

A severe water crisis is expected

"Dear Community, this is to inform you of the water scarcity that Auroville is facing. And though there is still water flowing from our taps, it is important to know that many of our supply wells are showing depleted levels, some are already dry. The summer is still ahead and there is a need of action from all of us to assure our water needs."

The Town Development Council Interface Team, April 2019

The Auroville Town Development Council (TDC) has declared Water Security for Auroville to be its priority and has called on all Auroville residents "to become very, very conscious in our use of this valuable resource," stating that "Water is Life!"

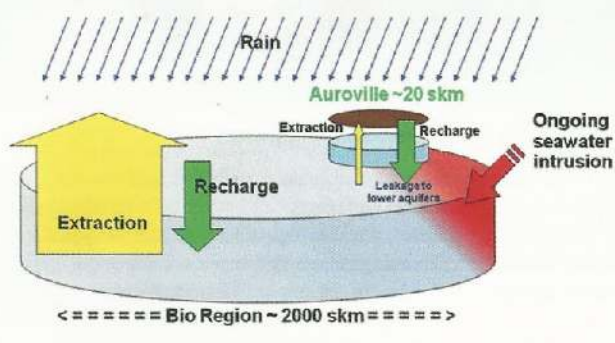
This is not the first time that the alarm bells about water scarcity are sounded. Over the years, *Auroville Today* has published many articles about the need to secure our water needs. Many solutions have been studied. In February 2007, we reported about a proposal to set up a central water organization for a large area around and including Auroville. In March 2013, we reported on the proposal of Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research to capture surface rainwater and use it as a fresh water supply for the Auroville city. In the June-July 2014 issue we reported on other proposals 'to tackle the drought'. And many more articles have appeared since.

But what effectively has been done? According to Gilles Boulicot, one of Auroville's water experts who has been living in Auroville for the last 25 years, the answer is a depressing "almost nothing."

The emergency, he says, has been building up for years. "But no strategy has ever been decided by the community and successive TDCs have not acknowledged the situation or taken adequate actions: most investments have been on water supply systems. But where is the water to be supplied? In fact, the community has been sleeping over it and probably will only wake up when the tap runs dry. Worse, the water budget for the last financial year has been substantially reduced to hardly anything. There were many reasons for this, but the bare fact remains: access to water is no longer secure. To top it, an Auroville Water Master Plan doesn't exist and neither a plan of action of what to do in an emergency."

Auroville Context

Water Security cannot be achieved through ground water alone



Gilles is skeptical about the call of the Town Development Council 'to be conscious of our water use'. Promoting water saving measures such as installing drip irrigation systems and water saving showers is all very well, he says, but they are no more than drops on a hot plate. "Even if all of Auroville would stop pumping groundwater, it would not change the scenario. For around Auroville, more than 6,000 wells supply water from the same aquifer. Auroville is a minor water user. While the efforts made by Auroville to recharge ground water are very valuable, the extraction by far exceeds the recharge. Groundwater levels are going down and will continue to go down."

Emergency measures

We are in crisis; wells are falling dry. Two years ago, Auroville faced a similar threatening situation. Then, everybody managed somehow. But today, says Gilles, the situation is worse. For the groundwater level on which all of Auroville depends is now much lower than two years ago – and it keeps going down.

What emergency measures can be taken? The best wells of Auroville are situated in the Aspiration and Auromodèle areas, but Auroville does not own the lands connecting these communities to the city and there is a village in between. In the absence of a pipeline connecting these wells to Auroville, the only option is to use a small fleet of water tankers and start ferrying water to places where the wells have run dry.

Gilles mentions the situation in the Residential Zone. "Auroville's largest collective water distribution system which serves 42 communities and about 1,000 people is the 'elephant' water tank in the Residential Zone. It gets its water from five bore wells which are located in the same area and tap into the same aquifers. One well is now out of use as the water level has dropped too much, another is full of silt. So only three wells supply the system, but meanwhile more buildings are being constructed. That's not great. Ideally, we should connect other wells to this system. The problem is that nobody wants to share 'their' water. The concept of mutual benefit is not understood."

He gives the example of the Matrimandir, which is Auroville's largest water user. It has three wells and large underground storage facilities, but the executives have so far refused to share 'their' water. "The Water Group is in discussions to convince them to use recycled water instead of groundwater for their gardens. This is possible as a few months ago a centralized wastewater collection system for eight communities in the Residential Zone was finally completed [a video on this system can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/331749431>, eds.] The black and grey wastewater is collected, treated, and recycled. It is redistributed to the eight communities for their garden use and the excess water is collected in a 200 m³ storage tank close to the Matrimandir. If the Matrimandir could start using this recycled water for their gardens, their wells could be connected to other distribution systems and be used for drinking water purposes. This would require an overhaul of Matrimandir's water distribution network, but I do not think there is much choice, especially if you consider that they plan to build new gardens which will also require a lot of water."

Interconnecting wells is also a priority need in other areas of Auroville. If funds would be made available, says Gilles, we could within a time frame of two years develop more reliable supply networks, e.g. in Centre Field and Auromodèle areas, in the Cultural Zone, in the Industrial Zone, the Service Area and in Auromodèle.

The missing Master Plan and the need for water governance

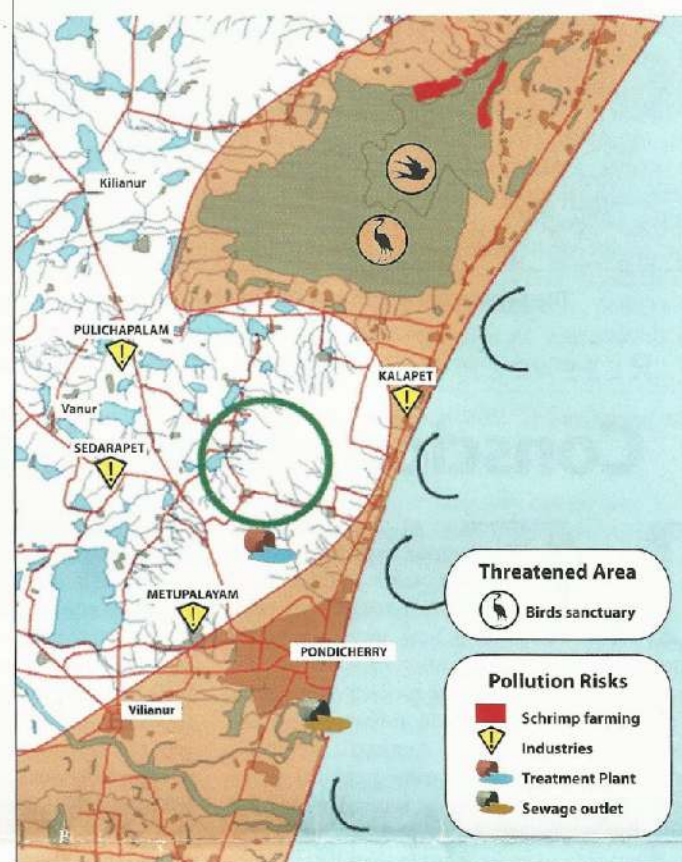
The lack of vision and agreement on what is to be done is now harming Auroville. There has, in fact, never been a coordinated effort to look at the Auroville water situation and take the required action. The cupboards of the TDC are full of studies, but what is missing is an Auroville Water Master Plan and a 'water authority' which not only approves the plan but also is charged with implementing it. Otherwise, says Gilles, we'll have yet another document gathering dust in some cupboard.

"There is no strategy, no plan of action, no group in charge," he says exasperatedly. "I am concerned because I know the situation is alarming. But the level of awareness in Auroville is extremely low. How can any group approve a new building when its water supply cannot be secured? How can we convince people that they do not 'own' their well and have to share it with others? Which group is in charge of metering and maintaining Auroville's 176 wells, and which group will replace leaking underground supply systems which Auroville has plenty? Who tells someone that he's using too much water? Which group takes responsibility for regularly testing the water availability and quality of our wells? Who in Auroville warns the residents that the water of their well is turning acidic or contains e-coli bacteria? Who advises about proper home purification systems? The community has to get its act together, constitute a group, give it a mandate and authority,



The centralized waste water collection system in the Residential Zone

Salinization of the aquifers



and allocate funds for all these issues!" It's a good thing, he says, that the Auroville Water Group, constituted by the TDC, is making tentative efforts in this direction.

The coastal situation

Auroville's best wells are in the Auromodèle and Aspiration communities close to the sea. This is strange considering that all around this area sea water intrusion into the aquifer is happening at an alarming rate. Gilles points to a map of the region which shows in an ominous red-brown colour the large area where salinisation of the groundwater has been recorded. "The borders of this map are an approximation as we have insufficient information about what's going on exactly. In the Cuddalore area south of Auroville, salinity has been found as far as 15 kilometres inland. One reason is that many agricultural wells pump water 24/7 [the Tamil Nadu government has exempted farmers from paying for electricity for farming, eds.] Other reasons are prowling urbanization, infrastructure development, uncontrolled pollution, and lack of sanitation facilities. All these are contributing to an increasingly fragile eco-system."

The area between Auroville and the sea is somewhat better off, most probably due to Auroville's reforestation and rainwater harvesting efforts. Yet, the ground water level in the Auromodèle area is also going down. For many years it was at sea level, but since a couple of years, it is below. This hasn't yet affected the water supply as the groundwater storage there is very deep, but salinisation is bound to happen. Auroville's beach communities are already affected. The saline ground water at the Quiet Healing Centre is now purified using a small reverse osmosis plant. This will become necessary for the other beach communities in future.

Alternative sources of supply

As we can no longer exclusively rely on groundwater, we need to develop alternative sources of water supply. These are recycled wastewater, harvested rainwater and, as a last resort, desalinated water.

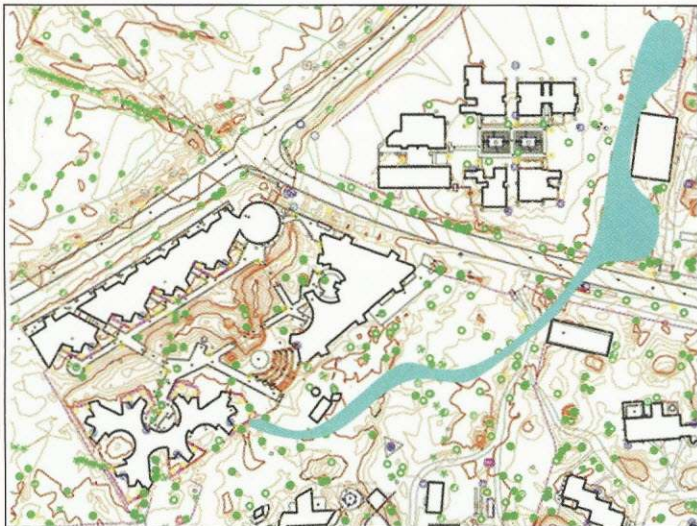
Waste water treatment installations are not new to Auroville. There are 65 of them in operation, 62 as stand-alone systems for single houses or community, two with shared facilities as well as the largest one for the eight communities mentioned earlier.

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As most of the wastewater is treated but not recycled, there is a large scope for improvement.

Rainwater harvesting in the urban area offers even more opportunities, says Gilles. "Urban areas generate massive runoff. Perceived as a nuisance in urban areas, runoff is actually a precious resource. The idea is to catch rainwater as much as possible and use it for all purposes. As underground storage is prohibitively expensive and we have to develop rainwater harvesting on a large scale, I have proposed we store it in the open, by creating bio-swales and open storage tanks in the urban landscape, starting



The swale concept in the Residential Zone

"There is enough water; the Aurovilians will have to use their ingenuity to collect it and make use of it."

The Mother, in conversation with Tim Rees, 1972

in the Residential Zone where the density is relatively high.

The water only needs filtration treatment before being distributed in the existing supply network or through a separate one. This alone would reduce the fresh water requirements by 75%. This idea is not new: It was used in urban centres of India during the Harappa civilization period some 5 000 years ago. What is new is to integrate such system in a modern urban context."

Desalinated water is yet another possibility. As reported in *Auroville Today*, the Auroville-related company of Varuna Pvt. Ltd. has started the process for obtaining permissions for erecting a small, 5 million litres a day, desalination plant. But the plant is not expected to become operational for the next four to five years.

The Matrimandir lake

Would the envisaged Matrimandir Lake have a role to play in the city's water supply? Gilles firmly believes so. "The lake could become a large storage area to supply water for gardening and even drinking water, if properly cleaned. We studied the matter in 2012 and proposed a system where the lake would be built in a kind of terrace form and have different water levels according to the season and availability of rainwater. It would be filled from water runoff around the lake. Each terraced section of the lake would be fed by a dedicated drainage system extending through the city, in

accordance with the topography, with water overflowing to the terrace below. But the proposal has never been taken up. The lake will also generate a very large overflow in the monsoon, which should be collected in a secondary tank. But all this, for the time being, is mere theory. My main concern at this stage is that the proposed lake doesn't become a liability."



The reverse-osmosis desalination plant at the Quiet Healing Centre

In conclusion

We don't have time to spare. The crisis requires immediate action: we need to implement emergency measures, agree to start a plan of action towards water security, start drafting a Water Master Plan, constitute an Auroville Water Authority and allocate the necessary funds to improve the existing supply systems and develop alternative sources. "We need to invest 3 to 5 crores each year for the next few years," says Gilles. "And only then can we talk about Auroville approaching sustainability in its water management."

In conversation with Carel

RESEARCH

Conscious food choices at Pour Tous Distribution Centre

Members of Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC), the Auroville community's food cooperative, have recently been given a new way to monitor their consumption and develop more sustainable patterns. The Consciously project, created by Talam (the Auroville-based software development unit that manages Aurostat), has been analysing PTDC data to create graphical representations of the trends in consumption over the past five years and to develop a community response for a more sustainable lifestyle.

Divish Gupta, a Talam volunteer, explains, "The goal of Aurostat is to develop indicators which measure Auroville's progress and well-being as a community. And we thought that one major aspect of this was sustainability, especially regarding food." Divish first came to Auroville in October 2017 and was struck by the experience of visiting PTDC. When he returned a year ago to join Talam, his earlier inspiration found practical application. He was later joined in the project by Shubham Bansal, Kanika Agarwal, who are also specialised in computer science and data analytics, and Garvit Sahdev, who has a background in business management. They reached out to PTDC as well as to the Farm Group to find ways in which they could tackle the question of food sustainability.

Anandi, the manager of PTDC, has warmly welcomed the Consciously project because "PTDC is not here for commerce; we are here to do something different, and so it made sense." She elaborates further, saying, "When I go to bed at night, I think of all the plastic waste that we are creating as distributors. So when they came with this initiative, I could see the potential."

On 12 March, Anandi, Kanika, and Shubham

gave a presentation called "Data-driven insights on our progress towards conscious consumption" to the PTDC community where they presented statistical analysis and data visualisations of the total consumption at PTDC. The event also served as an important opportunity to present PTDC's history and model. Anandi explains that this was necessary to remind people that the central concept of PTDC is meeting basic needs collectively through individuals contributing toward the cooperative purchasing of goods. "We started 13 years ago with 156 members and now we have 1,510 members. We've had incredible growth, but we have to keep repeating the reasons behind PTDC because people forget."

Introducing the Consciously platform

In April, the Consciously team launched consciously.auroville.org.in, which combines a personal dashboard and a discussion forum. Through the dashboard, users get individualised tracking of their consumption of products from PTDC, broken down to show the percentages of local Auroville products, organic goods, and the products that result in plastic waste. Using the Apache Superset web application, this data is visualised as graphs and charts that allow users to observe their progress toward more sustainable consumption and identify their weak spots.

To complement this data and enable users to change their patterns of consumption, the platform also has a discussion forum where members of the community can share their goals and ideas with each other to progress toward more sustainable consumption patterns. With an attractive user interface powered by the open-source Discourse software, the forum is divided into the categories of Goal Board, Questions & Challenges, Idea Box, and Offerings.



Millet, grains and pulses are available from bins

The Consciously team has opened the platform for the first trial users, and the response has been overwhelmingly positive. "When we launched it, we thought we would get maybe fifty people, but within two days we had seventy to eighty sign ups," Divish says.

This pilot group is particularly pivotal because new discussion forums can be plagued by inertia, when active users are few in number. An earlier attempt in 2018 to create an Auroville-wide Discourse discussion forum never took off as few people made the leap from the community's existing intranet, Auronet. "It takes time," Divish explains. "Users are not going to post a question when they are not seeing other people posting questions."

Consequently, the Consciously team is actively supporting the pilot users to help the forum obtain the vibrancy it needs to be self-sufficient. Divish says, "In the next fifteen days, we are meeting with the Consciously users one-on-one to see the kinds of questions and ideas they have. Then we want to follow up with them so that they post their questions, and we want to follow up with the people who have answers, so that they post answers. Maybe after two weeks, after there is enough buzz on the platform, we can open it for all."

Garvit recalls, "When we showed people their dashboard, they saw the quantity of plastic waste they are generating and non-organic products they are consuming. But somewhere they are stuck. Either on the alternatives side by having no sustainable alternatives, or on the usage side when they don't know how to use the alternatives, such as cooking with local vegetables. So the point is to bring the community together to solve each other's challenges."

Next steps toward sustainability

With the Consciously platform now live, the Consciously team continues to reach out to stakeholders in Auroville and to build a product list of

what is available locally. When meeting with Auroville farmers and other local food suppliers, the team wants to promote the platform as a space for dialogue between suppliers and end users.

As an example, Divish mentions, "When meeting a farmer yesterday, we learned that what they are producing is still driven by what people want to eat. Because people want tomatoes, they have to grow tomatoes, even though they are tough to grow here." The Consciously team therefore wants to amplify the voices of these farmers as they try to educate their end users about more sustainable options.

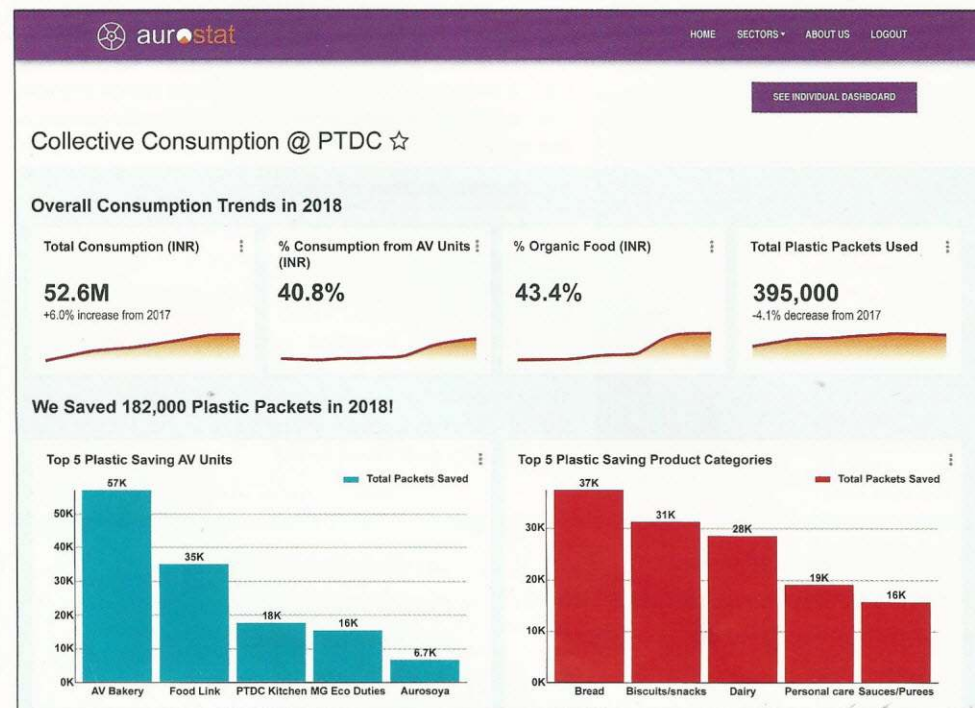
PTDC is also broadening the availability of bulk goods and products free of plastic packaging at an impressive rate. It is increasing the number of barrels for rice, grains, and pulses. Initial steps have already been taken to see how to provide toiletries and commercial biscuits in bulk as well. "There has been a lot of support from the community for the change to bulk distribution," says Anandi.

Next on PTDC's agenda is getting an additional electricity supply to allow for a refrigerated drinks dispenser. This will reduce the dependency on plastic bottles. "Our objective is to have no single-use packaging at all, or at least only paper," says Anandi.

With the Consciously dashboard in place, the shift to more sustainable patterns, both for individuals and the collective, will be more easy to track. "Showing people their dashboard of consumption at PTDC is a starting point, but it can't be scaled up to include every shop in Auroville," says Garvit. "In the long term, it is about creating constant awareness, so that even if a person picks up something in plastic packaging from another shop they will still be aware of the impact."

"We have a long way to go still," Anandi concurs, "but I think that in general our users are becoming more sustainable in their own right. And it's very nice to see people coming up with their own initiatives, too."

Hilary



Auroville youth and peer education

Auroville and local youth are being trained in the Y-PEER methodology by the Auroville Peer Education Network (APEN) that enables them to help their peers deal with the challenges of life here.

Juan Andrés was born in Chile to parents who were psychologists. He began studying medicine because he wanted to understand the body as well as the mind. However, he was disappointed by the prevailing medical paradigm and eventually dropped out of medical school. But while there he started working with the International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFMSA) which dealt with topics like public health, medical education, sexual and reproductive health, human rights and refugees.

The Standing Committee on Reproductive Health including HIV/AIDS (SCORA) of the IFMSA organized trainings for its members by the Y-PEER organization, which had been set up by the United Nations Population Fund to encourage peer education regarding sexual issues, reproductive health and use and abuse of drugs. Juan Andrés was enthusiastic about the approach and subsequently became an advanced Y-PEER trainer and the focal point of Y-PEER in Chile.

Meanwhile, he began studying psychology. After graduating, he worked for some years as a psychologist in the Chilean Institute of Integrative Psychotherapy (ICPSI) before deciding to leave Chile and travel with his former partner to Asia. Last year, they arrived in Auroville to stay.

Why did you decide to leave Chile?

Juan Andrés: The approach of the ICPSI was refreshing because we were trying to see what psychological approach worked best for different cases and for different situations, but I realised that the support I could give to my patients was limited because they were subject to so many social, political and economic factors that I had no control over. We had to work too much with coping mechanisms; I felt like I was just putting on patches rather than doing the real work.

Also, my work with Y-PEER in Chile didn't progress because there is no concept of peer education in my country: the approach is too top-down, paternalistic.

My partner at that time and I shared many idealistic approaches, we were trying to live sustainably and were on a spiritual path, so we decided we wanted to try to live somewhere else less limited by the social, political and economic context of Chile.

None of our plans had included Auroville. We travelled first to Southeast Asia but felt overwhelmed by the material unconsciousness and began considering India. However, we did not feel ready for the raw India, so we looked for a place that was a safer bubble, and Auroville appeared on our screens.

We didn't know anything about Sri Aurobindo or The Mother but on my first day here I went to an exhibition on the first floor of the Visitors Center where there were images illustrating quotes of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. I could not believe what I was reading: it was like getting to know my own unknown spiritual wisdom. After that, I thought this place really is something and I wanted to find out more.

How did you come to use your Y-PEER expertise in Auroville?

After started to work in Santé as a psychotherapist, I began hearing parents' and teachers' concerns about teenagers who had sexual issues, drug issues, psychological issues etc. I felt their distress and a certain hopelessness. They were saying they had no clue about what to do with the kids because they felt so distant from them.

We were wondering how Santé could help but then it struck me that the Y-PEER methodology could work, although I couldn't be certain as I didn't yet know enough about the social context here. So I went to YouthLink, who warmly welcomed me and the idea and they referred me to people who were already working with teenagers. When I explained the Peer Education concept to them, I got very positive feedback.

I decided to go for it. I found somebody with some experience who could co-facilitate with me and we started trying to apply this methodology Aurovilian-style.

Why are some Auroville teenagers having these "problems"?

It is very special for them to be brought up with these ideals and vision but I think kids here have a hard time accurately recognising and describing their feelings. Actually, I don't think this is just confined to the teenagers. Adults also find it very hard to talk about their feelings because I think this attempt of going directly into the spiritual path may be somehow bypassing the self, so people don't necessarily deal consciously with their feelings and emotions.

So while Auroville's ideals are calling us to push our boundaries, there is a need for assistance in working with the vital and the mental elements of the being: I don't think everybody can just jump into the supramental.

These kids understand the vision but they also have a very high sensitivity to what is going on around them, so they see how far the adults can fall short of the ideals. In their eyes this can be hypocrisy, so they may get frustrated and rebel.

The first element in the rebellion could be saying "I cannot trust these people, so I'm not putting myself out there". They can become introverted. If they feel they cannot share their feelings, it can be much harder to process their emotions and they may not know how to deal with themselves: this is the pressure cooker they can have inside them. This could take different forms of expression, like issues in relating to others or drug abuse, but these are all just symptoms of a less conscious state that lacks integration.

I learned that even a few years ago the older kids would watch over the younger kids but in the last few years the age groups apparently became very segregated: now teenagers only mingle with people of their own age. So everybody is on the same level, and if the only people they can go to are their peers who have the same level of ignorance and lack of resources, they might receive a lot of misguided advice which may put them in potentially damaging situations.

How can Y-PEER help?

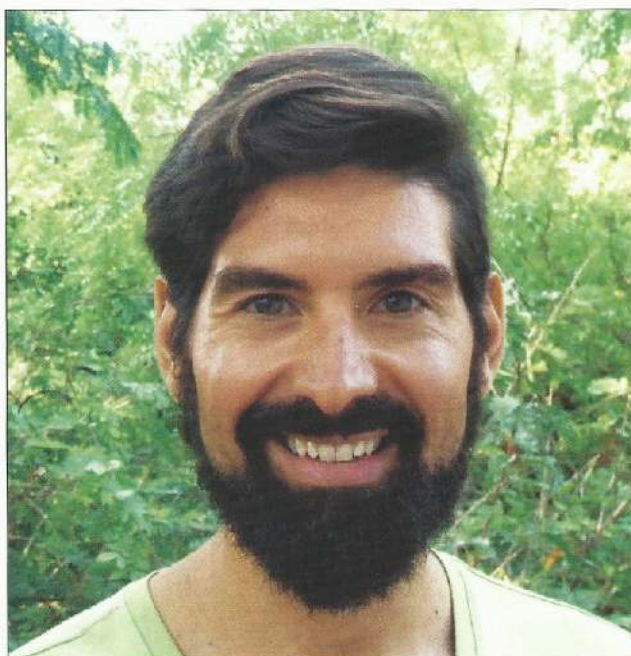
The idea is to empower young people to help each other and to assume positive leadership roles in their peer group. This is particularly important when there is a general distrust of adult advice, or when adults tend not to know what to do with the youth, as is the case in Auroville. These Peer Education trainings allow young people to convey important information to each other in a much simpler way than having to spend years learning content. You can spend just a few weeks or months learning through trainings and your practice as a Peer Educator how to do it in a contextualised and empathetic way, opening spaces to go deeper through developing trust.

Y-PEER trainings give essentially a methodology. It helps people understand an effective way to deliver information in order to create motivation and change behaviour by connecting with the resources available. Information, motivation, behaviour, resources: these are the 'four pillars'. This approach can be applied to several different situations but it is most often associated with aspects of sexual and reproductive health and rights, life skills, drugs use and abuse and psychosocial issues like discrimination or bullying.

What training do the young people receive?

APEN has done two Peer Education trainings in Auroville so far, involving about 40 people from the ages of 16 to 35 from diverse cultures and backgrounds, including that of the bioregion. Y-PEER has developed training manuals but we have adapted some of the exercises to the Auroville context by using situations that would be familiar for young people here. I complement the discussions and insights with my psychology background.

Attendees go through three levels of development. Firstly, there is the individual level in which they reflect upon themselves. The trainings' techniques and safe space allow them to reassess their identity, attitudes and value system and to define their mission in becoming a peer educator.



Juan Andrés

Once they are comfortable enough with their identity and the life skills they are acquiring, they can feel more prepared to explore the social level. They learn to identify and understand situations like bullying or detecting use of words or communication styles that can be discriminatory or emotionally damaging, and begin to see that they can do something about them. They can team up with other peer educators to organise themselves at a party and just be there on the lookout, or try to have a conversations with people when they see behaviour that might negatively impact others. This requires skills and gets better with practice. One of the very basic tools they learn is active listening, acknowledgement and being supportive rather than pushing people into doing what you want them to do or think is right. They also learn to use non-moralistic language and to deliver information in a way that is empathetic and related to the specific context.

The third level is the structural one. When they are feeling confident enough about the other two levels, they can start creating and delivering education sessions for their peers using the four pillars we talked about. They need to know what information they are going to give, which motivation they want to trigger, the attitudes they want to foster and how to connect with the available resources. They need to approach this in a very contextual way by assessing their target audience and understanding cultural and age particularities, etc. They should also be clear about what they are doing this for, what would be the expected outcome, and be able to design the best methods to achieve this. One of the strongest techniques we practice is theatre-based peer education, but they are free to invent and add others, a process that is overseen and supported by the whole network.

This is because you need a certain level of confidence to be able to design and deliver peer education sessions, which is why we do the trainings and hold monthly progress meetings with all peer educators to assess where they are at all three levels. The support factor is crucial, which is why the network aspect of the APEN is so important.

As a result of the team building and deep sharings, the trust level among the participants in each APET is quite high. For most of them, they are opening up much more than they've ever opened up before in their lives and, for sure, everybody has gone beyond their individual comfort zones.

Is the assumption that most of the young people's problems can be solved on a peer-to-peer basis?

Not necessarily. If you are experiencing more peer-related issues, like discrimination or bullying, where the first intervention is more needed from peers, you may dilute most of the "problem" by having social interventions from peer educators: this can tackle the root of several issues. But if, for example, you're already experiencing deeper psychological distress, it would be preferable to come and see me, for example, because as a psychotherapist I have knowledge and resources in the field that your peers do not have access to. In this sense, being able to trust an adult again, when they may have not felt really supported by adults in the past, can be a huge relief and very healing for them. Actually, peer education serves more as a preventive strategy and for early detection of issues.

But doesn't peer education challenge the traditional assumption that adults are the source of wisdom and guidance for the young? And may this not create conflict with the traditional 'authorities'?

The difference is that we are dealing with topics that nobody else is talking about, taboo topics that usually parents won't even talk about, like sexuality, drugs and gender roles, so we're not taking anybody's role away; we are just taking a role that is vacant.

But it is true that peer education does challenge certain traditional attitudes. For example, we try to be non-moralistic, context-based, and to avoid the dualism of 'this is good, this is bad'. Instead, we emphasise that everybody is an individual and has a right to choose what kind of life they wish to lead. We stand for people being respected, and we do not accept that there is just one version of how to lead one's life, with a checklist that you have to satisfy or else you are an outcaste. Nevertheless a critical element is how to approach these choices and issues; and we aim for the most conscious, contextual, integrative and compassionate way possible by developing life skills that enable this.

Do parents have any role in facilitating this process?

I think the first thing they can do is to really get to know their children. But if these youngsters don't see a genuine opening, a feeling they are accepted in a non-judgemental way, the parents are not going to get to know them. If parents get to know a little bit more about their children's mindset, their values and ways of seeing the world, they will realise how different they are from them, and the assumption that 'my children are just like I was, I have gathered experience so they should listen to my wisdom' will no longer hold. This is all about parents and other adults acquiring humility, about realizing that what is right for them may not be right for someone else. The truths we discover are our own treasures. The moment we try to generalise them, to make one size fit all, it's not accepting the diversity of humanity.

Although there are dangers in generalising, what do you see as the major differences between the perspective and outlook of the Auroville youth of today and those of their parents?

I think the youth have a very different outlook because the different generations are subject to very different influences. Their parents, many of whom were early Aurovilians, had a big vision for the future, a big goal, and were willing to put up with a long and bumpy road to get there but the youth of today are focussed much more on the present. I think the big goals are not getting that much attention from the youth now, they want to deal with the urgent things in front of them. So long-term things like what they want to do with their lives, whether or not they want a family, or whether they want to stay here for good or settle down elsewhere, do not really bother them.

What I've seen so far is they want to be of service, and they are practical rather than 'abstract and aspirational'. Their attitude is 'Don't give me the big words, show me where it is manifested'.

In other words, it's as if the generations are speaking a different language. It's like the older Aurovilians are speaking Chinese while the youth are speaking German; this is why the disconnection happens. And I don't think this attitude of youth is peculiar to Auroville: it applies to youth in other parts of the world, too.

Do you see Y-PEER as part of a much larger grassroots movement, one based upon the empowering idea that there are tools that anybody can learn and use and this is not dependent upon one's age or qualification or status?

Yes, for me this new way of education is completely connected with this kind of empowerment. It is also about focussing on what we have around us and what we want to do about it now because of the urgency of the situation, rather than having a very long-term plan. Everything is changing, moving so much faster now, so the need for a fast and adaptive response is 'on the skin', engrained, in every young person.

From an interview by Alan

The Auroville Archives enters a new phase

The Auroville Archives was established in 1991 by Krishna Tewari. For many years it was located in a temporary space in Bharat Nivas but in 2018 it moved into a new building in the Auroville Administrative Zone and the team was expanded. In a free-wheeling discussion, they talk about their work and their hopes for how the Archives can contribute to our understanding of the past, present and future of the Auroville experiment.

Auroville Today: Why does Auroville need an archive? Some people say that in the 'Town of the Future' we should be focused only upon the future, not upon the past.

Thambidurai: Auroville is a unique project on earth so future researchers need material to understand what it is and how it has evolved.

Gilles: Auroville is an intentional community. Mother spelled out this intention but this intention needs to be better known. She spoke a lot about Auroville between mid 1965 and mid 1973 and things evolved a lot during that time. It is important to understand this; you cannot plan for the future unless you understand the past. Fact checking is also one of our important roles. People are claiming that Mother said things which she did not say; this needs to be corrected.

Moreover, if it is entered in the right manner, the data that we are feeding into the Archives computer today could help with tomorrow's planning. For example, the statistics we collect shows us we will have to build new schools for young kids soon because in two years the ages of the kids will make this a necessity.

Amy: Auroville is an ongoing experiment and people need to see for themselves how the experiments so far have gone. Hopefully we can learn from the things we have done in the past and do them differently in the future.

Gilles: If you look at *Auroville Today* you see how many projects were started but disappeared without trace. And we have a cupboard full of expensive planning studies by *L'Avenir d'Auroville* that never saw the light of day. We need to understand why this kind of thing happens.

But do you have enough information on past experiments to know why they failed or why plans were never initiated?

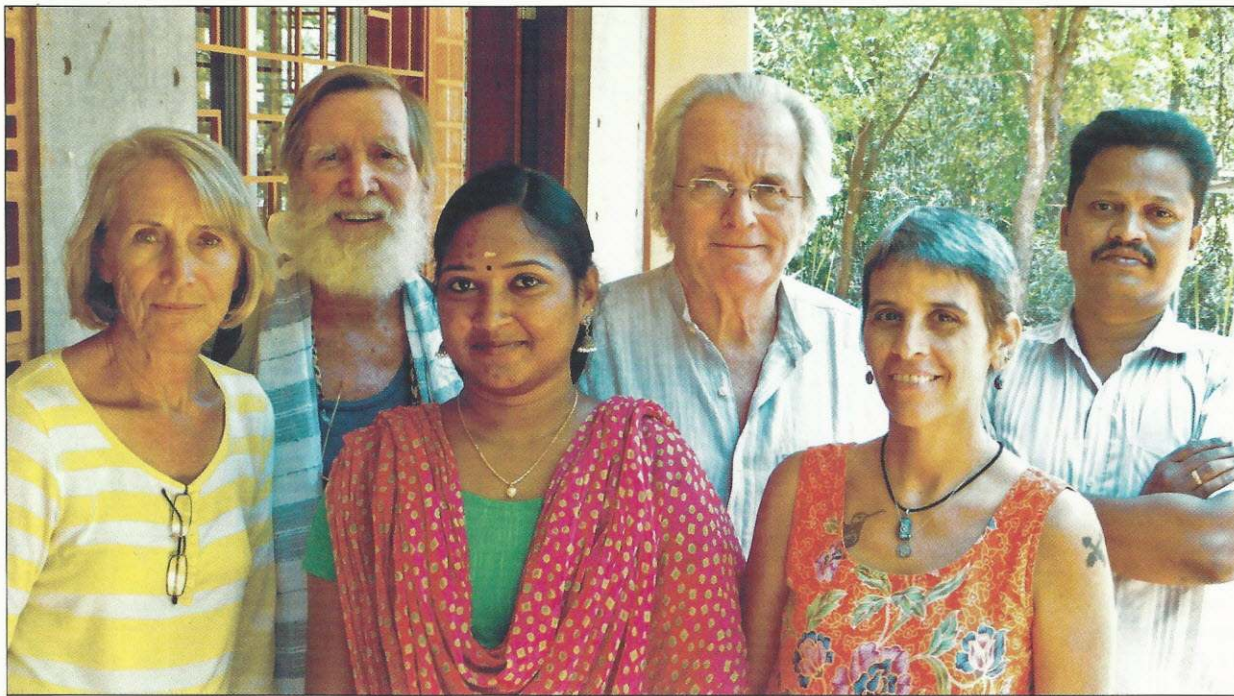
Doris: No we don't. There is also a lack of information on ongoing projects. Take the Sacred Groves project. In *Auroville Today* some years ago you did look at some of the problems and tried to analyse what had happened but there was no follow up. We are three steps behind in everything.

If somebody wanted to write a comprehensive history of Auroville, do you think the Archives has sufficient material now to allow them to do it? Or are there significant gaps?

Thambidurai: We have a lot of material from the minutes of Pour Tous meetings, for example, but materials on other experiments are missing and need to be added to the existing collection.

Gilles: I think we have almost all the material necessary, it is just a matter of making it easily available through digitizing and classifying it. We now have a very comprehensive collection of Mother's words on Auroville but this compilation is limited to her known words because we have no, or very few records, from some of the key actors (such as Navajata, André Morisset and Pournapréma) and Roger Anger kept notes of his discussions with Mother only during a short period. The last treasure trove we are missing is Roger Anger's personal archives, which Jacqueline is presently sorting out. She told me she will share these documents with us when she has completed this task. We look forward to collaborating in assembling these pieces.

Francis: During the conflict with the Sri



From left: Doris, Francis, Meera, Gilles, Amy and Thambidurai

Aurobindo Society there were a lot of meetings when nothing was recorded, neither the discussions nor the decisions. And many other things from that time were not written down.

Amy: There are definitely gaps in our documentation. Somebody who is making a film on the Greenbelt asked for images and we have found there are a lot of gaps in that area of Auroville's development.

Important material is also scattered between different archives or collections in Auroville – schools and research places like CSR. I think one of our primary roles in the Auroville Archives is to create a centralised repository of these different archives. I'm also making a digitized repository of all the issues of the *Auroville News*, the *News and Notes* etc. to enable people to do research more easily.

Doris: We are doing the same with videos. So far, we have collected 358 videos on Auroville. We don't have much documentation on architecture or real research on education. These gaps need to be filled before we can really say something about these topics to the larger world.

Do you see it is your roles as archivists to fill the gaps and do further research on the raw material you have collected?

Amy: Research and analysis of the factual documents needs to happen, but we are a very small team and our first work is to scan, digitize, transcribe and utilise what we have now. While we can provide the materials, people need to come in to do the research.

Gilles: We can only do so much with our present resources. We keep our present collection of documents by topic in sixty steel cupboards. Unfortunately, we don't have the human resources to put much order into these and it is being done on an ad-hoc basis. What we can do is make this material known, and then ask people to fill the gaps and analyse it.

Amy: Around 2000, the Archives conducted interviews with over 200 Aurovilians. We've talked about contacting some of them again to do a follow up and this would be one way of filling the gaps.

As archivists, do you believe that at some point you will have enough information to be able to understand this place? After all, in Auroville there are so many different layers and energies in play and that cannot be transcribed.

Gilles: But it's like that all over the world: the most important things are often not documented. If you look at politics, the key moments may be two or three people meeting in a café and these conversations are not recorded. Also, people view the same events differently. People can understand the French Revolution, for example, from very different perspectives.

Amy: I don't think I know what Auroville is by having access to all this information. I believe what we're doing here is hugely important, but this question of being able to understand what Auroville is is deeply personal: Doris's Auroville is probably a little bit different from my Auroville. I feel my personal understanding is deep and profound and fluid,

not fixed, and I would not want to see this spelled out in a document. Rather, I hope people can live it out every day.

Gilles: I absolutely agree that there are as many Aurovilles as there are Aurovilians. I also think that Auroville is best understood by the soul, not by the mind.

Doris: At the same time, I have understood a lot more about Auroville through doing this work. For me, every day there's something new.

Is material in the Archives available for both Aurovilians and outside researchers?

Amy: Yes.

Are there or should there be any restrictions upon who can access it?

Thambidurai: There should be restrictions. The material is mainly for the Aurovilians. In some cases we provide material for non-Aurovilians who have been recommended by Aurovilians to ensure that the material will not be misused. Otherwise, anybody could come in and do anything they like with the material.

Gilles: There are some people who are genuinely interested in understanding Auroville or one of its aspects, but there are others who only want to look in the garbage.

Amy: We are a conscientious archive. Anybody can walk in the door or send us an email but we have a right and obligation to ask who they are and what their intentions are. We will have a conversation with them, and then we see.

Francis: As the Archives grow, more regulations will be put in place because a lot of sensitive information may come in, so some areas will not be generally available.

Doris: Regarding videos, the policy is clear. If an outsider requests Auroville videos, the request is viewed by Outreach Media and they tell me what I can give. But sometimes I go with my gut feeling, as happened recently when a young German student wanted material for his research on Auroville.

What are the areas in which people want to obtain material or do research?

Doris: Mostly it is people making new Auroville videos who want to include excerpts from old historical videos.

Francis: We sent 32 videos on Auroville to Doordarshan, the government broadcaster, when they wanted to prepare India for Auroville's 50th anniversary and Prime Minister Modi's visit. These short videos were broadcast on Indian TV every evening for five weeks.

Where would you like the Archives to be in five years from now?

Doris: I hope that a lot of the cataloguing will have been finished and made available for the Aurovilians.

Francis: I hope we have gone to the next level of service by linking all the scattered documentation and information together in one

central point.

Amy: My dream is that we are viewed as an active viable service and people start to see the value of the work that is being done here. More and more people would be accessing the information, coming in to use the guest station, and generally making the whole place more dynamic.

What effect do you feel that an active, vibrant Archives used by many Aurovilians will have upon the larger Auroville?

Amy: I can tell from scanning issues of *Auroville Today* and the *News and Notes* that in this community we keep having the same conversations over and over again. So I hope we will realise that now is the time to move on.

Gilles: The problem in Auroville is that the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing. For example, a volunteer

recently documented for us chronologically every plot that Auroville has purchased. But when I have looked at what was purchased and the plans for that period, there is a total discrepancy! What this shows me is that in the field of planning as well as in other fields of work, too many of us tend to have difficulty in acknowledging the reality of our situation and dealing with this reality. Unless we acknowledge our past mistakes, we are very likely to repeat them.

Doris: I hope that people will also be reminded of our positive achievements. We still have to solve a ton of problems but it is important that we respect what we have already achieved.

Francis: This Archives project is just beginning to bloom. Until now the community mindset has been short-term, just focussed on making it to the end of the month, while the whole process of digitizing and categorising material is alien to a large section of the community. But you get the feeling that eyes are beginning to open and more people are coming through the door with requests. The Archives is definitely going to grow as people understand its importance, for the work being done today will allow researchers in the future to evaluate our past as well as our current progress.

From an interview by Alan

A treasure trove for researchers

In addition to many thousands of photos and hundreds of videos and recordings, the Auroville Archives has copies or originals of:

- ◆ all the Messages of The Mother relating to Auroville
- ◆ all the Auroville brochures
- ◆ books by Aurovilians
- ◆ details of all the court cases involving Auroville
- ◆ Satprem's letters to Aurovilians
- ◆ minutes of all the Governing Board and International Advisory Council meetings
- ◆ minutes of all the Working Committee, Funds and Assets Management Committee and Auroville Council meetings
- ◆ complete sets of *Auroville Notes*, *Auroville News* and *News and Notes*
- ◆ complete sets of *Equals One*, *Gazette Aurovillienne* and *Auroville Today*
- ◆ the Auroville flag (unveiled during the Inauguration)
- ◆ handwritten notes by Shyamsunder of his interactions with The Mother concerning Auroville
- ◆ the original book of Auroville's births signed by Mother
- ◆ Piero's personal archive relating to the construction of Matrimandir
- ◆ many documents relating to Auroville International, including Auroville International newsletters

Creating content that can be relied upon

The work of OutreachMedia

“Nobody wants to talk to me”, said the journalist, annoyance clouding his voice. He had come to write an article about Auroville and had asked the staff of OutreachMedia to find people to whom he could talk. The search had been unsuccessful. “Not many Aurovilians want to be interviewed these days,” says Divya. “Too many had negative experiences and sometimes we don’t manage to find someone. But we give all journalists printed materials and access to our videos.”

OutreachMedia is the Auroville unit that is responsible for all interactions with outside media. It started in the 90’s as a two-person interface team for visiting journalists, providing them with background materials, organizing interviews, taking them around and telling them what can and what cannot be photographed. This work continues but the focus has shifted from the printed word to video reporting. “It started with ‘A Dream Down To Earth’, a short, 14-minute introductory video on Auroville,” says Serena, the team’s filmmaker. “It was made for the Auroville International Centres, which had asked for a short video. And from that, naturally and organically, video production became what it is today.”

“The turning point was Auroville’s 50th anniversary,” explains Fabienne. “Suddenly there was a large demand for information on Auroville, both from the media as well as from within Auroville. Many newspapers and television channels asked for content. Doordarshan, one of India’s largest broadcasting organizations, aired many of our videos. For one month, it broadcast one video each day. The visit of the Prime Minister brought another demand for publicity and we had a lot of interaction with the media. Then there were the Auroville festivals in New Delhi, Baroda and Kolkata. For these we outsourced the newspaper coverage, but we made our own films and photographs and took full care of the social media. Our team expanded accordingly. We now have seven persons working full-time. There is an editorial team, a photographer, and a team of filmmakers and video editors.”

“February last year was a whirlwind, every day there was something new. There is quite a lot we can criticize about the 50th celebrations, but the sheer fact of it meant that OutreachMedia had to start collaborating with people, had to start centralizing things, and all of that very quickly,” adds Matthew. “That meant we had to restructure, which was, in fact, a good thing. We now have a close collaboration with the Auroville Archives and with the Auroville Radio and with individual film makers in Auroville.”

Ever since the 50th celebrations, the outside interest in Auroville has increased. More and more requests are coming in for information, for pictures or for permission to make photos or shoot films inside Auroville. “We are very careful,” says Divya. “There are people who want to use Auroville or the Matrimandir as a simple backdrop, for example for their commercial products, or as a location for their TV series. That’s a no-go. Others wish to shoot photos for private reasons, such as family photos in the Matrimandir Gardens or photos in the Inner Chamber. That, too, is not allowed. Genuine requests we entertain. But here too, the Matrimandir is off-limits.”

“It’s not only the Matrimandir which is attractive: the Auroville forests are also very popular,” says Fabienne. “During the weekends, people come to make photos of newly married couples wandering amid the trees in our forests. They are looking for pristine places which, with all the garbage lying around outside Auroville, are not so easy to find. In



from left: Arovenkatesh, Serena, Fabienne, Alessandra, Divya, Marco, Matthew, Mariana

fact, there is so much demand that in one of our meetings a suggestion was discussed that we should create a dedicated space which can serve as a décor or backdrop.” The suggestion was not taken up.

The photographs are Marco’s department. OutreachMedia has handed over the digital image bank to the Archives. It is now a fully searchable image catalogue. Marco constantly updates the image bank with the newest photographs, tagging them as they are uploaded.

The video demand is both from outside and from within Auroville. Television networks request ready-made films, if possible with subtitles. For the Tamil networks, OutreachMedia provides films complete with Tamil subtitling or dubbing (voiceovers).

The requests from within Auroville are on the increase. “Every day we get a minimum of five requests,” says Fabienne. “For example, for fundraising purposes, or to explain why the proposed highway between Auroville and the East Coast Road would endanger the environment. This led to ‘The Highway or the Higherway’. Other

requests come from Auroville units, such as SAI-IER Confluence, Village Action, Eco Femme, and Upasana; they all ask for videos which they can use in their outreach work. For example we made ‘Fantastic Plastic’, a 14-minute documentary for outside Auroville.”

“Then there are requests to record a specific event such as a musical performance or a conference,” adds Serena. “But what’s the point of recording an entire conference? Nobody will watch it. So we edit these videos and transform them into short videos that can be shared. But if there is something which is really important for the community, we record it for archival purposes.”

Apart from responding to specific requests, the team also decides what topics need to be covered for future communication. Culture and its related expressions will be its next focus. It will be covered in a video, two or three photo reportages and a basic editorial and will be publicly accessible on OutreachMedia’s website, on its Facebook page, on Twitter and on Vimeo. “The idea,” says Mariana, “is to create content that touches people and to share it as widely as possible.” But isn’t there a risk of portraying Auroville more rosily than it really is? “We are aware of that and want to bring a change,” Fabienne replies. “A future topic may be the challenges that Auroville faces - for example, the solid waste pollution in the villages and the health impacts of pesticide spraying on cashew crops. Such videos will also contain interviews with the villagers.”

“But the dirty laundry from within Auroville does not need to be presented to the whole world, at least not by OutreachMedia,” says Divya. “Hard-nosed journalism is not what we do. We try to avoid publishing personal beliefs or perceptions or ideas. Discrimination could be an issue, but then as a case study for reflection.”

“We try to provide quality content,” adds Matthew. “Two years ago, if you visited YouTube and searched for Auroville you would find tons of dross, much of it material generated by people who had spent two days in Auroville. OutreachMedia’s videos are quality. Everything we publish has been checked for accuracy and correctly reflects Auroville as far as we are able to ascertain. We create content that can be relied upon.” But, he says, “We do not ‘advertise’ Auroville.”

Like the image bank, a video database was cre-

ated. It contains all videos made on or in Auroville, including all historic videos, and is maintained and improved by Doris at the Auroville Digital Archives. The catalogue is searchable by Aurovilians and copies are available on demand.

So how can one identify those ‘truthful’ videos online? “OutreachMedia’s videos all carry our logo,” says Serena. “The videos from other Auroville film makers have the Auroville symbol.”

What about the ‘negative’ articles or videos on Auroville that continue to be published? “There is not much we can do about that,” says Matthew. “Journalism sells when there is negative content and articles are rarely fed back to us for our comments or factual corrections before being published. We do get back to the magazine or newspaper in case the article is really outrageous. But most of the articles on Auroville that have recently appeared are ok. A recent article in the English *Daily Mail*, which is famous for carrying negative stuff, was even positive.”

“But even in negative coverage there is always something positive,” says Fabienne. “Recently, Arte broadcast a documentary on utopias and Auroville was mentioned. They had used old video material but it was still ok. The material they used wasn’t really what we would have liked, but the good thing was that the philosopher they interviewed spoke about the ideals of Auroville and didn’t refer to it as a sect. It shows that Auroville is slowly gaining recognition.”

In providing information on Auroville, OutreachMedia hasn’t yet interacted with two important sites: the official Auroville website and the Visitors Center. “The website could do with an overhaul, and the Visitors Center would benefit from a few more installations where people could press buttons to see different videos on various aspects of Auroville,” says Mariana. “We are open for exploring productive and creative collaborations. For example, we can provide the latest videos, but not the equipment.”

OutreachMedia moved into the new Archives building a few months ago. The allocated space was soon too small and a meeting room was annexed for video editing. Yet, even the two-room space is already bursting at its seams. “We have asked for a budget increase,” says Fabienne. “For the work we do is service-oriented and essential for Auroville.”

In conversation with Carel

All the videos of OutreachMedia can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/avoutreachmedia>
Here we give a selection

- ◆ Auroville Conversations: what would you say to a Newcomer
- ◆ Auroville University Confluence 2019
- ◆ Auroville, a Dream down to earth
- ◆ Bhu Earth Performance
- ◆ Eat Local Week at Solitude Farm
- ◆ Eco Village Design Education documentation
- ◆ Fantastic Plastic - plastic awareness documentary
- ◆ Flash mob in Auroville
- ◆ How to move a house
- ◆ Jaipur, Indian Ceramics Triennale, at Jawahara Kala Kendra.
- ◆ Portraits I, II, III and IV, Human Unity
- ◆ The Fearless Tattoo project in Auroville with EcoFem
- ◆ The Highway or The Higher Way
- ◆ The Voices of Auroville
- ◆ Tibetan Sand Mandala, Auroville

How to present Auroville?

1971, January 30th: While reading to Mother a chapter from his book “On the Way to Supermanhood”, Satprem quoted the following passage from one of Sri Aurobindo’s letters:

“...I don’t believe in advertisement except for books, etc., and in propaganda except for politics and patent medicines. But for serious work it is a poison. It means either a stunt or a boom – and stunts and booms exhaust the thing they carry on their crest and leave it lifeless and broken high and dry on the shores of nowhere – or it means a movement. A movement in the case of a work like mine means the founding of a school or a sect or some other dammed nonsense. It means that hundreds or thousands of useless people join in and corrupt the work or reduce it to a pompous farce from which the Truth that was coming down recedes into secrecy and silence. It is what has happened to the ‘religions’ and it is the reason of their failure.”

letter from November 2nd, 1934

Mother commented:

That passage should be typed and put up in Auroville. It is indispensable. They all have a false idea about propaganda and publicity. It should be typed in big letters; at the top, “Sri Aurobindo said,” then put the quotation and send it to Auroville. Say I am the one who’s sending it.

1971, February 28th: Auroville’s 3rd Birthday:

Sri Aurobindo’s letter on publicity sent by Mother to Auroville and Mother’s remark that the Aurovilians have a false idea about propaganda and publicity provoked the following questions:

Q.1: Where does information end?

Q.2: Where does publicity begin?

Mother commented: It is a question of mental attitude rather

than of physical action. Publicity does not discriminate between the persons to whom one speaks. Publicity means addressing a public which cannot understand.

What we try to do is carry the Light where it can be understood and received. It is a question of choice. It is a question of selection: not to spread the thing without discernment. It is to choose which milieu, which people, which conditions can understand and to act there only.

In publicity, to make the ideas comprehensible, one lowers them while we keep our teachings at the height where they are to be understood. We do not diminish the value of the thing so that it may be understood by all. We keep it at its height so that those who can understand may do so. The teaching should be kept at its maximum height. The selection then takes place of itself. It is the comprehension which makes the selection.

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The Anatomy of Emotion

As an arts institute that attracts artists and performers from around the world, one that is itself engaged in producing its own radical body of performative work, we are fortunate to have Adishakti in our neighbourhood. We spoke to Vinay Kumar, the artistic director, about their current work and about their experience since the passing of their founder, Veenapani Chawla.

Auroville Today: How and when was Adishakti conceived?

Vinay: Adishakti was conceived as a theatre laboratory by Veenapani Chawla in 1981. Veenapani had just returned after her studies with Patsy Rodenberg and the Royal Shakespeare Company in London. As she began to work in India, she realized that she, like several other urban theatre practitioners, had imbibed what was fundamentally a European tradition of theatre. Based on Stanislavski and Psychological Realism, these traditions do not consider the body, its articulation and its presence, in performance. It dawned on Veenapani that our cultural capital as far as urban theatre was concerned was zero, and she delved into traditional Indian forms to understand how these systems work with the body.

In 1981, Veenapani decided to go to Kerala to learn Kalarippayattu, and to Mayurbhanj and Puruliya to learn *Chhau*. This marked the beginning of her exploration of the body as central to the actor's craft. She instinctively knew that the body has the power to free us from the tyranny of the linear, oral narrative. In terms of visual imagery, texture, form and treatment of time, the range of what the physical body enables us to do is enormous. The Indian traditions understand this and use the physical body to generate multiple narratives, of which the oral is only one signifier.

So Adishakti's research has revolved around the body in performance?

Over the years, this research on the body has led to notions of a neutral physical craft. In 1995, Veenapani developed a production called *Bhima* which was a very significant exploration as this was the first time we developed a single actor performance creating a whole body of physical language. Along with pure physical movement, we started exploring how an actor's emotional landscape affects or generates the physical vocabulary.

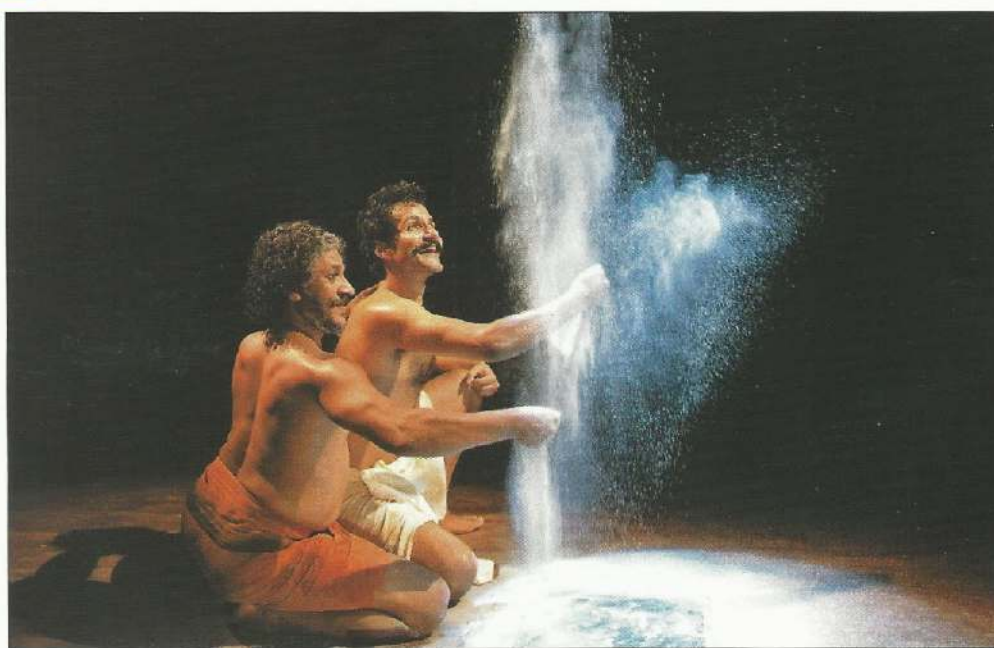
What do you mean by a 'neutral physical craft'?

Generally, we tend to consider the body, the emotions and the voice as three separate entities. However, we found that all these activities are united by, and a culmination of, a singular anatomical response, the respiratory system. The body is a mechanical entity in which multiple factors are interconnected through one singular rhythmic or time keeping mechanism which is the heart structure, operating at around a 72 beats per minute pulse rate. This pulse rate governs all the other body functions. Any deviation in this 72-beats is what we call disturbance, happiness, excitement, sadness or anger, which in turn creates deviations in the voice or physical body. Viewed this way, and this is what we propose, all physical movement in the body is the outer response to accommodate the difficulty that is felt within the body. It is not something that we are doing or have control over; it's a mechanical response or adjustment.

So, in fact you're a mechanical system, like a Swiss watch, and every function in your body is organised around a predictable rhythmic structure. Over the years we developed a neutral, mathematical formula that allows us to understand the rhythm of an emotion, text or movement. When we perform, therefore, what we are really doing is destabilising somebody else's rhythmic structure, and hence their emotional graph, by creating another or multiple rhythm structure. This formed the basis of Veenapani's explorations in theatre.

When did Adishakti find its present home in Pondicherry?

This space was created in 1993. Pondicherry was a natural choice for Veenapani because she wanted to be here for Mother and Sri Aurobindo. So it was here that she chose to bring artists from different parts of the country together and to build an institution. Her idea was to create a space for artists where they can be nurtured and provided with basic sustenance, in order that they can develop their own artistic voices, and move the body of work forward.



Adishakti's most recent production "Bali" during a performance

Veenapani passed away quite suddenly in 2014. This must have been a huge shock for you and for Adishakti.

Yes, it left us with several challenges. Our biggest concern after her passing was that the research work would stall, in which case Adishakti would be reduced to being mere bricks and mortar. But to our surprise and relief that has not been the case. Our research work is alive and continues to be a very important aspect of our work.

As far as performance went, the four years after her death were very confusing. We were unsure about how we should continue. Veenapani had created a body of work and we asked ourselves whether we should repeat that work or reinvent it. Our first attempt was to try to follow her work in terms of structure, form, content and philosophy. But half way through we realized that this was not the way forward. We should allow the second and third generations of actors, writers and creative people to create something that, while being rooted in Adishakti's work, reflected their own creative process, engagement and questions.

At what point did it become clear that you had to pursue your own paths?

I was trying to evolve a play on Sita. It was a play that Veenapani was working on when she passed away. In fact, our first rehearsal was meant to be on the day she died. So, for emotional reasons I felt the need to develop it into a production. As I began writing it, however, it became clear to me that Veenapani's voice could only be hers. Only she could make the kind of work that she did, take the leap that she did with her body of work. Others have to create work that reflects their politics, their history, their geographical understanding. Eventually Nimmy, my colleague, wrote a script for *Bali* which she developed into a production and this allowed me freedom to start writing my own script.

How has Adishakti managed to sustain itself financially in recent years?

Having watched Veenapani go through the humiliation of dealing with funders, it was clear to us that we needed to make Adishakti viable without depending on funding or grant agencies. This is a nightmare that no artist should have to endure! So, over the years, we have developed a structure where the majority of our funds come through our teaching activities and through the residencies that we host in our space. Several companies have enjoyed creating here.

We have also worked hard to develop a network of fellow artists and supporters. Veenapani was a recluse. While she was excited about the ideas and process, she wasn't interested in marketing Adishakti's work. We realised, when she passed away, that we did not have a network to which we could reach out for support. In this respect we have had to start from scratch. In recent years we have built alliances by hosting the annual Veenapani Festival, teaching in multiple contexts and by performing to audiences beyond our regional network.

Tell us how you disseminate Adishakti's work and research

We offer the methodology that is the outcome of our research work over the last 30 years – on emotions, breath, notions of rhythm that govern us – to students in two ways. Firstly, we organize classes and workshops. These have a cost factor and are not affordable for everyone. Each year, therefore, to ensure that everyone has access to this research, we take our workshops to small rural theatre groups as well. The most important factor for us with actors around the country is to challenge their existing, romanticised notions of theatre and to invite them to look at their body as the biggest tool for creation.

In studying emotion and understanding that the respiratory system, governed by our emotions, controls all the functions of the body, we found ourselves branching out into areas beyond performance. We spent years studying this subject as actors, and comparing our findings with the ancient knowledge systems developed by Ayurveda on the one hand and with the findings of modern science on the other. The resultant methodology, dealing with the anatomy of emotion, has proved to be useful for people from other disciplines such as medicine, psychology and counselling. Recently three important papers have

been published on the use of Adishakti in modern counselling to help severely traumatized patients open up and reveal their stories.

You also worked with a group of women who had lost their homes and families in the Tsunami.

In 2005, we worked with a group of women from Nagapattinam whose lives were destroyed by the Tsunami. We spent 10 days with them. The idea was to teach them some basic livelihood skills, and support them in dealing with the trauma. We found that while some people were able to enjoy some relief after narrating their stories and going through the techniques we have developed, others who were extremely traumatized were not able to access their emotion. In fact, it was at this point that our research on emotion entered the medical area. Their medical reports revealed that the majority of these women suffered from anaemia. Now, we associate anaemia only with chemical imbalances or blood. But anaemia is created fundamentally by fear. Anyone who has experienced sustained fear will

not recover their hemoglobin or platelet function. This fear, retained in the body's memory, has a lifelong crippling effect.

This realisation opened up a whole new territory for us. We started looking at fear and accessibility to emotion. While we say that there are multiple emotions, the daily emotional graph of an average person, whether in an urban or rural setting, is limited to two or three hard emotions such as detestation (*jugupsa*) or fear. Experientiality of softer emotions such as love or sadness is more or less absent! This fact frightened and alarmed us. Our current research deals with how opposite activities can restore the emotional range of a person.

How would you describe Adishakti's contribution over the years?

Making the body central to the craft of the actor, I believe, has been one of Veenapani's biggest contributions. She played a huge role in bringing Kalari to the forefront and establishing it as a form of performance. In recent years, it has become common for actors to work with movement, to write their own scripts, and to ask questions of their own context. This too, I believe, has been a ripple effect of Adishakti's engagement with our own myths and stories. In the 1990's, when we began resourcing mythology for our productions, unloading and reinterpreting it, our modernity revolved around a primarily European existential script that emerged from the experience of two world wars. Our reality is different. So, working with our own myths and stories was a conscious and significant decision. It allowed the artists to connect with our past. Veenapani used to say the moment we stop rereading our myths and stories and stop interpreting them, their plurality will vanish, they will be appropriated and become our history.

What does the Adishakti team look like now?

Our core team is more or less four people and there is a peripheral team of another four people who joined us a few years ago. There are also students who we have been training.

The bane of every institution is that there's a head, and with that person's passing everything crumbles. This had been a topic of discussion at Adishakti since 2010 and we consciously organized ourselves to avoid that. The first decision we took was that we must merge the creative and administrative aspects of the institution. The second important decision was that we must become autodidactic. In 2011, Veenapani put forth the idea that all actors should write their script and direct. This provided an alternative to the conventional model of an institution with a single creative head. It means that there are three or four creative people, all of whom are simultaneously engaged in their own process, each of whom has the liberty to take two or three years to create their production. This ensures that Adishakti presents new work regularly without undue pressure on any one person to constantly produce and be relevant. It also allows each artist to expand their own engagement with their craft in terms of both form and process without having to package it into a production, but rather as a life engagement or spiritual journey.

What has been Adishakti's relationship with Auroville?

Veenapani was here for Mother and Sri Aurobindo. As an arts institution, however, she believed that Adishakti must guard its independence fiercely. "We must be able to make rules in the morning and break them in the evening," she would say. She was also very clear that her own philosophy should not be a deterrent in the functioning of the institution, nor an influence in the ideological moorings of each creative person.

Geographically, of course, we fall under the Auroville constituency and most of our audience comes from Auroville. More than that, though, we are very proud to be near Auroville. Creating a space like Auroville was a very special moment in time. I don't think this kind of process can ever be repeated in the human psyche. We have passed that idealistic space. When I speak to some of the early settlers, I am struck by their idealism. They didn't consider geographical boundaries when they came here. They came from around the world, stayed in small huts, surrounded by barren land which they spent their lives transforming. Just look at what we have here now! To those people who did that work, I feel, we owe our very breath!

In conversation with Anusha



Adishakti campus – a creator's paradise

Views on the International Zone

In its March 2019 issue, *Auroville Today* published an interview with Andrea Cammarata on the International Zone (IZ). He explained that the plan now is to build continental and regional clusters of nations and cultures in the International Zone. Two readers comment.

Dear *Auroville Today*,

I would like to ask if clusters have souls?

I think it's safe to say that almost nobody in Auroville wants to support narrow nationalistic tendencies. But this is a challenge when there are national pavilions envisioned on a place which is meant for Human Unity. Therefore it is understandable when the IZ group decides to support mainly greater groupings and cultural neighborhoods, for example European, North-east Asian, Eastern European Brotherhood, All-Americas and other clusters.

But does this concept match the specific point that the IZ is meant for?

Mother's vision refers to the soul of nations, not to the soul of continents, clusters or

regional neighborhoods. In Sri Aurobindo's view, it is firstly in nations and not in tribes, clans and cultural or racial families and groups, that free will and rational orientation get a chance. It replaces mostly unconscious tribal, genetic and cultural bondings and loyalties. Therefore, the nation is the evolutionary level where we can and have to make the decision if we want to depart towards transnational unions like the EU or eventually towards a world federation.

The present world situation is proof of Sri Aurobindo's words of 80 years ago. How can we uphold the present vision of a growing EU when important members leave because they feel that their national exclusivity is not yet exhausted? What is the meaning of a revival of an "International Brotherhood" club, when

ex-members like Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic countries are still struggling towards a new national identity? And what is the truth of an Asian Northwest cluster when China does not respect Taiwan's sovereignty, when Japan still has not convincingly processed its war atrocities in China and Korea, and when North Korea is not represented at all?

All of these are mutual understanding processes, but first and foremost it needs each single country to do its homework. Therefore, I am sorry but I see this cluster concept mainly as yesterday's pipe-dream internationalism.

In my opinion, as a first step the IZ should help, like Mother said, to bring the true genius of each nation forward. In the light of these soul qualities, then we can and we must work with the unhealed shadow sides of our countries.

The design and functional manifestation of the pavilions (or their representative monuments, as Andrea rightly proposes) should not only reveal the national genius, but also inspire the healing work with the national ego. Integrating the national genius with work upon the national shadow could be the missing link and the precondition for lasting transnational unifications. And last, but not least, to the realization of the International Zone.

This part of the City with its unique approach will attract the participation of the "better part of humanity". There will be no mass tourism (which is bad for Auroville anyway) but enough participation and interest to fund the pavilions and their processes.

Wolfgang J. Aurose (Schmidt-Reinecke)

Dear *Auroville Today*,

I tend to agree with Wolfgang, but in part only. I believe it may be a little premature for Auroville to focus on continental collectivities – I prefer that term to 'clusters' – rather than national souls for Pavilions.

If one refers to Sri Aurobindo in CWSA Vol. 25, Chapter 4, *The Discovery of the Nation-Soul*, one sees that he speaks of a society, community or nation which can develop a group soul. I have emphasised the relevant sections.

The primal law and purpose of the individual life is to seek its own self-development. Consciously or half-consciously or with an obscure unconscious groping it strives always and rightly strives at self-formulation, – to find itself, to discover within itself the law and power of its own being and to fulfil it. This aim in it is fundamental, right, inevitable because, even after all qualifications have been made and caveats entered, the individual is not merely the ephemeral physical creature, a form of mind and body that aggregates and dissolves, but a being, a living power of the eternal Truth, a self-manifesting spirit. In the same way the primal law and purpose of a society, community or nation is to seek its own self-fulfilment; it strives rightly to find itself, to become aware within itself of the law and power of its own being and to fulfil it as perfectly as possible, to realise all its potentialities, to live its own self-revealing life. The reason is the same: for this too is a being, a living power of the eternal Truth, a self-manifestation of the cosmic Spirit, and it is there to express and fulfil in its own way and to the degree of its capacities the special truth and power and meaning of the cosmic Spirit that is within it. The nation or society, like the individual, has a

body, an organic life, a moral and aesthetic temperament, a developing mind and a soul behind all these signs and powers for the sake of which they exist. One may say even that, like the individual, it essentially is a soul rather than has one; it is a group-soul that, once having attained to a separate distinctness, must become more and more self-conscious and find itself more and more fully as it develops its corporate action and mentality and its organic self-expressive life.

Indeed, as elsewhere mentioned by him, the nation – as opposed to a State or country – has so far proven to be the most stable unit. Not all States may have their own group soul. e.g. We gather from what They have said that it is the collectivity of several countries within South Asia which is the true nation. These various countries, though independent States today, are not different nations. There is a long shared history and culture which makes it one despite being separated now as different countries. Perhaps that realisation will come one day from within these countries, even perhaps through SAARC.

Similarly, in Europe, there has been a shared history and culture from the UK in the west to Russia in the east for centuries. Maybe that group soul will also be recognised one day and develop, perhaps through the European Union – as differentiated from the European Commission. For now, I see a clearer differentiation between the collectivities of Western and Eastern Europe. Perhaps some States within Europe are not even nations but sub-nations within a larger psychological grouping, maybe like the Balkan states, maybe like the Slavic type and so on. It is for these countries to find out for themselves whether they are a true nation or a sub-nation, notwithstanding their Statehood. e.g. In India, most states are sub-nations within the larger context of

the Indian nation which includes civilisation and culture.

I also believe that the African and American continents in parts may be large nations with several existing countries within. And possibly that may be realised some day and expressed through one of their groupings like the African Union, etc.

One can similarly point out that Auroville is not a nation and yet as a collectivity – though not yet self-conscious – it has or is a soul which will one day be discovered and manifested. So essentially my understanding from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother is that not just nations, but various collectivities can have souls. However, in the context of Auroville, my feeling is that there are not enough people from each nation to search for and discover their national souls. There is also not enough money going around to create all those pavilions that the Mother spoke of. So like many other things in Auroville, people do what they can rather than what they should.

In my view, temporary umbrella units are fine to hold and help nations to discover themselves for now. But to concretise them into pavilions may be jumping several steps in between and putting aside the hard work involved in searching for and manifesting the soul of each nation. Further, the purpose of this inner search is to realise the relationship between nations, somewhat like between different instruments in an orchestra, each knowing their own contribution to a beautiful harmony and appreciating the contribution of others. This is also how we could see human unity in the light of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother and Auroville has the opportunity – even the mandate – to find it and present it to the world.

Kosha Shah

REFLECTION

Luminous reaches and comfort zones

The recent community gathering on the topics What are you here for? and What are we here for? was inspiring. There was a strong collective aspiration for changes in our governance, our economy and ourselves so as to ally them more with our ideals. And ideas, inspirations, poured out about how to do this.

I was reminded of the energy and creativity of the Retreat a few years ago. But in recalling that event, I was also reminded of how few of the excellent ideas expressed there regarding governance, education, town planning, etc., have actually been put into practice.

So what is blocking the flow, the implementation, of so many good ideas?

One obvious answer is it's the lack of the resources needed – financial, infrastructural, human – as well as insufficient time or energy. But I wonder if there may be other, perhaps even more important, factors.

One is that mind and matter are very different 'modes', and to translate something from the former to the latter requires skill and creativity. I think this is hugely underestimated. We sometimes seem to believe that merely articulating our ideas and dreams is sufficient for them to get manifested. And so we fail to do proper assessments of the longer-term outcome of events like the Retreat which would allow us to understand what did or didn't work, and why, so that we can do better next time. And we fail to see that, while some people are excellent in coming up with good suggestions, others are needed to 'pull them down to earth'. Ideologists are not necessarily good implementers.

Another factor is our present organization. Most organizations, by their very nature, tend to support the status quo and resist change and

I don't think our organization is any exception to this, in spite of the best efforts of the people who work within it.

Yet another consideration may be that the 'stars are not aligned', that certain initiatives, however promising they may appear, are simply not in sync at that moment with the deeper unfolding of Auroville.

But one factor that is often ignored is the gravitational pull of our comfort zones.

In many of us, and certainly in myself, there seem to be two factors in opposition. One is the thirst to expand, to know more, to experience new places, people, ideas. The other is the tendency to contract, to hold to the familiar, the trusted, the unthreatening. Depending upon circumstances, as well as the make-up of the individual, one or other of these tend to dominate.

In our collective brainstorming or visioning sessions, we feed our expansion mode and get high on each other's inspiration. Suddenly, we no longer feel crushed by the deadweight of our present town planning, economy and governance systems: a new world is within reach.

But next day, when we are back in our familiar milieu and faced with familiar demands and challenges, we often give the highest priority to stability, to the known ways of doing things, so that we can continue to function undisturbed. The high-fives of yesterday are packed away into a drawer labelled 'enjoyable community events'.

Comfort zones are the places that insulate us from the challenges of our daily lives here, where we can switch off and go on automatic pilot because we feel we are in a safe space. They can be personal daily rituals – like the mid morning coffee or evening sundowner – they can be the way we replicate familiar living spaces from other climates and cultures, but they can also be accustomed thought forms or

attitudes, like a tendency to favour voting when it comes to decision-making or using money as a means to assess value.

The paradox is that by continually reverting to our comfort zones we are not only giving up on the changes that motivate another part of us to attend workshops. We are also making it much more difficult to experience something far more wonderful than our present 'comfortable' lives – the "luminous reaches of spontaneous knowledge" and "wide calms of our being" spoken of by Sri Aurobindo. For our comfort zones insulate us not only from some of the difficulties of existence but also from the wonders of an expanded consciousness. And it is only by discarding them that we make ourselves available for fresh experiences, profounder knowledge.

"Safety lies in tending towards our highest and not in resting content with an inferior potentiality," wrote Sri Aurobindo. "To rest in or follow after an inferior potentiality may seem safe, rational, comfortable, easy, but it ends badly, in some futility or in a mere circling down the abyss or in a stagnant morass. Our right and natural road is towards the summits."

Christ put it even more radically: "Whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it."

So what stops us doing this? Sri Aurobindo names "fear, distrust and skepticism".

All these are characteristics of the ego, of the smaller self that views everything through its limited lens. For it is the ego which creates our comfort zones as defenses against what it perceives as threats: the new, the wider, the deeper. And its ingenuity in doing this is almost unmatched. It convinces us that just by being in Auroville we are pioneers of a brave

new world, while all the time encouraging us to create or recreate our small comfort zones which are far removed from Mother's Dream for Auroville.

What can we do about this? One way is to continually feed the aspirational self through reading Sri Aurobindo and Mother, for example, or through attending inspiring collective initiatives and gatherings (the poor practical outcomes are not necessarily a reason for cynicism if they serve to keep the flame alive). We can also support each other in our attempts to break through our comfort zones – for some of us are braver or more aware of our self-imposed limits than others.

It is unreasonable to expect that we can drop all our comfort zones at once as they have a protective function, and if we are to step into the unknown, initially we may need to keep some familiar footholds. But at least we can take short 'space walks' outside our comfort capsules by engaging with or reading about cultures or individuals very different from ourselves, or by cultivating a 'witness' space which allows us to see our hermetic silos for what they really are.

Finally, however, we are called to step out of them completely and here there is no substitute for faith and for surrender to something much larger. It's a process that calls us to embrace flow rather than stasis, risk rather than safety, the new rather than the known.

This, after all, is the aspect of ourselves that brought many of us here in the first place. Do we really want to put that self to sleep in favour of the comfortable, the known? Are we really willing to trade a very limited and transient sense of personal well-being for the possibility of experiencing those "luminous reaches of spontaneous knowledge"?

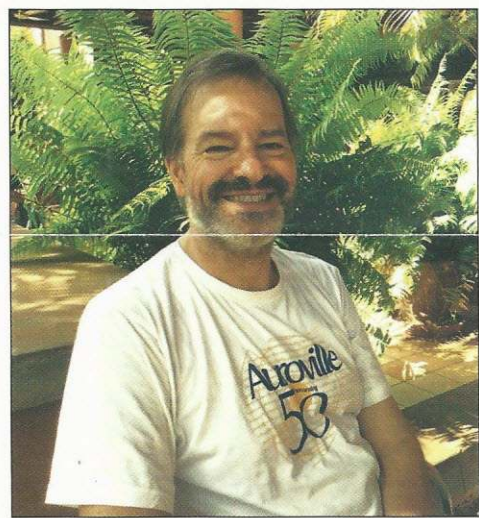
Alan

Singing human unity

Conductor Antoine who started the women's choir, Auroville Harmonies, talks about his vision

When Antoine put together a group of female singers in Auroville and began rehearsing two years ago, his initial goal was to "share beauty and emotion" through music. But over time, a parallel goal evolved. "I realised that amongst 12 women, there were 10 different nationalities. The music I was discovering came from many different countries, so it became obvious that we had to celebrate human unity through the diversity of polyphony." From Eastern European folk songs to African rhythmic chants, from Irish ditties and swing tunes to a Jamaican-style folk song, from Japan to Brazil, the choir's repertoire spans at least 15 different countries. For Antoine, the first criterion for choosing a song is the music's emotional content. "If I'm touched by the music, I will choose it. It's instinct. Of course, I have to check whether we can sing the song, that it's not too complex. But the main question is, 'How do I feel when I listen to it?' For me, singing is sharing emotion."

Growing up in a musical family in France, Antoine learned piano and sang in different kinds of choirs from a young age. "I was lazy with the piano, so I prepared only 15 minutes before going to the piano class. For the choir, I never work at home, I learn very quickly. I should not say that because, like all conductors, I request the choristers to work at home!" Antoine could have been a professional musician, but his father steered him towards engineering, which meant that singing became a spare time passion. Over the decades, Antoine sang with church choirs, oratorio choirs accompanied by large orchestras, small vocal ensembles and men's choirs.



Antoine

Antoine started conducting a small choir in France about twelve years ago, inspired by his own experiences as a chorister. "I had the chance to sing



The women's choir

with some very sensitive conductors, but I was often disappointed by the conductors of the choirs I joined." He was particularly inspired by one talented conductor, who established a "deep contact" with the choristers and brought the choir "to paradise". "He made us think beyond the music, beyond the notes. Unfortunately, he died too young, and since then I never found a conductor who could bring such a quality of emotion. So, one way to have what I expect from a conductor is to be the conductor myself. I know what I want from a choir. As a conductor, I can try to draw out the emotion that I expect. Of course, at one point one needs someone who explains how it works, technique is necessary. So I attended several classes and met experienced conductors. Once you know how to do it, you don't have to think, and you can focus on the most important aspects of music."

When Antoine joined Auroville three years ago, he initially tried to set up a mixed choir but couldn't find enough willing and skilled men. After four months, he transformed this nascent group into a women's choir, choosing repertoire from the 20th and 21st centuries – a repertoire designed to stretch him out of his comfort zone of music of the baroque, classical and romantic periods. One of the new songs performed by the choir, Caramba, is a case in point. "Caramba has a lot of dissonance, and it's very challenging for the choir and for me. Sometimes, the notes are clashing. It's a good training for everyone's ear – to sing one's own note, despite other singers' clashing notes. I will go on

choosing this kind of song, to make the choir improve." When developing the songs with the choir, Antoine employs a fairly fluid approach. "I don't do deep analysis of the music beforehand. When we start working on a song, I don't know exactly how I want the choir to interpret it, but it comes naturally as we start to sing. I evolve the music in the process of rehearsal."

The choir's first performance in March 2018 in CRIPA prompted more than ten people amongst the audience to ask to join the choir, expanding the choir to 16 women. In 2019, the choir gave performances at CRIPA, Unity Pavilion and Sri Aurobindo Ashram, as well as some flash-mob events that surprised shoppers, workers and tourists at various Auroville venues.

After two years of hard work, Antoine feels that the choir is coming closer to his initial conception, and the performances have sometimes surprised him. "On the day of the performance in CRIPA, there was something that was beyond us. I was deeply touched and almost in tears. I felt transported, and the audience felt it too. That's what I call the grace. Giving one's best in Auroville is an offering, where one is not fixed on the result. If you focus on your offering and doing your best, you open yourself to a higher force."

At every performance this year, the audience requested an encore of the Latin American song Abrete Corazon, a song which Antoine arranged. "It is a shamanic healing song that triggered something inside of me. But it's not written for a choir. I

recently started learning composition with Pushkar, and I decided to try harmonising the song for the choir. Shruti then joined the choir and she is a naturally-skilled singer with a beautiful voice, so she took the solo part. I also asked Lauren to play the flute, wanting to use the hidden talents in the choir. It's been a great exercise to do this harmonisation for the first time."

For Antoine, the greater challenges of the choir have not been musical, but have rather been related to the coordination and management of 16 women from very diverse backgrounds. "Despite some attendance difficulties, the fact that we performed well and had a beautiful result suggests that my attitude of trust is right."

The choir continues to evolve and improve. "I say to the choir, 'It was very good, but we can do better.' I always ask them to give a little bit more, so they can improve. You can always go higher. We need to improve the quality of the voice. We can improve the emotion, work more deeply on every song, be more precise in the interpretation... But what is most important is spreading a beautiful energy. And this is seen in the smiling faces of the singers."

Antoine's long-term goal for the choir includes the development of his own skills. "The choir is a musical instrument, and the musician is the conductor, and I have to train myself to make my instrument more and more responsive. I can do nothing without the choir. We are together. The improvement is collective. I'm on a path with this group."

For Antoine, the choir has been intrinsically wrapped up with his experience of joining Auroville. "When I joined Auroville three years ago, I knew I had to do something with the human voice here. When I conduct, I'm at my soul place. Even though he introduced me to choral singing my father steered me to be an engineer, but these days I do what I like and what I'm designed to do. Conducting now has more importance than singing for me. I follow my intuition with a lot of joy."

As well as singing bass in the main Auroville choir, Antoine works with singers and actors to improve their voice, and he collaborates with the Unicorn Collective theatre company.

He also offers weekly spontaneous singing classes, in which people come together to sing without any goal. "It's very important, because I can see many people who were told by parents to stop singing, stop making noise. In this way, adults become blocked in their self-expression. Singing is a natural thing that is really specific to humankind. When people can enjoy singing together, creating their own music on the spot without any rules or guidelines, simply being themselves, it's wonderful. People are most of the time deeply touched when they discover what they can do. For many of them, it is a deep surprise."

Lesley (who is a member of the choir)

PASSINGS

Francesca Ivanov

Francesca Ivanov passed away on March 24 in a hospital near her native village, Edolo, in northern Italy. She was 48 years old.

Francesca first arrived in Auroville in 2007, and started her Newcomer process in 2009. She soon started working as a receptionist at Kailash Clinic. She loved the job and many of us may remember her as always busy and very involved and dedicated. In 2011, a year after officially joining Auroville, she had to return to Italy to look for a job that would provide her with resources to be able to continue to live here. Unfortunately, things did not go well for her and at the end of 2015 she discovered that she had lung cancer.

Auroville was always in her thoughts and words and prayers and Francesca never lost hope of returning one day. Sadly, this was not to be.

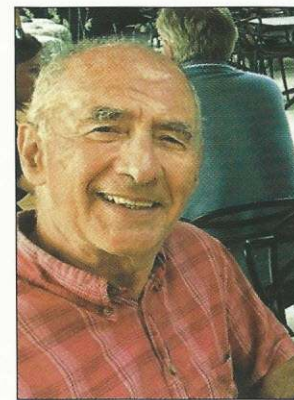


Gildo Pivetta

Gildo Maria Pivetta left his body on April 5th, in Belgium, surrounded by his wife and children. Gildo (most people know him as Guido) had been quite unwell lately and left Auroville in March 2019 for Belgium where it was found that a terminal cancer had rapidly spread throughout the body. He was 74 years old.

Gildo, who was originally Italian but lived in Belgium with his family before joining Auroville, started his newcomer process in December 2011 and became Aurovilian two years later. After a short while in Luminosity, he lived for the last two years in Swayam. Being fluent in French, he was individually tutoring pupils from various schools in the French language and he also taught in Last School.

He was an energetic, solitary man, very clean and orderly, not only in life but also in his approach to death. Nearing the welcomed end, he was very calm and clear, being profoundly grateful for what he had received in life.



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