

## The mission of Savitri Bhavan



“Sri Aurobindo announced that mankind will enter the subjective age, that a new civilisation is going to come where the primary thrust will be inwards,” says Shraddhavan. “Auroville is intended to become one of the focal points for that new age and will in future be known as a spiritual city; in that context, we feel that the work of Savitri Bhavan is of prime importance.”

Savitri Bhavan's mission is to help manifest the spiritual side of Auroville through education based on the vision and teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. The complex, which has grown up over the last 20 years, includes two auditoria, two large exhibition halls, a digital library, an ordinary library, a reading room, offices, a hostel, as well as a large garden and nursery. It welcomes all kinds of people who want to know more about the lives, work, vision and teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. It hosts scholars who come for research or to give lectures and participates in the 'welcome' programmes for newcomers. In recent years, teachers of Auroville and Outreach schools have been bringing groups of students to explore Savitri Bhavan and its activities. “We want the younger generations to feel that they are welcome here, and find that they enjoy their visits very much,” says Shraddhavan.

Since 1998 Savitri Bhavan has been organising programmes of weekly classes, courses and workshops to study the major works of Sri Aurobindo and those of The Mother. *The Maison de l'Agenda de Mère – The House of Mother's vision*, is also housed in Savitri Bhavan, where the 13 volumes of *The Mother's Agenda*, the record of her *sadhana* from 1956 to 1973 in the original French and translations into several other languages, are available and where people can come to listen to the *Agenda* recordings of the Mother's voice. The activities of Savitri Bhavan cover all the four languages which the Mother recommended for study in Auroville: Tamil, French and Sanskrit as well as English. *Invocation*, the Bhavan's twice-yearly journal in English, was launched in 1998, and was followed by a Tamil version, of which 34 issues have now appeared. Special classes are also held for Tamil-speaking newcomers and Aurovilians, and Savitri Bhavan has published a Tamil translation by Mahalingam of the booklet *Aims and Ideals of Auroville*, which was recently released to celebrate the beginning of Mahalingam's centenary year.

### Studying Savitri

The central focus of Savitri Bhavan is the study of Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri – A Legend and a Symbol*, which has been called “sublime mystic poetry of the highest order” and “the greatest spiritual revelation given to man till now.” The Mother has said that “*Savitri is a mantra for the transformation of the world*” and called *Savitri* “the supreme revelation of Sri Aurobindo's vision.” “This made me feel the importance of *Savitri* for Auroville, which is supposed to manifest the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother” says Shraddhavan.

Shraddhavan's passion for *Savitri* was shared by others. But many were not native English speakers and had problems understanding Sri Aurobindo's poetic language. “In the early 1980s, I was asked to help people understand English. I responded that I am not an English teacher but that we can read *Savitri* together and I can respond to questions. That became a regular weekly event, and went beyond explaining the meaning of words to explaining parts of the poem, as far as I was able to. In this way, covering about two pages of *Savitri* each session, we went through the whole book. These weekly sessions were videoed; then several people offered to make transcriptions in order to get a deeper understanding about *Savitri*.”

*The English of Savitri* books came as a consequence: “A gentleman in Gujarat started translating our transcriptions into Gujarati and then published them – he has just brought out the 10th volume of *The English of Savitri* in Gujarati. That made me think, “Well, if he publishes the books, why don't we?” That led to *The English of Savitri* series, the 6th volume of which has just appeared.

Study sessions also took place on other major books of Sri Aurobindo, such as *The Life Divine*. “We found that *The Life Divine* and *Savitri* are complementary. They convey the same teaching, but address different types of people. Some are more responsive to the beauty, imagery and suggestiveness of the poetry, even if they don't understand it intellectually, whereas the appeal of *The Life Divine* is more to intellectual understanding.” A recently-joined Aurovillian is now transcribing the weekly sessions of *The Life Divine* study covering the whole book, which started in December 2008 and continued until September 2017.

### The English of Savitri

The six volumes of *The English of Savitri* do not follow the book sequentially. “The order is haphazard, and I apologize for that, but I had no idea that it would be required of me to explain the whole of *Savitri*,” says Shraddhavan. Full explanations of six books have now been published, but the demand continues for more. Shraddhavan shudders. “I've always said, ‘Don't expect me to do the whole thing!’ And I really thought that after publishing these six volumes and 52 issues of *Invocation*, I could wrap it up and that I would not be expected to do anything more. But it seems I cannot avoid it.” Book Two of the poem, the last nine cantos in particular, daunt her. “I am struggling with them. Some of these cantos are amongst the most difficult of the entire epic, even if they contain some of the absolute highlights of *Savitri*, such as the passage which describes how King Aswapati, after going down and down into the deepest subconscious and ‘suffering the ordeal of evil's absolute reign’, discovers ‘the secret Key of Nature's change’:

*Then in Illusion's occult factory  
And in the Inconscient's magic printing house  
Torn were the formats of the primal Night  
And shattered the stereotypes of Ignorance.*  
This experience projects him into *The Paradise of the Life Gods*. But his ultimate aim, which is to find

the Power which can change this earthly life to the Life Divine, remains to be fulfilled by his daughter Savitri at the climax of Book Eleven.

This is not just sublime poetry. This was the work of Sri Aurobindo himself.”

### Mantric poetry

*Savitri* is by no means easy to understand. “*Savitri* is a new kind of spiritual poetry,” explains Shraddhavan. “Sri Aurobindo describes this kind of poetry as the mantra of the real, and he describes mantra as the poetic expression of the deepest spiritual reality. It cannot be understood intellectually. The outer mind, the outer consciousness has to settle down to a receptive silence for the mantra to be heard. Sri Aurobindo describes this beautifully:

*As when the mantra sinks in Yoga's ear,  
Its message enters stirring the blind brain  
And keeps in the dim ignorant cells its sound;  
The hearer understands a form of words  
And, musing on the index thought it holds,  
He strives to read it with the labouring mind,  
But finds bright hints, not the embodied truth:  
Then, falling silent in himself to know  
He meets the deeper listening of his soul.*

“The prime thing is the ability to open oneself in an absolute mood of surrender and silence, receive it and let it work in yourself. And then, even if you don't understand the passage, it will still work within you. And when you re-read the same passage later, you'll discover that the lines begin to make sense to you. Mother said that reading *Savitri* is to practise yoga, spiritual concentration.”

### Savitri around the World

Parallel with the publication of *The English of Savitri* volumes, Savitri Bhavan has published on YouTube video recordings of readings of the entire book in 325 sections by 325 people from all over the world. This is called *Savitri around the World*. “It linked people from around the world, even many people we did not know, such as a lady from Trinidad and Tobago who is reading *Savitri* every day alone there in the Caribbean,” says Shraddhavan. The initial recordings were done on the occasion of Auroville's 50th anniversary, but had some shortcomings. A second version was launched on the centenary of Mother's arrival in Pondicherry, and the entire reading is now permanently available on YouTube. (see [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DS\\_0wk\\_owWM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DS_0wk_owWM)).

### The picture gallery

If *Savitri* expresses the Future Poetry, The Mother tried starting the Future Painting. Savitri Bhavan hosts the 472 *Meditations on Savitri*, oil paintings made by Ashram artist Huta between 1961 to 1966 under The Mother's direct guidance, illustrating selected passages from *Savitri*. “Mother was aiming for a new kind of painting,” says Shraddhavan. “She told her student, ‘We are going towards a painting that will be able to express the supramental truth of things,’ and said ‘You must try to do the Future Painting in the New Light ... Do not try to adopt the technique either of modern art or of

old classical art. But always try to express the true inner vision of her soul ... You must have the psychic touch to see and feel the vibrations, the sensations and the essence of the Truth in everything and that Truth is to be expressed in the Future Painting.’ These paintings must be experienced in inner silence.”

### The Auroville response

Asked about Auroville's response to the work of Savitri Bhavan, Shraddhavan answers that, initially, it was negative as people were afraid that teaching Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's vision could become religious. “But this fear has subsided. We have gained a certain acceptance, but not with the whole community. For example, the golden jubilee photo book that Auroville published on the occasion of its 50th anniversary carries not a single photo of Savitri Bhavan, and we were quite hurt to discover this.” Is this a sign of a lack of interest of Aurovilians in the work done at Savitri Bhavan? Or does it show a lack of understanding of the spiritual purpose of Auroville?

“I hope not,” says Shraddhavan. “After all, The Mother made it abundantly clear that the first necessity for being a true Aurovillian is the inner discovery. Most people have no knowledge about who they truly are. They forget that their personality is a mask and that they are not their body, their mind, or their life energies. Mother wrote ‘At our centre there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville.’ Sri Aurobindo explained it in *Savitri*:

*This bodily appearance is not all  
The form deceives, the person is a mask;  
Hid deep in man celestial powers can dwell.  
His fragile ship conveys through the sea of years  
An incognito of the Imperishable.  
A spirit that is a flame of God abides,  
A fiery portion of the Wonderful,  
Artist of his own beauty and delight,  
Immortal in our mortal poverty.  
This sculptor of the forms of the Infinite,  
This screened unrecognised Inhabitant,  
Initiate of his own veiled mysteries,  
Hides in a small dumb seed his cosmic thought.  
In the mute strength of the occult Idea,  
Determining predestined shape and act,  
Passenger from life to life, from scale to scale,  
Changing his imaged self from form to form,  
He regards the icon growing by his gaze  
And in the worm foresees the coming god.*

“And what better help to make that inner discovery than studying Their works? Mother said that for the opening of the psychic, it is good to read one or two pages of *Savitri* each day and added: *Savitri* alone is sufficient to make you climb to the highest peaks. If truly one knows how to meditate on *Savitri*, one will receive all the help one needs...”

In conversation with Carel

For more information on Savitri Bhavan, its architecture and its publications and activities, visit <http://savitribhavan.org/>



# Searching for the self

Lara Davis, mason, architect, amateur botanist, forest worker and poet, speaks about her path to self-discovery.

## Daily Reminder

*Knowing the end approaches  
He asks what we should all ask –  
What would I truly wish to do  
With the rest of my life? How do  
I make my time on this planet count?*

*Vision and dream of global transformations  
Mean nothing – when we cannot transform  
Ourselves. And so the daily prayer must lead us  
On the path of the life well-lived –  
On a path with beauty spilling over for us to notice  
With a speed modulated, that we may take joy –*

*In leaning over, to kiss the flower that crosses us  
To look out along the distance and all around us  
At the coyote passing, pausing with prescient stare  
To look up at the light piercing the canopy  
With its luminescent greens, comforting  
And even the flaming orange lantana!*

*Take notice of the life all around you  
This is the magic way the shaman seeks  
And the Divine Grace of self-discovery.*

February 2, 2019.

“I am in a serious transition phase,” says Lara, gazing earnestly at the interloper who dared disturb her forest solitude to write about ... “Yes, about what? My life? It is not interesting. My transition? But I have been in transition all my life! Is this really the moment...?”

She finally agrees to share. Her early days? “I am one half of a monozygotic twin. And there is a third sister, born two years earlier. We were always called ‘the triplets’. As it was impossible to distinguish me from my twin, for years my mother would put me on the left side in all portrait photographs, so that she would remember later (‘Lara on the Left’). But there was more than an outer resemblance. For there was oneness too. Twins have a natural tendency to sublimate their minds to the other mind, and are often not able to distinguish between a single mind, a single ego and two minds, multiple egos. I still answer to ‘Sara’, the name of my twin sister, and for many years also to the name of my older sister. Finding my own identity was a huge problem. For years I was searching for autonomy, for the integrity of my ‘own’ self, breaking and reconstituting the twin ego-self to find my own. It was my first hard work. Once I wrote a treatise on the praxis of being a twin, called *Twin Logics*, in which I used different metaphors to help a non-twin understand what it means to be a twin. Sri Aurobindo’s ‘the one in two and the two in one’ were words I had been using all my life – though, of course, in a different context. It was in this search for the autonomy of self that my first poetic catharsis came, as a help to work through the double identity and find my own.”

So poetry came at an early age?

“The poetic strain started when I was around eight years old. I loved reading the dictionary, tracing the etymology of words. Later, for my college graduation, my grandmother presented me with the compact edition of the Oxford English Dictionary, printed on ‘bible paper’, where each page held nine original pages of the original 20-volume edition. The book came with a magnifying glass; otherwise you couldn’t read the sentences and the etymologies in even smaller fonts. I read it like a dilettante, constructing lateral significances that never existed, and enjoying the history of words. That was a natural introduction to the world of poetry.

“But I never really studied poetry. I went to art school, but for a long time I couldn’t find my medium. I did drawing, sculpture, installation work, but felt most at home in working with bricks and stone and doing landscaping. I took a poetry class for one semester, taught by a lovely teacher. She gave me her personal copy of Martin Heidegger’s *Poetry, Language, Thought*, a book that contains his pivotal writings on art, its role in human life and culture, and its relationship to thinking and truth. This became my favourite book; it may have sealed my calling as a poet.

“But that was not the daily work. I loved masonry and landscape construction, and after I left school I found work doing that for the wealthiest of the wealthy in New York City. It involved very hard physical labour, but I enjoyed it: the heavier the better. But there was something wrong. It was not the pay, which was vastly insufficient – I barely survived, living in the one of the worst neighbourhoods of New York, the one with the second highest crime rate. The problem was that I was working for a class of people who were living in ivory towers, and who look down on labourers who enter their building through filthy back basements using service elevators. I liked being dirty and was amused at being frowned upon by the wealthy when I walked through their pristine apartments to their landscaped gardens. It was even more fun to speak to them in a way which made them question what kind of labourers they had hired. But in the end, I realised that I wanted to work for people – like my crew members – in a public domain, not work for the rich and wealthy and experience the inner angst and outer pain that comes up when labour is not respected.

“So I went back to school, this time to a prestigious place, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, MIT, to study architecture and so gain tools that would allow me to free myself for this work and not be ‘behind bars’ for the rest of my life working for the

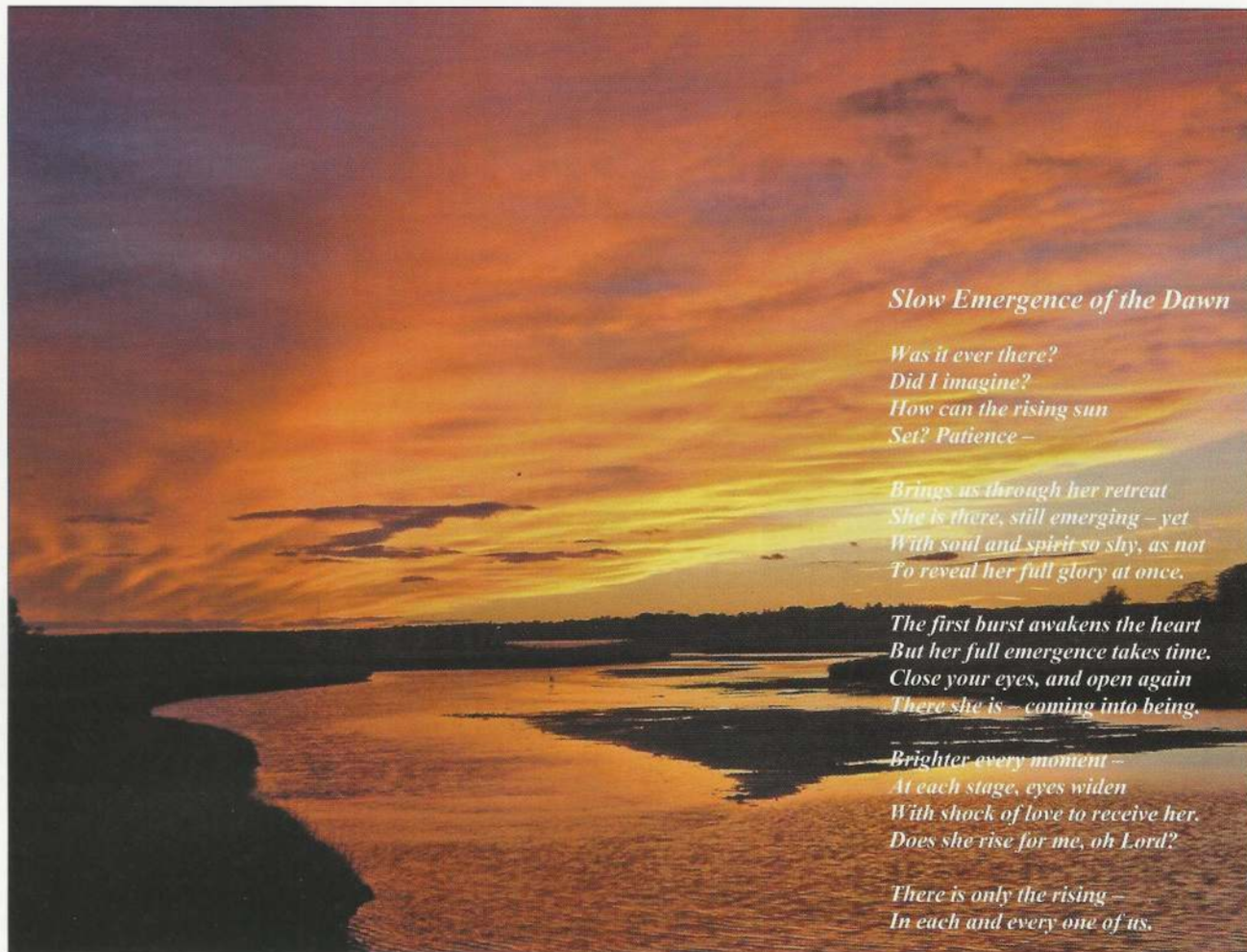


PHOTO: LARA DAVIS

## Slow Emergence of the Dawn

*Was it ever there?  
Did I imagine?  
How can the rising sun  
Set? Patience –*

*Brings us through her retreat  
She is there, still emerging – yet  
With soul and spirit so shy, as not  
To reveal her full glory at once.*

*The first burst awakens the heart  
But her full emergence takes time.  
Close your eyes, and open again  
There she is – coming into being.*

*Brighter every moment –  
At each stage, eyes widen  
With shock of love to receive her.  
Does she rise for me, oh Lord?*

*There is only the rising –  
In each and every one of us.*

Dawn at Zeek’s Creek salt marsh, Conanicut Island, RI, USA

wealthy without any kind of inner satisfaction. But MIT was a mistake. I went there because there was a particular masonry engineering professor I wanted to learn from, and that worked relatively well. Through him I got to work in Switzerland, Singapore and Ethiopia and a handful of other places in between, doing some fancy free-form architecture design and building a few affordable housing prototypes. I even started a PhD, but I quit when I realised that it was a façade and a fallacy. I didn’t want to play that game.

“But it was suffering to be at MIT, which is one of the most un-poetic places in the world, at least at the architecture department. I did write poetry in those years, but it was always an extremely painful process, like a hernia that pops out. There was a deep catharsis in the closure of each piece. My twin sister used to say, ‘I just want to weed my garden, but you want to weed your soul’ and that my work was ‘like a shaft of light falling through a window of an abandoned, shattered and dusty house’. So for years there was that forceful, painful effort to bring things out.

“Auroville came up because of the Auroville Earth Institute. I had known about the existence of the Earth Institute many years earlier, since my New York years, but at that time I was broke and couldn’t come to India. That changed after I left the US, when I was building catalan and other vaults in Ethiopia. I came to Auroville to study the earthen vaults which the Earth Institute was building. So, indirectly, the mistake of going to MIT brought me to Auroville. In hindsight, I have come to realise that all my mistakes conspired to bring me straight here. Mother uses our mistakes and all our gaping wounds that lie dormant within us to capitalize on the moment She sees fit.

“I worked as a co-director for the Auroville Earth Institute for almost eight years, primarily involved with earthen architecture and construction projects, in particular those with thin-shell masonry vaulting. I also gave courses on the structural theory of masonry and on the construction of arches, vaults and domes.

“And now – back to my roots – I am working at the edge of Darkali Forest in the International Zone, doing forestry work. I mulch, I fell dead trees, and I prune. Tree pruning is like a zen art. When I am pruning trees and look up at the canopy, I let nature speak to me. There is no active mind, the mind doesn’t interfere in the action. Then there comes an automatic discernment of which branch to prune and where. I listen to what the trees want. Sometimes the pruning work is done to let light in, so that the indigenous species can grow and develop. At other times I correct a shrub which is twisted and causes damage to other plants; you prune and it all becomes different, like a sculpture of canopy. This time of year there is a need for ground protection so I increase soil cover wherever I can. All that for me is karma yoga: the mind not interfering, there is a free flow between mind and action and giving up mind and serving something that is higher. That service, for me, is to the Earth Mother.

“During the time at the Earth Institute and now working in the forests, the poetic expressions have intensified. I am writing about stone, water, nature, the metaphysics of nature, essentially an introspection. For many years of my life I would have called it self-searching; but it is a spiritual search.

*Home grows in the forest  
The home, it grows in the forest –  
Self-germinating, all effort joyful,  
Seeded by the ancestors, fostered  
By the Mother, and offered by she  
Who dreamed before me.*

*What future lies in this forest hut  
The place to go and do my yoga –  
To trim the plants and sweep the  
Stones, bring creativity into being  
Rise with the sun and set with the stars  
Surrounded by the light and the life...*

*The ancient sages sought such places  
Turned away from the world, to gain  
Enlightenment. The shamans too –  
Who did their work between the planes  
Of the living and the lost. Is it in solitude  
That this yoga must be done?*

February 1, 2019

“The poetic intensity has changed. For years I used poetry to air my own dirty laundry, attempting to clean the inner channel so that there was no garbage on the road. I’ve discovered that this is an unending process. Every single day I have to clear the way, actively, but gently. The voiding of – or rather the facing of – the self used to come as a painful exercise; but now it has become a gentle observation of oneself, and it helps in empathizing with others.

## Human weakness

*Our greatest human weakness, we have  
Little imagination for the Divinity in people  
Even those we love, we want to support  
Yet constrain to a prison of our expectations.*

*We patronize, appeal to lower natures, we  
Make it difficult for them to step beyond, into  
Their own natures – vast and unfathomable.  
Most human love smothers in this way.*

*To empty ourselves, approach others with  
No expectations, speak to the luminous vastness –  
This is beyond our expectations for ourselves.  
Who are we to be surrounded by light and love?*

*We feel we must protect ourselves from  
The precipice of disappointment, and so  
We never approach the cliff of the Divine  
In others. We shield our eyes.*

*We never look out over the luminous sea,  
And never jump into the cold, hard waters  
Of Divine bliss. To do so takes enormous courage  
And openness to the presencing of Divine in us all.*

4 April 2019

“And then I write in solitude and silence. If I am not totally still, if my mind is active and makes an effort to produce things and tries to write poetry, I stop. I have to silence my mind. Then the flow comes, effortlessly. When the effort is there, I have to stop. When there is no effort, there is no judgement either; then there is just the bliss of creation. Then the ‘good’ poetry comes. And then there comes the opening to the true essence of your being, who you are behind the ego formation.”

In conversation with Carel



# Loneliness in the time of COVID

Clinical psychologist and NeuroLife coach Praveen Chopra talks about the increasing number of people who are suffering from loneliness and what can be done about it.

**Auroville Today: How would you define loneliness?**

**Praveen:** Loneliness is a negative and distressing emotional state that arises from a discrepancy between one's desire for social connectedness and one's achieved levels of it. It's the dissociation between what an individual expects or wants from a relationship or from society versus what an individual is actually experiencing at that moment in their lives. There are two aspects to it: loneliness, which is the subjective feeling of being isolated; and social isolation, the objective state of having few social relationships.

The word 'lonely' should be distinguished from 'being alone'. Lonely has a psychological element of suffering: it is an emotion because of a lack of companionship. But 'being alone' does not necessarily trigger the feelings of loneliness. You can be alone because someone has left. You can also be alone because of your choice; for example, many Buddhist monks live alone. They live in solitude, which is a state of being alone without the negative emotions associated with feeling lonely.

**Has the pandemic and the imposed lockdowns increased the sense of loneliness?**

Yes. The pandemic has triggered a loneliness epidemic. The statistics show us that pre-COVID, worldwide one out of ten people were lonely. Today, mid-COVID, it's one out of four. That shows an exponential rise in loneliness. The feeling of loneliness is intensified by the protocols and precautions society needs to follow to protect against COVID-19. Social isolation has become a major reason for the onset of loneliness or for its increase. If a person had a tendency to be lonely pre-COVID, it will now intensify. And there is a risk that loneliness becomes chronic, as is now seen in countries such as Japan.

Loneliness is not only an issue of people who live alone, but also of people who are habitually in the company of others. They are lonely because they are not able to identify with the others. Also in partnerships people can be lonely because that what originally brought them together, is no longer valid. This is now being aggravated as due to the lockdowns, people are forced to be together. Earlier, at least one of the partners would be out for work for the day. Now, people have to stay together. This creates tensions. Earlier, such issues would be swept under the carpet. Now they have surfaced and come forward.

**You have been advising on partnership issues?**

I have been dealing a lot with partnership issues. For many people, this is a litmus test. "Can we stay together? What are the rules of engagement, of our behaviour, of our intimacy level?" I've found that the first barrier to overcome is the denial factor. For if you admit that there is an issue, then you must seek a solution, and if you don't want to see the issue, you live a lie. But there is a cost to no-decision, to inaction. If you don't do something, there will be always be a consequence: whether it is a lack of peace of mind, or an increased physical ailment. Some couples who have lived long together decide to continue living their 'script', even if they have nothing more to say to each other. That's a

relationship of convenience, but it isn't a healthy one. There was research some years ago on men and women staying in an abusive and unhealthy relationship who preferred this to the prospect of facing loneliness. They compromised their authenticity for fear of the unknown. In all those cases, I advise them to agree to change their 'script' and possibly separate for a few months. That gives each of them the possibility to refocus on themselves, for being alone can be a beautiful contemplative process as well. Often it is better for the person to remain alone and discover themselves – that's the opportunity given here in Auroville. For here you are not in a rat-race and you can find like-minded people. But you have to take the courage to do so.

**What are the consequences of loneliness?**

One study has found that lonely individuals are often affected by physical and mental health problems. Another recent study predicts that COVID-19 will have a long-term and profound impact on older adults' health and well-being. We can expect an increase of cardio-vascular diseases, stress, obesity, diminished immune system functioning, depression, anxiety, poorer cognitive functioning, and an increased occurrence of behaviour dysfunctionality and suicide rates. Statistics have also shown that the occurrence of Alzheimer's disease, connected to dementia, is on the rise. In the last 6 months, there has been an increase of more than 100%. This is scary.

**Can you 'measure' loneliness?**

Yes, but only to an approximation, because measuring the subjective experience of loneliness can be a very complicated process and may involve MRI brain scans for accuracy. Changes in loneliness are easier to identify once a baseline has been established.

As a simple guideline, the following UCLA loneliness scale developed by Russell in 1996 could provide a general indication of loneliness. Answer each of the following questions with 1 (never), 2 (rarely), 3 (sometimes), 4 (always), and then tally up your score. The average score is 20, and anything below 25 is normal. But a score above 30 indicates extreme loneliness, which may require medical or psychological attention.

1. How often do you feel unhappy doing so many things alone?
2. How often do you feel you have no one to talk to?
3. How often do you feel you cannot tolerate being so alone?
4. How often do you feel as if no one understands you?
5. How often do you find yourself waiting for people to call or write?
6. How often do you feel completely alone?
7. How often do you feel unable to reach out and communicate with those around you?
8. How often do you feel starved for company?
9. How often do you feel it is difficult for you to make friends?
10. How often do you feel shut out and excluded by others?

What if your score is over 30? The first thing to do is not panic. Because taking this test at home is not the same thing as getting a proper thorough psychological assessment.

**How is the situation in Auroville?**

I think loneliness in Auroville is as prevalent as elsewhere in the world. But I can't say for sure. Many years ago, when I first visited Auroville, I met an Aurovilian at the Solar Kitchen who said to me, "Praveen, there is an issue of loneliness here. Join Auroville. People will be queuing up in front of your clinic." But that did not happen. Many Auroville residents hesitate to go to someone and ask for help. The argument is "We don't need to see a psychologist if we follow the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother". But I have found that many do need a guide as the do-it-yourself option lacks what I call "accountability". Many people find it difficult to monitor themselves and have discipline. For example, they say, "I will now start meditating every day at 6 am." It works for a few days, then they give up, and soon feel bad about that. If there is an interaction with a helper, this is different.

I often ask my clients to do something during the week, and report about it the week afterwards. That creates continuity and a certain accountability of the people. And I advise them to start small. Small steps will finally lead to your destination. As the Dalai Lama once said to his audience, "There is no enlightenment pill". It goes step by step. Micro efforts lead to macro benefits.

**What are the main issues you are dealing with?**

The top five issues I face as clinical psychologist are loneliness, depression, anxiety, stress, a life change due to circumstances like death or divorce or loss of job, and severe issues of sudden grief: people just losing their *mojo*, saying that they are really tired, have lost their interest in life, and in essence, are saying 'I am fed up, my passion for what I am doing is no longer there.'

**What do you advise people?**

I focus on introspection, cognitive re-framing, interaction and connection, movement, and changing perspective as ways of coping with loneliness and depression.

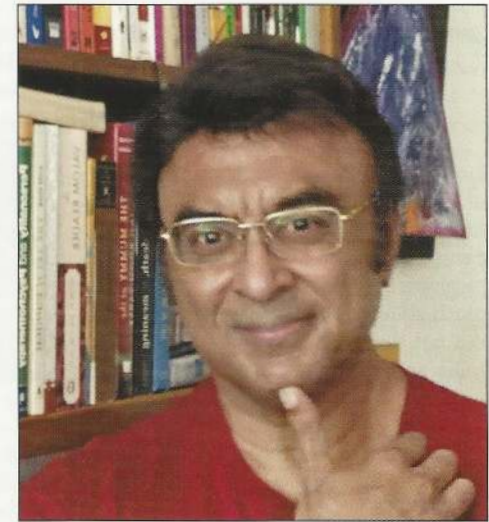
Regarding introspection I advise to observe your inner script: Are your default ways of thinking about life, others and the environment positive? Or are you in an "I am a victim" frame of mind? Are you inspired to improve your day-to-day functionality? Can you observe your depression as a passing cloud?

Cognitive re-framing means that instead of looking at some unpleasant event or experience this way, try look at it in a different way. Change your perspective. Be more generous and kind, and less self-centred and judgemental. The person who did not smile back at you may have not even noticed you as he was lost in an inner state. Don't take it as a personal insult. And reach out. A sincere smile does a lot for the well-being of another person. Compliment a person for the work he or she is doing, don't take that work – or the person – for granted. These are known as micro acts of kindness, and they mushroom. You make one person happy, and the person in turn will do something nice for the next person.

Then again, talk to friends and family on a weekly basis, preferably in person or by phone, or through social media. It also helps if you can send and receive short video clips. Form or participate in an online local group in Auroville to investigate your inner journey with others who may have similar interests. Social contacts must be made at least once a week. Because otherwise isolation becomes a black hole, and the gravity pull of a black hole is so strong that it becomes increasingly difficult to get out of it.

Motion is responsible for emotion, and if you move the body, it changes the well-being and the mental stage. Movement improves mind and memory. Go out for a walk and get some sunshine – this will help reduce depression, anxiety and stress. If you can't go out, do a little brisk walk in your apartment. Sit up and lie down for 5 minutes, this prevents muscle and mental atrophy. Do hatha yoga exercises. By increasing our heart rate we release the "feel good" neurotransmitters – dopamine and serotonin. These two help in reducing symptoms of loneliness, depression, and improve memory. For there is a connection between regular exercising and cognitive functioning: regular exercise leads to decrease in the onset of Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

I also encourage many of my clients to consider the possibility that this challenging phase of their life may represent an opportunity to explore some of their goals that they may have "shelved", waiting for the perfect mood or time. For example, read that book that has been on the shelf for a while, start the study you have always wanted to do but for which you never had time, and so on. And last but not least, I remind them that "time is like oxygen". It's precarious; with each out breath one is moving towards one's last breath. And this awareness can bring people to a feeling of intense gratitude for what they have. I ask them to say 'thank you'. Thank you that their body is functioning well, that their eyes are seeing well, that their heart is functioning without problem, and so on. This is an amazing exercise which brings great joy. Gratitude is a huge factor in the well-being and meaning or life. If you intentionally bring your awareness to your body, do a self-scan of your body, and feel grateful for its functioning, you feel much better afterwards. This is not only a psychological fact. MRI machines have



Dr. Praveen Chopra

shown the positive shift in the neural correlates that these exercises bring.

**What can the Auroville community do to help others?**

The first step is to increase public awareness that a rise in the rate of loneliness and an increase of depression are expected consequences of the current self-isolation rules. The next step is to start a system of community helpers.

Let Auroville set up a helpline, a 911, for people to call when they are in distress. This line should be 24/7 operated by people who can connect the callers with trained Aurovilians who can take care.

Let every community in Auroville appoint one or two of its residents to be community helpers who visit the members of their community who have problems and are available to help out.

Provide good training to the helpers. How can they help a person who is closed up? How can they convince such a person that there is light at the end of the tunnel? I would be happy to teach them some principles and methods and run some workshops.

If these measures can be implemented, if community helpers are there to help those in difficulty, one more step towards that elusive human unity will be made.

*In conversation with Carel.*

Dr. Praveen Chopra is a quantum physicist who has worked with institutions such as Fermilab and CERN in the fields of astrophysics and in researching the mass of neutrinos. In 1996 he shifted to clinical psychology when he discovered that the behaviour patterns of human beings were more complex and less predictable than particle physics. He has been working as a clinical psychologist and NeuroLife coach in the USA and with clients in Europe, UK, Middle East and India. Since 2011 he has visited Auroville and taught Psychology at Future School for several terms, conducted a 5 week workshop at Arka on Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction and presented seminars on "Understanding Your Teenager." He is currently in the phase of permanently settling down here and will soon start the process of joining Auroville. His book Psychology, Quantum Physics, Spirituality and Philosophy is scheduled to be published in 2021.

## Two Auroville services are helping out

### Koodam

At the beginning of April, Koodam, the conflict resolution platform that offers personal and group conflict transformation services in Auroville, extended their support to anybody needing help in coping with the challenges presented by the lockdown and quarantine regulations. The first need of the hour, they experienced, is to strengthen the collaboration within the community.

### Matram

Matram (sharing for connection) offers a counselling service to help the process of healing, transformation and growth in a holistic way, with a team of professionally trained psychologists, psychotherapists and psychiatrists.

## AUROVILLE TODAY

To our subscribers

Due to India's lockdown in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, the April-May issue # 369-370 and the June-July issue # 371-372 could not be printed or mailed out. All our subscribers have been sent soft copies instead.

In the last week of July the press started functioning again, and on August 1st, these two issues have been mailed to our subscribers in one envelope. Please send us an email at [avtoday@auroville.org.in](mailto:avtoday@auroville.org.in) in case you have not received these issues.

The editors



## Auroville teens on COVID-19

Thanks to the Internet culture, Aurovillian teenagers are very connected to the world: they knew about the coronavirus when it had just started, long before it hit India. "It was all over social media, in serious format and humorous memes as well," says 15-year old Anu. While some posts were borderline racist, according to one teen – the phrase 'made in China' took on a new meaning. However, they didn't think much about COVID-19 at the time; they did not think it was going to spread to India and affect their lives over here as well.



Anu

Then, lockdown.

When schools closed, teens' online research became more serious as it all started to feel 'real'.

"I was rather shocked when the government implemented a lockdown with strict protocols for the police," says Mir (16). The general mood was nevertheless quite relaxed, with most believing the situation would come to an end quite rapidly as the lockdown was nothing more than a precautionary measure. Surely a cure would be found quite rapidly, especially in our usual warm conditions.



Mir

Manu (16) strongly believed that "everything would go back to normal in no time."

Before the national lockdown took effect on March 25th, some teenagers were getting ready to take exams, and most were planning on travelling to other countries, such as Korea, Japan, Singapore, Europe, and other parts of India. Their plans included internships, summer holidays with family or friends, and – for the older kids – visiting or going to universities. When their plans were disrupted or cancelled, there was disappointment, but the A-level students suffered most from the uncertainty floating around their future.



Manu

Even so, things didn't feel very different for most; we seem to be living quite secluded lives here in Auroville, even in 'normal times'. Nevertheless, the youth kept up with what was happening by watching the news every day, reading newspaper articles online and researching the daily statistics regarding cases and deaths in India and worldwide. However, Aiyana, (17), shared: "I quickly realised that surrounding myself with this constant stream of information (most of which tends to be negative and frightening) was putting me in a state of paranoia and causing my anxiety levels to spike." In fact, the morale of the youth ranged from



Aiyana

very low to very high; many of them experienced the entire gamut over the weeks, like a rollercoaster effect.

At first, Auroville teens felt some animosity towards the government for imposing such strict restrictions: no physical interaction with friends, long queues due to restricted opening times, uncomfortable masks (especially in the summer heat), the smell of hand sanitiser insinuating everywhere. They were 'in a funk'. Manisa (17) mentioned: "the situation affected my mental health to a



Manisa

certain extent because it just felt like all my plans and aspirations went down the drain. After some time, it got better and I realised that everyone is going through the same struggles." Most of them felt pressured to perform, but gradually came to the realisation that the entire world is in 'survival mode', so they could lower their self-expectations. Jasmine (18), opened up: "I have started putting less pressure on myself to constantly do things, because when the world is on pause it feels like I'm allowed to take some time off as well."

As time went by and days became weeks and months, most felt that this was like an extended holiday. They decided to make the best of it by volunteering at Foodlink and various farms, studying, participating in permitted sports, gardening... Just like everyone else, they were trying to keep themselves busy to cope with events. Volunteering gave them a routine and a structured framework: people came together to give back to the community, for the greater good of the community. Several people (youth and adults alike) mentioned that they never felt more united and connected to the rest of the community than in these troubled times. "I think one of the biggest changes is that I'm starting to realise how I've been taking many things for granted, and it is time I show my gratitude," mused Manu.



Jasmine

The lockdown allowed many Auroville teens to spend quality time with their family and closest friends. Like people of all ages and everywhere around the world, it was also a time of self-work and introspection. Manisa added: "Corona has really given me the time to sit down and reflect, to deal with all the issues that were bothering me and really face them." Some youths mentioned that they've matured more in three months than in the past year, and are much more in touch with themselves. "At first, I felt like I had my freedom taken from me," reflected Kishore (15). "Later, I noticed freedom was something I needed to create for myself."



Kishore

Auropradeepa, 19, explained the impact this situation had on her social life: "I've realised that I don't always have to surround myself with the people I thought I 'had' to. I realised I've never actually been or lived all

alone, I am always surrounded by people. Now, I have reached the stage where I'm voluntarily practicing 'social distancing'. I finally realised that sometimes I just have to prioritise myself and spend time alone."

The teenagers' focus was not only on how India dealt with the situation, but also on the situation worldwide, and they feel that this crisis has brought numerous flaws to light. Manu added: "If everyone doesn't discipline themselves and if they do not do it together unitedly, how will it work?" Although it's easy to point fingers, the entire world was caught off guard. Manu likened COVID-19 to the Black Death that ravaged Europe in the 14th century: "History repeats itself: people then did not know what it was and were unable to stop it."

Most of the students felt that things were handled quite well here in Auroville, although some feel the schools could have offered them more support. Aiyana explained that "Auroville as a whole could have supported the children more as they are affected most by social distancing". Nevertheless, as the community kept covering basic needs, they did not let the situation dampen their



Auropradeepa



Hamin

spirits too much. Hamin (17) shared: "I feel I am safe, and that is the most important thing right now." Half of them were not frightened of catching the virus (*Carpe Diem* style), but others were very cautious and followed the guidelines to the letter. The latter, like Sama (15), felt that "in Auroville people didn't and still aren't taking it as seriously as

the rest of the world, especially the teenagers and children."

They are not convinced by the conspiracy theories that are going around, nor do they believe that some higher force will keep them safe. As students, they are definitely worried about the future of their education. At first, not having to go to school and having exams cancelled was thrilling, but this was soon replaced with a feeling of frustration and incompleteness as well as apprehension. However, most of them are curious and eager to start with what Anu calls: "two words ruling over my near future for now, as vague as can be: Online Schooling." Most of them believe things will gradually settle and 'go back to normal', and life will pick up where they left it. Some are quite intent on catching up for lost time and doing all the things they couldn't do during the lockdown.

They are touched by the impact that this pandemic has had on people all around the world, feel concerned by everybody's wellbeing, and are appalled by the deepening of the divide between rich and poor, locals and migrants. 18-year old Leela observes that her current reading of Noam Chomsky's *Global Discontents: Conversations on the Rising Threats to Democracy* is applicable to the current situation worldwide: "The system has got to change, especially capitalism since it clearly is not working. It flourishes on the fact that no one has the time to stop and think, you're always pushed to work more, do more, but at what



Leela

cost?" Zara (15) shares: "I hope we can take this period as a moment to reflect on the way we live our lives which are usually very busy, and we can move forward into something more conscious, especially when it comes to the environment."

Leela, however, is concerned that the opportunity for change is not lost for the world as a whole. She points out that many paradoxes became more apparent in this time of crisis, such as the underprivileged putting their lives at risk for the benefit of the 'overprivileged'. "We're at a tipping point, and it's on us: either we strive to go back to our own little bubble of comfort without caring about others and their suffering, going back to normalizing death and destruction; or we give up this position and start from the beginning in a way that helps everyone."

In fact, it is evident for the youth that here in Auroville we live in a privileged situation. Also, seeing the inequalities everywhere in the world, they realize that some of them are also present in our aspiring-for-better community, and they want to find better ways of dealing with them. They are ready, they say, let's just do it!



Zara

Divya Lieser

## Closed doors, open hearts: Deepam in the time of Corona

On 18th March 2020 Deepam closed. Deepam is the day care centre in Kulilpalayam for children with special needs where I work as an occupational therapist. I moved to Auroville in October 2019 with my partner, Allan, and I threw myself happily into my work at Deepam. It was a joy to work in a place which isn't governed by fear or money-driven policies (as I was used to from the UK), but rather by kindness, care and a heartfelt desire to do everything we can for the children in our care. Deepam very quickly became my work, my anchor, my integration, my social network and my purpose here in Auroville, so the temporary closure of Deepam has been quite a change for me.

Normally, Deepam offers day care, vocational and outreach programmes which are tailored to the needs of the individual students. Our students have a wide range of diagnoses from cerebral palsy and hemiplegia to learning disabilities and autism to sensory integration issues and childhood trauma. As an occupational therapist, I was mainly providing individual therapy for the outreach and day care students.

Over the last four months however, the team has been taking turns to go to Deepam to do a deep clean, sort and repair games and toys, do assessments, catch up on paperwork, update the website and share our collective knowledge and experience with each other, and do our own personal training. We are able to provide those families in need with food, medicines and a little money to help them through this hard time, but many children are sitting at home doing very little and losing the progress they had made through their therapy. Many of the parents have lost work and home life is not always easy, comfortable or pleasant for our children and their families. Deepam has never closed before



Leo with children from Deepam at Pondicherry beach

for longer than ten days in its 28-year history because the negative impact on our students is too high. There are a few that have very supportive parents who are providing therapy for them at home and this is heart-warming to see (via WhatsApp videos), but many of our students are facing neglect, aggression and extensive boredom. We're doing what we can, but it just breaks all of our hearts to not be able to open Deepam for them.

'Doing' is so important for our health and wellbeing; engaging in occupation is fundamental to our sense of self and our relationship with the world. It is hard, as an occupational therapist, to see our children not having access to occupational engagement and to be able to do

very little about it. I have therefore put energy into developing individualized homework packs with English, maths, puzzles and games to develop skills required by that child (e.g. education, fine motor, attention, focus, hand/eye coordination, problem solving, spatial awareness, visual acuity, memory etc.). I am having regular phone calls with our kids to provide them with social contact, prompt them to do their homework and engage in tasks at home (many household tasks hold a lot of therapeutic potential, but many of our children are not supported or encouraged to do these). And I have been trying to help parents understand why and how to help their children.

But there is only so much that we can do when the children do not have the resources, like phones, stationary and games (what we provide quickly disappears into the family network or is sold), support systems (family or friends with the time and/or will to help), or the ability to engage in healthy and beneficial activities independently due to learning disabilities. Alongside Deepam work and my own professional development, I have been able to help Thamarai develop some educational resource material for their students and I have been working at AuroOrchard farm for a few hours, six mornings a week. There is something incredibly humbling about growing good organic healthy food that provides nutrition and sustenance for Auroville.

We do not know when Deepam will be able to open again. But despite the disruption, particularly to our students, it's a luxury not to be stuck in a work or professional box, but to be able to be flexible as the situation requires. I am endlessly grateful that we are in Auroville during this lockdown; in a place of learning, exploration and nature. I can't imagine a better place to be.

Leo



## 'Calling the Future': preliminary results of a community survey

In May, the community was invited to participate in the 'Calling the future' survey. 245 people participated, the majority of whom (over 90%) were Aurovillian residents. One purpose was to find out how residents had experienced and responded to the lockdown. Another was to find out – from the perspective of an enforced break from our usual activities – what changes people felt needed to be made, both in their individual lives and in the organization of the community, and to assess how many people would be willing to be actively involved in making such changes.

The results are still being analyzed in detail, and additional responses from under-represented groups are being sought, but certain broad lines are already emerging.

### The general response

In answer to the question, "What do you think of Auroville's response to the crisis?" the vast majority (86%) felt there was much to be celebrated. These included the calm, disciplined response to the crisis, the spirit of service displayed in the volunteering, the way that the essential services kept running, and the dedicated work of groups like the COVID Task Force, the Working Committee and Security. There was a feeling of fraternity and cooperation, reflected in the way that food delivery services were provided for those who needed assistance, as well as in the financial assistance offered by individuals and the Village Action group to those in neighbouring villages.

However, while some lauded the general maturity shown by the residents during the lockdown, 62% felt that certain things could have been improved. It was noted that there had been instances of irresponsible behavior, like people hoarding basic supplies, and rebelliousness, as in those refusing to observe social distancing. Communication was also an issue. While the updates from the COVID Task Force and Working Committee were appreciated, a few said the tone was too functional, conformist and lacked any sense of spiritual inspiration or guidance. And those who accessed AuroNet felt that at a time when it needed to be a forum for mutual support, it was too often a venue for mudslinging, recrimination and paranoia.

### Personal responses

On the personal level, an astonishing 84% said they had positively changed habits. As their lives became radically simplified by the lockdown, they had more time for family, for slowing down and living in the present, for paying attention to their immediate environment, for regular exercise and walks in nature, and for connecting to the self and the spirit of Auroville through meditation and reading the works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Many became more aware about the food they were eating, about its nutritional value and where it comes from, and how they could make choices that would support local food production.

And, in the absence of workers and tourists, many celebrated the quietness, the general atmosphere of peace, which descended upon the community during the lockdown.

There was also an increased sense of solidarity as people in different communities took responsibility for caring for each other and their immediate environment, cooking collective meals, gardening and looking after waste disposal. While some celebrated the new spirit of self-help – "Auroville once more for the Aurovillians!" one person joyfully wrote – others noted that now they had a new appreciation of the work and support provided by their regular household helps and community workers and said this would be reflected in how they would relate to them in future.

In that future, 75% said they would adapt their food consumption as much as possible to the availability of home-grown production, 69% would be more attentive and compassionate with one another, and just under 50% would be willing to volunteer according to the needs of the hour. Another 44% would be willing to accept more in-kind contributions than cash in their maintenances.

Many (76%) also experienced negative changes. The most common were a sense of isolation and panic and a feeling that the

community aspect had suffered. Others mentioned financial concerns, difficulty in getting food, and missing the ability to visit the Matrimandir.

Asked what surprised them most during the lockdown, they mentioned the resilience of the community, the adaptability of Aurovillians, and the realization of how much of the essential work can be done by the residents. They were also surprised by how living much more simply was a bonus. They realized that what they had viewed before as a 'necessity' (office work, frequent meetings, etc.) was no such thing and now they had the time to explore more interesting pursuits. "I am no longer thinking of my work in terms of 'what the world sees'", wrote one, "I am thinking about doing work that fills my heart with joy and brings joy to those I share my life with."

Asked to summarise their experience in a few words, respondents mentioned "learning to live with what I have", "gluing more together", "going from 'mine' to 'ours' and 'Hers'", and "reconnecting with the spirit of Auroville".

The negative surprises included the level of fear and paranoia generated in the community, and the realization of how much we are dependent upon outside funding, labour and tourism to sustain our present lifestyle and development.

### What needs to change

A theme that emerged time and again was that the lockdown was a unique opportunity for Auroville to look deeply at itself and to make radical changes. "It's a chance we cannot lose", wrote one, "It's an opening for a new world to emerge", wrote another.

For while the lockdown threw up many positives, it also highlighted weaknesses and gaps. Regarding the economy, the lockdown and freeze on financial activities revealed how much our economy is dependent upon tourism and guests, while it also accentuated existing inequalities in the community regarding maintenances and income.

Food autonomy also became a pressing issue at a time when food provision from external sources could not be guaranteed, and many people realized how little support was provided to our farmers and to expanding our food growing capabilities.

Asked in which fields Auroville needs to change, an overwhelming majority of respondents (73%) listed the economy, followed closely by farming/ food distribution (64%) and water and energy supply (52%). Social interaction/collective life (50%) and spiritual life and aspirations (41%) were also frequently mentioned as areas where we need to improve.

Respondents were asked to identify one or two of the most important changes that needed to happen in the areas they identified. Those who identified the present economy said there is a need to support the basic needs of all residents, possibly through providing a universal basic income, and to minimise or eliminate money exchange between residents through some kind of Prosperity system for essential goods and services. Others said far more Aurovillians need to work directly for the collective, there is a need to find an alternative to tourism as the mainstay of the economy and, more generally, "move away from the money mind".

Ways of moving towards food self-sufficiency included providing additional financial support to existing farms, allocating more land for farming, encouraging communities to grow their own food through the cultivation of circle gardens, and encouraging more people to participate in farming. In this context, suggestions included building 50 houses on existing farmland to encourage people to work there, and requiring all residents to work one day a week on farms or in food distribution.

The environment was another area of concern, and suggestions for changes included a more conscious use of our water resources and the need to become independent of the TNEB grid through the widespread adoption of solar power.

Others mentioned the need to strengthen spiritual life by following the spiritual guidance provided by Mother for Auroville, and through the development of a genuinely integral education.

Some specific initiatives to effect change were proposed during

the lockdown. When asked if they supported them, 10% of respondents said they did not know of any of these initiatives and another 10% didn't know some of them, a reflection of that fact that they hadn't been communicated well enough in the community. Of those who replied in the affirmative, 41% supported Solitude Krishna's proposal to accelerate food sovereignty for Auroville through the creation of circle gardens in communities and eating local foods, 34% supported Jasmine's call to improve food security and distribution, while 27% endorsed the Exploring Prosperity proposal which seeks to provide the basic necessities to all Aurovillian residents. Other initiatives that received support included David's post-pandemic planning proposal and detailed suggestions for preparing Auroville for future emergencies from the Deep Adaptation group. Already existing proposals, like those for the Birth Centre and the Lotus proposal for re-inventing our economy, were also mentioned.

However, some scepticism was expressed. "We need real transformation, not old wine in new bottles," wrote one respondent. "This is not to say that the above initiatives are not valuable... But let's please not pretend they are in any way resembling a relevant shift or transformative development, because it's not. It could be, if we, for example, stop treating these proposals as individual initiatives and invite everyone to sit together and make it into one integrated and collaborative initiative."

### Caveats and comments

The findings of the survey need to be treated with caution. Firstly, the 245 respondents represent only about 11% of the adult Aurovillian population, and certain sections of the community – notably those under 30 years and those born in the local area – were very under-represented. The survey team is at present making efforts to get more responses from these groups.

Secondly, the survey was conducted during the most rigorous part of the lockdown. Since then it has been relaxed, and many people have gone back to their usual work and routines. It's unclear, therefore, if the positive changes people speak about in their individual lives have all survived a relative return to normality, although the broad institutional changes suggested seem to have deeper roots for many of them have been mentioned often over the years.

Thirdly, a number of respondents criticised the survey – many felt it was too long, that some of the questions were too complicated or required them giving the same information more than once – and this may have impacted the quality of the responses. Many did not answer the second part in questions that required a two-part answer. Again, the fact that it was compulsory to answer each question was a source of irritation to some, and there is a suspicion that they may have rushed through some replies just to complete the survey.

A major lacuna was that the survey form did not provide links to the recent proposals for change, which may be one reason why so many respondents replied that they had not read them.

Finally, it's always difficult to know how much weight to attribute to the answers that merely ask respondents to tick boxes and, of course, it's always easier to make promises on paper than stand by them when called upon to do so.

But having conceded all this, the survey does seem to give valuable, if broad brush, indications of people's experience during the lockdown and their ideas about the changes that need to be made, along with their willingness to be involved in making such changes. For what does seem to emerge is an individual and collective willingness to use the unique experience of the lockdown as a springboard for change, as a way of 'calling the future'.

The survey was only the first step. Hopefully, those who have proposed specific initiatives for change will use it as an inspiration and practical help to implement those changes. They will be heartened by the fact that 60% of respondents said they were willing to participate in projects that may emerge, or be given new life, as a result of the survey, particularly those related to the economy, food production, and the environment, while a further 22% said they might be willing to help.

Alan

## EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

## Shared passions beyond borders: the Auroville Learning Exchange

The Auroville Learning Exchange (ALE) aims to connect Auroville with the world outside through the sharing of ideas, cultures and experiences. Its vision is to create the conditions for unity in diversity through shared passions and long-lasting relationships. The core team is Chali, Dave and Elene.

Dave Storey is an Aurovillian who has done a lot of work in different countries. This experience makes him feel that Auroville is too internalized in its focus: that we are not sharing our discoveries enough with the rest of the world and not taking enough inspiration from elsewhere. Like many Aurovillians, he is also aware that, while we term ourselves an 'international' community, there are many nationalities and cultures which are under-represented or not represented at all.

To help remedy this, he came up with the idea of a learning exchange between Aurovillians and individuals in under-represented countries. Individuals would spend about six weeks in each other's community during which they would do a project which would benefit that community. At the same time, they would be learning about a very different culture and talking about their own.

"Essentially it is about diversifying the pool of

people that we have in Auroville while helping create awareness about Auroville as well as centres in under-represented countries," explains Elene, the coordinator of the project. "Dave's plan was to go 'off the grid'. He didn't want to launch a conventional internship programme or knowledge exchange. He wanted to focus on creating human connections through shared passions or interests."

The first step for the ALE team was to build a list of contacts. Aurovillians were asked to identify individuals or groups doing interesting work in any country which is currently under-represented in Auroville, while people in those countries were asked if they knew of Aurovillians who shared their interest. The ALE group then invited people with shared interests to collaborate on writing a proposal for a learning exchange.

There are a few criteria. Those applying from abroad should not only be from an under-represented country, but what they are doing should be of interest to Auroville and they should be able to communicate well in English or French. All participants, whether in Auroville or abroad, are expected to be receptive to new perspectives and be willing to host their learning exchange partner or partners for the exchange period.

The project was launched in 2018 and the deadline for applications was September 2019. "We had ten applications," says Elene. "The proposal we selected was put together by film-makers from Kenya and from Auroville."

"The Kenyan, Timothy Mwaura, is a man who does social photography. At the moment he is making a film about life in Nairobi, contrasting life in the slums with that in the more affluent areas and documenting the issues that arise. He is asking 'What is a city? How does it care for its inhabitants?'"

"Then he heard about Auroville where the principles and goals are very different, so he wants to come here to study this place and see what he can learn and if there are any commonalities. If he has time, he would also like to look at Auroville through African eyes by interviewing the few Africans we have here."

The Aurovillians involved in the exchange are Sri Kolari and Serena Aurora. Sri does social photography while Serena is a documentary filmmaker. They will follow and document Timothy as he films in a Kenyan city. While there, they will also make presentations about Auroville.

The original plan was that Timothy would come here in March and Sri and Serena would

accompany him back to Kenya in April. However, the coronavirus has put paid to this. Now the exchange is scheduled to take place next year.

The pilot project is being sponsored by the Dutch foundation, Stichting de Zaaier. But how will it continue in the future? "We will rely on donations," says Elene. "Among others, we hope to receive support from Auroville International because one of the intentions of the project is to assist in the setting up of AVI centres in new countries, or in bringing more energy to existing centres. But we're not talking about a huge amount. Apart from the travel costs, expenses will be minimal as participants will be hosting each other during their stay in their respective countries. And in Auroville we hope that the pavilion groups and Aurovillians of the same nationality will also contribute and help."

"It's a unique opportunity for Aurovillians to build new relationships and gain fresh perspectives with people who have a shared passion outside of Auroville, so we hope it will become sustainable in the long-term."

Alan

For more information contact [learningexchange@auroville.org.in](mailto:learningexchange@auroville.org.in)



# Breathing safely: Aurovilians making masks

In Auroville, the prevalence and the meaning of face masks has shifted radically in recent months. From something that was previously worn to protect two-wheeler motorists from dust and pollution, the mask has now become ubiquitous as a signifier of a public health disaster. We look at Auroville's recent revolution in mask-making and consider masks as different things: protection from a virus; a healing implement; a social cause.

**W**hen the coronavirus pandemic hit India in March, four different units in Auroville saw mask-making as a way in which they could serve the larger cause. But they had to learn fast, as they had little experience in making masks in the kind of mass quantities that the pandemic demanded.

## Aire

Aire was the only Auroville unit that had been solely dedicated to making masks before the pandemic arrived. Until then, Aire's masks had been focused on protecting people from the growing pollution in India's cities. Lola and Juan-Felipe, Aire's founders, had travelled much of India on motorbike, and were conscious for the need to protect bike riders from the pollution on India's roads. "We enjoyed making masks. But Indian people were not interested in masks for pollution, they were blind to the problem, even though India has 20 of the 30 most polluted cities in the world."

Due to this lack of awareness of pollution, Aire's sales were low – around 50 masks sold per month – and there were reportedly only a few other businesses in India making masks at that time. Aurovilians wore them largely to protect themselves from the dust and car pollution on the roads in and around Auroville. But Lola and Juan-Felipe believed that the situation would change once awareness was raised in India. "We were wondering how to awaken people in India to the problem of pollution," says Juan-Felipe, "and then suddenly the virus appeared. When we got the news that the virus was in China, we realised that we had to jump."

Lola and Juan-Felipe describe the "huge challenge" of increasing production to meet the surge in demand for masks; from 50 masks per month to 100 000. Their initial focus was to make thousands of masks for Aurovilians and to fulfil an order for 4 000 masks for the Sri Aurobindo Society, so they added five new members to their production team to achieve this. They could no longer import fabric from China, and had to start sourcing fabrics from inside India. "In three months, we've changed

summer. While the team wanted to use organic fabrics such as cotton, they discovered that it did not provide enough protection, because cotton fibres "absorb the virus," according to Lola. "Our masks offer 95 or 99% protection, according to international standards."

A mask classified as N95 (in the American system) keeps out 95% of 2.5 micron sized particles and above – which are the more dangerous than larger size particles because they are small enough to move from the lungs into the blood and to cause poisoning. While the coronavirus is even smaller (approximately 0.125 microns in diameter) and experts and institutions such as WHO have debated the evidence for the efficacy of masks against coronavirus, many governments around the world have advised people to wear them in public, and the Indian government has now made it mandatory for people to wear masks in public places.

Aire is now developing a mask for doctors that is made from soft bamboo with nano silver. "If you wear a mask for a while, the bacterial flora from the mouth starts to smell, and skin irritation can happen," says Lola. "So we're developing this to create a clean ambience in the mouth, even if you use it for hours. We're testing it in the hospital with professionals."

Aire is supplying its masks to shops in Auroville and Pondicherry for only Rs 300, while their valve-based model costs Rs 350. The new masks can be washed in soap and water and reused, and are therefore more sustainable than disposable masks sold elsewhere that create waste problems. Auroville's Upcycling unit "fell in love" with the fabric remnants from Aire's production, as Juan-Felipe narrates, and is reworking the fabric into artworks for a planned exhibition in December about the virus. He contrasts this eco-friendly approach to materials with the government directives that masks must presently be sold in plastic bags for hygiene reasons, which was a disappointment for Aire after they had spent a lot of time designing eco-friendly packaging.

## Miniature

Two Auroville clothing units – Miniature and Upasana – have also turned their hand to making masks. For Miniature, it was a "spontaneous and instantaneous reaction, the need for our community," says Miniature's Liliana. The atelier had closed a week before the official lockdown, so Liliana jumped online and started researching the requirements of the fabrics used in masks. But the lockdown posed a big challenge to getting the required triple tissue surgical material from wholesalers in Pondy. Auroville's ambulance driver, Alok, came to the rescue. "He could move freely in Pondy and had access to medical shops," recounts Liliana, "so we were able to buy the fabric and make some samples to test." The elastic was transported from Chennai, thanks to the help of Sauro and the Working Committee in arranging the necessary permits. Miniature distributed the cut pieces and samples to their tailors, who worked at home with their sewing machines. Some kits were also given to Aurovillian women to sew. Soon they were producing tens of thousands, with Miniature donating 11 000 masks to Auroville's COVID-19 Task Force, who then distributed them free to various services and volunteers, including Santé and the Village Action Group. The design team also "had fun" creating some masks in fancy cotton, which are sold in the Taboo Boutique in Kuilapalayam. "We have the capacity, if necessary, to produce another 30 000," says Liliana. "We had so much help from the community to do this."

## Upasana

Upasana is a conscious clothing unit making masks. Like many units, Upasana's overall sales dropped to almost zero at the beginning of lockdown. Looking to find a relevant contribution to make in a crisis, Uma came up with the idea of making masks. "It created a sense of energy and activity," says Uma, "and kept people occupied at home. So far, we've kept all our 40 staff on half salary. It's important that staff should have food to eat at home. In fact, we employed more people in the villages – we were the only company hiring during lockdown!"

To produce such a large quantity of masks outside the unit's premises, Upasana had to design a new system overnight. Travel passes were secured for two staff members to move through the police



Mask making at Auroville Village Action

checkposts on the roads around Auroville. They distributed the cut pieces, brought them to another location for finishing, and yet another location for packing.

Upasana developed two reusable masks in organic handwoven cotton that have a unique twist: one is dyed with neem, and the other incorporates silver thread. "We wanted it to be long-lasting and made from fabric which impacts positively on the body, with a holistic kind of protection," says Uma. "Neem is naturally detoxifying, antiallergenic and calming. Silver has been used all around the world for its health benefits." Upasana has also made a DIY kit for people in Auroville to dye their own masks.

Upasana quickly sold out of the model with silver thread. Uma emphasises that the masks are not for medicinal use. Rather, these masks work on the cellular body, "not on the gross body in a way the mind registers." The innovation of the masks also held broad appeal for India's media, and the masks have now been profiled in many mainstream news stories. "What we're doing is a little new and progressive" says Uma, "and this gave us a lot of media coverage."

Upasana has sold more than 15 000 of the masks, which are available for Rs100 each, in order to be affordable to everyone in shops throughout India and online. Upasana has also sent bulk orders to USA, Europe, Canada, Japan, Asia. "The day the postal service opened in India again, we sent 23 parcels!" says Uma. Upasana also donated hundreds of masks to Auroville's COVID-19 Task Force, and to other Auroville services and volunteers.

However, Uma emphasises this activity is not enough for the unit to survive. "A Rs 100 product cannot achieve much in terms of keeping Upasana running, unless we sell 10 000 masks per month, which we're not. But this was a nice way of being engaged. It's sustained us psychologically."

Masks are no temporary fad, Uma predicts. "Masks will be the new scarf in people's wardrobes. Japan and Asia have been using masks culturally for a long time. The rest of the world saw masks as a medical appliance, but now, across the world, it's no longer just a medical aid. It's a clothing piece. Health and hygiene measures have pushed us to be in that space. So we'll be part of it."

## Masks as a social cause: Auroville Village Action

Auroville's village outreach projects have taken another approach: to supply masks free of charge to villagers as part of their relief work during lockdown. The Life Education Centre (LEC) has been making a small number of masks from existing fabrics in its premises, and these are offered to school children. While the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) had previously made a few masks, its social enterprise sector had to stop functioning under lockdown. But when village representatives started asking for cotton masks, director Anbu saw the opportunity to "seriously" take up mask-making as a response to the need expressed by the communities, and as an income-generating activity for villagers, particularly women.

AVAG undertook an emergency fundraising appeal, and the funds from donors enabled them to produce the masks. The organisation already had some stock of pure cotton fabric that had been sourced from weavers' collectives in south India. AVAG cut the pieces on their premises, and then distributed these to around 20 people from its social enterprise and other villagers who were rendered jobless due to the lockdown, and they all stitched from home. AVAG then verified the quality, and the finished masks were distributed to the people in the villages. Because AVAG had to produce 16 000 masks in a short period of time, the "very committed" cutting and quality-checking team worked seven days a week.

As people were not allowed to move about on roads, the stitchers took turns to bring the stitched masks to AVAG's office, and to collect the cut pieces. However, because AVAG's area of operation spans the border of Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry, and there was a blockade on inter-state travel, this posed difficulties. "Although we got permission from the government, sometimes the Tamil Nadu police stopped them, sometimes the Pondy police, so that was a challenge for us."

AVAG has distributed 16 000 free masks to date, and now 30 stitchers are making another 48 000. The masks are sold in the market place for a low price, and AVAG hopes to get large orders from other parts of India.

Anbu acknowledges that it's been a "very challenging" time. She emphasises that the mask making efforts may give livelihoods to the women, but they do not sustain AVAG's social enterprise due to the costs of making the masks.

But most importantly, the initiative enables AVAG to employ women and men at a time when they are jobless, and to provide local communities with quality products. AVAG's efforts have been greatly appreciated by the local and block level authorities, and AVAG now plans to arrange a campaign in collaboration with the police and block medical officials. Anbu points out that while the government made mask-wearing compulsory, many villages could only find thick and low quality masks in the market, which are not easily breathable. This difficulty became "an excuse" not to wear masks, according to Anbu, and the maximum fine of Rs 200 for people driving motorbikes without a mask is not much of a deterrent or incentive. "Giving masks is one thing, but following the protocol is another thing. So we're planning an education campaign to communicate this."

AVAG aims to mobilise the community by arranging a care and support team in each village that will support AVAG's campaign and arrange their own initiatives. The team in each village will conduct education strategies about social distancing, and will ensure that customers and shopkeepers in the village shops wear masks. "It's a huge task," says Anbu. "The block medical officer is very happy and he will support us by allowing government health staff of local villages to join hands with us."

Lesley



Liliane from Miniature showing a mask

totally," says Juan-Felipe. "We had to get an easy and fast way to make really high quality masks."

The team decided to purchase a large machine with a greater manufacturing capacity, but when they went to Chennai to collect it, they found the machine needed fixing. Transportation under lockdown of such a large item was also difficult and required significant liaison with authorities. When the machine finally arrived two weeks later, it weighed five times the promised 200 kg. "We were working in Lola's home at that time, so how could we work with a one tonne machine?" says Juan-Felipe. "It was crazy." But once they brought it, everything changed.

As they ramped up their production capacity, Aire was approached by doctors from nearby PIMS hospital to supply bulk orders of masks that would provide them with suitable protection. "The hospital doesn't supply masks to them, so the doctors organised themselves and ordered from us," says Lola. Aire and the doctors worked collaboratively to develop a design that would meet the doctors' needs to create a mask that would be comfortable to wear for many hours, and that would provide proper protection from patients with the virus.

While Aire's previous mask designs included a valve to keep out pollution and to help wearers breathe, Aire has created a new design that excludes the valve because of the danger that a mask-wearer with coronavirus can emit the virus through the valve. Aire's masks are made from multiple layers of polypropylene and polyester, so they are thicker than the cotton masks made by other units in Auroville, and this can make them hot in



# Breathing easier: Aurovilians building ventilators

As the corona virus started spreading in India, two Aurovillian teams were inspired to help the health service in India by producing cheaper home made ventilators.

**The JASAN initiative.** Five individuals came together, Jorge, Akash, Sukrit, Alex and Nigel (hence 'Jasan') with complementary skills motivated to help. Akash and Sukrit, who both grew up in Auroville, already had a history of collaborating on technological innovations in Auroville, such as electric bikes. They were joined by the other three team members – Jorge, Alex and Nigel – who are industrial designers or engineers.

Akash recalls being asked, "Why don't you guys do something in Auroville like making cheap ventilators?" Akash's first response was, "You must be joking". But they started experimenting with different versions, testing and learning as they went along. Alex, the industrial designer, read up about ventilators and did the drawings. Sukrit "drilled a few holes" and tested the feasibility of the design by building some prototypes.

The team had to constantly adapt, due to the shortage of parts available under lockdown. "I had only one kilo of plastic for 3D printing so we had to think hard about what we wanted to print," says Jorge. "We even had to print our own screws!" For other ventilator parts, team members looked in their waste baskets. The early prototypes were classic examples of Indian 'jugaad' (out-of-the-box innovation), and were made from a muesli bottle and a pump motor from Aquadyn.

The design has evolved since although all the models used an 'ambu bag resuscitator', which is used for patients in an ambulance. In the latest design, a unique scissor design allows for very precise control of volume and pressure, and an LCD screen shows

volume and pressure curves, FiO2 levels as well as blood oxygen saturation. This version is now "quite robust and ready for medical testing," according to the team.

While the Jasan ventilator is much simpler than ones currently available (which have a turbine or compressed air source), it is the result of a collaboration with Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences (PIMS) hospital's Dr Karnam Hasan. Dr Hasan told the team that a cheaper, simpler machine was beneficial for small clinics in rural



The JASAN team. From left Alex, Sukrit, Akash, and Jorge. Nigel is not in the picture.

areas. So the team responded by creating a machine that can also be used in hospitals when all other ventilators are in use. "It's like you can drive a Mercedes or Suzuki – both have air-conditioning but with different features," says Alex.

The team's priority now is to finalise the product and get it medically certified. Of the five prototypes they are making, one will go to PIMS for testing, whilst two will be sent to Bangalore for certification. Once tested and certified,

the ventilators will be manufactured on a greater scale through a partnership with an outside company. The partnership aims to ensure that the ventilators can be produced on a larger scale as quickly as possible, in order to help as many people. The JASAN team

will license the design to the company through an Auroville unit, so that the royalties will benefit Auroville.

Jasan's enterprise reflects the spirit of Auroville's pioneers who learned on the job, as they built their vernacular windmills and houses. "Initially it had the Auroville spirit, we didn't know where it was going," recounts Akash. "The whole project came together in an Auroville way." Jorge chimes in: "It was a collaboration, everybody worked with no interest other than to do something to improve the situation," and Sukrit remembers that "In a time of crisis people come together; this happened too in the cyclone and tsunami."

## Tusky

The ventilator created by Aurovillian Samvit's team is named 'Tusky', due to its elephantine appearance. Samvit, an industrial designer, wanted to make it as low-tech as possible so that it could be affordable and replicable. As he initially only had access to the existing materials in his workshop, the team engineered the project "to be adaptable to the materials available."

Samvit points out that there are two types of ventilators: one runs at a preset speed, while the other adjusts to a patient's breathing pattern and therefore needs to be adjustable with sensors.

Samvit decided not to work with airflow sensors because of their high price, and felt that something more affordable was needed immediately. "I wanted to put ten ventilators in Santé to take care of Auroville. Each sensor costs 8-18 000 rupees and usually you need two for redundancy. I saw that this is not the kind of product we could pull off in a short time. Our ventilator is a basic system which can be taken home to your bedside and is low cost, easily recreated and intuitive to use. It is not meant to replace intra-tracheal

pulmonary ventilation."

Samvit's machine pumps air through a column of water which creates positive end-expiratory pressure (PEEP) – the positive pressure that enables air to remain in airways at the end of a respiratory cycle. Adjustments can be made manually in this water pressure concept, and this design does away with components that may be difficult to source and can often be expensive. Measurements on the water tank connected to the machine provide readings to indicate the volume and pressure. The mechanical action of inflating and deflating the AMBU bag is provided by a windshield wiper motor, where the speed can be regulated.

He had a few breakthroughs in developing the latest model. "It's typically not easy to measure the rotation of something. I looked at tachometers [an instrument which measures the working speed of an engine], but they were quite expensive and I didn't think they would work well at low speeds. Then I remembered it is possible to measure the speed of a turntable using an app. After some searching, I have found an app that could be adapted to this machine to accurately measure breaths per minute. Something that would normally cost a lot of money was free and precise."

Samvit has decided to make his invention available to the Open Source community. "It should remain within the Open Source community because I borrowed a lot of technologies, and they gave me a starting point. The first Open Source ventilator that I 3D printed and tried out, worked. We improved it, but I hope someone in the Open Source community will let us know of something even better."

Currently Samvit does not foresee mass production, as it takes three days for his three person team to make one machine. His prototypes are being



Samvit with Tusky

medically tested by the same PIMS medical team which is working with Jasan, and then he hopes to manufacture up to one hundred machines.

The creation process has been a fun challenge for Samvit. "It's nice to solve big problems because usually my profession only solves inconveniences. But here something really important needed to be done, and that made it interesting."

While the certification process will take at least until the end of the year, both teams are confident that their efforts to go into production will see fruition.

Dr Hasan from PIMS hospital has been the advisor for both of the Auroville teams. He points out that the innovative ventilators being developed by the two Auroville teams "will be of use beyond COVID-19 because India is in need of affordable and reliable models which can be deployed in more hospitals and made accessible for home use by long-term patients."

Peter

For more information and updates go to: [www.InspiredMachines.org](http://www.InspiredMachines.org)

## Exiles' views

### Valentina Garozzo

In early March I flew from Chennai to Sri Lanka for a short vacation. After two days, I discovered that I was unable to return to Auroville because India had closed the borders to Italian passport holders. I must confess: I felt my world collapsed. It couldn't be true... I tried to stay more days on the island hoping to receive miraculous news, but soon it was clear that there was no other option than flying to my country as soon as possible. I landed in Rome on March 21st and I had to stay there for two months before I was able to reach my parents in northern Italy. It has been four months since then.

Italy is in chaos and in a heavy crisis. The limitations on individual freedom, due to the emergency regulations imposed by the Government, are evident and often incomprehensible. The whole world is in the same situation, and I wonder: Can we do better?

Yet, despite all what's going on, I can't help but feel immense gratitude for what I have experienced recently. I don't recall having lived through such a dark period, but at the same time I recognize its great fertility. I feel it's like a sort of gestation process, in which I want to powerfully bring all my attention inward, giving myself a strong discipline and scheduling my routine by distributing my time equally for my body, mind, spirit, and outer work, which I'm doing daily for Auroville Art Service despite the physical distance.

Yes, because the umbilical cord that keeps me hooked to Auroville certainly did not break. Every day, in fact, I offer my service and I am constantly in connection with friends. Auroville is here with me, accompanying me step by step. This is another sign that this experimental city is indeed not only a physical space, but also a vibration, an attitude, an intention, which all those who feel its call carry it in their hearts to the places where they live.

This period of COVID-19, which has brought turmoil on a global level, for me has demonstrated that is precisely in the darkest moments that there's a special possibility opening up: the opportunity to bring to the surface as much light as possible, the one that is hidden inside that shadow.

In recent months I've written and published my third book on this topic, *Una nuova storia: La rivoluzione interiore necessaria*.

Since I decided to break through the difficulties, my creativity has been a flowing river and I can't help but to go with it. Sometimes I wonder if this creative journey would have happened if I had stayed in my warm Aurovillian cocoon. The answer somehow is clear: everyone is exactly where they should be, a bright pawn in an evolutionary game in which everyone has his own individual experience to live.

Nobody can play for us, there are no shortcuts or easier ways. The important thing is to take everything with a playful attitude, to smile, to move forward grounded in the present moment, to have an unshakeable faith in the universal wisdom that guides us.



### Dan Greenberg

Having squeaked out of India on the last seat of one of the final flights before international travel shut down in March and hoping to return on one of the first flights once they resume, my time away has felt like a parallel reality to what my friends and colleagues experienced during the pandemic in Auroville.

Although a U.S. citizen, I returned to southern Ontario to support my elder daughter, Simone, while my wife Monique stayed with our younger daughter, Pema, in Auroville. Although relatively safe and calm up here in Canada, being just 10 km from the U.S. border has felt like living in the apartment above a crack house!

My time away has led to four important insights. First, being in the "belly of the beast" has helped me see our world's unfolding drama more clearly and how vital is the role Auroville plays as we near the climax of this movie.

The pandemic seems to have flipped the switch and catalyzed humanity's – and perhaps the planet's – first conscious experience of our collective interdependence as well as our collective vulnerability, which I believe is pouring fuel on the fire of our conscious evolution. In this light, it is natural that our collective shadows are emerging and fighting for their survival.

As humanity's systems, structures, and worldviews dissolve into a sort of nutritive soup all around us, similar to a caterpillar in its cocoon, Auroville is like an imaginal cell, offering a blueprint – the DNA – for a "butterfly" culture. I can't wait to come home!

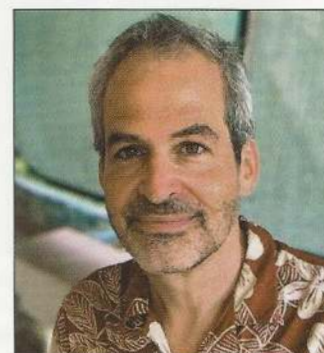
Second, from this wider perspective, I have come to further appreciate things about Auroville that I noticed or heard about, which I suspect are easy to take for granted from inside. The COVID19 Task Force was quick to assemble and, along with the Working Committee, has been organized and thorough in its communications. Over a hundred cheerful volunteers stepped up to keep essential services running and support those less fortunate, both in Auroville and the surrounding region. And Solar Kitchen tiffins, Solitude Farm's vegetable boxes, and PTDC's basket delivery service all allowed people to be well-nourished during lockdown.

In addition to more time for meditation and inner solitude, it seems that for many, Auroville's Greenbelt and abundant nature has become a newly appreciated site of spiritual nourishment...

Third, it seems this period has pointed to some ways Auroville can become more resilient and impactful going forward. I hope Krishna's Circle Gardens project and the "Roots" group will continue to increase our access to local food, both cultivated and wild. I hope we can continue to explore how we can best support ourselves financially, perhaps by shifting the maintenance system to some form of Universal Basic Income.

When I left, I assumed I would be outside the bubble of communication, but was surprised and appreciative of how much moved online. This has sparked in me excitement for how much impact Auroville might have in the world if we virtually shared more of our gifts and wisdom through webinars, online courses, meetups, etc.

Finally, feeling a part of the Black Lives Matter movement in the U.S. (and now around the world) has inspired me to dig deeper into my own unexamined biases. While I have worked hard to be a good ally to oppressed populations, I still carry a knapsack of white privilege that I hope to further unpack and release. Similarly, while Auroville is ahead of the curve in so many ways, there is still a lot of work for us to do as we continue our journey towards our vision of human unity and the City the Earth needs. May this "time out of time" allow all of us to reflect and sink deeper into our core vision and a recognition of our fundamental interbeingness with each other and all life.





## Paolo Tommasi

**P**aolo Tommasi passed away in JIPMER on July 16th due to the COVID-19 virus. He had just turned 92 years. Paolo was born in Ancona, Italy in 1928. The war and his father's deportation and death in the Mauthausen concentration camp left an indelible mark on his reserved and reflective nature and influenced his future development. Moving to Rome, he received a degree in architecture and cultivated his passion for theatre and painting. In 1952 he joined the Compagnia dell'Opera dei Burattini, founded by Maria Signorelli, with whom he went on various tours throughout Europe, receiving acclaim for his original stagings of the "game of life." In 1957 he began working with Giulio Coltellacci, a set and costume designer already successful for his stagings of theatre and opera. In 1958 he had his first exhibition in Paris, consisting of dreamlike visions of cities and cathedrals that, the following year, he exhibited at Galleria L'Obelisco in Rome. Exhibitions followed in New York, Tokyo and other European capitals.

In 1963 he travelled through the Nazi concentration camps in Europe with Holocaust historian Miriam Novitch, resulting in a profound existential crisis that he was able to process only through his encounter with India and Jungian psychoanalysis. In 1966 he arrived in Pondicherry where, in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, he came into contact with The Mother and felt he had found what he had been seeking.

In 1968 he participated in the foundation ceremony of Auroville. He made the designs for the exhibition under the Banyan tree for Auroville's Inauguration Ceremony on 28th February, which, after receiving The Mother's blessings, were given to Nata (Alberto Grassi) who, with his team, executed the works.

On 29 December 1969, Satprem spoke to The Mother of Paolo's idea to build a centre in Auroville. This conversation has been recorded in Mother's Agenda. Satprem:

*He [Paolo] says that for a few years, energies in Auroville have been scattered: they are egoistic, everyone wants to build his own little hut, his own little story, or, at best, hopes to build a supercity, which will only be an improvement on all the existing cities of the world. In this Auroville, an axis, a*



*center is missing. What's missing is ... a unification of the consciousnesses around a center, an axis. So he said that in the past, they built pyramids, they built cathedrals, and around those symbolic constructions, consciousnesses could unify and rise and purify themselves. Well, what should be built in Auroville is an axis, a center, a symbolic temple of the new world we want to create, and all the consciousnesses should unite in the construction of this pyramid of the new world, or this temple of the new world - which will at the same time help to bring down what must express itself there.*

Mother approved of the idea, saying "It's very good, that was the first idea: there was the center, and the city was organized around it... As for me, I've known it for a long time. It's there (gesture above) waiting [to come down]."

Paulo further elaborated this idea in a letter to The Mother, recorded in Mother's Agenda of January 10, 1970:

*Very sweet Mother, I saw Roger Anger on Sunday, he came to my room and we had lunch together. With love I arranged beautiful flowers for You and Roger. You were with us. We spoke a lot. I felt Roger like a brother.*

*I told him that Auroville cannot be born like any*

*other city (urban, social, economic problems, all of them to be seen later). The starting point must be "something else." That is why we must start with the Center. That Center must be our lever, our fixed point, the thing we can lean on to try and leap to the other side - because it's only from the other side that we can begin to understand what Auroville should be. And that Center must be a form manifesting in Matter the content that You can transmit to us on every plane (occult included). As for us, we should only be the open and sincere means through which you can concretise that.*

*Then I told him how I felt the need for all of us to approach all this while living the experience inwardly and unitedly - people from the East and the West - in a vast movement of love, because it is the only "concrete" possible for building "something else"....*

*... And that Center can give us that love right now, because it's the love of You!*

*I told him that, on the practical level, we could begin with a moment of silence, gathered together, try to make a complete blank, and in that blank, with everyone's aspiration, bring down the signs for the beginning. But all of us united and together, especially the more spiritually advanced - the Indians. R. agreed entirely. He said we should really do that.*

Paulo returned to Italy, visiting Pondicherry and Auroville regularly. He continued his work on set and costume design, working alongside numerous internationally renowned directors. With his exhibition at Galleria L'Obelisco in 1975, he inaugurated a series of paintings identified with what came to be seen as his symbol image, a sort of mandala that evokes silence and infinity. The monograph *Architetture di Paolo Tommasi* (1979) illustrates some of his most avant-garde projects for the conception of space, the environment and furnishings. His forms, simple and essential in the purity of their golden proportions, have received numerous accolades, including the "Design Source Spec Neon Awards USA" (1983; 1984). Acclaim for the innovative theatricality of his installations also earned him the "Premio Armando Curcio per il Teatro" in 1985.

In 1987 Paulo made a proposal for the outer skin of the Matrimandir in line with his concern that it be of the utmost simplicity and purity. At that

time, the space-frame (consisting of hundreds of pre-cast concrete beams joined in nodes cast in situ) was almost complete and a decision had to be made on how to cover it with a beautiful and weather-proof outer skin. In October 1987, in a marathon meeting, the Aurovilians present were asked to vote for either Roger Anger's proposal with golden discs, or Paolo Tommasi's proposal to cover the space-frame with large triangles of white marble. Roger's proposal was accepted.

Over the next years, Paulo continued to advise Roger on aesthetic matters on Matrimandir issues, such as the relationship of the 70 cm diameter crystal globe and its cube stand, which consists of four gilded symbols of Sri Aurobindo.

From 2000-2002, at the request of Roger, Paulo made detailed concept paintings for each of the twelve Matrimandir gardens. Roger however discarded this proposal as he felt his brief for the gardens had not been followed.

Since 2010 Paulo has been living in Pondicherry for periods of increasing duration. "In no other place do I feel my soul reawaken and do I achieve that inner work that gives meaning to my life: becoming more aware of myself and the mystery that surrounds us." From time to time he would visit his friends in Auroville and Matrimandir. In his Pondicherry house, he would continue painting his often strikingly expressive images, and these were published in the book *Immagini sull'Invisibile - Images on the Invisible* and exhibited in Savitri Bhavan in 2016.

Paulo's remains were cremated in JIPMER's crematorium on July 17. Due to COVID-19 restrictions only four people were allowed, one of them was from Matrimandir, Auroville.

*A 5-minute clip on Paolo, Piero and Gloria visiting the Matrimandir in 2009 can be found at <https://youtu.be/h2ziJPligNE>.*

*A longer interview with him in his final years can be viewed at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nkeVKSnhp8g&feature=youtu.be>. The publication 'Paolo Tommasi. In Search of Harmony' published in 2015, traces his artistic trajectory in constant evolution.*

## PASSING

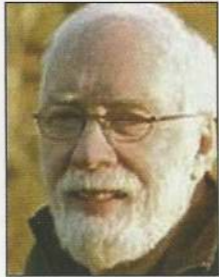
### Arya Maloney

**A**rya (Charles William) Maloney, USA, passed away on April 17th due to a long illness. He had just become 80 years old.

While at Columbia University (NYC) working toward his doctorate, he came across Sri Aurobindo's work and this would entirely direct his further life. Already in the late 70's-early 80's he was facilitating groups to study the Integral Yoga in Woodstock (NY).

At the end of 1983 he came, along with his then partner Marlenka and 8-year old Ashaman (who both had lived here in the seventies), to Auroville and stayed with them in Verité. A year later he returned to USA where he worked in the various fields of science, philosophy, psychology and spirituality as a teacher and psychologist. His book, *Alchemy of the Soul* which was based on his life, work and spiritual exploration is his contribution to the field of transpersonal psychology.

While he lived in Auroville only briefly, his teaching enabled Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's yoga and vision to find access to innumerable young and open minds.



### Joan Tomb

**F**ormer Auroville resident Joan Tomb left her body on June 23rd at the age of 85 in her apartment in Tucson, Arizona, USA, with three of her four children by her side.

Joan had first heard of the Mother through Dietra (Claire Worden). In 1971 she decided to go to India to meet the Mother, together with June Maher. It was a momentous event, of which she later wrote "Extremely lucky to have met the Mother in this lifetime, without whom nothing would have been possible."

In April 1972, June phoned her, reading a message from Mother, "We are here to prepare the way for the new creation. For centuries and centuries humanity has waited for this time. You are here at this moment, that is to say on earth, because you chose it at one time. You do not remember it anymore, but I know it. That is why you are here. Well, you must strive, you must conquer all weaknesses and limitations, above all you must tell your ego: 'Your hour has gone.' It is the Divine Consciousness which will allow the race to develop itself and the supramental being to take birth." It was a sign for Joan to settle in Auroville. She later wrote, "We were both very moved ... it affirmed that 'YES', we took birth so as to participate in this work, this process."



Soon afterwards she left the USA by ship with three of her four children, and saw a spectacular pink/orange sun setting behind her over the San Francisco bridge. She later learned that that colour was the shade Mother designated as the Auroville hibiscus. It became Joan's favorite colour to wear.

Initially Joan divided her time between Ashram and Forecomers in Auroville. She drove a small moped up and down, sometimes staying over at Forecomers. But soon she moved to Auroville as a resident. She was one of the first Aurovilians to build a tree house in the Certitude area, and later had a house built there which she called 'Recueillement'. She became a friend, mentor, and guardian angel to many in Auroville.

In later years she decided to return to the USA, regularly returning to Auroville for short periods. In early 2011, Joan came back to Auroville for the last time. Shortly before her 80th birthday Joan wrote, "Although I miss the babies born in Auroville and the close expressions of spiritual family there, here is the best home for me now. My spiritual family in Auroville live forever here in my heart wherever I reside. I feel the Mother's presence at work, arranging even details of my life, which was my experience in Auroville as well. So, while the outward has changed, my inner life is the same."

### Jean Neal

**O**n July 10th, Jean Neal, wife of Bob Neal, peacefully left her body at the age of 86 in her UK home. She had been in constant pain for years and had got to the point where communication was not possible anymore.

Jean was and remained, until the end, in intimate relationship with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Long before she knew anything of yoga, she had been drawn to practice meditation but knew of no one who was able to assist her. Knowing little herself and knowing no one to ask, her questions were nonetheless answered by an elderly, small gentleman in the subtle physical who would gently guide her. She later came to know this gentleman was none other than Sri Aurobindo.

Jean was a lively, amazing woman who already in the early seventies was part of London's 'Bell Street' group that regularly came together to study the works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. In 1998, Bob and Jean came to Auroville and settled in Sri Ma. Jean, who had from a young age onwards a second sight and hearing ability, would assist Aurovilians in different ways by giving 'Beyond the 5th sense' and other workshops and one-to-one treatment sessions. It was a great loss to Auroville that her health gradually started deteriorating, causing the couple to leave in April 2006. They both continued to work for Auroville through Auroville International UK.



## About Auroville Today

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

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