across is amazing."

Lesley



Invented by Solitude Farm. Illustration by Sofie A.

For more on home farming see the video at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TIR3Vnod8k>



The challenges facing Auroville's commercial units

When the lockdown started across India in late March, economic activity ground to a halt in Auroville, and individuals, commercial units, and community services had to take a rigorous look at their expenses to see how they would survive. How have some of Auroville's units and activities dealt with this crisis and begun to plan towards the future?

After the nationwide full lockdown began on March 25, in Auroville only those employed in essential services, like health facilities, grocery outlets, a limited number of restaurants which could serve take-away, and the farms and food production units supporting them, were allowed to continue work. The rest of Auroville's workforce, both those living in Auroville and those from the surrounding bioregion, were forced to stay home and, if possible, work from there.

Some sectors, like computer-based services and consultancy, and food and health products, were able to function even at the peak of the restrictions. Now, as the lockdown in Auroville and all around India passes the two-month marker, restrictions are easing and an increasing number of the offices and production facilities of Auroville's units are restarting their work, while respecting the new public health measures and acknowledging the economic realities. But the Auroville economy has been shaken by the mandatory shutting down of the bulk of its units.

Facing the immediate financial implications of the lockdown

When units began preparing to close for the stringent lockdown, the projected duration was only until the end of March. But very soon it was extended until mid-April, then till the end of April, and even now it continues, albeit with certain relaxations. Many Auroville units have had to face the challenge of how to pay maintenances to Aurovilians and salaries to workers with limited or no means of bringing in income because the initial recommendation of the Government of India was to continue to pay all salaries, regardless of the suspension of work.

One significant boon for unit managers here is the smaller infrastructure costs of running a commercial unit or activity in Auroville. Whereas businesses around the world have been crushed by the additional expense of paying sizeable rent on unused offices and facilities during closures, in Auroville the units have their own facilities or only have to give a contribution for the spaces they use. And Auroville's commercial units are also strikingly debt-free compared to establishments around the world. This is not a typical business strategy, but it has been a saving grace for the units during this uncertain economic period.

But bridging periods of economic downturn can also be challenging in the Auroville context because of the community's aspiration towards a fraternal economy. Rather than keeping financial reserves in their units' accounts, many Aurovillian unit executives choose to give more than the requisite 33% of profits to the community pot. This can make unexpected misfortunes more difficult to weather. And even closing down a unit can have sizeable costs as non-Aurovillian employees are owed retrenchment compensation when forced to leave their job, and gratuity if they have worked at the unit over four and a half years, both of which are calculated based upon the last salary and the number of years worked.

As COVID-19 and the associated lockdown have begun to have their impact, the Auroville Board of Commerce (ABC) research group has made itself available to Auroville's units to provide information about loans and financial assessment. Already, they have been contacted by a first wave of units who are experiencing cashflow problems that make them unable to pay salaries or meet other financial obligations. When requested, one or two members from the ABC research group with expertise in the sector of the commercial unit help the unit's executives to evaluate ways to reduce fixed costs and formulate a trial balance sheet and projections for the coming months. These decisions depend largely upon the sector that the unit works in, and whether their commodities will rebound quickly or whether the unit can easily shift to a more resilient product or service.

Abha is the executive at Shradanjali, a 40-year-old Auroville unit that produces stationery, home goods and jewellery using pressed leaves and flowers, seeds, and natural fibres. The Shradanjali team stopped working when the lockdown began, but she managed to pay the March and April salaries in full to the 17 women and 4 men who are employed in the workshop. Now that they have begun working again, she is considering paying salaries for the days they work (as they are not yet working full-time), though she adds that if this does not produce a living wage, "We might also need to provide a flat allowance for everyone."

At Rio, an Auroville Small-Scale Activity (ASSA) that does elaborate beadwork, the Aurovillian in charge had to resort to a personal loan in order to cover the salaries of her four helpers, as all her income is generated from sales in the Auroville boutiques. She expects to have to stop her activity's monthly city services contribution until revenue begins to pick up again.

Kumar, who is one of the executives for the larger umbrella of 57 ASSAs and 18 Auroville Food Activities (AFAs), says, "Most of those who have an ASSA only have income from that activity. And if they don't have money in their account, they can't cover their maintenance and the salaries of any workers, and they can't even cover their city services contribution." He explains that many of the ASSAs are waiting until the end of May to re-evaluate their financial situation. Those that cannot continue viably may choose to go "dormant" until such time as their activity can pick up again.

The lockdown has also hit the Auroville Earth Institute, a unit specializing in research, training, and construction using earthen building techniques, as it depends heavily upon income from its

regular training courses that draw participants from across India and abroad. Already two of its courses have had to be cancelled due to the lockdown and prospects are dim for those scheduled in the months to come. After managing to pay full salaries and maintenances to its team at the beginning of April, the Earth Institute had to halve the payments to workers and Aurovilians alike the following month. Now that some construction work is being allowed and there is a possibility of consultancy work, this situation will hopefully improve.

Resuming work with caution and safety measures

As the restrictions have eased during the current "Lockdown 4.0", many of Auroville's units and activities have been able to return to work, though the government has imposed strict guidelines concerning checking the temperatures of employees, wearing masks, disinfecting work spaces, and keeping the workforce socially distanced. Still, some units have decided to remain closed for financial or safety reasons. And some of those whose occupations



Ladies at work at Shradanjali

have allowed them to work from home have continued doing so to reduce health risks to the community.

At the beginning of May, employees from Shradanjali came in to clean the workshop after almost six weeks of disuse. One week later they were able to resume limited work, with half-strength teams coming in on alternating days and only key members coming in every day. "Safety measures are not so difficult for our workshop because we don't work very closely together," Abha says. "So, it's more a question of awareness and diligence." Even though many of Shradanjali's clients - both in India and abroad - have not yet opened their shops, they are placing a few small orders. "One export client who is concerned about us has hurried to send us an order so that we can start work again. She is not able to function fully in Germany, but she has placed this order based upon trust, hope, and anticipation."

Returning to the workshop has been important for the morale of the team, many of whom have been working together at Shradanjali for decades. "If it hadn't been for the social distancing, everyone in our team would have been hugging each other!" Abha says. "But we are aware of the very uncertain and open-ended situation ahead of us. The Auroville Boutiques are not going to function immediately, and that is where half of our production goes."

Gastronómica, which specialises in Italian delicacies like hand-made pasta and bread, was able to continue functioning throughout the lockdown because of its designation as a food production unit. Antonello, the Aurovillian who runs Gastronómica, reduced staff to one employee to help with baking during April, and they supplied ciabatta bread to three of Auroville's shops and sold loaves through a window at the front of their factory shop. "The important thing was not to stop, because it would be too difficult to start up the activity again," he says.

A key challenge Gastronómica faced was getting the essential ingredients for its recipes. Just before the lockdown restricted the transport of goods, Antonello had made a bulk order for high quality organic flour from Rajasthan on behalf of his activity and two others that make baked goods in Auroville. While he has been able to make do so far, when he tried to re-order the flour now that goods are moving again, the price had tripled and so he has had to find a new source. Likewise, he would usually buy chicken from a farm run by Pondicherry-based NGO Volontariat but is now getting chicken through an Auroville farmer, albeit at a higher cost.

But although he has seen a hike in some production costs, he has also noted an increase in local demand for his bread and prepared dishes.

Auroville.com, the online shop that markets the products of about 60 Auroville units and activities, has been able to resume shipping products with India Post, though they are restricted to the orange and green zones of the country, which are less affected by COVID-19. And so far, they have not been able to resume export. They have told their regular customers in India that the online shop has opened again, though the bulk of these customers who have greater spending power live in the urban areas, many of which have been labelled as red zones where only essential goods can be delivered. As these shifting situations can easily lead to deliveries being delayed or returned, Auroville.com is offering free shipping.

"Our main reason to reopen was to give the Auroville manufacturers some way of selling their products while all the brick and mortar outlets are closed," says Luise, who is one of the executives at Auroville.com. In particular, the boutiques at the Visitors' Centre are the primary salespoint for many of Auroville's commercial units, but most of the boutiques are closed.

Miniature, an Auroville unit producing a large range of garments from hand-dyed textiles, has also resumed operations with workers coming on alternating days. In an announcement to the community, they explained the importance of resuming their work. "We wanted to open not because we have orders in progress, but above all to give a signal of hope and support to our economy: a signal for us all to get back on track and get ready for the new challenges and opportunities that are emerging."

Planning towards an uncertain future

As unit executives make financial decisions and resume fuller activity, they also have to address the questions of how to protect their employees in the long run and meet the changing demands of the larger market. Auroville is unlikely to encourage tourism until the public health risks have diminished, yet a significant part of Auroville's economy depends upon an influx of visitors. And even for those units which can serve a wider geographical area with their products and services, the global nature of this crisis means that all must carefully plan towards the future.

The ABC research group expects that they will continue to receive requests for loans or assistance in financial planning as the continued ramifications of the crisis are felt. Even those units that have been able to use financial reserves or personal loans may still need to reformulate their products or services in response to the market. As Auroville has always attracted far more craftspeople and other creative types than it has businesspeople, the group's skills are an important asset. In the longer term, the experience of this economic crisis may also change how the role of trustees is seen, as the financial responsibility for units rests with the trust, the legal umbrellas under which units are organized.

Luise has also been engaging in extensive research to gauge where the market is heading and to prepare Auroville.com for what lies ahead. "Online sales are going to get even stronger, both in India and on a global scale," she says. She predicts that consumers of the high-end lifestyle products that Auroville's units produce will react to this crisis by re-evaluating their habits and consumption. "There will be an increasing shift to personal health, wellbeing, and mindfulness. Auroville is already very connected with this because we have long believed in conscious living and natural health - it's part of our life here." But she warns that other market players are also moving into this segment, and so Auroville.com must continue to reach out to share its story.

Luise points to a few ways that units can optimize their activities. They need to shift to having the least stock in hand and reducing their overhead costs. "The global market indicates that units need to weather the next six months. And if they survive, they need to rethink their activities and reinvent themselves."

When Antonello considers the lockdown, he thinks it had a positive influence on Gastronómica. "I didn't make money, but it helped me to better reorganize the operations," he says. He was able to streamline production of the bread, which will allow him to focus on the pasta-making part of the activity. As wholesale orders come in from Delhi, Mumbai, and Bangalore, he is looking to expand to a second kitchen facility to dedicate to pasta production and hopes to move Gastronómica to one of the larger food-focused trusts.

For Shradanjali, the outlook is more complex because even before the COVID-19 crisis hit, Abha was beginning to analyse the long-term outlook for the unit. "Already, I was thinking that our kind of labour-intensive, handcrafted work may not have a future and the demand for our products might eventually peter out," she says. But some clients have confirmed their orders, even if goods have to be stored locally until they can be shipped out. "Now there is a possibility that our products will be more appreciated and valued, even though they are not essential goods. So, for the future, it's all up in the air."

Shradanjali is one of many units in Auroville that has relied on labour-intensive work that brings livelihoods to thousands of workers throughout the bioregion and this question about long-term prospects therefore extends to many of Auroville's commercial units. But as consumers around the world take a step back and consider what they wish to align themselves with, perhaps this will lead to greater interest in all of Auroville's products and services.

Hilary

Text by Alan

Despite the restrictions of quarantine, an innerly creative world was quietly emerging during the lockdown. For some Aurovilians, the halting of everyday busyness allowed their muse to take flight and for creativity to take form.

Poems were written, pictures painted, books read, music played, dances danced, films videoed, as well as other uniquely meaningful acts of inspiration.

Here is a sample of some of those Auroville creative outpourings during the lockdown time.

Painting by Brigitta V. "Steinbewohner" - "Stone-Dwellers"

Plaster print with oil colour on Chinese paper from a rotten palace wall, worked out with colour pencils.



MOTHER EARTH CALLING HER DAUGHTERS HOME

Poem by Kushmita S.

Come home dear daughters, to your souls, to your skin
Come home dear daughters, stepping out of the shadows, courageously leaning in

The winds carry my voice, my songs of grief,
The rivers carry my tears, trees bearing my message on every leaf

I urge you to put down your ladles, your rolling pins and your knives,
I urge you to pause in your hurried corporate lives

The songbird has sung himself hoarse trying to catch your attention,
The sun has hidden behind the moon in sheer dejection

The ants follow you in vain from the kitchen to the laundry,
your paintbrush waits with bated breath to be picked up,
your musical instruments all knotted up in a quandary.

Do you think she will create today? They ask me
Will she paint the world with her strength and resilience?
Will she voice her opinions, will she shine with her brilliance?
Will she guard her boundaries? will she pen down her dreams?
Will she dance with abandon, empty her heart, quit bursting at the seams?

Come home dear daughters, we have work to do,
a humanity to nourish, a sacred balance to hold true

Relationships to sew, hearts to be mended,
Rivers to be cleaned, fields to be tended
songs to be sung, dreams to be painted
a vision to give birth to, the sooner we get acquainted

Come home dear daughters, to your soul, to your skin
Come home dear daughters, stepping out of the shadows, courageously leaning in

I wanted to know what caused this virus. So I went to visit a wise man. He told me it had been caught by a worker from a wild animal at an animal market in China.

Fine, I thought, now I know. But a slight doubt remained. So I went to another wise person with the same question. He was equally assured. "The virus was manufactured in an American germ laboratory and released in China to cripple the Chinese economy."

Aha, I thought. But then I realized that the U.S. was being hit just as hard as China. So a nasty little doubt returned.

"Actually, it's all due to the stars," an astrologer confided. "Ketu is solely responsible for this virus. Once Jupiter moves onto Makara Rasi as adhi saram, a cure will be found."

"Rubbish," said a passer-by. "This is nature's revenge for the terrible way we have been treating her."

I had to agree. I mentioned this to a friend, who snorted in derision. "It's a plot by Bill Gates, aided by the World Health Organisation, to get the world to take his vaccine during which they will implant chips for surveillance."

"It's even worse than that," confided my hairdresser. "This is a deep laid scheme by a powerful shadow group that is planning to take over world government."

Mm. But what if there is no longer a world left to govern? And if this group doesn't have a cure, they'll go down with the rest.

"Forget the rubbish about taking over world government," said another friend. "This is a plan by the pharmaceutical industry, and particularly the makers of masks, ventilators and protective equipment, to boost their sales."

My head was beginning to spin. "Can I sell you an aspirin?" he asked.

When I mentioned to another friend that I was feeling dizzy, her eyes lit up.

"That's the 5G radiation," she said. "It's weakened everybody's resistance so it's easy for the virus to take hold."

So how do I prevent getting infected?

"Wash your hands regularly, practice social distancing and wear a mask," I was told. "But if it's an ordinary mask, it's useless," warned another, "because the virus is so small it will pass through. And if you already have respiratory problems, the mask will make them worse."

I returned to my wise people and received the following nuggets of wisdom. "Take megadoses of vitamin C and D." "Avoid cold drinks and ice cream." "Avoid dairy, eggs, sweet food and poultry." "Eat garlic and onions." "Drink water every 15 minutes." "Consume colloidal silver." "Drink bleach." "Stop vaping." "Lie in the sun for two hours a day." "Hold your breath."

Finally, in desperation, I stopped a masked passer-by. "Enlighten me," I pleaded, hoping that he (she?) was not on the way to robbing a bank.

"It's all a scam," he (she?) said. "Coronavirus is no more deadly than any other flu. Governments are pumping up the death figures because they want to use it to further control their citizens' freedom of movement and speech."

But...what?...how? Aaaaagggggghhhhh...

I started running, wildly, anywhere, just anywhere, to get away from the voices, the confused janglings in my head. I was running through a forest, smashing into trees, stumbling over roots, crashing through bushes, thorns shredding my flesh.

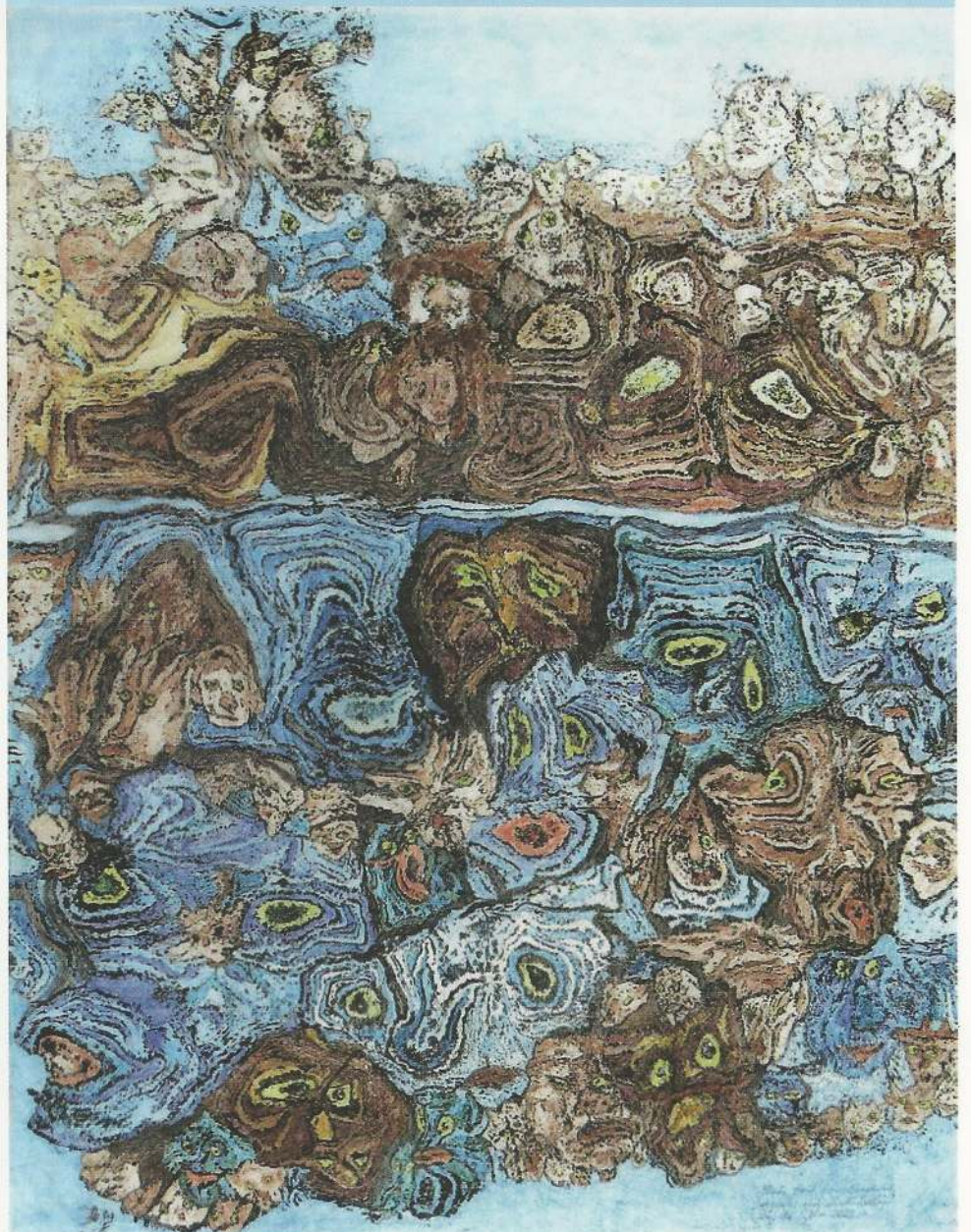
At last, I stopped, exhausted. I looked round. Lost. Utterly lost!

Ahead, I could see a clearing. I walked towards it. In the middle sat an old man, a seraphic smile upon his face. I approached him warily. Was this another 'expert'? If so, I was ready to flee again. But he just...smiled.

I sat down, facing him. I still had so many questions, but now the words, the voices in my head, began to leak away. That smile dissolved all the hard edges in my brain and I began to sink, sink, through layer after layer, persona after persona, life after life, until I touched what seemed like rock. Then all quietened, stilled, into a peace beyond all understanding...

Lost no more.

Painting by Brigitta V. "Aquatic and mud being"
Plaster print with oil colour on Chinese paper from a rotten palace wall, worked out with colour pencils.



TRANSFORMATION

As aspirants of the truth, we are aware that change is slow and gradual, but we still, silently and secretly, wish for a single big moment of transformation. We tread and toil hoping and even believing that such a moment is possible and would come within our lifetimes. Well, this is it, the future is here!

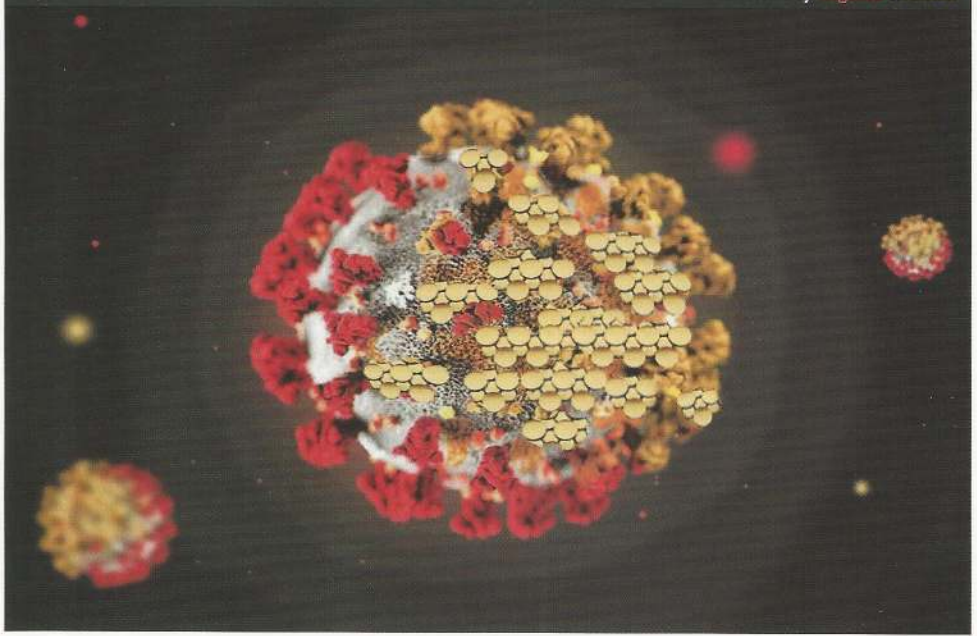
As over a third of the human population is forced to stay at home and others with severe restrictions and suffering, people losing their jobs and lives, separated from families, some stranded on the streets and some locked up inside, we are also witnessing a truly global phenomenon, a wave of awakening, imploring all of us to slow down, turn off the noise and pay close attention to the essentials and connect with the part of ourselves that had not had the chance to speak up or be heard. This situation has put in front of us what we had been ignoring or shy of dealing with for far too long.

But the contagion of the disease brings with it also the contagion of fears and hope.

We are at the crossroads of denial and acceptance, of complacency and rebellion, of wanting to go back to normalcy and wanting a new world, of the longing of transformation and dreading the realization that nothing has and will change. We witness this massive polarization of our emotions, ideas and visions, stretching out forcefully as if to catapult us into something and somewhere new.

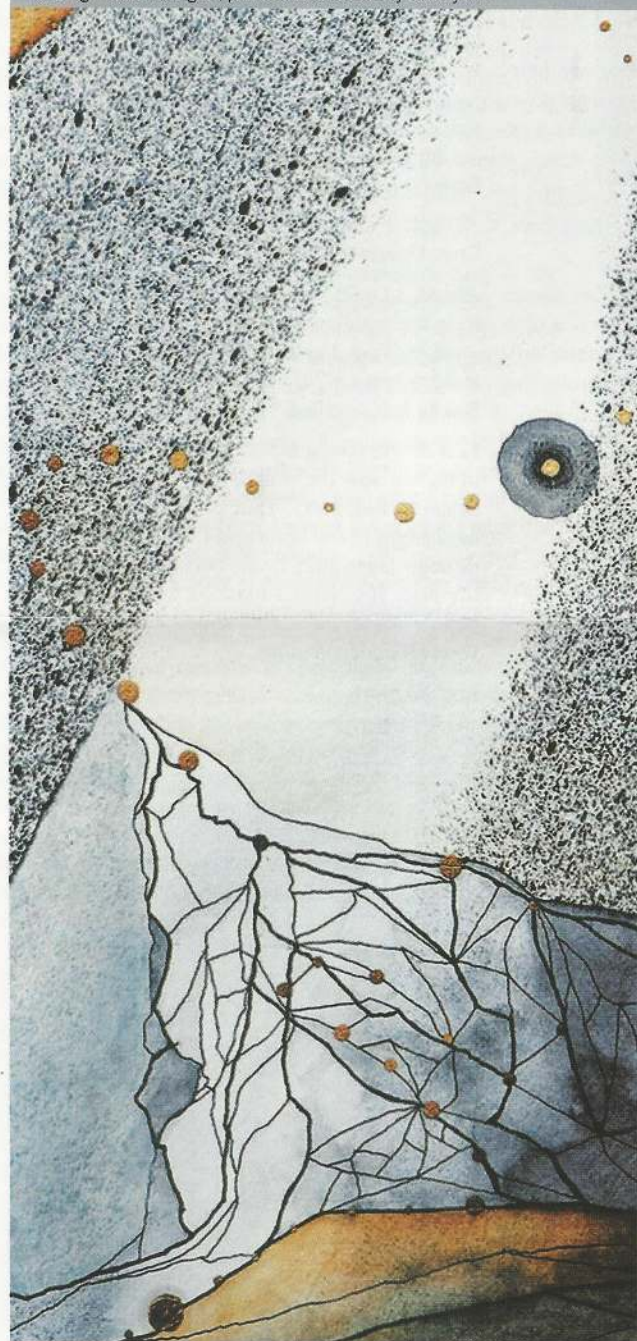
As this cosmic drama unfolds, we have the choice and the help of our masters to use this moment and participate with the forces within and without, for the birth of a new consciousness. The world is not the same anymore and will never be. It may take time for some people to realize this, but we in Auroville, with our material and spiritual privileges, have no excuses anymore. The question is, are we ready to take the leap or will human unity always be a faraway dream?

Text and Picture by Angelica & Anshul



NECTAR OF LIGHT

Painting "Nectar of Light", pen and watercolour by Lavanya P.



*I saw them cross the twilight of an age,
The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn,
The great creators with wide brows of calm,
The massive barrier-breakers of the world
And wrestlers with destiny in her lists of will,
The labourers in the quarries of the gods,
The messengers of the Incommunicable,
The architects of immortality*

Sri Aurobindo, Savitri, Book III, Canto IV, pages 343-344

DON'T FORGET TO ZOOM WITHIN

Poem by Kushmita S.

*Isolate physically yet don't create a despondent
desolate homepage*

*Connect Virtually yet don't be so enamored
by clicking on connections that you forget to 'zoom' within*

*Wash your hands often yet don't wash your hands off
your responsibility your commitments your integral action*

*Wear a mask to protect yourself yet do make an effort
to unmask your true feelings emotions and authentic expression
with loved ones*

*Stay at home yet strive endlessly to walk yourself and
humanity 'truly back home'*

*Honor the lockdown yet don't lock down your spirit
your compassion your generosity and your hope*

*Maintain social distance yet acknowledge and build bridges
of warmth trust and genuine empathy in all relationships*

*Make all efforts to 'Flatten the Curve' of Coronavirus
yet don't forget to
straighten the lines of our vision
Unite the scope of our perspectives
embrace the oneness of our hearts
raise the bar of our shared reality
ascend the heights of our collective consciousness*

STOP THE WORLD

Text by Peter L. and Painting by Tara R., watercolour and poster colour.

Aquifers unwind my colons finally sigh earth in unbelieving joy at last space stretches itself wide, wide each moment, glimpses eternity each action, fuller each thought, with consequence	busyness, smallness and compromise false gods their itching stops buried and forgiven the depths have been calling me through fevers fractures heat and lockdowns
silently the constant hum calling for years in assured faith reaching my deaf ears	Silence is loud pausing dynamic my guts a refined antennae
at last i breathe the hot air, eternity slowly returning	elephants walk through Rishikesh Goats meander through Llan-dudno Delhi's air is clean Eden is not so far away
	Stop the world Trump is naked no need for sugar, or sugar coating



NOW

Poems by Anandi A.

“
Naked
Under the Neem
Perfume
White rain
Nobody nothing
Now.
”

“
No need to go anywhere
Everything is here
You visited me
I Am.
”

SHINSEKAI



Notre mère nous donne le sein, nous berce gentiment pour tout effacer de ce cauchemar quotidien que l'on s'était bâtis. C'est en chemin.

L'entends-tu, au loin, l'écho simple de nos voies lactées?
Patience : c'est en chemin. Toutes voiles sorties pour nous laisser porter par son souffle, nous arriverons bientôt et alors, à l'horizon, il n'y aura plus que toi.

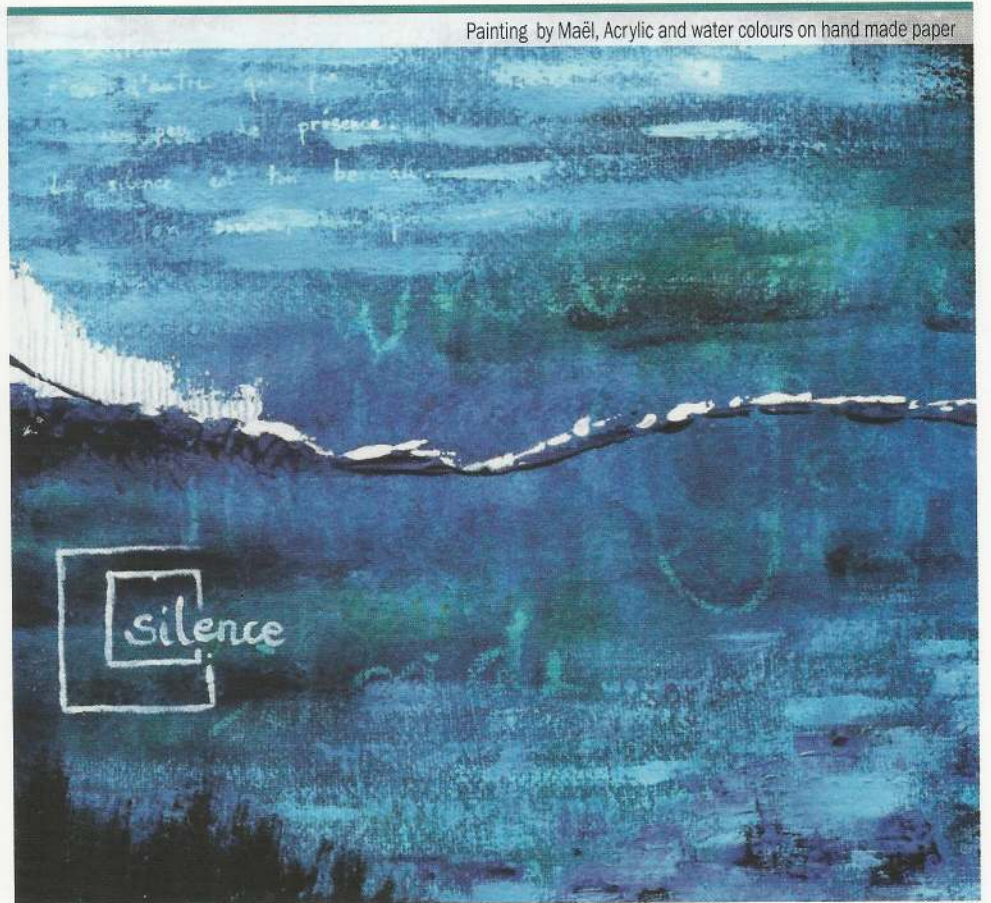
Plus de retour en arrière, de chaos, de brouhaha - juste toi, baignée de silence et de coquelicots.
C'est en chemin.

English translation :
Our mother gives us the breast, gently rocks us to erase everything from this daily nightmare that we had built. It's on the way.

Can you hear, in the distance, the simple echo of our milky way?
Patience: it's on the way. All sails left to let us carry by its breath, we will arrive soon and then, on the horizon, there will only be you.

No more turning back, chaos, hubbub - just you, bathed in silence and poppies.
It's on the way.

BLEU SILENCE



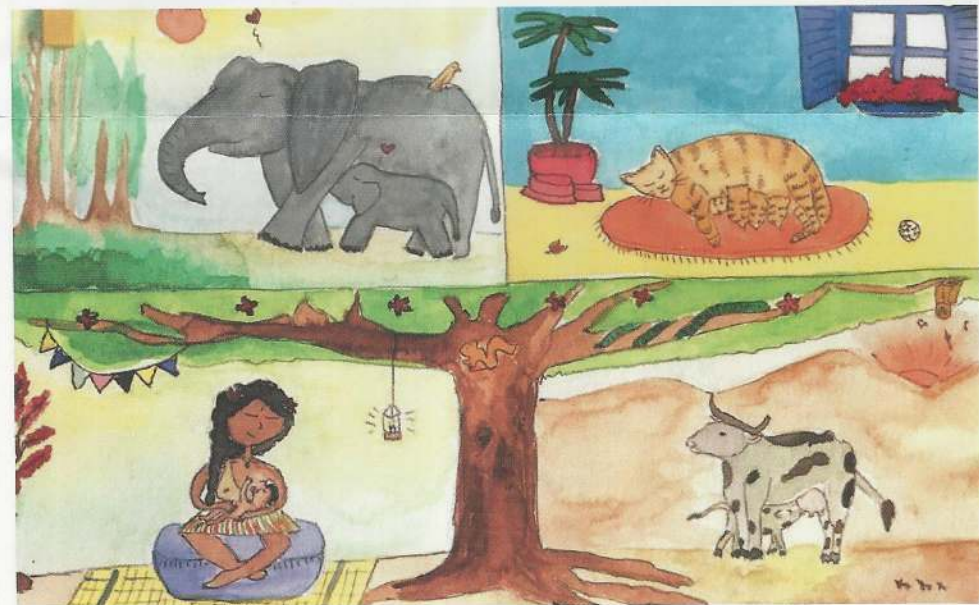
Painting by Maël, Acrylic and water colours on hand made paper

MOTHER NATURE HUGGED ME

Text and Painting "We are mammals" water colour and pen by Valentina B.

Slow life, Soul life
Time is just art.
Circles of deep understanding
Instead of lines of dual thought
Aquarius is settling down.
I embrace the mystery and jump into the unknown
It is written in the stars anyway
It was never about quantity. Will we finally get it?

Exuding endorphins, purging cortisol out,
Forgiveness comes in peppermint flavour.
And you only took one dance movement, Mother
To melt my pride away
like yellow tears on ice cream.
Craving for mama's milk, we are children asleep.
If we just could see
That we never really abandoned the womb.



But changing scenario was too traumatic
for an amateur actor
Compassion then
hugging the afraid child
sending the fear monster away
we will see, it's an illusion
we will see...

It was too good to be truth, Mother.
So we have made this earth a living hell
Make me remember once again, then
With your tender hug
That love and life never abandon my nest.
Make me remember once again
So I could finally rest
Knowing,
I am life.

Let us drink from your milky rivers
Let us bleed like your volcanic lava
Let us move slow, in tectonic plate mood
Shake us. We need a deep-felt heart earthquake
Pressure us to transform our coal into diamonds
We will take that sunbath only after being soaked
to death,
Under the storm

Make every second a drop of silence
Make every noise an expression of love
I want to dance naked with my friends
No shame.

Teach me, Mother. Make every tear count,
Transmute every drama into ecstatic laughter
Transform this zombie thriller into compelling comedy
Make me the film director of my story this time
Change my anatomy from within,
and I will dedicate my life to serve your creation
in softness and intimacy.

Forgive me.
I have made you wrong, I have made you right
I have made myself crazy trying to grasp the truth
with the mind
I have denied your humanity, I have denied your
divinity
I tried to use chopsticks to catch that sunset cloud
it didn't work...
Now the Source is cracking me from inside.
I allow myself to stop now.
I'm learning how to breathe and that will be
enough
No matter how many ghosts would come crawling
to my door.

Thanks be to the Gods to take a chance on me
Now breathe, grieve, release
And celebrate
New life is just around the corner.

MOTHER NATURE'S PORTAL OPENS... WHILE THE WORLD IS LOCKED DOWN

Text and Photos by Aikya

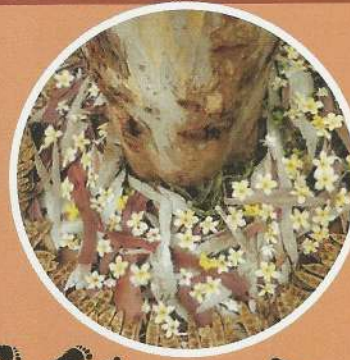
The forest welcomes me on my daily pilgrimage. My bare feet open to the throb of the earth, a steady rhythm in unison with my heartbeat.

"Slow down" she whispers. As the branches wave, bird chants soothe the echoes of my human mind, trees and dogs invite me for an intimate hug, I melt.



Day after day, She reveals Her face to me, Her power, Her beauty, Her unexpected moves in the eternal rhythm of synchronicity.

Another gentle snake guardian stops me in my tracks, a big toad being swallowed. Evil transformed by serpent power.



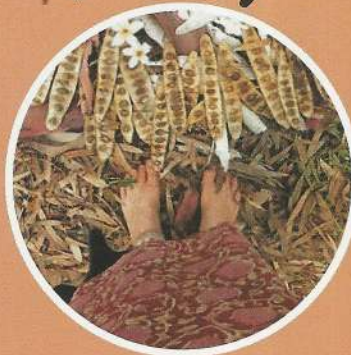
I weave a net with ropes to God. In my heart, neurons grow, vibrating with Earth's blessings. Water breaks and birth is imminent; it will be wild, expectant, and non linear. A bubble, after the rains, grows, joins and pops.

My cat purrs with the stars at night
Returning; I sigh, I yawn, I cry, I pray.



The moon is at its fullest, the cricket's noisy trance, dark shadows revealing hidden fears, initiations into faith and humility.

Rustling leaves in the bush, a wild pig crosses my path, a snake walks over my feet, while I cursed the forest, not to have elephants or rivers.



Colours and shapes, oh you beauty!
You shed your skins, inviting me to surrender to your wonder.
Seeds of wisdom and psychological perfection fall into place.

My feet walk with the ashes of burnt memories.

Lockdown imposes; I clean, I cook, I garden.



THE EMPTINESS OF SOCIAL DISTANCING

"There should be somewhere on earth a place which no nation could claim as its own, where all human beings could live and work freely in human unity, without diseases, sicknesses and fears." This is the beginning of a new dream that I imagine Mother could have said in these times of COVID. "Practice social distancing," say the scientists. "Decrease personal contact so as to prevent disease transmission." But is this the best step towards human unity? Shouldn't we also practice social empathy?



Text and Photo Art by Marco S.

Text and Photo Art by Melina P.

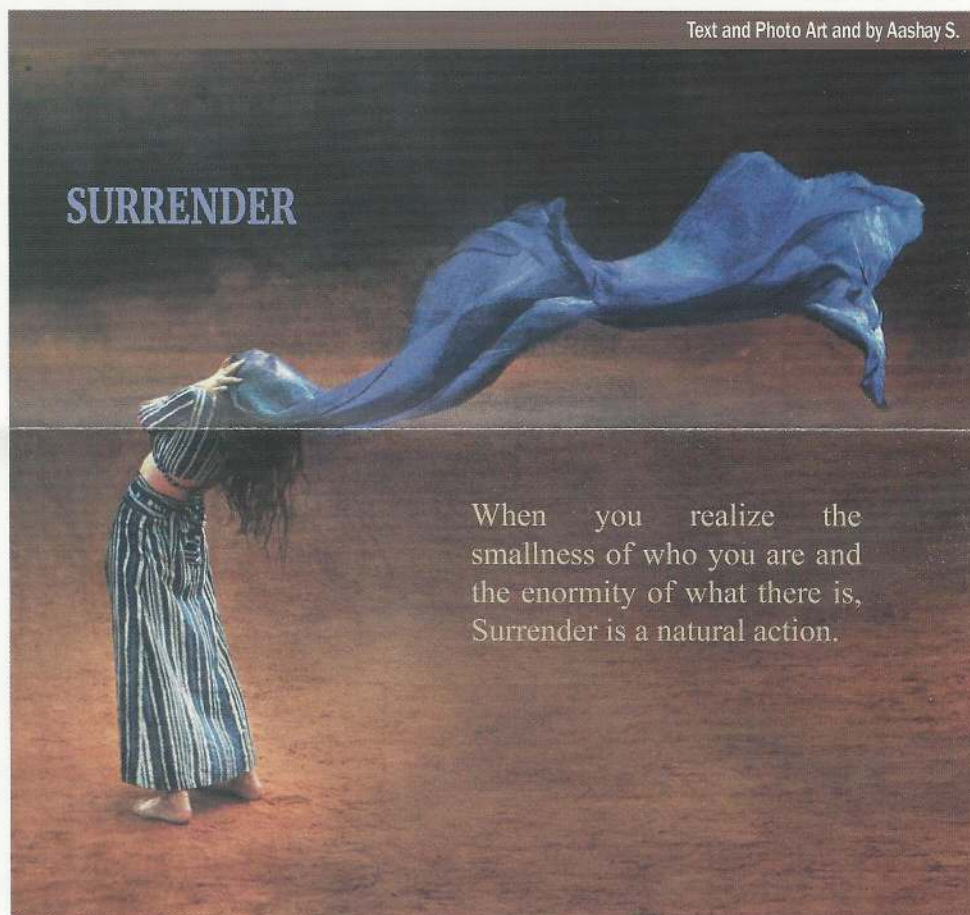


LISTEN INSIDE

Take this precious time to go deeper in your layers, to guess your purpose, to find your path, to deal with your roots. Deal with your old memories, clean your mind and take a step to the side. Go inside to discover and see, to listen and taste, to smell and touch your beauty, this extraordinary beauty that only asks you to bloom...

Let yourself listen to the voice of your soul to become ONE with the Big Whole.

Text and Photo Art and by Aashay S.



SURRENDER

When you realize the smallness of who you are and the enormity of what there is, Surrender is a natural action.

Text by Samrat and Photo Art by Melina P.

LOVE'S PASSIONATE EMBRACE

As the world changes, rushes and pauses, As the rising creseendo turns off key, Breathless and lost, we dread the future, Waiting for the footsteps of the unknown.

As economies crash, and governments topple, And rumours of conspiracies wax and wane, Silently waiting behind the corridors of the heart,

Love awaits its hour, an unbidden guest. It will catch us unaware, and shake our old leaves, It will ensnare us with its bewitching eyes, It will transform us, in spite of our cries and protests, It will crack us open for the light to shine through, We will be drunk with its Dionysian kiss, And tremble like new born babes, to this magical dawn.



MULTIMEDIA

QR codes are an easy way to access to a webpage, use your mobile camera or use an App to scan the barcode and you will access to a webpage (the one below in the description).

HOW TO SCAN THE QR CODES?

For Android

Google lens: Most of the latest Android phones come with Google lens integrated within the camera app (If it's not integrated into your phone, you can download Google lens from the Play Store).
QR & Barcode Scanner: that you can also download on Play Store.

For iPhone

- 1 - Open the Camera app from the Home screen, Control Center, or Lock screen.
- 2 - Hold your device so that the QR code appears in the viewfinder in the Camera app.
- 3 - Tap the notification to open the link associated with the QR code.

FERTILE FUNDRAISING CONCERT

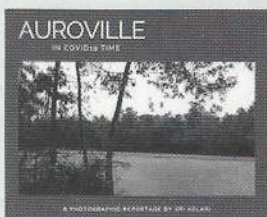


During the lockdown, Marius Pibarot discovered that Fertile community was having money issues as they could not work and sell the timber that is its main revenue. Being a professional travelling musician, Marius decided to organise a fundraising concert. He found a way to train community singing including some sweet songs with the kids and also learning Tamil. The concert, which was live-streamed on Facebook and then added to YouTube, earned enough money to pay for 2 months of workers' salaries. It's a lovely taste of Fertile and forest life, enjoy.



<https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLFXBCYN5rN5592n-QO-RCDenhrlYQvOpDenhrlYQvOp>

PHOTO REPORTAGE



"I look at Auroville through the eyes of Sri Kolari and I see it organize itself, commit itself, I see it resist, moving forward with will, and I can feel the creativity... I hope you can enjoy the reportage, but also enjoy the beauty of these images captured by Sri's photographic lens, which portray the present moment in its simple but yet so powerful unfolding."

Valentina Garozzo



<https://vimeo.com/groups/kinoaurovillemonthly>

KINO KABARET



Kino Kabaret is a worldwide film making challenge to produce a short film within a limited timeframe. During lockdown, a new Kino Kabaret took place in the bioregion, organised by the Kino Auroville group. All the participants received an email indicating the rules of the game: All films must have taken place within the home, contained two objects (a sticky tape and a pressure cooker), and had a duration between 30 secs and 6 mins long. In four days, fourteen videos were scripted, shot, edited and uploaded to the Auroville Kino platform. Watch them here:

<https://vimeo.com/groups/kinoaurovillemonthly>

DANCING VIDEOS



The lockdown didn't stop these residents keeping their regular dance practice, and it even inspired them to share their movements with the rest of the community through social media.

<https://vimeo.com/user115847046/videos>

BLAST OFF



Lockdown blues cause a young man to take off!

Film made by Milo, Oliver and Tom.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c95sfv-Ynr0>

A LOCKDOWN NOON IN ANASUYA



A filmmaker, an annoying fly and a bored dog during a hot lockdown noon.

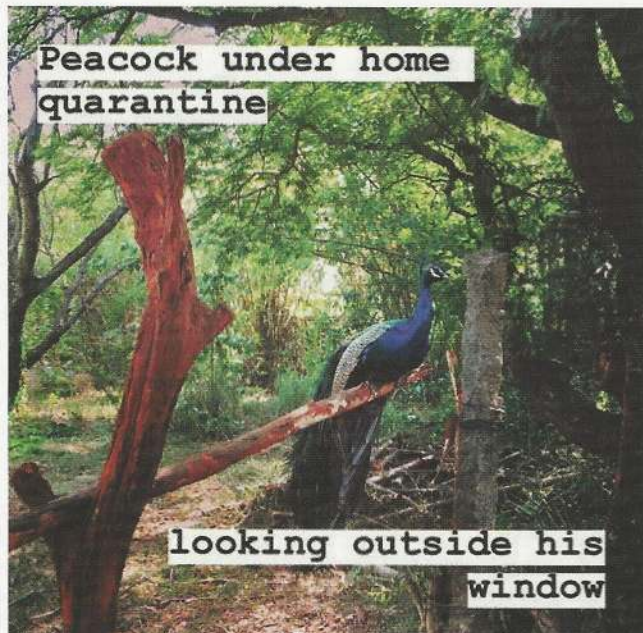
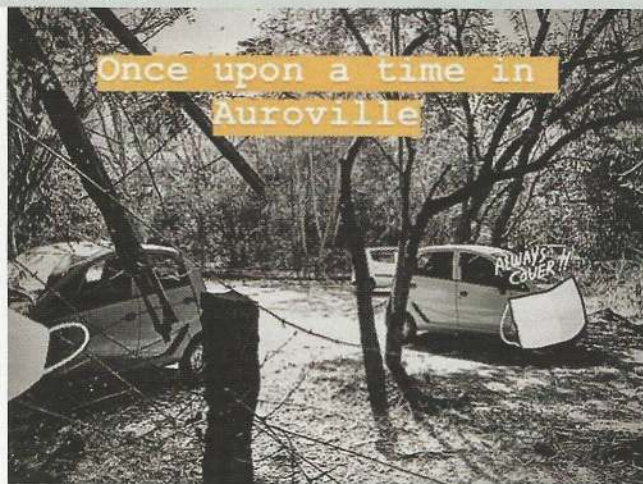
Film made by Piero Cefaloni.

<https://vimeo.com/groups/kinoaurovillemonthly>

AUROVILLE LOCKDOWN MEMES

Meme done by Ahilya before official lockdown. Source: Auroville_memes. Other memes by Valentina B.

Made before the lockdown was instituted



ROBOT



by Luca Z.

Luca Zbinden is an Auroville mechanic who used his spare time to create a stationary robot up-cycling only used, junk and old parts. During the lockdown he sanded it down, cleaned and polished it up; "the lockdown gave me the time to finally finish it up".

Education during the pandemic: how schools are reaching their students after closures

Even before India entered one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, among the first measures it took to stop the spread of COVID-19 was to shut down schools across the nation. By March 17, all of Auroville's schools were closed, and teachers and school administrators were having to think on their feet about how to support their students during closures of unknown duration. *AV Today* spoke with teachers and students from some of Auroville's schools to find out what challenges they faced and how they continued the learning process and planned their academic futures. The responses demonstrate the individuality of Auroville's schools with their different age groups and educational philosophies that span exam-oriented curricula to free progress models.

Refashioning the certificate process at Future School

When classes came to a halt at Future School on 15th April, only two months remained before the British system high school examinations were scheduled to be administered at the school. However, with schools the world over facing the same school closures just before the examination period, the British government made an announcement that the Summer 2020 exams would be cancelled and that, instead, the teachers would be responsible for assigning "the grade that they believe the student would have received if exams had gone ahead", based upon their performance in mock examinations and assignments before the closures in March.

Exam results are extremely important for those students who envision going to university after graduating, especially for those who will be studying abroad and may need to qualify for financial aid, and it has been a challenge for Future School's teachers to give final grades for the first time. Rolf, a coordinator and teacher at Future School, says that the teachers are not



All photos this page: Students at The Learning Centre

academic progress. Eleventh and 12th graders are applying for university and need to get their certificates for this process. And the 12th graders had to finish their Auroville schooling careers without the highly anticipated experience of graduation and other end-of-school festivities. While these are important to graduating students around the world, they can be especially poignant for students at Future School, who have grown up together and now face the moment when many will depart from Auroville to pursue educational opportunities with their internationally-recognized high school qualifications.

Meanwhile, the next academic year is slated to begin three weeks earlier than usual to give extra time to cover the material that was missed.

Balancing exams and school closure at New Era Secondary School

New Era Secondary School (NESS) offers many Auroville youth the opportunity to receive a high school certificate from India's Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE), which can facilitate entry into universities across the country. For NESS students, the annual exams were already happening when the school was forced to close and not all were completed before the lockdown started.

Students have been given a holiday and the CBSE announced that the two postponed 12th grade exams will be held at the beginning of July. Since then, the teachers in charge of the material covered in those remaining exams have begun online review sessions for the graduating students. For ongoing students, the NESS staff have created WhatsApp groups for the classes in the upcoming academic year and shared links to digital versions of the textbooks so that the students can begin preparing for the coming academic term. Students can work

on assignments at home and share photos of their work on the groups.

One NESS student, who has just completed 9th grade, has begun working through these new materials, but is doubtful about her ability to absorb the material from textbooks alone, especially since she has to read on her phone the ones she doesn't have physical copies of. She has been managing with the books on social science and English, but says, "Unless the school start online classes, it simply won't help me to read science and maths texts. Usually it helps me when our teachers explain." She looks ahead to when the school is able to reopen and provide an environment where she can concentrate and have ready access to guidance from teachers.

As for when NESS will be able to reopen for classes, this will be determined by the CBSE. "We can't predict the date as of now, we have to wait for the official announcement," says a school administrator.

Providing voluntary learning opportunities at Last School

While Last School serves the same age group as Future School and New Era Secondary School, it follows a free progress education model. Class sizes are small and some teachers had already established WhatsApp groups to communicate with their students. So when the school had to close, teachers were still able to reach out to their students, whether through WhatsApp or email, giving students the chance to progress with reading and writing

assignments, daily art projects, and other learning activities.

Aurevan, who teaches English at Last School, mobilized her classes' WhatsApp groups to work on independent writing assignments. Several students have been doing a three-month creative writing project, with Aurevan giving guidance on how to create a plot and develop the characters and setting. The students submit their writing weekly for feedback. As April was National Poetry Writing Month, other students engaged in writing poetry.

For his maths classes, Ashwin has given his students worksheets that they can fill out, photograph, and send back to him. He is then able to evaluate their work and give them feedback. He also started sending them fun logical reasoning math problems to solve together over the WhatsApp group. "It was an effective way to keep them occupied with math," he says.

And every two days, Jean-Yves has been sending new pages from Sri Aurobindo's *The Human Cycle* to his students over WhatsApp to continue the reading they were doing in his class prior to the lockdown.

Still, there can be no comparison to the learning environment on the Last School campus. Internet connectivity has been a snag for Last School students as well, and not all of them

that progress. If an item is consistently ranking low, they have the opportunity to evaluate its importance and decide whether they want to drop it from the list or put more focus on it. Aurevan's students have continued to do these weekly evaluations and she says, "Even if they are not doing other classwork, it is a way for me to keep the contact."

Supporting learning in the younger grades at Deepanam, Transition, and TLC

For primary schools in Auroville, the challenges in reaching students when the schools have closed are more complex, because younger students may not have the e-literacy to be autonomous and may need more parental assistance.

Deepanam School serves 1st through 8th grade students with a free progress curriculum that puts particular emphasis on the arts, in addition to other academic subjects. When the school had to close, several of the teachers continued to reach out to their students to offer them projects and assignments, ranging from poetry to science and foreign languages. Mahavir, who teaches students aged 12 to 14 at Deepanam, had been already using the online educational platform, Edmodo for a couple of years to give his students personalized lesson plans and to collect assignments. When Deepanam closed its campus, he continued offering materials through Edmodo as well as through Google Classroom, providing video content for lessons on maths and science. Though Internet and computer access was an issue for some, he reports that all his students made an effort to keep up with the new material. And for the National Poetry Writing Month daily poem writing challenge, 120 poems were written by a group of students and teachers.

Transition School, which caters to the same age group as Deepanam, has one of the largest student bodies in Auroville. The school administration was caught by surprise by the order for students to stay home. While only one person at the school had prior experience with online teaching, the teachers were able to quickly adopt WhatsApp and email and reach out to both parents and students with new material to study and assignments to work on. The 1st grade teacher at Transition said, "I sent the children videos on WhatsApp of me reading the week's phonics story and explaining the phonics rules to them. On Earth Day, I encouraged them to write and draw something about why we should take care of the earth." Independent work was progressively easier for the older grades, and the 5th grade teacher asked students to send her pictures of their work on a daily basis. On Fridays, she tried to recreate the social aspect of school by asking students to call one or two other classmates to work together on activities related to sports, art, poetry, and other topics. The 8th grade students, who were finishing their time at Transition and sadly had to

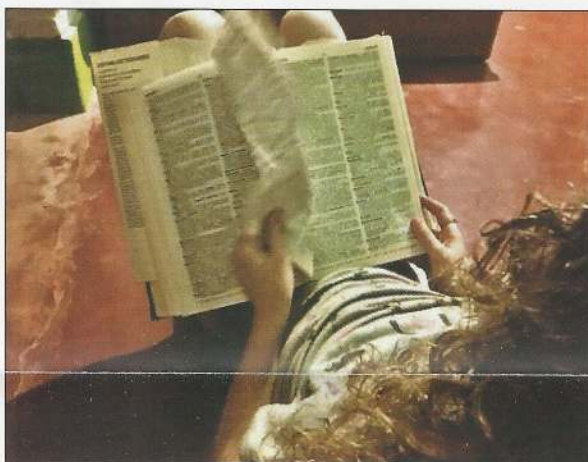


PHOTO BY TAMAR AZULAY



PHOTO BY GIORGIA GIUNTA

allowed to share those grades with their students. "The actual grades are given by the exam board after their adjustment, so there is a protective element for the teachers."

But although the students' receipt of their certificates may have been salvaged by this switch from exams to grades, the school closure has also highlighted the vulnerability of the student body to not having access to classroom sessions. While the Government of India has endorsed online learning as a solution to school closures, Future School's own experience exposed the gaps. Immediately after the school closed, some teachers tried to continue their curriculum online through Google Classroom, the school's free access to Google Hangouts, and even WhatsApp, but the major impediment was internet access. "A lot of students don't have proper internet connections," Rolf says. "There were some classes where more than 50% couldn't participate."

Rolf explains that whereas assignments were relatively easy to give remotely, holding classes online was nearly impossible. "The teachers were trying to do live classes, but the problem is that the important part of a class is the interaction and exchange between students. If this doesn't happen, then it is only a lecture. And on YouTube you can find much better lecturers than us."

Future School's students had mixed reactions to the school closure. While some students welcomed the early start to the holidays, many are concerned about how this may affect their

have access to a reliable internet connection at home. Also, the level of discussion has gone down after the transition to distance learning, with students only coming forward when they have a major question. Nevertheless, the teachers have tried to keep in touch with their students and proposed learning opportunities. Because there are no examinations to work towards or mandatory units to cover, the Last School teachers have also made participation in the classwork voluntary for their students. And Aurevan further believes, "Let the students have a break, they will come back for classes when they are ready."

In the meantime, it is up to students to use their extended holiday as they see fit, whether watching movies, learning new cooking recipes, connecting with family, reading, playing music, or starting new exercise routines. Some have taken this time to engage with volunteer work in the community or to start new projects of their own. A host of young people have come forward during this public health crisis to deliver groceries, sanitize public spaces, help with the cashew harvesting, etc., and students from Auroville's high schools, including Last School, have been well represented among them. One Last School student also began working with the Auroville Safety and Security Team, a commitment that will carry on into the coming school year, and two others continued involvement with the Auroville Ambulance. These diverse engagements can be also seen through an educational lens, as Last School's philosophy emphasizes that life itself is an education rather than just schoolwork.

Aurevan has also been continuing an ongoing exercise that her students have been doing since the beginning of the school year, where they have each listed the areas in which they would like to be making progress. Each Friday, the students go through their lists and rank on a scale of 1 to 10 how they are doing on realizing

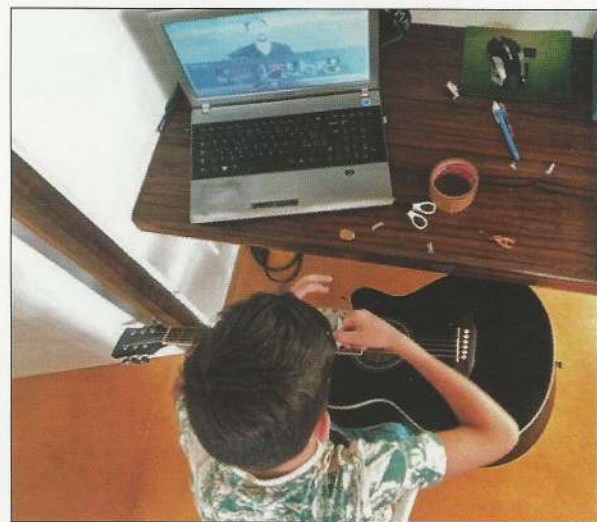


PHOTO BY CHIARA MERIANI

forgo their graduation ceremony, were able to complete their last science, history, and literature lessons via email and WhatsApp with vibrant discussions in their WhatsApp group.

However, Anton, who assists with computer-based learning at Transition, also highlights the constraints of distance education. "Transition works with kids between six and fourteen, so primary and middle school. The youngest are just learning to read, the oldest are entering puberty."

continued on page 13

Koodam: providing a heart connection during the lockdown

At the beginning of April, Koodam, the conflict resolution platform that offers personal and group conflict transformation services in Auroville, extended their support to anybody needing help in coping with the challenges presented by the lockdown and quarantine regulations. Here the team reflects upon that experience.

Why did you decide to offer special support during the lockdown?

Niva: In the beginning, the situation pulled our full attention into the four walls of our house, our immediate family, food, sanitation, etc. We went into survival mode. There were rules we had to follow and to accept. For a while, I just took care of my little circle and didn't have enough energy to take care of the bigger circles.

Elvira: Yes, but as a Koodam person I realised that we also went away from the collective. We got caught up in fears. We had different concerns and our priorities got small, which is exactly the opposite of what was needed. So, having taken care of our children, our families, homes and our immediate needs, we realized there was a wider need that had to be addressed. We felt we had to look into ways that Koodam could offer some kind of support to people in the larger community, especially those who were in quarantine.

Niva: Some things were clear. We knew we were not going to do deep meditations using Zoom, but if somebody needed a bit of advice or someone needed to be listened to, we could offer personal support by phone or online – which we were already doing before the pandemic.

Helen: For those of us, like myself, who had to go through a period of strict quarantine, the experience was particularly acute. My husband and I went into quarantine because my husband had just come back from overseas. It was a very confusing time. We were like, 'What are we supposed to do? Do we just sit

at home?' But once the COVID-19 Task Force was set up, we could ask all the practical questions like how to get food – and that was very helpful.

Having been in quarantine, I saw first-hand how the connections I had were so valuable and I felt that there must be other people in the community who really needed that as well. That's when the idea of forming a WhatsApp group came up. We decided to widen the offering to anyone who had a need to have more connection, and not only for the people who were in quarantine.

Whether it was asking practical questions or allowing people to share something from their day, it was a space to express yourself. The main topics centred around children and family; people with children were sharing a lot of tips. There were practicalities about how to get food in quarantine, questions regarding testing, or when could people go out again, that sort of thing. Then there were people expressing how they were doing. Saying things like, "I had a lousy day yesterday and this is what helped." Sometimes it was a simple sharing followed by an empathic response – "I heard you", or "I'm here". It was all about that heart connection.

Elvira: I initially joined the WhatsApp group to offer my support, but then it became something more. I realised that lending support actually supported me because it helped me to process what I was going through. Later, when I realised that others had the same issues as me, I started reaching out myself for help. For three weeks there was a lot of interaction. Then, the day when the first lockdown got extended the group went really quiet; it just went into silence.

Helen: It seems that once people who had been in quarantine came out of it they started to adjust and didn't need that support anymore. For the others, being in lockdown became a kind of normal and people felt they could deal with the situation.

Elvira: With the extension of the lockdown, the initial state of emergency was over, we had figured out how to take care of our basic needs, learned more or less how to navigate the

restricted conditions and were coming to terms with the scale of the pandemic.

Helen: However, even though people stopped reaching out for support, we continued to receive messages saying thank you for the offer. It seems that the offering itself made a difference.

Has your experience of the lockdown given you ideas about how things could be different in the future?

Julia: Everything is moving too fast and I feel we are all still shaky. Personally, I feel much more vulnerable because the truth is, I have no idea what the future will be like. I cannot connect to what was, but I have yet to see what I can connect to in the future.

Niva: We have all witnessed how everything stopped and nothing happened, which helps us realize that we can do things differently.

Helen: There are lots of ideas floating around, people saying, 'let's try this, let's try that'. There seems to be more openness and a general feeling of moving towards something.

Niva: One of the things that became very clear is that what we need to strengthen community is collaboration. We don't need separation and distinctions and divisions and partitions.

Elvira: I think that everybody needs to think for themselves about how can they contribute to creating positive change on a community level. What if we stopped complaining and instead shifted into taking responsibility for improving whatever we feel is not working? What if we found other like-minded people and co-created something new?

Julia: It starts with us, it starts with me. I came to Auroville because I don't want to do things that take me away from my heart. It's about the alignment, always.

Elvira: We don't need to revert to passé structures. Let's allow ourselves the opportunity to think and imagine and wonder what would happen, if...

Excerpts from an interview by Mariana

Education during the pandemic

continued from page 12

Most of them will need experienced assistance. Seventy percent of our students are second generation literates from nearby villages who do not necessarily have laptops with good internet at home." He therefore does not see the distance format as a conducive option for continuing classroom learning over longer periods.

The Learning Community (TLC) was perhaps most uniquely positioned to continue its educational activities after the closure of its "base camp". Drawing upon the idea of free progress, it does not see itself as a school, but a space for learning where children and their parents are equally encouraged to participate. So, when the base camp had to close and TLC kids began to learn from home, parents were equipped to foster learning environments at home because of their pre-existing connection with their children's education and shared experiences with TLC.

Tamar, one of the parents behind TLC, describes what has been done to support this. "We have created a WhatsApp group where we offer and propose daily activities for the kids to engage in. These include creative writing assignments, mathematical problems to solve, research projects, music projects, suggestions for artistic expression, etc. We have encouraged the children to share their work in the group, so that they can inspire each other and share their inspiration. This has been a great success, and worked really well, both for the children who have been responsive and enthusiastic, as well as for the parents, some of whom needed some extra support in taking on this new role of facilitating their children. It has been a 'real-life' implementation of the approach that TLC has been encouraging for many years, a test of the independent learning approach, and we can see clearly how the children have been able to focus, self-motivate, self-manage and find joy in their learning."

Looking to the coming academic year

Some Auroville schools have start dates for the new academic year, which normally begins in July. Others are still waiting on further information from the Indian government. But without a doubt, the nature of schooling in Auroville will be different when the classrooms reopen to students. The Indian news sources are abuzz with potential measures such as online classes, alternate day schedules, and elimination of campus sports, and some forms of social distancing will doubtless still be required as students return to school. Mary, who teaches at Transition, says, "We cannot allow our children to suffer academically, emotionally or socially and must prepare for all future eventualities." Despite the academic disruptions and uncertain prospects, this generation of students will surely come out benefitting from the ingenuity that is keeping an unending flow of education happening in Auroville.

Hilary

The Gratitude Cake Project

"Because of you all, the collective is safe"

The uniqueness of Auroville reflects also in small, touching initiatives like this one. In these days of lockdown, while many have been forced to stay home, others have offered their help in essential services like health, security, food supply, etc.

Somebody noticed that these persons who were working under stress didn't even have the comfort of hot drinks, snacks and cakes. This is where this story starts:

Helena, while working in Santé, dreamed: "I wish we could have cake for all the staff and government people working here". While contemplating how to make this a reality, she talked with Uma, who said: "I will take care of that".

Uma is not an experienced baker, so she asked Tamar to make and send a cake to Santé on Monday. Everyone there was super happy, so the idea of giving cake to all those working to keep Auroville functioning during the lockdown was born.

Uma called Jaya: "Will you bake some cake for volunteers to say: 'Thank you!'" Jaya immediately said yes.

Torkil agreed to pay for the ingredients. Naren agreed to do the shopping – starting with 2.5 kg of butter and 48 eggs! It sounded diffi-

cult in these lockdown times, but Naren managed and delivered to Sunship community kitchen, where master chef Jaya is baking.

The first batch of 60 cakes appeared on Earth Day 22nd April. The logistics – cards, packing, distribution – all got worked out as we went along. When we ran out of handwritten 'Thank you' cards, friends and schools willingly agreed to help.

The second batch of 90 cakes arrived on the morning of 23rd of April and these were also packed and sent out.

Then new sets of 'Thank you' cards to volunteers and the next set of ingredients were planned.

We have already sent out 400 cakes. All have gone with 'Thank you' notes on behalf of the community.

It has opened a flood of generosity and gratitude. We hope this ripple continues to inspire others to carry on saying 'Thank you' in their own way.

The cards read:

"Thank you for being in front and serving the community. Because of you all, collective is Safe. This cake is specially baked for you all, to say Thank you!"

Helena, Jaya, Naren, Uma and Torkil

Uschi Ernst

Long-term Friend of Auroville and Auroville International Germany member Uschi Ernst, passed away on Sunday 3 May at the age of 80. Her health had been gradually weakening this last half year.

Uschi, and husband Helmut Ernst, had been closely connected to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother since the sixties. They were active members of AVI Germany and would regularly participate in the various AVI meetings in Auroville and/or abroad. They built a house in Grace in the mid-nineties which they co-stewarded throughout the years while yearly visiting for some weeks.

Uschi was an energetic woman, an enthusiast trumpet player, and warmly received visiting Aurovilians in her large, plant and flower-rich Frankfurt home.

Vijayamala Ganapatrao

On Tuesday May 26th, Vijayamala, a long-term volunteer at New Creation's Crèche and Boarding School, passed away due to a heart attack at JIPMER at the age of 51.

Mala came from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 2000 and has been living and working in New Creation, co-running the Boarding School with Marie Babu ever since. Always smiling, she was a gentle, kind person who became a beloved member of the New Creation family. Her gift was art, which she shared with countless children as well as at various Auroville events, exhibitions and marathons. She also taught New Creation's children French, Hindi, painting, drawing, stitching and other artistic activities.

Vijayamala's remains were buried at Auroville's burial grounds on the evening of May 26th.

Jan Pieter Derksen

On June 2nd, Jan Pieter passed away in the Netherlands after a period of illness.

Jan Pieter's connection with Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and Auroville goes back to the mid-seventies. In those days he stayed in one of the houses of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry and visited Auroville almost every day, as a guide, informing visitors about the Dream.

After his work in Pondicherry, Jan Pieter lived at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch, before joining Pindhorn in Scotland. He then moved back to The Netherlands, and became a board member of Auroville International The Netherlands. During this period he translated parts of Sri Aurobindo's *The Synthesis of Yoga* into Dutch.

Jan Pieter recently completed his Newcomers' period and had taken up residence at Sunship. An illness prompted him to briefly go to The Netherlands, before returning to Auroville. This sadly was not to be.

PASSINGS



COVID and the local villages: AVAG's response

The COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown have brought large scale unemployment, poverty and hunger to the rural villages and urban slums of India. The initial spread of the COVID-19 virus in India stemmed from people who had travelled through infected areas abroad. But local transmission started soon after, and people were asked to stay home, working if possible from home or maintaining social distancing and high standards of hygiene within the offices of essential services.

The announcement of a nation-wide lockdown on March 24 came as a surprise to everyone and we in the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) had to close our office completely. Today, two months on, we see a shift in those in need in the villages around Auroville. Initially, migrants to the villages needed support, but now a great concern is the village residents who have been unemployed for the past two months.

AVAG's fundraising campaign has so far raised 31.8 lakh rupees, including very generous donations from individual Aurovilians (5.1 lakhs), AVI centres (15.4 lakhs), the Auroville Deep Adaptation Group (1.3 lakhs), Udhayam Women's Federation (6 lakhs) and others (4 lakhs), demonstrating the care Auroville and friends have for the people who live in the surrounding villages. Around 70% of this money has been utilised to support the neighbouring 11 villages around Auroville, while 30% was used to support the other bio-regional villages, including some in the containment zones. Support went also to some sanitation workers and volunteers as well as to members of the Udhayam Women's Federation of AVAG, mostly women from marginalized families. So far, we have delivered 8 423 relief packages that contain food and masks. If further funding is available we will support

the preventive measures without causing panic, offering psycho-social support, helping people enroll in the relevant government schemes, financially supporting families and, most important of all, making space and time to listen to people.

Since COVID-19 is a pandemic, there are government regulations concerning the distribution of relief materials. AVAG received permission to do relief work from the block level officers and the police, who provided a special mobility pass for our staff and vehicles.

Even though the government declared COVID-19 to be a "notified disaster" and announced several relief measures at state and central levels, many migrants and single member families lacked the necessary documents to access the schemes. Due to limited funds, we focused our phase one distribution on people who lacked documentation, as well as the aged who did not have anyone to look after them. We also prioritised single and widowed women who were economically and socially more vulnerable.

Our team members and representatives of local groups helped us identify the families and a list was submitted to the Panchayat



Distribution queues in a village

Enduring Concerns

Though we are grateful to everyone who has contributed and feel proud of the endurance of our team, our efforts are insufficient considering the daily needs of the people. As one village leader told us, "The present situation is totally unexpected. Apart from the need for food, families need money for purposes like clothing, medical care, education, housing, marriage, etc. Now there is no money even to get biscuits for children. In the past, people have borrowed money with the plan to repay from their monthly income. Now, when all of a sudden they have become jobless for months, how will they pay back the loans? Crime may increase and possibly the incidence of suicide."

Let's hope this does not come true. However, The National Commission for Women has expressed its concern over the steep increase in violence against women in India, and Childline India has reported a 50% increase in calls from children since the lockdown period started.

It is particularly hard for those in containment zones where the lockdown is very strict. A woman from Nesal village, a containment zone at some distance from Auroville, told us, "We felt totally neglected. The infected family is not in our settlement; those two families are roughly 1.5 km away, but no one outside our village, including our relatives, wants to be in touch with us, fearing that we would infect them. AVAG has come to us to give food essentials. This is not new: AVAG has always been there for us."

The future

Everything our team has accomplished has been made possible by the large network of support. We are grateful to all those who have mobilized or given donations, supportive government officials and to the strong local support network for distribution, including Auroville Outreach Education Board, local women's and youth groups, Paalam network, Panchayat Secretaries and Village Elders. This relief work has provided AVAG with very valuable experience of how to work in challenging times. The capacity of the support teams has improved tremendously and the relationship between the different community groups has strengthened.

However, the situation remains fluid in the region, and everything depends on whether the disease spreads further. For example,



Tribals near Edalyanchavady collect relief parcels

poorer settlements and people like the aged, single and physically challenged and those most in need in our bio-region.

The first phase of distribution

Through ongoing capacity building, since its inception in 1983 Auroville Village Action Group has established a network of 300 women's self-help groups and other community-based organizations, such as Udhayam Women Federation, Paalam Youth network and Auroville Bioregional Sports and Cultural Association. We also collaborate with the village leaders, government institutions, other local non-profit organizations and with different outreach units of Auroville. When the COVID crisis hit, it was these local bodies that requested support for marginalized sectors of the rural population.

When working with communities, we have a list of priorities. These include giving accurate information about the disease and

Secretary. Once he had given his approval, the staff of AVAG and the team would visit the houses to give out tokens which made those people eligible to receive the relief materials. The beneficiaries were invited to a public place, such as the Panchayat office, where they were given a relief package in the presence of the traditional leaders and the Panchayat Secretary. In this first phase, 335 families in 11 villages around Auroville were given relief packages that contained food and sanitation materials worth Rs.1000 (USD 13). At the request of the Panchayat secretaries, we also gave sanitation materials to 76 sanitation workers. The Udhayam Women's Federation also provided Rs 500 cash to 355 women they had identified as being in dire need.

The second phase of distribution

When the second lockdown was announced, we saw hardship and worry on the faces of unskilled workers, the aged, daily wage earners, artisans, street vendors and the workers in small business units. Even though the state government had been supplying food essentials to all, the government's cash distribution stopped. While most employees of Auroville units and services continued to receive their salaries, many non-Auroville businesses either stopped paying or reduced the salaries of their workers. Employees in the transport and tourism sectors became jobless for an unforeseen period. Consequently, AVAG decided to extend its work to help the many people who were experiencing distress due to prolonged periods of joblessness and lack of income.

In a demonstration of human unity, Aurovilians, AVI centres and friends of AVAG gave us the support and confidence to expand our help to more families impacted by COVID-19. We distributed kits with food and masks worth Rs 500 to neighbouring villages, giving particular focus to single/widowed/deserted women, physically and mentally challenged people, families with a history of dialysis, and those severely impacted by extension of the lockdown, such as hotel staff workers, drivers, masons and artisans.

Mr Ranganatham, a village elder from Kottakarai village told us: "The COVID-19 lockdown has crippled the lives of everyone, and people everywhere face many hardships. All the leaders of my village, and the women and youth, agreed to support AVAG in this initiative, in identifying the poor. We gave priority to the widows and single women, the families that are living in huts and the very poor families. We are very happy to play a role in this great work."

As in phase one, AVAG's Udhayam Women's Federation again provided support from its collective fund (of 5000+ members) by distributing rice and masks, and AVAG shared half the expenses. To honour their work, AVAG also gave food essentials to 80 police and Home Guard volunteers, and supported 376 families in containment zones, with special attention to the infected families.



The Deputy Superintendent of Police joins distribution

our neighbouring territory, Pondicherry, considered a safer zone until recently, is on the verge of becoming a danger zone. If the virus spreads, there will be more restrictions and the mobility of the people will be further controlled. Though everyone will be impacted, continued financial support for marginalised families is particularly important, otherwise they are subject to the high rates of interest demanded by money lenders. We also plan to help people without documentation to enroll in government assistance schemes, and we plan to supply masks to school children when government schools open again.

In other words, our COVID relief work will continue for a considerable time to come.

Anbu, Bindu for AVAG

Covid-19 Relief Expenditure till 31st May 2020

Type	Families	Amount	Total	Funding
Migrants & Aged - mostly non ration card holders in AV neighbouring villages phase 1	335	1 000	3 35 000	AVAG Covid Relief Fund
Sanitation workers in various Panchayats - phase 1	76	400	30 400	AVAG Covid Relief Fund
Single women, Aged & Poorest families in AV neighbouring villages	2 775	500	13 87 000	AVAG Covid Relief Fund
All families in Kuilapalayam & Lakshmiapuram	676	250	1 69 000	AVAG Covid Relief Fund
Villages with virus-containment zones	376	400	1 50 400	AVAG Covid Relief Fund
Bank transfers to the poorest SHG members - phase 1	355	500	1 77 500	Udhayam Women's Federation
Volunteers to the Police and Home Guards	80	325	26 000	AVAG Covid Relief Fund
Women SHG members	3 750	250	9 37 500	50% Covid Fund - 50% Udhayam Women's Federation
Total	8 423		32 05 700	

Direct costs related to distribution, excluding staff costs

For more on the Coronavirus lockdown impact on the Auroville bioregion visit https://vimeo.com/423915395?fbclid=IwAR2Y9rPjYnByXX5X_D8PPV7A-QnZY_qOSXVp4Kp93iCaw2i-vNAPfm-PAYs



More than a number

The Coast India Initiative is a national work of civil society organizations concerned with the welfare of vulnerable migrant populations. Aurovillian Bindu along with other volunteers formed the Tamil Nadu team of Coast India, and here she shares her work.

Let me begin by confessing my failures. The failures that haunt me, each night, when I retire to bed... the decisions that I had made and subtly pushed back into the depths of my memories. For my days have been a fervid blur of solving problems. Disaster management is essentially engaging in triage. One quickly decides on priorities, does the best one can, and moves on. For every case that I act on, there are ten more demanding my attention. But, in the quiet of the night, my conscience haunts me...

The first email stated: "Sapan Kumar is asking for Rs. 70 000/- for medicine and help with rent." "Out of the question," I dismissively responded. Having taken the responsibility to check and help in the welfare of 98 000 stranded migrant workers from Jharkhand, I was not going to dole out 90% of the funds at my disposal on this one, single case. But then my dogged team of volunteers, networked across different cities, persisted. Someone physically checked on him and reported that Sapan Kumar had brought his aged father who was suffering from cancer to the Apollo Hospital in Chennai in March for treatment. His plan was to go back home to Jharkhand after the chemotherapy session and then come back in a month's time for the next treatment. But then, without warning, there was a lockdown imposed by the government on March 25 and the family was stuck in Chennai, paying Rs. 1000 rent for a small room. In a tale that is familiar, first the money ran out, and then the food. But with a chemotherapy session also due soon, Sapan was desperate. Even his relatives pleaded on his behalf, saying that even if they were to liquidate all the capital of Sapan's street-food stall back home, Sapan would not be able to meet his expenses. I spent less than an hour on the case-made enquiries about free shelters in Chennai where an older cancer patient could be safe or an NGO that could lend Sapan at least part of the money, but when no one replied to my queries, I moved on, deserting Sapan to his plight.

Or, rather I tried to move on, despite the persistent whispers in my head of the sheer injustice of it all.

There were more such cases. Many more. 9 000 patients from Jharkhand in Vellore alone where the Jharkhand Medical Hospital offered good medical services at subsidised prices. Again, it was the tariff of the rooms that crippled them, for even though the treatment was over, they could not go back home. One such patient was my first case: Abdul Ansari, who was stuck there with

almost 2 000 km away. And when we called our contact whose number we had, all he wanted us to do was to look for his cousin who, after a police encounter, had been separated from the group. It took another round of calls before we located Yadav and ensured his safety.

There were days when I refused to even accept pleas for food. Late one evening, Mita texted me in agitation saying that the case she had brought to our notice a few days ago had gone unheeded. Given the deluge of challenges that poured into my inbox each day, I could not immediately place her request for help. But when I heard it was a group of 60 people in Tiruppur who had apparently completely run out of food, I ruled out cash handouts, saying that what I could give would barely last a day. Luckily, Rakesh could save the day again, getting the Tehsildar to take care of the group. Rakesh only asked for Rs. 1 000 for a woman in that group who was due to deliver a baby within a week. I felt guilty thinking Rs. 1 000 will hardly suffice to ensure natal care under lockdown, but the couple was so touched to receive this small donation... they said they would manage with that amount and would not need more. I was humbled by their response. I felt it was we and not they who had received a gift.

Not all want our help. Some are angry and brusque on the phone and turn down our offers, saying that they have managed to survive so long without the help of any NGO or government, and they can do so now. They are tired of being called, of being repeatedly questioned, with succour arriving too late or never. Even then, we do not close the case, for who knows, if the lockdown gets extended again, even these self-respecting workers that the system has beggared may need to reach out to us again.

We do not see the migrant workers as victims or beneficiaries. The Migrant India app that we use (developed for this cause), they are called help-seekers. And some of my team members have developed a deep friendship with the people that they reached out to. One confessed that a young boy, one of those who had dared to start on the long journey home by foot, is her saviour: whenever she feels down and overwhelmed, helpless, she calls him and his youthful optimism never fails to cheer him up.

It is that human touch, and my team's joy at every little achievement or sorrow when we fail, that makes this job worthwhile. For behind the number of the 120 million migrant workers stranded all over India, or the 98 000 from Jharkhand that have been stranded in Tamil Nadu, is another human being. And a genuine conversation, stripped naked of all socio-economic standing, religious or cultural differences – a simple call to enquire how the other person is coping – is one of the most meaningful things in life.

Part Two: The Digital Discrimination

Shortly, after we had started our work, we were informed that the Jharkhand Government had developed an app, Sahayata (meaning "help"), and all stranded migrants could get Rs. 1 000 by sending their details on this Android app. The app was announced on April 16 and had a deadline of April 29 for people to apply. Shortly after its release, the app crashed. The government fixed the glitches and on April 29, we heard that the deadline had been extended till April 30. I worked overtime, crowd sourcing over 100 volunteers and asking them to spread the word by reaching out to 20 migrant workers each. The Kafkaesque catch was that the workers had to first uninstall the previous version of the app, delete the cache, install the new version, upload their Aadhar card, and then take and upload a selfie with the GPS on to verify their current location. In those early days, I was brimming with good-willed enthusiasm. I used Google-Translate to translate all these instructions into Hindi and my dedicated team of volunteers send the message out through WhatsApp. But till date, I have not got confirmation from a single person that they actually received money by applying through the Sahayata app. They called us back, perplexed, asking when they would get the money. We had no answers to give.

Expectations were again high that day of April 29th, for the Ministry of Home Affairs had issued a government order that allowed for the movement of workers back home. Even with Google at our fingertips and resource persons across India connected on WhatsApp, it took hours to decipher the complex orders issued by each state government. If you were stranded in Tamil Nadu and wanted to travel back to Jharkhand, then you had to fill a detailed application form on the



Migrant workers walking back home helped in their journey by Coast India volunteers

government portals of both states. The Jharkhand portal often crashed. The Tamil Nadu portal worked better, but you had to be literate in either English or Tamil in order to use it. Again, a group of volunteers made videos in different regional languages, showing step-by-step, what to fill in on the Tamil Nadu portal.

And then, after a few weeks, it turned out that even if one filled in the registration requirements of both state governments successfully, there was no guarantee that it assured one a place on the train. Trains were highly infrequent and their operation schedules guarded as defensively as a national secret. Every now and then, officials in Chennai would take recommendations from our Coast India volunteers as who to include in the train, but that meant another round of getting information from the migrant workers. This time, we asked them to write down their personal information on a piece of paper, photograph it, and send us an image, which we then entered into an Excel sheet for the government. Persistent dinosaurs in the information age that we are, we collated information of over 2 000 workers and successfully sent them home. But it was all the luck of the draw. And desperate migrants would lose faith in the system and start walking back home in the searing heat, sometimes without even chappals on their feet...

The work continues...

Meantime, the connectivity of the digital age allowed Coast India to expand almost overnight to connect over 250 organizations working all over the country. Our work is with Jharkhand migrants in Tamil Nadu, but typically our contact numbers would get passed around, and we would get calls for help from Odisha or Chattisgarh migrants stuck in our state. Now, being part of a national network, I could just pass these cases on to other volunteer organizations to resolve them. Connected over a WhatsApp group, we could now recommend to migrants which route to take and at what towns they would find food, water, and shelter. In some states, government agencies and NGOs operate shuttle buses and relay services on the highways. But every now and then, migrant workers who were wary of check posts and the police would leave the highway and go off on back country roads. And sometimes I lost track of them. This was the case of Arjun Das. The last conversation I had with him was that he was somewhere in the wilderness in Andhra Pradesh. I begged him to send me a picture of his location, of any sign that he saw, or, if he could, to tag his GPS location. But then he said that his phone battery was running out of power... I never heard back.

I still wait, however, for his call. Hoping against hope. For I do not want him to be another disaster statistic. He was somebody I knew, someone I "walked" with, for a brief time, and someone that I still care for and want home, safely reunited with his family. Even as the work relentlessly drives us on, I still wait for that one call.

Bindu

All names of help-seekers and volunteers have been changed.



The exodus of workers from Indian cities saw entire families leave with all their belongings



Coast India chartered buses to help stranded migrants go back home

his wife and 12-year old girl, begged me for some cash, as the promised cash handouts from the Jharkhand Government had not arrived. I politely demurred. Paying for rent was out of question. I simply did not pick up the phone when I saw Abdul's number, and after a while he stopped calling.

I rationalized it to my team of 30 or so crowd-sourced volunteers: "Look, at the most, we can try to provide food. Or perhaps a bit of cash for anyone who needs to buy medicine or cannot recharge his phone. Nothing else please. Don't feel the need to answer their calls. Just keep going down your list of 50 cases each."

The cases, the requests for help, each day, came thick as flies, and we dealt with them as best as we could. In Chennai, where we had some logistical help on the ground, we would pass the requests to a local team and they would deliver the food. In other places, our only option was to call the government official, the Tehsildar of the block, or the local police in charge and ask them for help. Every day there was a challenge to be dealt with, a fire to be put out, and as May rolled in, the stranded workers were hungry and tired. In Thoothukudi, there was a clash between hundreds of factory workers staying at one camp and the police. The mistrust of the workers for the police or their employers was not always justified, but often high, and in Thoothukudi, Tiruppur, Chengalpatt, we had to speak to both parties to calm them down and work out arrangements so basic needs of food and shelter could be met. Sometimes we failed or were simply not quick enough.

One such group started out on foot from Chennai city, but they made it only to Perangalathur, on the outskirts of the metropolitan area before they all got detained by the local police. My ace volunteer Rakesh, and not for the first time, had to negotiate till almost midnight to ensure that the basic needs of the group could be met. There were several episodes to this particular incident before it was finally resolved with the stranded workers being sent home in trains and buses after a few days.

Another group did make it all the way by foot to Jharkhand,

Roma Hira

In the late afternoon of April 25th, Roma Hira peacefully left her body at her home in Dana due to renal failure. She would have turned 73 in September this year. Her remains were cremated on the morning of April 26th at Auroville's mandapam in Adventure community.

Roma was perhaps best known as the person behind Roma's Kitchen, one of the best of Auroville's eateries with a reputation for serving gourmet Indian food. Every evening, seated in a quiet corner of the restaurant, she would keep watch over her staff and clients, guarding her restaurant's reputation and welcoming friends and guests. One such evening a few years ago, *Auroville Today* asked her for her 'story', the story of one of Auroville's pioneers who, more than 35 years ago, decided to make Auroville her home. Here it is published for the first time.

The true inspiration for my coming to Auroville was my mother. Not The Mother – though you can argue she had a hand in it – but my own physical mother. She and my father used to visit the Sri Aurobindo Ashram every alternate year and had darshans from The Mother. In February 1968, my mother attended the founding ceremony of Auroville. She came back glowing, with the absolute conviction that this was my place and that I should go there. But in my mind I had a picture of an ashram as a walled-in institution and I asked her why on earth I would do that? I wanted to enjoy life, and perhaps, on my retirement, go to Auroville. My mother insisted that Auroville was my place. I thought 'aaghh' and left it at that.

Then came 1975. My father had passed away, my mother had developed some mind problem and I had to bring her to the Ashram. And then something strange happened: the moment I entered the main Ashram building, I knew I was home – and I knew I would come back. I stayed in Pondicherry for ten days, and met Prem Malik. He brought me to Auroville on June 2nd, 1975, now almost 41 years ago. That day in Auroville was another epiphany: it was like a second birth.

After six weeks, I had to bring my mother back to Calcutta. But 1975 had become a turning point in my life. From that year till 1986, I would visit the Ashram and Auroville four, five or even ten times a year, sometimes for a day, sometimes for a week. And Aurovilians started visiting me in Calcutta: Prem Malik, Roger Anger, Roger Toll, Deepti, and small Patrice to name but a few. Roger Toll came to distribute Satprem's trilogy, small Patrice to work on *Mother's Agenda*. And soon, one room in my house became 'the room of books'. And in 1980, when there was an Auroville exhibition in Calcutta, eight or nine Aurovilians would come and stay with me.

But was Auroville my place? I met a man from Mysore who claimed to have the ability to make an astrological chart from one's thumb impression. He gave me an inkpad, asked me to put my thumb impression, and drew a chart. He then started telling me of my past, in which I was not interested – I wanted to know about the future! I pressed him for some insights. He answered that at the age of 39 I would go to live in a foreign country, at the seaside, among foreign people. I replied, 'Not possible, I'll never leave my country'. But he was right: at the age of 39 I came to live at the seaside among white people – but not in a foreign country but in Auroville in India!

On September 11, 1986, the night of my birthday, I made the decision to join Auroville. I decided to follow the rules and met with the Entry Group, with Fabian, Prem Malik, and Annemarie who were some of its members. One of them looked at me and asked, 'What are you doing here? Aren't you Aurovilian already?' For my face had become quite familiar. But, of course, I had to go through the process. Perhaps coincidentally, I became Aurovilian on June 2nd 1987, the date I had first come to Auroville 12 years earlier. When I wrote to my mother that I had decided to stay in Auroville, she wrote back that it was the best decision I'd ever made.

Flavours and fragrances

Two things have always been strong in my life: food and perfumes. I was born in Calcutta during the 1947 riots. As they couldn't take my mother to a hospital, the doctor came home and used our dining table to deliver me. I still have that table.

That dining table was a focus of our house, for my mother was the perfect cook. If I could achieve 50% of her art of cooking, I would consider myself very good. Our immediate neighbour were a Parsi couple who were caterers. They catered in bulk, cooking in huge copper pots, and I, as a one-year old, used to clamber in and out of their pots. So there are the origins of my food fascination.

The perfume side came from my father. He and his brothers were amongst the first importers of fine French perfumes in India. One of my favourites was *Soir de Paris* (Evening in Paris), a fragrance by Bourjois, in a cobalt blue bottle with a white cap. It still exists. As a child, I would fill up the bathtub, empty a bottle of perfume in it, add some blocks of ice and then soak in it for hours. The fascination with fragrances never left me: today my favourite is *Dune* from Dior.

My father also imported bath salts, and, as an aside, laxatives from an English company called Westminster Laboratories. One looked like chewing gum, the other, called Bonamint, like a piece of chocolate. As a child, I could, of course, not resist the temptation to freely distribute them to people I didn't like.

After I finished high school in Calcutta, I began to work for a batik company, travelling, like my father, the length and breadth of the country by bus and train, with a bag full of samples. My father also taught me the rudiments of storekeeping – if I pestered him too much, he would send me packing to the store, where I learned storekeeping and billing.

Encens d'Auroville, Aurelec and Hidesign

My relationship with Encens d'Auroville, Auroville's first agarbatti industry, started in 1977 during one of my visits. Small Patrice, Paul Pinthon, Claude Arpi, Mark André, Alain Monnier, Alain Antoine... they all started off there. I remember going in there and something caught my heart, and it hasn't left till now. There was an immediate and intense connection. At the time, they only made incense and candles for use by Auroville. During one of my first visits, I told Paul he should go commercial. He gave me a very nasty look, because 'commerce' was a dirty word those days. [Paul has become one of Auroville's most successful businessmen since, eds.]

But it would take years before I would join Encens, now known as Maroma. When I joined Auroville in 1986, I first started a little kitchen inside the old Pour Tous building in Aspiration, selling lunches for Rs 5. Pour Tous, in those days, was run by Jean Pougault and Ann, and Jean Legrand. Those were the days that everybody had to get their groceries from Pondicherry. I suggested they try to get the groceries on consignment basis from B.N. Sons, the shop in Nehru Street opposite the back gate of the Raj Nivas, where today you find Surguru Spot. I approached B.N. Sons. They agreed. And a small 2 x 2 metre corner was transformed into Auroville's first grocery shop. Surbhi and Claire had long before received The Mother's consent for the name Pour Tous and the ensuing envelope system, but this was the first time a groceries store came up in Auroville.

In those days I was house-sitting in many places. One was in Auromodèle, in Alain Bernard and Christine's house. One day, during a very heavy monsoon downpour, Ulli from Aurelec phoned and asked if he could come to talk to me. He came, dripped on Christine's cushions – I remember I got nervous thinking about how Christine might respond – and offered me a job as purchase officer at Aurelec, Auroville's computer company. I didn't know the first thing about computer parts but that was no issue, he said. I would receive training from Nini. The offer was very attractive. I was running a kitchen getting Rs 400 maintenance a month, and here suddenly I would receive substantially more. I accepted and started working for Aurelec in close collaboration with Nini, who became one of my closest friends. My work soon included taking the responsibility for Aurelec's canteen.

Another close friend, this one from the olden days, was Rita. Her family in Calcutta had become my second family. She had come to Pondy and was working for Dilip Kapoor's Hidesign. The link was soon made, and after four years I left Aurelec and joined Hidesign, running its domestic division which then consisted of two shops: the boutique in Nehru Street in Pondicherry and a shop in Bangalore. Soon more shops were opened all over India. I worked closely with Dilip, one of the most market-savvy people I've ever met.

Hidesign also marketed its bags in Auroville's Kalki Boutique in Pondicherry. One day there was an incident and Dilip told me to go solve it. Once again I interacted with Paul. And in the middle of



that difficult discussion, I realised how much I wanted to come back to Auroville and I told him I wanted to work for Maroma. It was one of those times you blurt something out without thinking it through. But it clicked. I resigned from Hidesign, and in May 1994 I joined Maroma, and never left, except for a small period in which I started Roma's Kitchen.

Roma's Kitchen

Running my own restaurant, Roma's Kitchen, was an old dream, which finally came through when the Auromodèle community agreed that I could get the community space built for Auromodèle by a Japanese-French couple. It's running well, but it's not highly profitable as a lot of competition has come up in recent years. To attract more business, I put up a sign board, but after some disgruntled comments from Aurovilians, it disappeared. Today, Roma's Kitchen runs on its good reputation only. But I never made it to the level of my mother. Before she passed away, she would regularly visit Pondicherry and Auroville. When she came, she cooked, and that was a food festival. She was also a professional critic. One day she ate some chapattis I had made. "Almost as good as mine," she commented. I, with my great reputation in Auroville, was deflated. She'd just punctured my ego.

But there have been days where our cooking was unsurpassed. One such day was when Dior launched the perfume *Escale à Pondichéry*. They brought a whole team for the launch and asked us to make them dinner. It was the best dinner I've ever made. We reached a height we've never reached before and may probably never be able to reach again.

So I am doing two jobs, working for Maroma in the perfume business and running Roma's Kitchen. Food and fragrances have remained the mainstays of my life.

I have often been asked for my views on Auroville's future. I must admit I have been a bit selfish, concentrating on my own development because there is so much to work on. So I can't judge the development of Auroville. But if I look at my fellow Aurovilians, I know that what we are trying to do here is something unbelievable. We may be in a situation of two steps forward and one or more steps back, but I've come to truly believe in everybody's aspiration. I feel that everybody has been given a thread, and as long as you follow that thread, it will be ok.

So this is my story. On reflection, I believe that at some time in my life I must have done something correct to land up in Auroville. For I feel very privileged to be here. No, I'm not anxious about my future. The Mother has looked after me so long that I am no longer worried.

As told to Carel

About Auroville Today

Auroville Today is an activity of the Kattidakkal Trust of the Auroville Foundation. The GST number is: 33AAATA0037BXZV

Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 issues :
India: Print + digital edition: Rs. 600
Other countries: Print + digital edition: Rs 3,000 equivalent
Other countries digital only edition: Rs 2,100 equivalent.

There are three ways to subscribe:

1. Through our website. Subscriptions can be ordered and paid on-line through auroville.com and www.auroville.org/avtoday. On-line subscriptions have additional unit charges and bank costs.
2. By bank transfer or cheque. Bank transfer to account # 163101000118 of Auroville Maintenance at ICICI Bank, Auroville Branch, IFSC Code ICIC0001631, Swift Code ICICINBBCTS reference Contribution Auroville Today. Cheques to be sent to Auroville Today payable to Auroville Maintenance, reference: Contribution Auroville Today.
3. By sending your contribution to:

U.K.: Auroville International U.K., c/o John Mulrey, 7 Cubb Field, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP19 7SJ tel. (44) (0)1296 415685 email: john@aviuk.org

Germany: Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49) (0)30-42803150, Fax (49) (0)30-92091376, email: info@auroville.de. GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS, IBAN: DE 1643 0609 6780 1938 9200.

USA: Make checks payable to Auroville International USA, and send to: AVI USA, P.O. Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818, Tel: (831) 425-5620, email: info@aviusa.org, or to: Pondicherry, 12 Tinker St, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: 845-679-2926, email: info@pondi.biz
The Netherlands and Belgium: Auroville International Nederland, Voorhaven 13, 1135 BL, Edam. Email: secretaris@auroville.nu Tel. 0031 6 13053213. Triodos Bank nr 1984.20.927, IBAN NL26TRIO 0198 4209 27, BIC: TRIONL2U

Editorial team:

Alan, Carel, Hilary, Lesley, Mariana, Peter, Valentina. Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel, Valentina. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu. Contact: Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. +91.413.2622572. Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.