

# Auroville Today

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## One Community – One Family



PHOTO COURTESY MIASTUDIO

**W**ith over 210 participating Aurovilians, the Auroville Singing Festival 2014 was doubtless the year's largest cultural event. Spread over two evenings in October, with Bharat Nivas auditorium bursting at its seams, more than 36 groups and soloists showed their talents. The OM choir, a choir from The Learning Centre, a team from Future School, a children's choir from Deepam, the Auroville Children's Choir, many adults groups and some individuals sang for their friends and family and for the community. "Auroville is one community, one family," said Minsoen, who directed the festival. "Do you remember when your family sang for you at your birthday party, or when you sang your favourite song along on the radio, or when on a picnic with friends you sang together? You remember that inner joy? This festival is meant to bring that out again, not only for your small group of friends and family, but for your 'family' in the extended sense of all Aurovilians together."

PHOTO GIORGIO



PHOTO LONDON

This was Auroville's second Singing Festival. The main difference from the 2013 festival is that then Aurovilians were grouped by nationality and sang songs from their own culture. This year saw the spontaneous grouping of Aurovilians from different nationalities singing the songs they liked, without concern for the songs' national origins. "I was very happy to see so many people from different nationalities coming together to sing in each other's languages," says Minsoen. "It brought out Auroville's very colourful culture." Another difference was the participation of so many children and young people. "Perhaps the most touching moment was the performance of the differently-abled children from Deepam school who worked for over six months to prepare for the event," says Minsoen.

PHOTO COURTESY MIASTUDIO



PHOTO COURTESY MIASTUDIO

For Minsoen, the purpose of the festival is not the singing. "The purpose is the process. For a period of more than two months people have come together to select their songs and rehearse. This not only builds friendships and helps create community, but also, for many, is a journey to self-discovery." Ananda, who organized the practical aspects of the event adds, "Minsoen's concept brought an interchange of cultures and brought a wide diversity of people to work together. In fact, it brought us all together – not only the singers, but also the many people who helped organize the event and were responsible for sound, lighting and decoration." Even the audience lost its usual aloofness and enthusiastically participated in singing *Do it Now*, the song which is part of the global movement 'Sing for the Climate'. [see box]

Kavitha



PHOTO COURTESY MIASTUDIO

First row: The children's choir. Second row: children from The Learning Centre singing 'Do it Now'; the opening ceremony. Third row: Korean, Japanese and Chinese group; differently-abled children from Deepam. Fourth row: group from South-America.

### Do it now!

It began in Belgium in 2012 with over 80,000 Belgians in 180 towns singing *Do it Now*. Later, 725 schools, with over 300,000 students participated. *Do it Now* carries a simple yet powerful message. It originally asked politicians in Belgium and at the Climate summit in Doha, all those who have the power to change policy, to take a stand against global warming, to make laws and rules in favour of our environment and to protect our planet from climate change. After a flash-mob on one of the squares in Doha, the Belgian makers were invited to show an audiovisual of 400,000 people singing together for the climate at the last session of the summit. Since then, the song has crossed borders, with people all over the world joining in this movement. Says Jo, who brought the song to Auroville, "I am every time amazed by the energy this song brings – it seems to have a soul of its own and keeps on mobilizing people."

More info at: [www.singfortheclimate.com](http://www.singfortheclimate.com).

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# Owner-driven social housing in Gujarat and Auroville

**Auroville's Dustudio / BuildAur, in collaboration with three other organizations, has won a bid to facilitate the process of designing and building 250,000 'social' houses in Gujarat.**

**O**n August 15, the new architecture office of BuildAur / Dustudio was inaugurated in Swayam community. It's an attractive building. A part of its rammed-earth façade is decorated with large calligraphic signs. In front is a small Japanese-style stone garden, designed in collaboration with Jyoti and Isha. "Jyoti got most of the boulders from the Kangra valley in the foothills of the Himalayas," says Dharmesh. "The white pebbles are from Gujarat and the other stones from Tamil Nadu." He smiles. "It's kind of a symbol of unity in diversity."

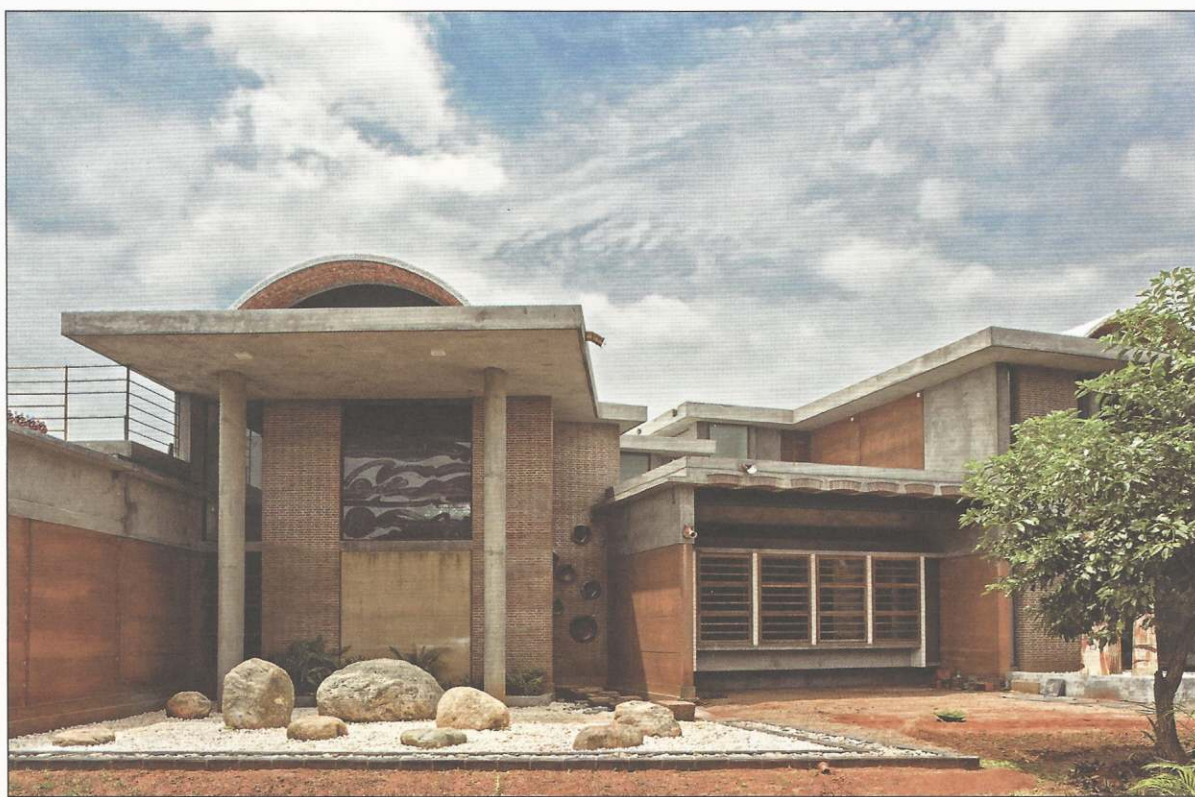
Dharmesh has been working as calligrapher, engineer and architect ever since he joined Auroville in 1992. "I first initiated the architecture studio Kolam, together with Raman and Anupama. In 2000, I moved on and started the unit BuildAur, an abbreviation of Build Auroville. I worked from a temporary office in Kala Kendra, the circular building of the Pavilion of India, which I administered and managed. But the name is Auroville-centric and we are increasingly working elsewhere in India. We decided to keep BuildAur for Auroville and create a new unit, Dustudio, for outside work."

With Dharmesh and Dhruv, who joined Auroville in 2002, as the two Aurovilian architect executives, Dustudio is now the largest architects office in Auroville. "We employ 10 architects and, on average, 10 interns for 6-12 month periods. We try to provide them with an interactive, academic and learning based set-up. Some may eventually join Auroville, but most will work here for a few years before they start for themselves," says Dharmesh. "In fact, we don't encourage anyone to join Auroville – if it happens, fine, but if they prefer starting their own company, we'll help them by passing on an outside project. We have just started a kind of an incubation centre which will help them set up and continue working with our design principles in their own cities."

Those design principles, says Dustudio's website, 'take their inspiration from the ancient Indian wisdom and art of building, where form is the creation of the spirit and draws all its meaning and value from the infinite spirit. Our attempt is to achieve a synthesis between traditional ways of designing and building, while responding to the contemporary context that is climatically appropriate, energy efficient and creates a conscious space for artisans to participate in this process of creation.' Accordingly, BuildAur's specialty is 'building with earth', particularly rammed-earth, and the use of local materials. "It's a niche market," says Dharmesh. "We are conceptually very Indian in design; we try to take into account the local ambience of the area where we are building, and employ and build the capacities of local artisans as much as possible."

## Owner-driven social housing

For more than a decade, BuildAur / Dustudio has been actively participating, as part of a network, in post-disaster rehabilitation programmes with



The BuildAur / Dustudio in Swayam community with its Japanese stone garden

government and non-government agencies. Presently, it is particularly active in Gujarat, Dharmesh's home state. The main project is for social housing, which Dustudio does in collaboration with three other organizations: the Bhuj based Hunnarshala Foundation for Building Technology and Innovations, the People in Centre in Ahmadabad and the Thumbimpressions Collaborative. Each contributes its specific capacities.

Dharmesh explains. "As per its Indira Awas Yojana programme, the Gujarat Government wants to build 250,000 'social houses' in the next two years in the 33 districts of Gujarat. The term 'social housing' is used to indicate housing paid for by the government and allocated to people who live below the poverty line. The houses are no bigger than 250 square feet (25 square meters).

"The Government initially proposed to build a single type of house, even though there are large differences between these 33 districts in socio-economic structures, climate, environment and even culture. But such social housing projects, where the government builds a brick or concrete house for the poor, have proven to fail all over the country. Over the last three decades the Central Government has spent over 70,000 crores (US \$ 1200 million) on social housing, but you'll hardly find any housing which qualifies as 'best practice'.

"We felt that this narrow interpretation of the original scheme needed to be expanded to be more people-inclusive, diverse and culturally appropriate and take into account the changing realities of India. If you give appropriate financial assistance to the people and build their capacities, instead of providing them with a ready-made house, they build in a very different way from the government schemes, in a way that is often culturally-appropriate and which offers them very high levels of satisfaction. That formed the basis for our approach.

"The Gujarat Government had asked for open bidding through the internet, which is now the norm in all government contracts. Our consortium submitted a very elaborate tender and we won the bid. We were elated: our owner-driven social housing proposal, where the owner of the house decides what he wants, was accepted. In future, money will be given to the owner directly, which will allow him or her to build a basic house according to the core design. They can later expand that design according to their own ideas and needs.

"After we had won the bid, we studied hundreds of villages in all the 33 districts: how people build in each district, the traditional technologies they use, their socio-cultural realities, their needs and aspirations and their local techniques and skills. We then determined each partner's responsibility. Gujarat has been categorised into five zones, each with different geographical, social and climatic conditions. Dustudio received charge of coastal and in-land Saurashtra, a very challenging and interesting area with a huge social, cultural and economic diversity. Our studies resulted in three huge reports and a basic design of a core house that people could build themselves.

"All these designs and the technical specifications have meanwhile been vetted by a national technical committee appointed by the government, headed by renowned experts. We now have to build a prototype core house, prepare the entire technical training manual and train the government officers in how to facilitate this process, help people build, how to supervise the construction, etc."

An unexpected new development is the interest the Central Government has shown in owner-driven social housing. "In May this year India got a new government at the Centre," says Dharmesh. "They mean business. Within 15 days after his appointment, the new Secretary of the Ministry of Rural Development visited Gujarat. Our collaborative consortium was asked to come for a 40-minutes meeting to explain our project. Instead of 40 minutes, the meeting lasted 4 hours. The Secretary was very interested to see if the Central Government could promote such a scheme all over the country. The new government has promised a house for every family by 2020, with water and electricity. They say that is the minimum a developing country can do. This means that they want to build 45 million houses for the poor within the next 15 years.

"As a welcome move, plans are now being developed to merge a number of government schemes for the poor. One is to make it possible that building one's own house is considered 'employment' under the National Rural Employment Guarantee Act. This Act guarantees 100 days of employment in a financial year to any rural household. Effectively, this means that the house owner could earn Rs 15,000 constructing his own house. The Gujarat Government is also merging other existing schemes at state level and some water and sanitation programmes, thereby increasing the assistance given to below poverty lines families from Rs. 70,000 to Rs. 95,000."

However, social housing, in India, is the State's responsibility. The Central Government can propose, but the final decision will be made by each

State. Some state governments have already shown interest, but others, including Tamil Nadu, have their own schemes for social housing funded by state and central resources.

## Housing in Auroville

The commitment to the owner-driven approach is echoed in BuildAur's work for the now almost completed Swayam community in Auroville. "We made a basic house plan, a core house, which is similar for all houses. But within similar plinth plans, there is a large variety. The residents have taken a lot of time interacting with our teams, in the process discovering what they want and communicating that to us. For us it meant a lot of extra work as well as getting to know what Aurovilians of diverse backgrounds need, while detailing the particulars of each house. But the results are very satisfactory, both for the residents and for us. When Dustudio was officially opened in August, the residents too opened their houses for public viewing. Visitors were amazed at the variety of the finishing and the individuality of the spaces, and the harmony of Swayam's overall planning."

For Dharmesh this is the way for Auroville to proceed. "We shouldn't give people identical houses which they cannot adapt. Residents should as much as possible be involved in the planning of their communities. People come from different nations and cultural backgrounds, they have different needs and making uniform structures doesn't make sense. They are already giving up everything by donating the major part of their financial resources and not owning anything; not even allowing them to be involved in the design is asking too much. We should build core houses, and let people develop them as and when they need, by adding a first floor or balcony or whatever. Of course the design capacities of our residents need to be developed, as most Aurovilians have not built prior to their Auroville adventure. But that will make people happier than having to fit within an organized structure."

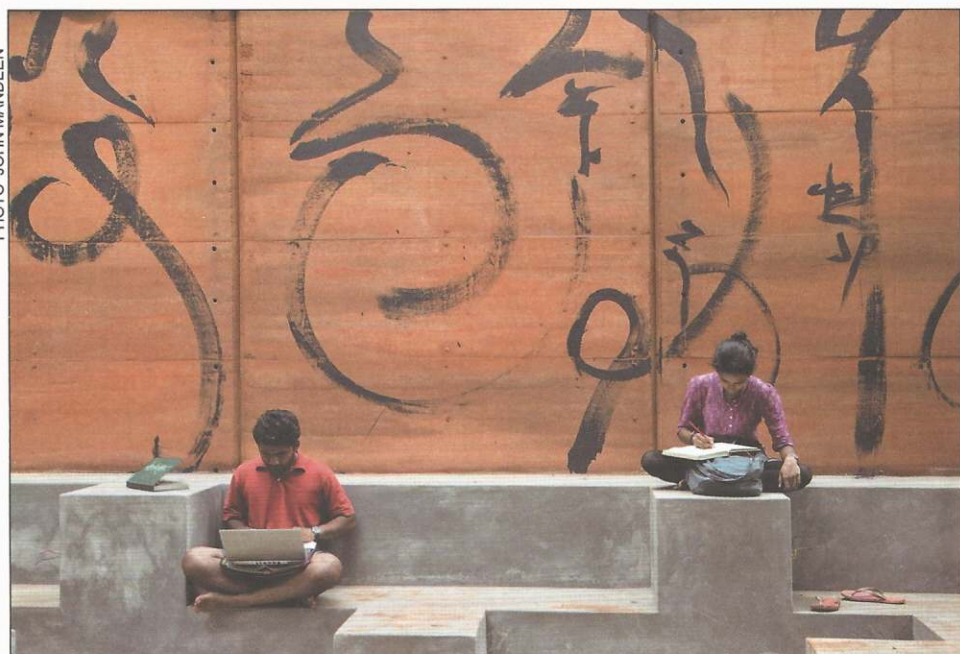
Swayam community is now finished, with 18 houses or apartments designed for approximately 52 people, and the office of BuildAur / Dustudio. It is a mixed-use design for a living and working community, not a place where you only find workers in daytime. Most residents use the ground floor as working space and the first floor for living.

"The Swayam project has been well received," says Dharmesh. "We have had many enquiries, so we have already met with L'Avenir d'Auroville, Auroville's town planning department, to discuss our next housing project – and we have asked them not to waste time this time." He would also like to create a common office or studio space to attract young innovators and entrepreneurs and a public square somewhere in Auroville, for example near the Solar Kitchen.

His reference to wasting time is based on his battle convincing the Auroville authorities to accept Swayam. "When we first submitted this project, we were told it didn't fit within the Galaxy. We proposed low-rise high density which fits today's Auroville needs, they wanted high rise. But in the subsequent years we saw all kinds of developments coming up which also did not fit within the Galaxy concept. Still, we were kept on hold. It took us eight years before Roger Anger and the planning group allowed us to build."

But mistrust was slow to die down. In spite of all difficulties, BuildAur has managed to complete Swayam within budget. "We went through quite a fuss last year, when malicious rumours were spread that we were having cost overruns. Unprecedentedly, the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) demanded a statement that the project would not exceed our estimates. We gave it. But then our commitment to Auroville was once again questioned when an enquiry was instituted about how we had managed to build our new office, which we had paid for from our savings." He sighs. "The FAMC was discriminatory. It had not taken such an attitude when Maitreye II, which has been built by an Auroville service with a grant from the Central Government, was running into cost overruns; in fact, it requested the Governing Board to allocate Rs 55 lakhs to

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Architects working underneath the large calligraphic signs that decorate part of the façade of Dustudio



# The Joy of Learning

Over the past two months, Aurovilians have been invited to participate in a new experiment called The Joy of Learning. What is it, and what is the idea behind it?

The Auroville of today is a much more complex place than it was even 20 years ago. The average Aurovillian's knowledge of what is going on in areas like the economy, town planning and governance is limited, and it is not always easy to obtain information to increase one's knowledge. There are many reasons for this, but one consequence is that many of our perspectives, opinions and strategies are based upon partial or inaccurate knowledge.

The 'Joy of Learning' series is an attempt to remedy this by providing a platform where important knowledge about the major sectors can be shared with the whole community. This is just one of the experiments promoted by the Auroville Campus Initiative (ACI) to contribute to the organization and development of adult education in Auroville. One of the usual ways in which knowledge is shared in this community is when it is required to solve a 'hot' issue, but as these situations are often emotionally charged it often distorts both the provision and reception of information. Consequently, the approach here is to disconnect learning from the need to solve a particular problem, although the hope is that better understanding of the issues will lead to new approaches to our most difficult challenges. It is also an attempt to create a learning environment where acquiring important information becomes something light, fun.

## The first session

The 'Joy of Learning' series began with two sessions that focused on the Auroville economy. In the first session, Divya highlighted some of the unusual features of our economy. These include that the land and capital are commonly-owned, that our labour force is made up of voluntary workers, and that we share a common spiritual aim. These, she feels, are components of a unique and precious system.

However, there is general uncertainty about how we want the Auroville economy to develop or how to cope with the present challenges it faces. This, she believes, is because of a certain cognitive dissonance which many of us experience. Speaking of her own experience, she explained, "I have not studied in Ashram schools. I come from the mainstream, privately held, private capital, private ownership, salaried world and I was thrown into the Auroville system of commonly-owned assets. These different influences have left many of us with a hodgepodge of understanding of what should we do with our economic system."

For Divya, the most important aspect of the ideal Auroville economy, and one that sets it apart from conventional economies, is the intention to build collective rather than private wealth. And, she concluded, "We have to be very careful that we don't just copy blindly the mainstream system and kill the very system for which we came."

Lyle began his presentation by identifying Auroville's major economic aims. These include establishing and sustaining a self-supporting city of 50,000 people; providing for everyone's material needs, not according to notions of right and equality but on the basis of the most elementary necessities;

and eliminating the exchange of money between Aurovilians. He pointed out, however, that we haven't really examined what some of these aims mean. What does it mean, for example, to provide everybody with the most elementary necessities?

Turning to money flows over the past decade, he noted that commercial units and guesthouses, which are supposed to be our most productive sectors, are seeing a per capita decline in growth when the figures adjusted for inflation. This is one indication that the Auroville economy is not as healthy as it should be.

But what to do about this? "The problem," said Lyle, "is we don't know enough about the Auroville economy to know what to do next, we do not have agreed upon indicators to evaluate our economy and no economic planning is taking place." He concluded that we have to create the means to think strategically.

## The second session

The second in the 'Joy of Learning' series included three presentations. Gilles spoke about the evolution of Mother's vision of the Auroville economy, Alain identified the major landmarks in the development of the economy and Nicole provided an overview of Auroville's service sector.

Gilles noted that the original conditions for residence in Auroville allowed people accepted by The Mother to purchase lifetime possession of plots of land in the township on which they could build their houses, although it was clear that all the land would belong to the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS). In those early days, there were no other material conditions laid down for residing in Auroville. In fact, initially Mother spoke of Auroville as being an experiment in no more than a "slightly more ideal way of life" and money, she said, would continue to circulate "as long as human habits are such". Giving Aurofood as an example of an Auroville unit, she implied that private businesses would be allowed in Auroville.

In 1969 things changed completely. Now Mother said the Aurovilians would not have money and that money wouldn't circulate in Auroville. She also made it clear that all businesses run by Aurovilians would belong to Auroville. This, Gilles noted, effectively killed the interest of outside businesspeople in investing in business activities in Auroville. He concluded, "In terms of social rules, things are still less constraining in Auroville than in the Ashram. But no private property and no circulation of money make things far more constraining in Auroville than they are today for people gravitating around the Ashram and living at their own expense."

## Economic milestones

Alain Bernard's review of the key milestones in the development of Auroville's economy began with the Prosperity system, which operated between 1968-75. Under this system, which was managed by the SAS from Pondicherry, adults received Rs 125 a month pocket money (children Rs 75) plus basic necessities like clothes and soap. In 1973, a central food distribution system began in Auroville,

followed by the opening of Pour Tous on 28th February 1974, the main purpose of which was to minimise money exchange in Auroville. In 1976 the Pour Tous fund was created as a common account for bakery, laundry, food purchase and the big kitchens. The existence of the fund was vehemently opposed by the SAS who cut off funding to the Aurovilians. However, this hastened Auroville's financial independence as friends and Auroville centres around the world gave the new fund financial support.

Between 1978 - 85, Auroville's finances were administered through the 'envelopes' system under which money was paid into and disbursed by an organizing group from twelve envelopes that covered key activities of Auroville's economy.

The temporary Government of India takeover of Auroville, in November 1980, led to a period of greater stability and consolidation. However, in 1984 the findings of a survey of Auroville's economic status concluded that the community had inadequate financial resources. This was when the linking of maintenances with work began and many more people began to draw their income from working in commercial units. 1984 also saw the creation of SAIER, a collective maintenance fund for educational researchers that also brought in substantial new financial resources for educational development.

In September, 1988 the Auroville Foundation Act created a new legal status for Auroville. The next year the Central Fund was created, which marked the beginning of the computerization of individual financial accounts, and the Auroville Board of Commerce was formed to foster better coordination between commercial units. In 1991 the Financial Service opened its first outlet.

In December, 1997, the opening of the Solar Kitchen marked a major step in developing the in-kind economy, and between 1999-02 there were the 'circles' experiment which aimed at increasing the sharing of resources between Aurovilians. This particular experiment proved unsuccessful, but it marked the beginning of consistent efforts to develop an 'in-kind' economy in Auroville. In March, 2006, the Pour Tous Distribution Service opened. Its aims include the encouragement of simplicity and the avoidance of consumerism.

## The Auroville Services

Nicole's review of Auroville services began with an attempt to define what constitutes a service. This is not obvious as our services are funded in many different ways and everybody in Auroville is expected to work in a spirit of service irrespective of their occupation. She explained that our services can be divided into different sectors - prosperity (PTDC, Solar Kitchen, Freestore, Health etc.), municipal (water, electricity, security, roads, waste management etc.), administrative, education and culture and outreach. She also referred to an FAMC note of 2011 that tried to define the characteristics of a service. These included not aiming at making a profit, only offering a service within Auroville, and operating, unlike commercial units, only under the supervision of the BCC or other bona-fide

supervisory body.

City Services, which support or partially support many services, can only utilise 18% of the income of Unity Fund, and City Services cannot make capital grants to the services. This means that any major investments in existing or new services cannot be financed collectively. This is a major obstacle to the improvement of existing services and the creation of new ones.

In spite of this, Nicole believes there is a need to increase municipal services like those necessary for supporting a growing township and the prosperity in-kind services. She also floated the idea of creating different zones in Auroville for different economic activities. For example, the central zone could be reserved for activities involving no exchange of money, another zone could be for Financial Account payments only, and an outside zone for cash transactions only.

## Reflections on the process so far

There seems to be general agreement among those who have attended these sessions that this is an important initiative. There is appreciation of the fact that a learning forum like this is very different from our usual General Meetings. For it requires participants, as far as possible, to empty themselves of preconceived opinions and ideas in order to open selves to new information and perspectives in order to offer their ideas and perspectives in a humble manner. And, during these sessions, a great deal of information about our economy, which is not easy for the average Aurovillian to obtain, has been conveyed.

The problem has been that, at times, too much information has been given for the attendees to absorb and sometimes it has been presented in such a way that it is difficult to get a 'handle' upon it. For example, a proliferation of facts about the evolution of the Auroville economy is less useful than drawing out the main trends.

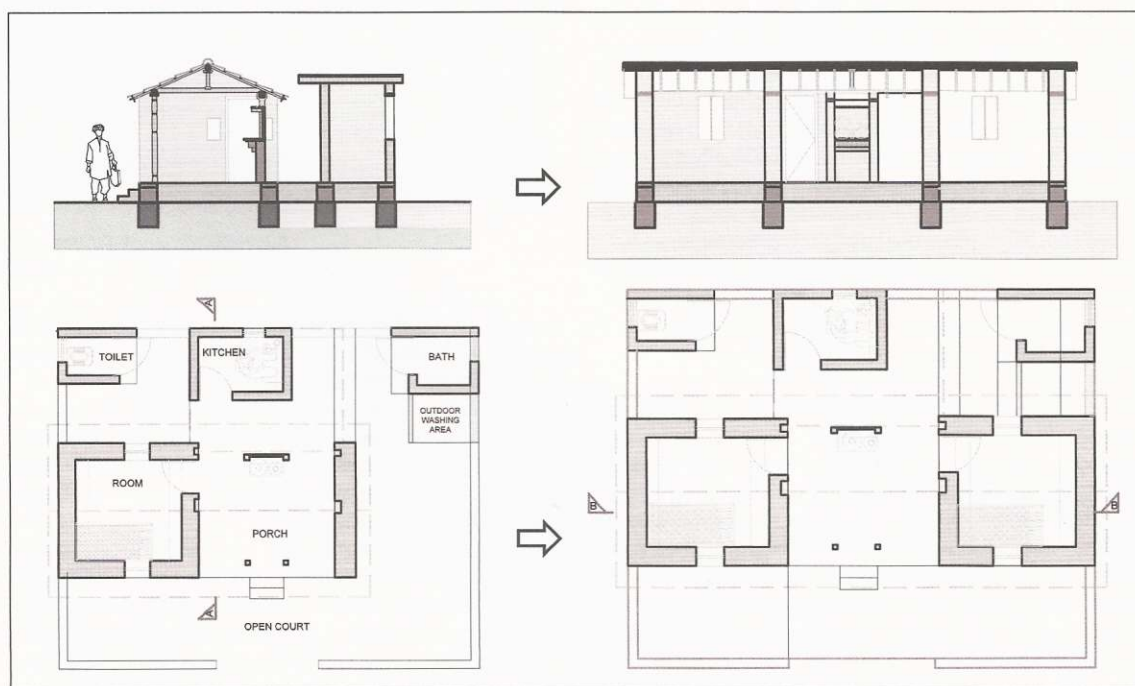
An associated problem is that while the presenters are experts in their fields they are not necessarily good communicators. Moreover, the mode of communication so far has been predominantly the lecture format. This can make it difficult for those who are not so able to receive information in this way, and, in the long run, may lead to them staying away. This would defeat one of the purposes of the Joy of Learning initiative, which is to spread key knowledge about our major work areas as widely as possible across Auroville so that the community as a whole can come up with solutions to the major challenges.

The organizers are very aware that this is a work in progress. This is why, after the second session, the decision was taken to look again at the way the sessions are organized and information is imparted. But there is general agreement among the organizers that the Joy of Learning initiative which plans, in the future, to focus upon areas like housing, governance and town planning, is potentially very worthwhile and perhaps even critical for getting greater community participation in planning our future development.

Alan

## ARCHITECTURE

# Owner-driven social housing in Gujarat and Auroville



Core house design based on the traditional organisation of spaces in Gujarat and (right) the expansion possibilities to accommodate the needs of growing families

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finish the building of Maitreye II [The Governing Board approved the request, eds.] But those responsible for the cost overruns were never questioned as we were. Our decision makers need to be more responsible, fair and transparent."

This brings us to a discussion of the usage of government grants in Auroville. The recent apartments built with government grants are all but cheap. "Frankly, I consider it unacceptable that Indian tax payers' money is used for building what I consider to be luxurious apartments in Auroville," says Dharmesh. "Government grants should only be used to create affordable community housing which include the costs of infrastructure, such as connection to the water supply, the electricity grid and the waste water treatment."

"Auroville is attempting to raise large donations for housing. If these attempts are successful and 10-15 crores could be fundraised, we should build 100-150 core houses and Auroville should ask a number of architects for their proposals, to be

evaluated by an independent and competent group. Afterwards, there should be competitive bidding for the construction of the selected proposal. The construction should not be done by an Auroville service and clear policies for allotment have to be developed."

He expresses his concerns about Auroville's development. "I was touched reading your interview with the parting Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. Bala Baskar. When I joined, in 1992, Auroville was extremely progressive in its products, design, concepts, people - everything. Auroville, at the time, was a step ahead. But I do not feel the same now. Are we missing the train? Are Aurovilians indeed becoming self-centered, with only 33% of them being fully dedicated to Auroville, as Mr. Bala Baskar surmised? In Dustudio we are working with organisations all over the country, and we notice that that cutting edge Auroville used to have seems no longer to be there. India is changing very fast, and Auroville should keep up."

In conversation with Carel



On 23rd January, 2010, for the French Pavilion, Alain Bernard gave a talk on the background and passing of the Auroville Foundation Act. Here is an edited version of the translation of that talk. It is also a testimony to the central role played by Kireet Joshi who recently left us and a token of our gratitude.

#### Glimpses of the early organization of Auroville

The Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), an Ashram organization, had proposed to the Mother, when the idea of Auroville began to take shape in the early sixties, to take care of Her project. She accepted the offer and therefore the Society provided in the earliest stages a first stable framework, both legally and economically, through which basic administrative tasks could be handled.

This administration was in Pondicherry and, soon enough, communication became rather difficult with the few Aurovilians who were trying to settle on the Auroville site. That the relationship between the early Aurovilians, particularly those coming from abroad, and the office holders of the Auroville official administration in Pondicherry should have been uneasy is not so surprising. Most of the Auroville administrators in Pondicherry were Ashramites, not so young or even elderly, used to a certain way of functioning in the context of the Ashram and generally expecting to be treated with a modicum of respect in view of their seniority. Many of the young foreigners who had come were rather brash, impregnated with the liberal culture of many western countries where youth was actually in reaction against the establishment.

There was also a deep contrast between the projections and plans made for Auroville in various offices in Pondicherry, which were rather on the grand scale, and the stark reality of the day-to-day life of the pioneers on the Auroville site, who were battling for survival on a severely eroded land, devoid of trees, where all too often procuring enough water for daily needs and watering the plantations – and protecting the same against herds of cows and goats – was a daily struggle.

After various organizational experiments, including a one year long experience with a Comité d'Administration d'Auroville (CAA), Mother was clearly dissatisfied and decided in February 1971 to give the responsibility of the day-to-day administration of Auroville to Shyamsunder, making him her Secretary for Auroville Affairs. He worked under her close guidance.

When Shyamsunder took over the direct administration of Auroville, he established what became known as the Beach Office in a large room on the ground floor of one big SAS building on the Pondicherry seaside. Soon enough, the residents of Auroville, most of whom quickly came to respect and have confidence in Mother's chosen intermediary, took the habit of coming to this office to submit their projects and problems. Shyamsunder, in turn, would see the Mother every day and take Her guidance whenever necessary. It gave him a special place and role in the complex hierarchy of Auroville's early management, which included the Chief Architect, Roger Anger, Navajata, who was the SAS General Secretary and main fund-raiser for Auroville, plus a number of associates of these main actors. One common characteristic was that none of them was residing in Auroville, which contributed to a developing sense of estrangement from the side of the residents.

For some years, mostly due to The Mother's presence and to some extent due to the role played by Shyamsunder, the frustrations of an increasing population of residents were kept in check, despite the accumulating difficulties. But after May 20, 1973, the Mother was no longer available for guidance and advice, a fact which contributed to the residents' growing feeling that they should develop their own organization.

#### The registration of the Auroville Society and its aftermath

On November 4th 1975, seven Aurovilians registered an Auroville Society in an attempt to create an independent legal body for Auroville, which could receive funds independently from the SAS and offer the opportunity to develop a new internal organization for Auroville. This was done out of sheer frustration at seeing no improvement in the way Auroville was administered by the SAS, particularly by its chairman. For instance, despite promises that two Aurovilians would be co-opted as members of the SAS Executive Committee, it was not implemented, reflecting probably the deep-seated aversion of Navajata to share power at any level. At the same time, the economic situation was deteriorating, making the life of residents quite precarious. Development projects were suffering and, in addition, all too often funds raised by the residents

themselves for various projects but by necessity channeled through SAS accounts suffered a 50% cut to honour an agreement made by the SAS with the State Bank of India that half of all funds raised for Auroville would go to reimburse the large debt incurred since the beginning of Auroville. So frustration was growing deep, and this led some Aurovilians to decide to act.

This action of registering a Society would be the first salvo in what would be a long legal battle for the autonomy of Auroville...

Both the SAS and the Ashram authorities wanted the new Society dissolved. There were several meetings between all the parties, but no resolution. Finally, the SAS filed an affidavit to obtain an injunction against the new Society claiming that, in a legal sense, all the land and properties of Auroville belonged to the SAS, and that the residents of Auroville had no right to carry on any activities except those allotted to them by the SAS.

The situation deteriorated rapidly. Now foreign Aurovilians could only get their visa guarantee through the SAS by signing a statement of support for the SAS, the SAS withheld funds and leased land that had been under the care of Aurovilians to local villagers, and two Aurovilians received quit notices and had to leave India. Finally, on a complaint lodged by the SAS on bogus charges, eight Aurovilians were arrested and sent to jail.

At this point, the Central Government sent Kireet Joshi to assess the situation and report back. The Aurovilians hoped this would lead to government intervention that would free them from control of the SAS, but then Indira Gandhi lost the general election and a new government was formed. Soon after, some Aurovilians managed to meet the new Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, who said he would direct that important Auroville matters should be referred to him before any decision was taken. But the new government did not take further action.

#### The government gets involved again

Then rather surprisingly, Indira Gandhi came back to power – since after the Emergency and her defeat in 1977 we did not have much hope she could possibly return to power. Her party won the elections early January 1980 after the collapse of the Janata Dal government. She soon called an advisor who was very close to her. His name was Sir C.P.N. Singh. He was someone who had already helped Auroville a lot and she asked him to become Governor of Uttar Pradesh, the largest state of India. C.P.N. Singh, who was already quite old (he was about 80) told her [something like this], "You know, politics for me... I have had my share; at present that is not what preoccupies me, I prefer spiritual life and I am preoccupied about the situation in Auroville."

Indira Gandhi told him: "Please do what I am asking you. I need you in Uttar Pradesh [the most politically difficult state] – I promise we will do something for Auroville."

So that was one of the reasons we came to know why Indira Gandhi got quickly involved with Auroville. But she herself had already shown personal interest in Auroville and she had a sincere devotion for the Mother. Therefore she was motivated to act to try to rescue the project. As a result, at the end of the year 1980, around November 12, one could see newspaper headlines. Auroville was big news: the Government had promulgated the Auroville Emergency Provisions Ordinance for a temporary takeover of Auroville.

Why an ordinance? There was a secret story behind this ordinance. It had been promulgated just before the opening of the parliamentary session. Normally, the government does not do that. An ordinance is passed when the Parliament will not be in session for some months or at least several weeks. But here the winter session was going to start very soon. But the Government knew that there was a lot of support for the SAS in the Parliament because Navajata had many friends and a considerable amount of contacts everywhere. There was a perception that if the government tried to pass a law on Auroville in the Parliament, it would be quite difficult, there would likely be lots of amendments proposed by SAS supporters and the desired result would not be obtained. Therefore, it was decided to go for an ordinance because when an ordinance is promulgated, Parliament, which must ratify an ordinance within 6 months, cannot amend it; it can reject it, of course, but otherwise it must ratify it as it is.

By December 9, the Ordinance was replaced by the Auroville Emergency Provisions Act, which

was passed after a few days of debates by both Houses. One of the speakers was Dr. Karan Singh, who said, "This is now a leap into the unknown, as it were. It could conceivably be the most important single Bill ever passed by this House because it deals not simply with material manifestation, not even with the collective human manifestation, but it deals with something which is still beyond the ken of human consciousness, it deals with an idea which is an arrow into the future."

The SAS had meanwhile launched a counter-attack against the government involving itself in Auroville by registering a case in the High Court of Calcutta. One can consider the way they did it as a kind of perjury, as they gave as the main ground for it the fact that Auroville was like a religious denomination and the writings of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo were basically religious. It was quite a colossal perjury but it was in fact the only thing they could do to win the case. Why? Because if Auroville were to be recognized by the Court as a religious institution, according to the Indian Constitution the Government of India had no right to interfere.

So a court case was launched by the SAS in Calcutta. ... Court cases in India can last a long time. But something quite extraordinary happened: the case was very quickly transferred to the Supreme Court. They took it very seriously, forming a constitutional bench of five judges, including the Chief Justice as it was seen as a constitutional case. And, quite soon, the case began.

You have to understand the situation: Kireet Joshi, who had been given by the Government the charge of the Auroville file, had also to deal with his work as a high functionary in the Education Ministry, a considerable charge. Yet he had to manage the Auroville case, which was also very demanding. ... Dealing with the Supreme Court case proved to be very exhausting. The SAS had quite a lot of money and they hired one of the best lawyers of India, Shri Soli Sorabjee, who later became Solicitor General of India and who, still today, writes a column every Sunday in the Indian Express. He is known to be a legal luminary and a good upright person. In this SAS case, he pleaded remarkably well. I remember Frederick – who was often in Delhi for the case – telling me: "At a certain moment, we both went out of the Supreme Court building and I saw Kireet turn towards me and in his glance I could see that we both felt the same, that the case was going very badly for us." Soli Sorabjee had made a brilliant submission and they felt that the judges had been powerfully impressed.

When it is a Government case, the main lawyer is a government advocate. The government lawyer was a Mr. Parasaran who, initially, did not seem to understand much, and Kireet and others felt quite concerned. He clearly did not make the grade in front of Soli Sorabjee. It got to the point where, the day before Parasaran was due to appear and plead our case, during the night, as Kireet told me later, he prayed to The Mother in (approximately) the following terms: "I do not know what is your will in this case, but things don't seem to be going too well. I have a feeling that something decisive should be told to these judges so that they may understand the difference between religion and yoga." That was indeed the crux of the matter in this case: how to clarify the difference between Religion and Yoga.

Kireet then went to sleep and, as he recalled later, he had a dream in which he saw a kind of parchment on which a formula was written. The dream was so strong and so precise that he could remember the formula in the morning and write it down. When he met Parasaran before his submission to the court, he told him that it was crucial that he should very precisely and clearly pronounce that during the course of his pleading. The

## The Genesis of the Au



Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi on her visit to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1974 is given a book by Kireet Joshi

formula is the following:

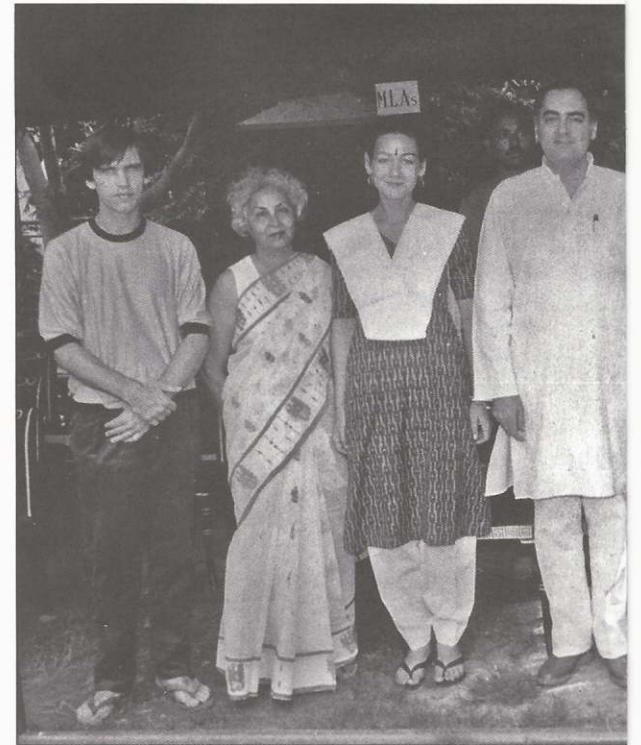
*"Philosophy, religion and yoga – all aim at God, but the method of philosophy is that of ratiocination; the method of religion is creedal belief, rituals and ceremonies; and the method of yoga is to arrive at a change of consciousness through change of consciousness."*

Kireet later said that when Parasaran did give that formula clarifying the difference between philosophy, religion and yoga, he heard the Chief Justice say: "That's it!" From that crucial moment, the situation changed, things moved in a more positive way....

Indeed on November 8, 1982, the decision of the Supreme Court was given. Out of five judges, four said that Sri Aurobindo's writings did not constitute a religion.

#### The temporary government takeover

The temporary government takeover of Auroville resulted in a period of greater stability. Two government administrators took up residence



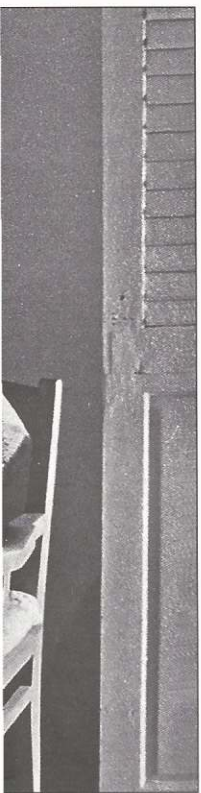
Aurovilians with Prime Minister S. From left, Rolf, Aster, Pala, Shri Rajiv Gandhi

here and an International Advisory Council (IAC) consisting of very eminent people – including J.R.D. Tata, Narasimha Rao, the then External Affairs Minister, and the Director General of UNESCO with Kireet Joshi as the Member-Secretary – was appointed to advise the government on Auroville matters. Specifically, the IAC would try to ensure that the ideals for which Auroville had been created were encouraged and that the residents had the freedom to develop activities to accomplish programmes envisaged in The Charter.

However, it was not a permanent solution. Since the Act was only temporary, there was always the possibility that when it lapsed the situation would revert to the status quo and the SAS would once again be in control of Auroville. The Act was



# roville Foundation Act



Sri Rajiv Gandhi

extended a number of times, but by 1988 it was clear that it would not be extended again. A Task Force was set up to work with the community and with Kireet to find a solution. In mid-August 1988, three members of the Task Force, Alain Bernard, Frederick and Krishna Tewari, went to Delhi.

## Surprising request for a draft bill

On Monday August 20th, 1988, Shri Baldev Mahajan, the Auroville administrator, who was now working under Mr. Veera Raghavan, the high functionary now in charge of the Auroville file, called us to tell us approximately the following: "There is a need for a draft of an Auroville bill. It is already three months since the Government has decided that such a draft should be prepared. But Veera Raghavan has done nothing and now he is asking me to prepare it. So now I am asking you to provide me with a draft."

We said: "OK, but when do you need it?" - "In two days!!!"

We went out quite flabbergasted, wondering what to do, if we should call some people from Auroville, like Sanjeev, who had some legal knowledge, to work out something. We went back to Kireet's residence at Talkatora Road and we told him: "We have just seen Mahajan and he told us that he needs a draft law for Auroville in just two days!"

Kireet's reaction was typical of his calm demeanour. He just said: "All right". And he began immediately to dictate. As Frederick has said in an interview, he just began by a long list of

hours that he had set, on August 22nd, in the morning. This episode is another example of remarkable happenings in favour of Auroville: normally, drafting the law should have been made by some official in the Ministry of Human Resource Development. Moreover, Kireet, at that time, was no longer in the administration. His contract, to be renewed every year, was not renewed after March 31st 1988 due to some manipulation from hostile bureaucrats. So the fact that the making of the draft bill was delivered into his hands in August was a first miracle, which happened thanks to Mahajan who boldly took it upon himself to ask us for the draft.

## A very serious problem comes up

After three days, on August 25th, first alert, we learn that Veera Raghavan had added in the draft law an article which would make mandatory the consultation of the SAS for the constitution of the Governing Board. This could be thought as a relatively minor modification but Kireet took it as a very serious setback. Since the SAS people were on the spot, near Auroville and in Pondicherry, they would always be considered as experts and their suggestions would carry a lot of weight with bureaucrats, which may practically mean that they would be able to choose most of the members of a Governing Board in charge of Auroville affairs.

So it was very serious and unacceptable, but what to do was not so clear. It had been approved by the new HRD Minister, who was no longer Narasimha Rao, as there had been a Government reshuffle. The new Minister was Shiv Shankar, who did not know anything about Auroville, and he had effectively approved this insertion of the mandatory consultation requirement. More alarming, we heard that Narasimha Rao had also approved the insertion and that was an even more serious blow as it meant that only the then Prime Minister, Shri Rajiv Gandhi [who had become Prime Minister after the assassination of his mother in 1984, eds.] could do something about it. But the problem was that it was extremely difficult to contact him.

But then Kireet was called by Narasimha Rao regarding a file which had nothing to do with Auroville. It gave Kireet the opportunity to ask Narasimha Rao (who was now again Minister for External Affairs) whether he did approve the insertion of the SAS mandatory consultation requirement in the Auroville draft bill. Narasimha Rao said that he did not approve of any such insertion. He added that Kireet should speak to Veera Raghavan and tell him that it was not true that he approved. Kireet phoned Veera Raghavan and told him what Narasimha Rao had said. Veera Raghavan got very angry and told Kireet that all these politicians were lying and that Narasimha Rao had approved the insertion. He took the opportunity to tell Kireet that he felt it was very unfair to completely exclude the SAS from Auroville: "These people have worked a lot for Auroville and you people are not prepared to give them anything."

The situation had become quite critical. We knew that the draft bill was about to be given to the official printing press so that it could be presented to Parliament. If it were to be printed with the insertion, it would make things very difficult.

Kireet told us that he did not know what to do. The only person who could do something about it was the Prime Minister but there was no way to contact him. If the bill were to be passed like that, it would be as if we were giving

Auroville on a plate to the SAS. He added very gravely, "At this point I do not know what is Mother's will." He then went to his room to pray and meditate.

Hardly five minutes later, there was a phone call for Kireet, in which he was told that he was expected to come to a function in which the Prime Minister would be present. Kireet was a member of the administrative committee of a school which had been selected to participate in an important Hindu festival, the *Raksha Bandhan*, with the Prime Minister.

So Kireet came out of his room and told us: "Tomorrow there is an opportunity to meet the PM." It was felt as something rather miraculous, suddenly everything was open again. But we were not sure how to proceed. As the three of us, Frederick, Krishna and I, had met Rajiv Gandhi only about a week ago, we could not really hope to see him again easily. So we wrote a letter that the president of the school - Ms Pratibha Singh who was the daughter of Sir CPN Singh - would give to him when he came for the function. In the letter we reminded him that he had told us earlier that he should be informed of any problems cropping up regarding the proposed Act and indeed there were serious problems for which we wanted to see him again.

So the next day we went again to the residence of the PM and waited outside, hoping for the best. Kireet went to the function, the PM came and when he sat down to listen to a song by the school-children, our letter was put on his knees by Pratibha Singh. He asked her what it was. She answered that it was about Auroville and that there were problems. The PM said that they were about to do the necessary to solve the problems of Auroville. She repeated that there were problems created by the SAS people and that he should agree to see us. Then Rajiv opened the letter and later told his security people to allow us to come in.

The small ceremony with the school was soon over and Rajiv Gandhi was about to leave. He went over to Kireet to greet him and shake hands. He turned away to go. Kireet later said that at that moment he prayed to the Mother: "Is that all? Is it what you want? Let Thy will be done."

Suddenly Rajiv, who had already left, came back and took Kireet's hand. He told him: "Kireetji, you know that we are preparing an Aurobindo law?" (Strangely, he spoke of an Aurobindo law). Kireet answered: "No Sir, an Auroville law". The PM said: "I am told that there are problems about this, is it true?" "Yes Sir, it will be a disaster", Kireet answered. Then, remarkably, Rajiv said: "You only know what Indiraji wanted for Auroville. I want you to take charge. Call Vasudev (additional secretary in the PM's office) and do the necessary. I will not move this till I know you are satisfied."

Despite the fact that for a few months Kireet had not been part any longer of the government administration, the PM put him in charge. It shows how much he sincerely wanted to do what his mother Indira Gandhi had wanted for Auroville...

## The J.R.D. Tata episode

Yet the day after, on Sunday, Kireet was not entirely satisfied. He felt that there still were some modifications introduced by Veera Raghavan which were problematic for the future. Kireet told Frederick that, at this moment, the only person who could still help was Tata, the well-known great industrialist and member of the Auroville International Advisory Council. He asked Frederick to call him. Frederick was quite close to Tata, whom he had often met and was calling "Jeh" (for Jehangir) as only few intimates were doing.

Frederick said, "All right, I call Tata, to tell him what?"

"You tell him to come."

"Yes, but when?"

"Now, immediately, it is urgent".

I can still see the scene: Frederick takes the phone and calls Tata, whom he gets quite quickly. And he tells him: we are in Delhi for this Auroville bill, there are problems as the draft that we had given had been seriously modified, it has become quite a big problem and there is a feeling that he should come as only his intervention could save the day...

So Tata says: "All right, but when?"

Frederick: "Well, Jeh, right now..."

According to Frederick, Tata's sarcastic reaction was something like, "Ah, of course, Frederick, no problems, I am only the chairman of Tatas and Sons, I am quite free, with no appointments whatsoever, of course I can just come immediately..."

"Yes, Jeh, I know, but it is very very critical and..."

"All right, give me Kireet..."

Again I remember that, when Kireet took the phone, he sat straighter, as if suddenly standing at attention, and he listened to Tata. What we heard was only something like, "Yes, Sir, yes Sir, it is very necessary that you come, Sir, all right, Sir..."

There were several reasons for this urgent call: Tata was a member of the Auroville International Advisory Council, which gave him the right to intervene. He also had great personal prestige in India. Kireet knew that Veera Raghavan had a special respect for Tata and, further, that, after his retirement which would come quite soon, Raghavan was hoping to find some position in the Tata organization.

What is really admirable is that, the same evening, Tata came. It showed the depth of his commitment to Auroville, as he must have had to cancel all his appointments for the following Monday.

We went to see him in his big suite in the Taj hotel (part of the Tata group). The meetings with Tata would usually begin with him being quite gruff, questioning rather sharply about the necessity of this or that, but, after a while, when he was satisfied to some extent at least, he would become friendly and accommodating. Kireet explained the problems and the points that needed to be modified in the draft bill. The next morning, we heard that Veera Raghavan had accepted everything. We supposed that Tata had asked him to come and told him what was to be done. Apparently Raghavan did not dare to object...

## The last suspenseful days

On September 1st, 1988, the Auroville Foundation bill was passed by the Rajya Sabha, the upper chamber of the Parliament of India. There were no problems. We were present. What was moving was the reading of the Auroville Charter by one MP, Mrs Najda Heptullah, member of a highly regarded Muslim political family - her father had been Vice-President of India. We later went to thank her for that nice gesture.

Then there was a serious technical problem. The vote in the Rajya Sabha took place on a Thursday. The last day of the parliamentary session was on Monday September 5th. There is a rule that there must be at least three working days after the vote of a bill in one of the chambers of Parliament before it can be introduced in the other chamber. Friday, Saturday, Sunday do not count as working days in Parliament, so, theoretically, the Auroville bill could not be introduced in the Lok Sabha on Monday, which was also the last day of the parliamentary session. It was really a big problem. If the bill voted by the Rajya Sabha was not voted by the Lok Sabha, it would remain in suspense for about two months in the public domain, and of course we knew this would give the SAS all the time to try to manipulate at all levels and influence many Lok Sabha MPs to vote against the bill. Not only

would getting a positive vote become uncertain but at the minimum there would be a big risk of problematic amendments to the bill. So we felt quite tense as we could see that this was quite a serious problem.

The General-Secretary of the Lok Sabha at that time was Shri Subhash Kashyap, a close friend of Kireet - he would become later a member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. He took it upon himself to put the Auroville bill on the list of bills to be passed that Monday. The last one, in fact. Then we heard that a zealous functionary below him had removed the Auroville bill from the list, precisely on account of the missing working days. But Kashyap again put it on the list!

Meanwhile something quite remarkable had occurred: there had been for a few days a kind of parliamentary strike by the Opposition who decided to boycott regular parliamentary work on account of the mishandling of some local MPs in Andhra Pradesh by the police. Huge scandal! Parliamentary boycott! The opposition parties united and decided to abstain from any work till reparation was obtained. But Parliament was still in session and, with hardly any debates, bills were passed quickly, a fact which did open the possibility for the Auroville bill to be on the list for that fateful Monday.

## The final triumph

On the afternoon of Monday September 5, Frederick, Krishna and myself were in the gallery of the Lok Sabha. I must say that we were quite tense. We were hoping that this Auroville bill would be put to vote.

As is common in many parliaments often few MPs are present and they represent their colleagues party-wise during the vote. This was the case in the Lok Sabha when the vote began, article by article, after an introduction by the Minister of HRD and a brief discussion. Then, suddenly, we saw lots of MPs both from the majority and the opposition coming in. The MPs of the opposition came in wearing yellow scarves, as yellow is a colour associated with Andhra Pradesh. The Lok Sabha was filling up quickly with MPs from both sides. I felt quite nervous as I was wondering if this would not lead to the disruption of the on-going vote. We knew that there was to be a statement by Chidambaram, who was then Minister of State for Home Affairs, about the incident in Andhra Pradesh and they were coming for that. The statement was to be followed by a debate and a vote. So they all came, including some members in wheelchairs.

Contrary to my fear, the entering parliamentarians did not disrupt the vote, they just speeded it on. They added their voices so that the "Yah" for each article became louder and louder - and surely there were among them quite a few friends of the SAS but it did not make a difference in the 'Yah' momentum. When the speaker called for the final vote, for the bill in its totality after the vote article by article, I can still remember the enormous and resounding YAH that came out from the full Lok Sabha.

I must say that I saw the whole scene as an extraordinary *maya*, that Mother's force which we felt so strongly operating during these strange days had managed to get a unanimous approval from a full Lok Sabha for the Auroville Bill at the very end of this parliamentary session. I remember that Frederick was sitting a few seats from me on the left, and we looked at each other rather bewildered. It was difficult to believe that it was over, that it had been done!

Alain Bernard

Alain's full talk is available as a booklet at the Auroville Papers Book Shop in the Visitors Centre and at Auroville Press. Price, Rs 180.

Sri Rajiv Gandhi in 1985, Alain Bernard, Sanjeev and Claude

"Whereas, Whereas", which is found at the beginning of any law.

When Kireet was asked how he could have dictated this draft law in less than 48 hours, he simply said: "I was ready". It is indeed true that he had personally worked a lot on this question, that he had consulted lots of people, including, of course, many Aurovilians, and it is why he was able to do what he did. During the long moments of dictation, during which we were present most of the time, he would quite often stop and discuss alternatives with us.

We went back to Baldev Mahajan with the draft before the time limit of 48



# Following the thread: a profile of Chali

Chali was born in San Francisco in 1967. She attended the inauguration of Auroville and was taken to Mother while still very young. She moved to Auroville in 1969-70 with Mary Helen and Narad (who she mainly grew up with), but left with her mother at the end of 1980. Narad followed a few months later. She moved back to Auroville in the summer of 1995.

Today, she is one of the key members of the management team of Future School, which she co-founded.

**What are your memories of those early years in Auroville?**

I have very positive childhood memories of freedom and fun, being out in nature, swimming in the mud-holes. Later, I realized those days were much harder for the adults, and particularly for sensitive people my mom. Actually, this is partly why we went back to the U.S. in 1980.

**You went from Equals One, a free progress school connected to the Ashram, to Kodaikanal International School, which was a much more structured, less individualized environment. Was it difficult to adapt?**

It was quite difficult. After all, I was only 10 years old and in boarding. But I already had some academic grounding – I had been reading from an early age – and there were two other students, the older sisters of Alok, from Auroville at the school. That helped.

**After Kodaikanal School you returned to the U.S. to attend High School and, later, university. What motivated you to revisit Auroville and to choose to live here again?**

I felt that I was stagnating a bit. I had a degree in Biology and liked my job working in a research lab in a hospital but there was nowhere else to go or learn in that position; there was some frustration there. More than that, I felt that something major had to change in my life, but I couldn't see what that change would be. So I came to Auroville for one month in 1994 just to get out of that environment for a little while. I hadn't thought that Auroville would be the next step. In fact, I had told some people that I would never again live in Auroville because I felt that that part of my life was over.

**What changed your mind?**

It felt really good to be here again, meeting people I had grown up with. Within a week of being here, it was quite clear that this was going to be the next phase of my life. It was a very conscious decision to return.

**Fairly soon after returning, you became involved in education. How did that happen?**

A young Aurovilian, Luc, had an idea to create a further learning centre. He had stayed in Auroville to do his higher education but had had a hard time because he had to find the teachers and materials all by himself, and he didn't want others to struggle in the same way. A mutual friend asked me if I would help him and I said, 'Sure, why not?' It was something of a casual undertaking. Luc and I started working on the concept in 1996 and the Centre for Further Learning opened officially the next year in the 'Curd Pots', which now houses the Language Lab.

We thought of it as an 'educational match-mak-

ing' service. The initial idea was that anybody could come to us who wanted to acquire any skill, from chemistry to basket-weaving, and we would try to put them in touch with somebody in the community who had those skills and who would be willing to teach them. Initially our focus was not just on teenagers or creating a 'high school'.

However, after one year we realised that we had to narrow that focus. Last School was already there, and it was and is great that it exists to create a different consciousness about education, but it was not offering qualifications recognised outside Auroville. Because of this, at that time many of our teenagers were studying for higher education at schools outside Auroville – at least 15 were studying in Kodaikanal International School, another 15 in the Lycee Francais in Pondicherry, and others were studying in schools in other parts of India or abroad. I remember thinking that trying to create a new consciousness about education in Auroville didn't make sense if we were doing that without the people it is aimed at. But how to keep them here?

So we started talking to the young people who were studying in these outside schools, asking them why they had left, what they were missing in Auroville education, and what it would take for them to study here.

What emerged was they wanted a higher education here in Auroville that would lead to them getting something recognised outside Auroville. It's not impossible to accomplish something if you don't have grades and certificates, but if you want to continue your studies in certain fields it is much, much harder. This is the present reality outside, and it is not going to change soon. So we decided we would try to help our young people get the academic qualifications that would allow them to pursue university and other higher studies outside Auroville, to give them the keys to open doors of opportunity and gain wider experiences.

**Your decision to help students study for examinations in Auroville in the Centre for Further Learning, which later became Future School, was controversial at the time because of what Mother had said about the true purpose of education, which has nothing to do with passing examinations.**

It is still something of a controversial issue. Even for us teachers in Future School it is always a challenge to prepare students for exams that are recognised outside, and yet to do it in such a way that this doesn't take over the whole educational programme and the mentality of the students. What we are trying to do is to bring together the aims and ideals that we have here, to offer an integral education, with an acknowledgement of the reality outside Auroville. We attempt to do this by teaching these courses in such a way as to make clear to the students that passing exams and gaining qualifications is not the ultimate aim: that the attitude that they take towards what they are studying is more important than the piece of paper at the end. But it is a constant challenge to maintain that way of think-



Chali

ing and maintain a balance.

One of the reasons we chose the particular examination system we use – 'O' and 'A' levels in English medium – is that it is very flexible. There is no rule about when students need to take the exam, which subjects they are going to take, how they are taught or which educational materials to employ. So we can use what makes sense for us rather than having to conform to an external system. But we also run many non-examination courses in Future School, including a course called 'Auroville Philosophy' where we discuss the history and ideals of Auroville and get the students to think about their relationship to them.

Clearly, we are meeting a need. Our student intake has grown every year since we began in 1996: this year we have 90 teenagers studying at Future School.

**You said that you had learned so much through taking up this work, even though you once said that one of the things you would never do would be to teach, and particularly teenagers!**

One thing that this experience has shown me is that when you don't approach something in too much of a mental way but try to follow the thread, what is presented to you, as sincerely as you can, then amazing things can happen. I have gained a lot of confidence from this experience. It has taught me not to be too attached to what I think should happen because often things won't happen that way. We actually don't know what is best for us, but if we can let go and follow what opens up in front of us we are usually brought to somewhere interesting. Helping to create and build something like Future School has been an incredible example of what I believe we are all here to do: find a work that serves the community and at the same time is an opportunity for growth in ourselves as individuals, a work that brings us joy and fulfilment while challenging us on all levels.

**I suppose one of the ultimate tests of what you have described is being part of a group like the Working Committee because it has to deal with very difficult aspects of Auroville. In addition to your responsibilities at Future School you were a member of what is considered one of our most successful Working Committees. How was that experience?**

I don't think I would have been able to do that work without having had the experience of the school and having the confidence I had gained through those years.

One thing that has become clear to me is the importance of the people I work with. If Luc and I had not become such good friends, if we had not been having such fun working together, I don't know if the Centre for Further Learning would have taken off. In the Working Committee that was also very much a part of it. We didn't know each other well when we first came together, but quite

quickly we clicked and felt good as a group. We learned to appreciate each other's strengths and to be patient with and complement each other's weaknesses. There was no feeling of competition, it was very much a team effort, and for me that makes a big difference.

I don't think I would have been able to go through that experience without having been part of such a team because dealing with the kind of issues that confronted us was really tough. One of the things that was hardest for me and for several of the others was to see so much rottenness, so many things that shouldn't be happening here. To hold on to your belief in the ideals and Auroville's very high aims when almost everything you see is in total contradiction of this was really, really hard. There were moments when I was in despair and it took me a long time to get to the point where I could thicken my skin a bit and feel enough detachment that it didn't hurt so much.

One of the things I kept reminding myself of when I was really struggling with a situation was that the work wasn't about us as individuals. We were doing it as a service. My daily mantra for that work was "Make me a better instrument". It was my way of reminding myself to step away from the result I wanted to allow forces wiser and more powerful to act.

**You revealed that recently you have been wrestling with the thought of leaving Auroville. Was this related to the frustration and disillusionment with certain aspects of Auroville that you felt when you were in the Working Committee?**

I guess it was for similar reasons. It had been building for a while but what brought the whole feeling to a head was the new selection process for the Council and Working Committee. I felt that the process itself was naive and artificial but I accepted that we should try new things. But what happened after the proposed new members of the Working Committee were presented to the community, the way that some of these people – including people who had been in Auroville for many years – behaved in the subsequent discussions in attempts to hold on to this position was so appalling, so aggressive and hurtful, that I wondered what we are doing here.

Of course, I can understand that sometimes these things come from a place of pain but I feel that in Auroville we should be able to deal with this differently. Even if we are a family, and in families you tend to be a bit more free with your criticism and your speech than with your acquaintances, still there is a line that you don't cross. And that line was crossed so drastically in one meeting in particular that afterwards I just went home and cried.

This was the catalyst that brought everything to a head. I thought, how can Auroville succeed if this is the mentality that is going to take over our community processes and interactions?

**Yet recently you said that you had changed your mind about leaving Auroville. What happened?**

It didn't happen immediately. Before this, I had already planned to spend a month in the U.S. with my sons. It was a really good trip, we met a lot of friends and family whom we hadn't seen in a long time. This made it even harder to come back, and reinforced the feeling that maybe we should move to the States for a little while.

So what changed my mind? It's hard to pin down what made a difference, it's never just one thing. It happened gradually but an informal group of Aurovilians that meets together on Saturdays to try to approach Auroville issues from another perspective definitely played a part because it quickly became a place for positive thinking and positive attitudes: it changed the focus. I think that that helped me to shift my attention from the things that were painful for me to the things in Auroville that are going well. I realized that there has to be a balance. It is not a solution to put your head in the sand and pretend some problems do not exist. But you can look at them and maybe even try to address them in a stronger and more balanced way if, at the same time, you have something else that's nourishing you, something that is giving you the strength and the detachment to be able to face them. It has become clear that the time to leave has not yet come for me.

*From an interview by Alan*



Mary Helen with Chali in Auroville's early years



# The love of life through clay

**A**midst a downpour of monsoon rains, the Citadines Art Centre hosted a remarkable exhibition of ceramic works by Priya Sundaravalli. The public's responses were unanimously positive, with some people judging the pieces as 'exceedingly beautiful', 'a wonderful expression of creativity', and 'a work blossoming like flowers, constantly getting finer, more interesting and gorgeous.'

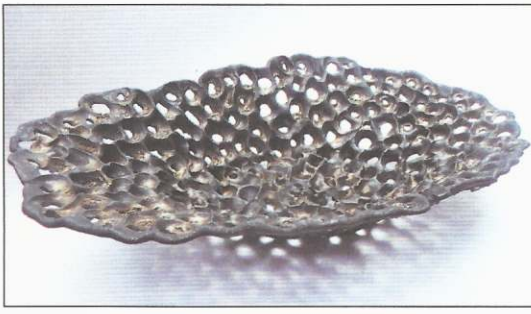
It's only since 2000 that Priya started doing pottery as a hobby in addition to her teaching work at various Auroville schools. The hobby has meanwhile turned into a full-time occupation, with Priya gradually finding her own, very unique way.

Many of the works in this Auroville exhibition were created over the last year, with about a quarter of the work being made following her return from South Korea in June, where she had spent four months on a ceramics art residency.

"South Korea taught me a limitless freedom in expression," said Priya in an interview with Auroville Radio. "The Koreans are far ahead in the field of modern ceramics, you could call it post-modern ceramics. There is a complete abandon, letting oneself go into clay without boundaries, not thinking that this is impossible or not, just accepting whatever comes. I became more fearless in my expres-



sion. Korean pottery has no concept of 'beauty' or 'ugliness' - duality does not exist. All forms of expression are accepted as being part of one sweeping spec-



trum. And what a freedom that is! I have even learned to embrace 'defects' or 'accidents'. A piece sometimes becomes more valuable

because of a flaw - it feels even more alive and true. So I throw nothing away. Pottery is like any person - it may be flawed but shining."

The Korean experience emboldened her creative approach. "For me the day starts with an unknown - I have no idea what I want to create. When an inspiration comes, I follow its thread. I try to pick up and flow with the energy. Sometimes I feel I am hollow and the wind is blowing through me. I may just create one piece based on that inspiration, and nothing more may come. But that is enough. I don't judge what I make. On the contrary, I feel I am falling in love with each piece as I am making it. Each work opens for me a little 'window into the universe'. But I am impatient that every piece must be finished on the day I started it. I do not cover up my pieces with plastic and continue the next day."

Her influences, she says, are from nature in its myriad forms, and from images of desert landscapes "that want to tell me something or a place where my spirit yearns to travel to, such as the 'song lines' of the Australian Aborigines, the Australian outback, the high desert of New Mexico, and in Korea, the volcanic island of Jeju-do." She specially enjoys the shallow and wide bowl forms. "Like the sky, they are so open and embracing and at the same time allow for an active play of images and texture on their surface."

Was she happy with this exhibition? "It was almost too much," she admits. "When I saw my pieces so splendidly illuminated and beautifully flower-decorated, there was a moment I couldn't believe that I had made them - I was overwhelmed and a bit scared, I could hardly take it. In the studio, I try to make these works as an offering to the Divine. But when I saw them here, I realised just how much they had to say. For me, they expressed 'transcendence', the sense of deep silence and peace, and delight in the joy of life and living." Judging from



the comments in the visitor's book, many people experienced something very similar.

For more images visit <http://goo.gl/F6S5gv>

## PASSING

## Ajit Koujalgi

**O**n October 12th, Auroville architect Ajit Koujalgi, aged 66, passed away in Apollo hospital in Chennai. He succumbed to the severe injuries he had sustained ten days earlier in a fall from the roof of his house in Samasti community. Initially admitted to PIMS hospital in Pondicherry, he was later moved to Chennai in the hope of better treatment.

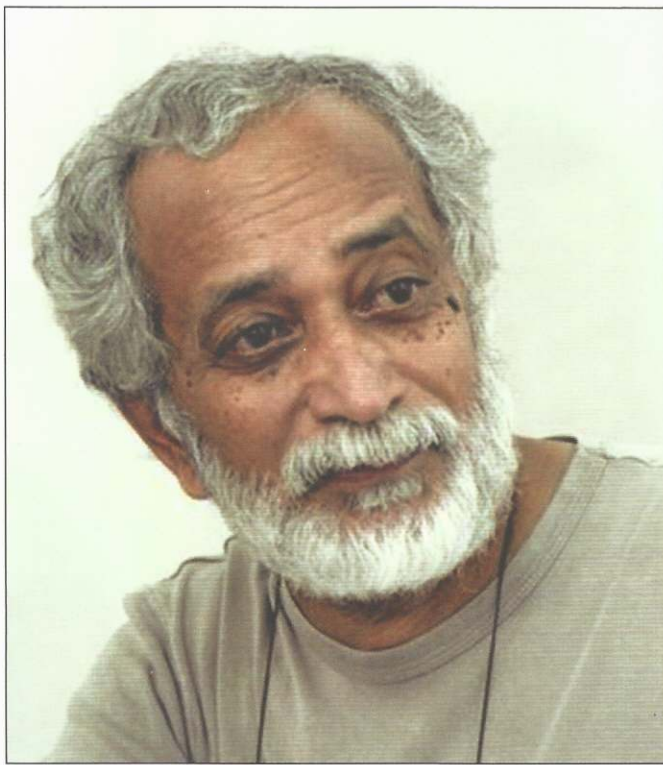
Ajit's death came as a shock to many Aurovilians. They, as well as his colleagues at INTACH, the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage Conservation, his friends and associates expressed a deep sense of loss.

Ajit graduated from the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi, in 1970 and joined Auroville in 1971. Initially, he worked with Roger Anger and was passionate about the Galaxy plan. But after eight years, when not much had materialised, he left to work in Germany. It was here that he came to appreciate the values of heritage buildings. When he returned to Auroville in 1987, he saw Pondicherry with new eyes and realized how beautiful it was with its distinct French and Tamil quarters. As there was not much work for him at the time in Auroville, he joined the Pondicherry chapter of INTACH. It ultimately became the main occupation of his wife Ratna and himself.

Over the years, Ajit often expressed concern about the general lack of interest in heritage conservation, both at government decision-making levels as well as in India's schools of architecture, where India's heritage is studied as being of historic interest without realising its relevance for the present. He called for heritage conservation to be made a mandatory topic, to be studied alongside the works of the great international masters.

Many Indian cities, he said, have no culture-specific cityscape left, and modern architecture is so universal that cities look all the same. He regretted that many works of modern architecture are isolated from the environment, glorifying the architect and his individual creativity, but not taking into account their relationship with the surrounding built environment. This, he felt, was a step back from the past where traditional cities present a 'surround architecture', a total experience where it is the whole that counts in a common pattern language and not the individual buildings. As he once wrote, "I haven't been able to find any convincing example of modern architecture of say one square kilometre in extent that is a product of a collective work of several architects and builders who have not tried to outdo one another in their individual creativity, where each one has honed his creativity for the harmony of the larger whole. It is for this reason that I admire and cherish traditional towns - and feel there is a great deal to learn."

When Ajit joined INTACH, the Pondicherry heritage was in a dismal state. Much of the Tamil heritage, more than 600 buildings that had been listed by INTACH along with the École Française d'Extrême Orient and the Institut Français de Pondichéry, had been razed to the ground, an irreparable loss for such a small city. Only a



few small stretches of some streets in Pondicherry remained which still gave - and that only partly - an impression of the beauty of the past.

Ajit's breakthrough came when the Indian Neerama Hotels Group, famous for restoring and managing heritage hotels, purchased a dilapidated building in the French part of Pondicherry. It had served for more than 20 years as Pondicherry's department of education and was totally run down. Ajit and Ratna got the assignment to restore it and turn it into a heritage hotel. Hotel de l'Orient, as the building was renamed, was opened in 2000. It was an eye-opener for the Pondicherry government. Almost all officials had visited the place before. Now they saw a small architectural jewel. It was a turning point in the history of heritage conservation in Pondicherry, and was awarded the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award in the year 2000.

In March 2002, the Asia Urbs conference happened in Auroville. Asia Urbs was a programme of the European Commission to foster partnerships between cities in Asia and cities in Europe. Shortly after the conference, Auroville helped in partnering Pondicherry with the Italian city of Urbino and the French city of Villeneuve-sur-Lot. Together with the Government of Pondicherry, and in partnership with these two European cities, an

Asia Urbs project proposal called "Achieving Economic and Environmental Goals through Heritage Preservation Initiatives" was submitted and subsequently approved. The project, which aimed at restoring some heritage buildings and improving the urban environment in Pondicherry, also brought in the idea of promoting tourism through heritage protection. Hotel de l'Orient was a case in point.

This brought about a change in perception of politicians and bureaucrats who came to take the concept seriously. Under the project, the facades of 20 heritage houses on Calve Subraya Chetty (Vysial) Street were restored to their original grandeur and another ten heritage buildings were restored with matching grants. In February 2009, the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award of Merit 2008 was given to the Lt. Governor of Puducherry for the successful restoration of Vysial Street as a notable example for urban streetscape conservation.

When the Asia-Urbs project was at its end, INTACH shifted its attention to other projects in Pondicherry. The revitalization of Bharati Park in the middle of the French town which turned it into a pedestrian oasis was completed in January 2007. Other important restoration projects that INTACH completed were Le Café near the Gandhi statue on the Pondicherry beach road; the heritage hotels Maison Perumal, Palais De Mahé, and Gratitude Heritage Hotel and the iconic Indian Coffee House in Nehru Street.

Ajit and Ratna's work was not restricted to Pondicherry. In neighbouring Cuddalore, INTACH became involved in the restoration of Government House, originally the residence of Robert Clive, one of the key figures in the creation of British India, and the Town Hall.

Another major project, stretching over many years, was the restoration of the former Danish colony of Tranquebar, now called Tharangambadi, a small coastal town 120 kilometres south of Pondicherry. The former collector's bungalow was restored and turned into a 5-star heritage hotel, 'The Bungalow on the Beach'. This was followed by the restoration of the Gatehouse, a large house next to the town's historic entrance gate. Unexpectedly, the work was extended after 26 December 2004, when the tsunami struck. Financed by the Danish Bestseller Fund, which was interested in restoring the ancient Danish colony to its former glory, INTACH continued to restore many small and large houses, provided urban landscaping, created a small public park, and even organised a solid waste management project.

Ajit was a source of inspiration to all who worked with him. He was a man of strong beliefs and great determination, yet his manner remained quiet and deeply respectful even of those he disagreed with. This was one of the secrets of his success in turning the tide of heritage preservation in Pondicherry. His wife Ratna and his colleagues at INTACH will continue his work of sensitizing officials and populations to the historic significance of their cities and to the need for heritage conservation.



# Auro-Orchard goes organic

**Auro-Orchard, one of Auroville's biggest farms, took the decision to go organic in October 2012. How have they done? And how optimistic are they about the future of food production in Auroville?**

**A**uro-Orchard was one of the first pieces of land purchased for Auroville in 1964. The land had been owned by a Brahmin, who was often referred to as 'the Swami', and there was a small Ganesh temple on it. When the land was bought, a promise was made to the Swami that the temple would be maintained and a puja offered there every day. This is still happening today.

Gerard, who had been in the Ashram since 1955, was the first manager of Auro-Orchard and is still there today. "It happened like this. When I asked the Mother if I should go up north to study agriculture, she encouraged me and I went. On one of my visits back, Mother called me and said, 'Near Promesse I have a piece of land. Nothing much is happening there. Why don't you go and see if you can do something there?' She mentioned it could be a good place to grow food for Auroville."

The work began there in 1969. "We dug a borewell and began developing the infrastructure without any big funding as Mother had told us to start small and let it grow. She also made me responsible for trying to make it self-supporting. Somehow, over the years, and thanks to many people who have worked here and to Bithi who is the backbone of our administration, we have succeeded in this."

Throughout the years, Gerard and his team worked to build up the farm and provide food for Auroville, refusing to become involved in the conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society in the 1970s. "Mother took me out of the Society," said Gerard, "and said 'work directly with me and carry on your work'."

Recently, Christian, who is a civil engineer and town-planner by profession but who has had much experience in the fields of forestry, gardening and poultry, joined the Auro-Orchard team. It was Bernard from nearby Pebble Garden who

introduced Christian to farming and then to Auro-Orchard. "Christian is a grace, he has fallen from the sky," enthuses Gerard. "He is the man who will carry Auro-Orchard into a new cycle of better things, and it is time for me to slowly withdraw." Christian is equally admiring of Gerard. "He is a great man and it is wonderful to work with him."

That cycle of better things includes the decision to turn Auro-Orchard into a fully organic farm. Gerard's decision not to go fully organic in the early years was based upon the need to provide enough food for the growing Auroville community, and his feeling that this would not be possible if the farm was organic. It should be remembered that the conventional farming doctrine of that period was that chemical inputs were essential to promote production. However, he had seen that over the years the soil was becoming exhausted and diseased and today he is fully supportive of the decision to go organic.

"Going organic is not an easy choice when the primary focus of Auro-Orchard has always been to produce plentiful food for the larger community," explains Christian. "Going organic requires a huge investment and there is a period when production falls off and there are losses. It is also important to manage the flows of organic matter so that you avoid external input: if you are importing organic matter from elsewhere, you are stealing it from another place. However, thanks to techniques like BRF (Bois Raméal Fragmenté) and the use of green manures, we managed to go fully organic. Only two years after achieving this we are back at the production level we had before Cyclone Thane in 2011. This means we are producing approximately ten tons of vegetables and five tons of fruit each year off the ten acres that we presently farm."

And it is not only the soil that has benefitted from the new regime. Auro-Orchard has always been a big provider of eggs to Auroville, and now the standard of egg production is also being improved. "Now we raise the



Christian, volunteers and employees sorting vegetables at Auro-Orchard

chickens in a more respectful way," says Christian, "by no longer de-beaking them and by allowing them to range free, feeding them kitchen waste and by providing them with a comfortable shelter. We are trying to establish the 'AV egg' as a better standard for our eggs than the 'Pondy egg'." Gerard chuckles. "The eggs taste much better because the chickens have a 5-star hotel here!"

What are the major challenges facing Auro-Orchard today? Christian notes that it is sometimes difficult to balance the accounts. "We do not rely on guest contributions, or providing consultancies or training courses, and we do not do food processing, as other Auroville farms do. We have to be very tight with our expenses. Our focus remains on providing simple, affordable food for the community." In fact, at present Auro-Orchard is one of the main contributors to Foodlink, with 98% of its produce going to Auroville. Water has not been an issue in the past, but there is concern that development along the Puducherry highway, which runs adjacent to Auro-Orchard, may make water scarce in years to come.

Christian, however, is optimistic about the future. "There is still potential for production to increase: we are still far from using the full capacity of the land as we still use only a small fraction of the organic matter available here. This place is like Sleeping Beauty that, one day, will awake and blossom. We just need to have more committed people – volunteers, Newcomers, Aurovilians – helping here." Gerard adds, "Our dream is that one day Auro-Orchard will become a centre of excellence and a first-rate research institute." In the long term, they would like to train Indian farmers and others in organic methods.

Meanwhile, they are concentrating upon stabilizing their organic production and exploring getting organic certification for Auroville farms. This could be third-party accreditation, like the one obtained by Annapurna from IMO India. For the moment, however, Auro-Orchard has pushed for the creation of a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) which is a way that a group of at least five farmers can certify their produce themselves. At the moment, Auro-Orchard, Brihaspathi, Discipline, Kalpavruksha, Sustenance and Windarra farms are part of this PGS.

Mother had wanted Auroville to strive to be a self-supporting township. At present, it is estimated that, on average, the Auroville farms provide only about 10% of the food needs of the community. Can Auroville ever be self-sufficient in food? Christian is doubtful. "There is no city in the world that can feed itself. Cities, by definition, are places where population gathers to maximize opportunities. As a consequence, they depend on their hinterland and surrounding regions to provide for their diverse needs." He believes that Auroville should encourage farmers in the region to turn organic and provide us with good healthy food rather than the food Auroville purchases at present in the open market, food which is laced with chemicals and which is sometimes transported from far afield.

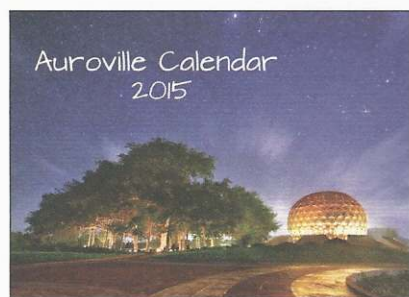
"Within Auroville we can also do several things. Through truly innovative town planning, we can encourage vegetable gardening and urban farming, namely farming in the city itself. And of course, we should make better use of the Greenbelt to improve and augment the production of our existing farms."

Kavitha



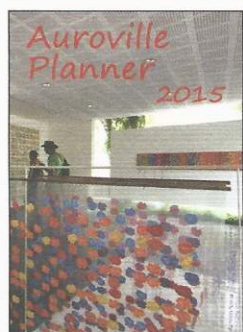
Free-range chicken at Auro-Orchard

## NEW PUBLICATIONS

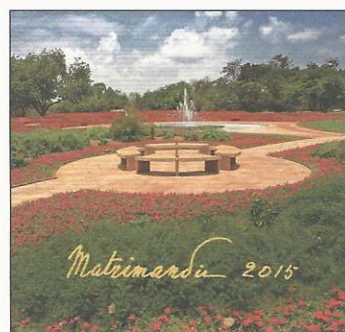


The Auroville calendar 2015 is a desk top calendar size 21x16.5 cm with photographs by Ireno. The calendar includes moon phases and a page with the calendar for 2016. Price in India Rs. 275, excluding packing and postage. For orders email ireno@auroville.org.in

**The Auroville Planner 2015**, size 15 x 10.5 cm and 174 pages thick, has 12 color photos by Tine and Giorgio depicting life in Auroville and with quotations from the Mother on Auroville. Price is Rs. 135, excluding packing and postage. For orders email tine@auroville.org.in



**The Matrimandir Calendar 2015** is a desk top calendar size 20 cm x 21 cm, with photographs of Matrimandir by Giorgio, Manohar and Tine. Quotations from Sri Aurobindo's Savitri are on each photo page. Price is Rs. 160, excluding packing and postage. For orders email tine@auroville.org.in



**Corrections**  
The photo of Mari accompanying the article *I really miss Auroville* on page 3 of our September issue was in fact the photo of Mira, whose article *Auroville changes people* appeared on page 4.

A printing mistake appeared on page 8 in the article *Creative Expressions from Auroville*. The text should read ...the photographer, not a cataloger of the project. "But its not a catalogue; there is ..."

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