

What is spirituality? A reflection by young Aurovilians

The article "Auroville's spirituality" in the August-September 2015 issue of Auroville Today contains a section on the Auroville schools. Concern is expressed that many of Auroville's youngsters hardly know of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and that most of the Auroville schools do not communicate anything of their vision. Inge, an Auroville youth who recently returned to Auroville after finishing her degree in The Netherlands, felt inspired to explore different definitions of spirituality among the youth, and whether young Aurovilians are indeed upset about not having been taught about the The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's vision in Auroville schools. She spoke to many young Aurovilians about it. Here are her reflections and her summary of the responses she received.

Having grown up here, I've heard the words 'spiritual' and 'spirituality' a lot, often in different contexts. When I left Auroville in 2008 to further my education in the Netherlands, I was often asked whether spirituality is taught at Auroville schools, and whether I am 'spiritual'. My initial and honest response to the former was always 'No', and over the years, I asked myself the latter: Am I spiritual? And what does being spiritual entail?

Looking back on my upbringing in Auroville schools, I can say that I was never directed towards spirituality, or pushed to read the works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. And yet, I slowly came to realise that the spiritual component that is transmitted to young Aurovilians such as myself is invisible and intangible. Throughout the years, I cultivated an interest and a curiosity about spirituality that I explored on my own, following my inner voice. I ultimately found my own ever-changing meaning of spirituality, one which resonates with me and that I apply in my own way.

I was allowed to discover my own interest in spirituality, and to foster the courage to do it at my own pace. I would not be able to pinpoint a moment, a place, or a person, that specifically guided me, but a critical element was identifying with the *Auroville Charter*. Having read it at school, it gave me a feeling of unity with others and created a concrete purpose for living in Auroville.

At the end of the day, I am here because I have chosen to unravel the winding path to spirituality, and to do it here; not because I read The Mother or Sri Aurobindo, but because I was awakened by a curiosity for and a drive to explore the essence of my being. For me, spirituality leaves the trail of philosophy when, through an integral approach to self-discovery, we actively pursue the aim to establish a connection with the psychic.

Having somewhat established what spirituality means to me, I was impelled to shed light on the experiences and voices of others like me. This article is the culmination of conversations that I have had over the past

Clockwise, from top: Noé (right) cleaning the Matrimandir disks with Sophie; Manjula; Dasha (left) and Suhasini in the Esendi Swimwear workshop; Mohini; Samai on the surfboard.



few weeks with a representative sample of Auroville youngsters, all of whom are currently living here.

Different meanings of spirituality

Someone who associates spirituality with taking moments out of the day to sit quietly and listen to himself is Emanuele (24 years old, working in

Future School). For him, spirituality is something personal and close to him, an awareness of what goes on inside. By experiencing things and by acting in a different way from usual, he asks himself questions, and realises that there are parts of him beneath the surface. This questioning element has always been there for him. He says that

when he is aware, he realises that most of the time he is not, and that there are moments that parts of him need to run on automatic, because being aware all the time can be very draining. He says that there is no how-to book on spirituality. He also believes that spirituality goes beyond the books. If you don't believe in it, feel that it is true, or apply

why he considers himself to be a bit spiritual, and that it's his destiny, that everything happens in the way it's supposed to. For him, being spiritual means taking moments during the day to sit down quietly and meditate, being in the present moment and getting rid of all your thoughts.

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Mohini (26 years old, working in Nine Palms) says that spirituality represents a path in life that you choose to follow by connecting to your true self, your inner being, and then connecting that to your lifestyle. She explains that she achieves that from time to time through traditional methods like yoga and meditation, or at home by being aware and more conscious of the goals she aims for.

She says that by growing up in Auroville, automatically you have a connection to The Mother and Sri Aurobindo because they are present all the time, and you learn about them, not only in school but also through interactions with people, your surroundings, and also through programmes and activities.

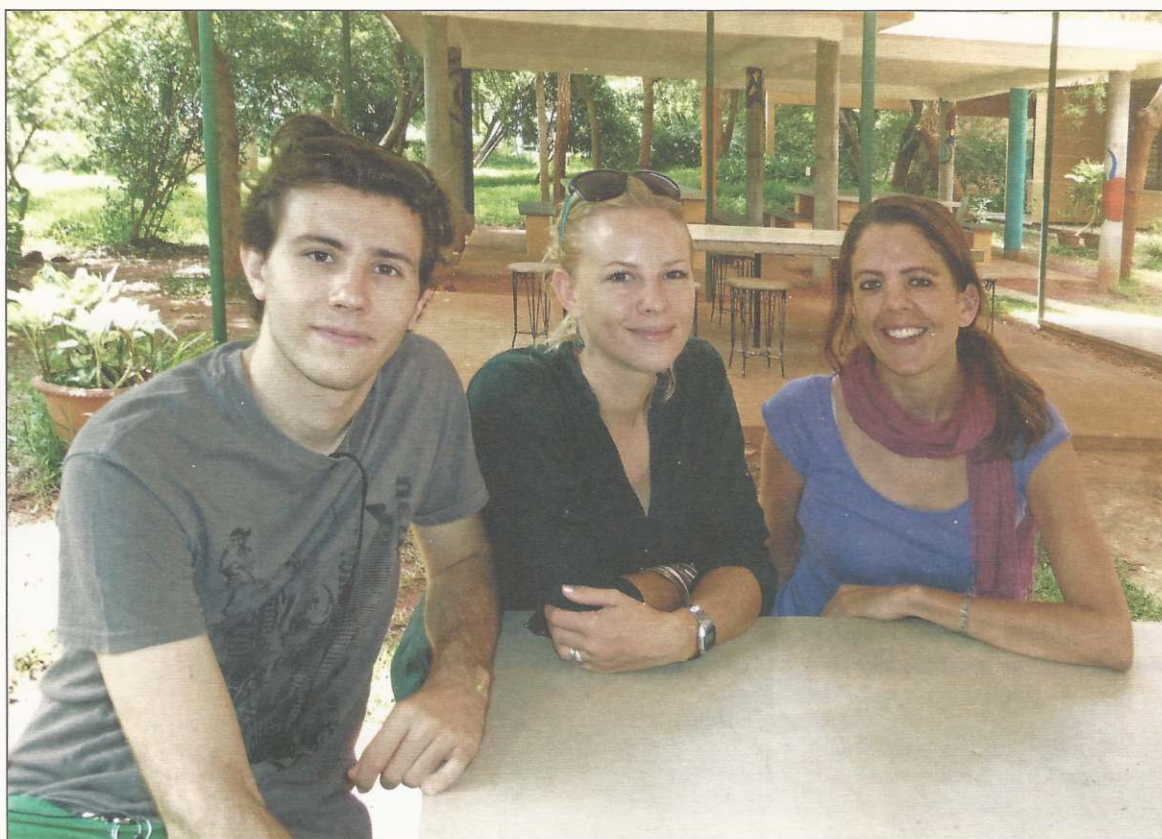
Dasha (23 years old, co-founder of Esendi Swimwear) who has lived here since she was a toddler, says that it's different for everyone, but also identifies with spirituality as a connection with yourself. She feels that she is spiritual in the sense that she has a kind of awareness, and feels grounded and in control. She mentions the role of Awareness Through the Body (ATB) classes as a starting point on this path. She adds that awareness and spirituality are almost a part of her personality, and that spirituality can never be defined by the way you dress or speak, that dressing fully in white as the stereotypical attire won't make you more spiritual. She also questions whether we can label someone as spiritual, and adds that, maybe, everyone is more spiritual than it may seem at first.

Two other views on spirituality come from Manjula (25 years old, working in Last School) and Shrishti (25 years old, working in Shradhanjali). Manjula thinks that spirituality is an inner journey of consciousness that can be made through work that requires sincerity. She says that in Auroville there is a lot of help, and that she aspires to be spiritual, in her own humble way. For Shrishti, being spiritual is an attitude of focussing on growth in whatever you do. Neither of them associate being spiritual with just reading works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. They explain that it's not only the exposure to the books, but also to the people who attempt to live according to the ideals that represents spirituality to them.

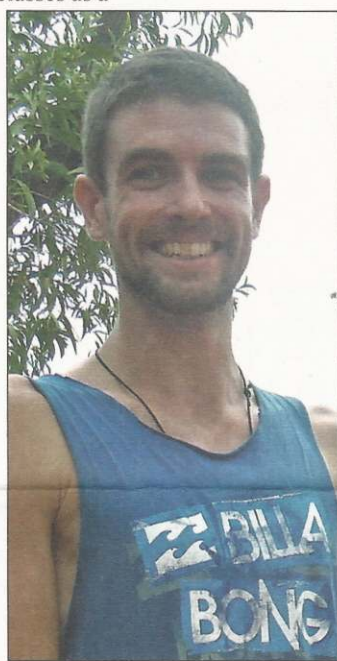
For Premi, (18 years old, student of Future School) spirituality is something which is above her that she connects to when she calms her mind, it is an external force that gives her a solution and another way of looking at things. For her, playing the Veena and dancing are what bring a spiritual component to her life.

According to Elke, (working in Future School) it is very clear that being spiritual is not the ability to extensively quote The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. For her, the message they convey becomes a part of her life and becomes integrated in the way she relates to other people and to nature. She does not relate it to meditating, but to growing as a person towards becoming a better being. She believes that there is a purpose in life beyond just being born and dying, and also that you can come back in a different life to learn what you did not in one lifetime. On a practical level, even small things such as how she talks and tries not to be hurtful, how she does not crush a bug because she recognises that this being has its own reason to live, are part of her spiritual touch.

Another side of spirituality was brought forth by Samai (30 years old, co founder of Kallialay Surf School and INDI Surfboards) and Suhasini (24 years old, co-founder of Esendi Swimwear) who both associate spirituality with something personal that comes



Emanuele (left), Inge (the author) and Elke at Future School



Virya



Shrishti

through work and doing things you love. Samai explains that on a daily basis spirituality plays a role in doing the best you can, and striving to do better every day. It doesn't mean only reading The Mother or Sri Aurobindo. There are plenty of other people that can help you, and spirituality is not a religion, so their work should not be taken that way.

Suhasini explains that although for every individual it's different and hard to define, for her spirituality is related to Love. If you love what you do and you can find yourself in it, that's spirituality, and that's where she is at this stage in her life. She shares that she feels lucky that she can do what she loves, and that this dedication and joy is a form of spirituality. It is where nothing stops you and you find ways to reach your goals. She stresses that many adults expect youngsters to look at spirituality the way they do, and they do not realize that it's a journey that is different for everyone.

Virya (28 years old, working in Green Care/AVHoops) defines spirituality as the essence of human life. He explains that all religions have the same spiritual aspect, a mystical, real, and pure essence. He says that because division and differences between religions have been created over time, the purity of spirituality did not yet succeed in uniting us.

It became clear that everyone I talk to believes that spirituality is something personal that cannot be defined or identified by anyone but yourself. Each one mentioned that the meaning of spirituality will differ from person to person, and that the most important factor is the application of spirituality to daily life, which has little to do with just reading The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. The latter is referred to as a help or a guide that can be sought out in times of need.

Can one teach spirituality?

Next, I probed my respondents about what they think the form and role of education should be in introducing spirituality and the vision of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Virya clarifies that spirituality is something you cannot push on a child, because the curiosity has to blossom from within the individual, and any form of teaching young minds would lead to a form of conditioning. He says,



Daniela

"It should present subtle and always present but not be force-fed" and adds that, in this respect, his time in Kindergarten, Transition and Future Schools was perfect. He adds that Awareness Through the Body was an effective class, where he learned to understand the philosophy of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo because it was integrated directly into his daily life in a soft and practical way.

Daniela (27 years old, working in Visitors' Centre) says that that the works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother should be read by everyone only when they are ready for it. Dasha and Suhasini both feel that Auroville schools should offer the option of learning things by themselves. Dasha feels that living here is not always enough to have an in-depth knowledge of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo, hence the option of a class should exist.

Suhasini says the Auroville philosophy classes offered in Future School provide such an introduction, but she is aware that not everyone of high school age would be interested. She doesn't feel she has missed out on anything as, being born and growing up here, she feels she was surrounded by the ideal of Auroville. After a certain age, and especially because she decided to stay in Auroville, these questions came up at the right time, and she was able to satisfy her curiosity at her own pace. Mohini agrees that the Auroville philosophy class allowed students to explore a very meaningful subject on their own. Premi says that when she sees a picture of The Mother she reads her quotes, but she doesn't miss a class in school that is dedicated to her teachings because there are books in the library, and spirituality cannot be taught.

Noé, however, says that when he reads the weekly News and Notes extract on the back of the cover page he realises that he would have liked to attend a class about Auroville, and The Mother and Sri Aurobindo, because there are so many things that he doesn't know. He emphasizes that such a class doesn't have to be in school, but that it should be aimed at young people who are interested, and be done in an inviting atmosphere, where nothing is forced on you.

Manjula adds that it is very important that the person guiding such a class is not too

opinionated and directive. Elke believes it would not be popular if The Mother or Sri Aurobindo's work were introduced in a class. She says that when it is integrated in daily life it becomes more relevant for students, for example by applying it to issues that concern a particular generation, such as family, relationships, or work. She says the classes in Savitri Bhavan are not accessible, and do not fit the mindset of young people. She feels that Auroville has to evolve in a certain way that goes beyond the vision of The Mother. It has its own dynamic and a lot of things are happening here that are a part of the process of evolution, and we cannot teach that in a conventional way. She mentions that there can be space for more introductions to spirituality, that Auroville Philosophy classes are a very good option, but it could have more emphasis and priority, and especially if there is an emphasis on academics it's always good to balance this.

Emanuele says he only took up the path of spirituality because it was a choice he consciously made. He shares that some classmates had a blockage which prevented them from being interested in spirituality because of repeatedly being faced with something they were not ready for. He also adds that he likes the way it is currently done.

Having heard many stories on how spirituality unfolds, I am moved and humbled by the responses. Perhaps young Aurovilians have not had a "sustained education in aspects of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's vision" but everyone is spiritual in their own way, and nobody points fingers and says that our education has not taught us about the vision. On the contrary, the feeling is that spirituality and the work of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo cannot be taught, but are instead taken up by each and every one at their own pace. School can offer guidance, rather than teaching. With this in mind, I asked my respondents how they got in touch with their spiritual side, and if they had some suggestions as to how this can be encouraged for future generations.

Getting in touch with one's spiritual side

Virya stresses that the role of the parents in a child's rounded education should not be overlooked, because they play a significant role in being able to raise curiosity about Auroville, and The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. However, he points out that in the case of Auroville children, it is often the parents' choice to live in Auroville and follow this way of life, not the child's, so it should rightfully be the child's decision if they wish to learn about The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Everyone needs their own time to plunge into spirituality, whether it is at 5 years of age or at 35, or even not at all. In his experience, the three schools he attended have always been in touch with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's concepts on education. "What more can one ask for?" he asks.

Samai envisions that the way to get through to children is by explaining what Auroville is about, and that the decision to pursue it further will be theirs. He explains that the aim of Auroville should be described in an interesting way, and he says that he would have liked to learn about The Mother's vision in a non-religious way. Mohini, who is someone who loves to work with children, points out that for the younger age group, a programme where spirituality and works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo can be integrated should include games and fun.

She agrees with Virya's and Dasha's opinion on classes like Awareness Through the Body and says that they can be very helpful and effective, especially for young children.

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School activities, outings and seminars would also help in integrating different aspects of our community into the education of Auroville children. She has read some of Sri Aurobindo's work, and agrees with Virya on the role of parents. She recalls that it was by talking to people who guided her, and especially her father, that she was able to grasp the meaning of spirituality in Sri Aurobindo's vision.

Mohini's interest in the works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo came much later, after having left Auroville. This helped her to appreciate The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. She mentions that, while living here, she constantly heard people speaking about it or using arguments based on what The Mother and Sri Aurobindo said, so she developed an aversion. For the same reason Daniela calls it an 'allergy', and explains that she was only able to appreciate the work when she chose to do it on her own. Manjula had a similar reaction. Hearing constantly around her, "The Mother said this, and Sri Aurobindo said that" made her not want to get in touch with the work, and it took her a while to begin the exploration by herself. Mohini explains that there are certain things that are done individually that can result in an interest in spirituality. She gives the example of attending bonfires where you feel connected to Auroville, and going to the Matrimandir to visit the gardens, or going into the chamber. She says: "Most of the people in my generation feel the same. We do talk about spirituality in school but then it also comes from the older generation because it is very present everywhere."

Emanuele expressed that having someone to talk to or a chance to explore it through Awareness Through the Body can be useful. If someone feels embarrassed about their inability to describe to someone The Mother's vision or what spirituality means, then that person should have made the effort to educate themselves. Elke says if you are interested in a topic then you make sure you get exposed to it. But Emanuele points out that if you are spiritual, you don't need to know anything. You can have a conversation about spirituality with someone who has never read The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and you will still have common things to talk about. Manjula reveals she has had the most astonishing conversations about spirituality with people that may not look like the classical image of spiritual people. She suggests that an

option for young people to get in touch with the work of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo would be some collective interactive sessions guided by senior Aurovilians, like they do in Last School. Shrishti agrees, and shares that one way to spark curiosity about spirituality, its meaning and its presence in our daily life could be through such interactive sessions that inspire questions and make us revisit our reasons for choosing to be in Auroville. She explains that what worked for her in Last School, having arrived in Auroville at the age of 14, was not having anything preached to her, but instead participating in discussions and open sessions about Auroville, the world, and life in general, and to explore The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's work from that angle.

Finally, Emanuele summarises it beautifully: "If you take all the parts of my life in Auroville and you dissect them, in the end there is something left that can't be named, and that's the reason why we are here. It's something that calls to you."

Responsible for own education

As can be seen by the responses, young Aurovilians are open to the idea of having classes about The Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and in fact do attend them when they feel the time is right. It is very clear that nobody feels that their education in Auroville has insufficiently prepared them when it comes to being able to explain the essence of Auroville and the vision of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. In that respect, we are all responsible for our own education, and because we have tools such as Awareness Through the Body, the books in our libraries, the platform in schools and in courses, and the people to guide us such as our parents and our teachers, not using them is our own choice. It is not the role of education to teach us about the vision of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo, because the essential truth of their vision is transmitted in invisible and intangible ways, and will only ever be felt by those who are open and ready for it. At the end of the day, words will always fall short because spirituality transcends those boundaries. One thing I've learned is that when I ask the question 'What is the meaning of spirituality to you?' I feel rather than hear the answers at the level of my heart. It goes far beyond words, and in that respect each of us radiates that feeling. The rest... It's all semantics.

Inge

Responses from Future School students to the question how they define spirituality

Besides the interviews, 54 students of Future School aged 14 to 18 filled in a questionnaire, asking them how they would define spirituality, whether they think schools should be the channel that teaches the work of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo, whether they would like to learn about the history of Auroville and The Mother and Sri Aurobindo at school, and how they would like to be introduced to the work of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Additional questions asked whether they considered themselves spiritual, what inspires them about Auroville, and whether they feel that their generation is somewhat lacking a spiritual component.

The results showed that 33% would like to learn more about the history of Auroville and The Mother and Sri Aurobindo at school while 29% answered that they would not. 33% answered that the school should be the channel for such an introduction, while 37% said that the school should not be the channel. 42% of students think that the work of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo should not be forced on them, that the introduction to this work is personal and should therefore not be mandatory.

Quotes

How would you define spirituality?

"Spirituality is enjoying the search for the Divine. Spirituality does not involve blindly taking on a belief system, it is finding your own answer and trying to live by it."

"Spirituality is the awareness of more than just our physical body, that there is more to life than what we know. Spirituality is the study within ourself, it cannot be taught, it has to be learned from within. Being spiritual is not the way you

act but the way you think, which will of course affect the way we act."

Do you think that schools should be the channel that teaches the work of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo? If yes why, if not why not?

"I do not think that these books should be forced on people. In our individual searches for spirituality we may find these books enlightening but it should be our own choice to read them. Insisting students study Sri Aurobindo would be no different from Bible classes in Christian academies, or forcing people to read Karl Marx in an attempt to promote communism. These books are available across Auroville and when we reach a point, we can always decide to read them."

"Auroville puts too much effort into trying to spread the words of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and should rather focus on trying to individually live by them."

"I don't think we should be forced into it but I do think it is the best channel because we can discuss it with people of our generation and not by someone who wants us to agree with him/her."

Would you like to learn more about the history of Auroville, and The Mother and Sri Aurobindo at school?

"I want to learn it but I don't feel like chasing their work, the parts I need come when needed."

"Yes! I want to know more in a fun and interactive way. I want to know what The Mother and Sri Aurobindo said about historical, future events and Auroville; all the fun stuff. The deep spiritual writing may be a bit too much for youth to digest just yet, and Savitri Bhavan is not for us."

AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL

AUM meets AVI at Woodstock

We are stardust

We are golden

And we've got to get ourselves

Back to the garden.

(Lyrics from
"Woodstock" by
Joni Mitchell)

During the last meeting of Auroville International (AVI) in Spain, our host, Alfonso, requested that the next meeting be held in the US "while Obama was still President" and the destination be Woodstock. His wish was fulfilled this August. The gathering ended up combining both an All USA Meeting (over 60 people from the US) and Auroville International with representatives from the US, Canada, France, UK, Germany, Holland and Spain in attendance.

The AVI members, who came early for their Board meeting, were housed with various neighbours near Matagiri, the Sri Aurobindo Center which, like Auroville, was founded in 1968.

When these meetings are held, the organizers often try to make a presentation about Auroville to the general public and we were fortunate that Frederick, one of the first Aurovilians, was visiting the East Coast and that Nadaka had been giving concerts in Quebec City and Montreal. Both were able to join another early pioneer, Savitra, at the Woodstock Community Center. Their talks, along with the screening of the new Acres for Auroville video produced by Rakkhal, gave the gathering a good sense of the history and trajectory of Auroville.

The first night of the conference opened with an introduction by Julian Lines who noted that the original '69 Woodstock Festival began on August 15th, Sri Aurobindo's birthday. While reading Festival promoter Michael Lang's "The

Road to Woodstock" he had uncovered the fact that the papers creating Woodstock Ventures, the legal entity behind the whole event, were signed on February 28th, another date which, he said with a smile, "was not a mere coincidence"...

The evening included local singers Amy Fradon and Leslie Ritter singing songs from the original '69 Festival, including the Dylan/Band classic "I Shall Be Released", while Woodstock photographer Elliott Landy showed his rare photos of the Band from the "Big Pink" era. Then Auroville expats Amando and Dhani Muniz rocked out the evening with hits from the era,

with some local friends assisting on vocals and drums.

The keynote speaker for the conference was Savitra (Alan Sasha Lithman) who has published a number of books and moderates the "Occupy Love" site on Facebook. He received a standing ovation for his talk, which explored the evolution of Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's yoga since their passing. In light of the unprecedented Evolutionary Force of Change shaking the very foundations of human consciousness and civilization, over-stressing ecosystems and nervous systems, challenging the very sustainability of our planet and our species, how, he asked, has

the Integral Yoga Community and Auroville evolved to meet it? And if the Mother and Sri Aurobindo were here now, what would they say to us?

Other outstanding Auroville pioneers who presented included Martha Orton and Andrea van de Loo. Martha had written her thesis on "Oneness" based on Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. Andrea spoke about the honesty and effort needed to climb out of addiction into a sober life. It was noted during the workshop that there are many forms of addiction besides alcohol, including power, speed and conspicuous consumption, drugs, gambling and sex, and that all had to be left behind in an evolutionary yoga.

Mandakini made a compelling presentation about the land and the work of Acres for Auroville and the recently acquired piece close to the Matrimandir. She also chronicled the life of Dr. Judith Tyberg who was given the name Jyotipriya by Sri Aurobindo. Her work in Los Angeles had a profound effect on the US, and the Sri Aurobindo Center there continues her legacy.

There were moments of bliss when Wendy was teaching an outdoor yoga class while Nadaka and Gordon were teaching a South Indian tune to Klaus, and moments of utter frustration when the

conference centre internet and phone system crashed exactly when a live video dialogue with Auroville was scheduled. The session finally took place on Sunday morning at Matagiri, where a final group photo was taken on the library steps. Having Nadaka present to sing and chant for the Woodstock community and those attending the AUM provided an invocation and closing blessing for the days we had been together.

The entire programme is listed on the www.collaboration.org website along with links to a Facebook page with links, photos and the latest information on AUM 2016.

Julian Lines



The AVI - AUM Meeting participants at Woodstock

India and Auroville

During the recent visit of the Governing Board, its Chairman, Dr. Karan Singh inaugurated the Educational and Research Network of Auroville, which connects us to the National Knowledge Network of India [see *Auroville Today* No.313-14].

It seemed like a big moment. And perhaps it was, because it will certainly increase our ability to interact with academics and researchers across India and beyond. But it would be wrong to see this as the moment when Auroville joined the larger world. After all, Aurovilians have been active in the larger India for the past 35 years or more.

There are many aspects of this outreach. Our environmentalists travel the country to run workshops on tree-planting and organic farming or to create eco-parks like Adyar Poonga in Chennai; our architects design homes and office buildings; our Renewable Energy specialists erect solar systems even in the remotest parts; Auroville artists exhibit in many major cities; the products and services of our commercial units are sold or availed of all over India; and Auroville's village and educational outreach activities continue to extend into and beyond the bioregion.

And, of course, there is also the 'inreach': many people visit Auroville to concentrate in the Matrimandir and to attend workshops and trainings in everything from mud architecture to WATSU.

But there are still many people who do not know of Auroville, or who view it as a slightly exotic, self-contained bubble, with little or no relevance to the larger India.

Why is this? Partly, no doubt, the 'bubble' perception is because Auroville continues to be confused with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where the focus is much more inward-looking. Many people are unaware of Mother's clarifications regarding the distinction between the two.



Dr. Karan Singh inaugurates the Educational and Research Network of Auroville connection to the National Knowledge Network of India

In 1965, for example, three years before Auroville's inauguration, she was asked if the projected experiment was meant "more for the outside" world than the Ashram. She replied, "Oh, yes! It's a town, so it is the whole contact with the outside".

She gave a fuller explanation of the relationship between the two institutions when, in 1969, she wrote a note for a UNESCO committee.

"The task of giving a concrete form to Sri Aurobindo's vision was entrusted to The

Mother. The creation of a new world, a new humanity, a new society expressing and embodying the new consciousness is the work she has undertaken. By the very nature of things, it is a collective ideal that calls for a collective effort so that it may be realized in terms of an integral human perfection. The Ashram founded and built by The Mother was the first step towards the accomplishment of this goal. The project of Auroville is the next step, more exterior, which seeks to widen the base of this attempt to establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind."

One reason for misconceptions about Auroville is the difficulty of explaining it: it doesn't fit into any convenient box. Another reason, no doubt, is Aurovilians' aversion to propaganda, to the 'selling' of Auroville, which is based, among other things, on Sri Aurobindo's forthright rejection of the practice. "I don't believe in advertisement except for books etc.," he wrote in 1934, "and in propaganda except for politics and patent medicines. But for serious work it is a poison. It means either a stunt or a boom – and stunts and booms exhaust the thing they carry on their crest and leave it lifeless and broken high and dry on the shores of nowhere – or it means a movement. A movement in the case of a work like mine means the founding of a school or a sect or some other damned nonsense."

Yet another reason, perhaps, is that there is unclarity among ourselves about how we should engage with the wider India.

The recent history of our relationship with the Government of India is an interesting case study here. When the Auroville Foundation Act was first mooted, many concerns were expressed in the community about the possible implications of fuller government involvement in Auroville (government-appointed administrators had been resident in Auroville since the

passing of the Auroville Emergency Powers Act in 1980, but they had been using a light hand). The concerns were either that the Aurovilians would lose control over their 'own' project; or that the 'purity' of the ideal would somehow be affected (Mother's warning that "To hand over the management of Auroville to any country or any group however big it may be is an absolute impossibility", was much quoted at the time).

The fact that the Foundation Act was largely drafted by Kireet Joshi, a great supporter of Auroville, and set up to protect the ideals contained in the Auroville Charter was ignored or, perhaps, disbelieved. And the idea, mooted by a senior Aurovillian at the time, that government involvement could be a two-way street – that this could also be a channel for Auroville's ideals to reach a wider world – was rather peremptorily dismissed.

Today, the situation is not so clear-cut. On the one hand, we have had uneasy relationships with some of our Secretaries to the Governing Board, and some Aurovilians find the Foundation's procedures too bureaucratic (although, in truth, we have displayed a remarkable talent for this ourselves). On the other hand, it can be argued that Auroville's status as an autonomous body set up by the Government of India and accountable, ultimately, to the Indian Parliament, gives it a great deal of protection from those who would like to co-opt it for their own ends, as well as facilitating access to government funding.

Perhaps, at root, Auroville's somewhat ambivalent relationship with the larger India is a reflection of the fact that we are simultaneously attracted by some of its aspects – like the sense of a young world on the move, throwing off old constraints and exploring new pathways – and fearful that, without a sufficiently strong inner compass or 'anchor', Auroville may be taken over by its more destructive aspects.

At an individual level, the failure to wholeheartedly embrace the world as a forum for transformational yoga, which is implied in Mother's UNESCO note, may also reflect how far we still cling to traditional ideas that separate, and oppose, the "world" and "spirituality".

All of which suggests that we still have a lot to learn. And unlearn.

Alan

Auroville's relationship to India

Our long-term Aurovilians involved in village development and commerce talk about Auroville and India.

How would you describe Auroville's relationship to India?

Kumbha: We are a bubble, absolutely. There's a lot going on in Auroville, and there's a lot going on in India outside. Link-ups between the two are increasingly happening, but not so much. From a business point of view, the opportunity offered by India is huge, but I don't think we are close to capitalising on all the opportunities out there.

Why? It's partly because of our 'style' which is a bit laid-back, and partly because some people feel we did not come here to do business. These are two quite large reasons why I think we're not embracing India more.

Alain: It's a matter of perspective. Some Aurovilians are more inward-looking, focussed upon what is happening here, others are naturally more oriented to the world outside.

There's a lot of madness out there, and I can understand Auroville does not want to connect to the aspect of India that is unsustainable. However, what is certain is that India has accepted Auroville, and Auroville should contribute to India as much as it can. And I think that to quite an extent it does.

Abha: Many Aurovilians are aware that we have to be connected, that we are connected, with India. But some Aurovilians seem unaware that there is a reason for Auroville being in India. This, I feel, is very undesirable.

Kumbha: This kind of attitude makes me uncomfortable. We have to accept India as it is, that we are in India, and work with that.

Abha: We need to have relations with India but, on the other hand, Auroville needs to be true to itself, and we Aurovilians need to be true to ourselves. Sometimes I fear that we tend to lose this touch with our *raison d'être*. We need to discover it and live by what we are supposed to be doing to become true Aurovilians.

How is Auroville viewed in India?

Alain: It seems that some people have an image of Auroville as a gated community where people of a supposedly high consciousness live together who don't want anything to do with the rest of India. Of course, it is not like that and must not be like that.

Other people are very positive. I remember that when the top person from the Comptroller and Auditor-General's office of India visited Auroville he was obviously very touched. "Such a God's work!" I remember him saying. He showed that in India there is the capability to understand Auroville at a deeper level: that its fundamental link to the world, its purpose, is to work on evolution and, as Mother put it, to be the solution to the problems of India and humanity. This is why our relationship with India is very deep, very subtle, and it is one of the reasons why Auroville has been sustained.

Kumbha: I run into different attitudes to Auroville. Some people know

nothing and only think of Pondicherry and Auroville as holiday destinations. Others think Auroville is an ashram because they totally confuse us with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Of late, though, some of the people I know who have come here have been really impressed. They feel we are quite closed to visitors, and our no-cash system frustrates them, but they really appreciate the quality we are delivering in pretty much everything we do.

Abha: Looking at it from the local point of view, from that of the girls who work with us at Shradhanjali, Auroville has a double-sided image. On the one hand, they are dazzled by the Auroville

they experience when, for example, we go to Matrimandir or on tours of the community. They are dazzled by the concept, by what has brought so many Aurovilians here and also the fact that Aurovilians can be utterly charming.

However, there is another side to it. Many of these girls have worked here for many years, decades in fact, eight hours a day, but they feel they are invisible, disregarded, by the larger Auroville; that they have no say in anything that goes on here. It comes out in small examples. When Sydo passed away, Auroville had a gathering for him at the Banyan tree. Many of the girls knew him and wanted to go, but they could

not because they were not Aurovilians. Or take our beautiful new health centre. It is only for Aurovilians, Auroville guests and visitors. An Auroville worker cannot go there. They ask, Why not? Then immediately they get the feeling that we are an exclusive club. It bothers me deeply. So much depends upon the goodwill of these people and we should be more conscious of how we are with them.

As to how Auroville is viewed by the people we supply with our products, they are extremely positive. However, they also have extremely high expectations of Aurovilians, so whenever an Aurovillian does not measure up to the ideal in their dealings or in the products supplied, they are disappointed.

Kathy: I think most of the people that initially contact us at Eco-Femme have no idea about Auroville. I don't think this project would have been possible without Auroville, so I feel very passionate about explaining that it is born out of the soil of Auroville.

At the same time, I feel it's a delicate one because people do not necessarily come to us to get the story of why we are doing what we are doing; they just want the product or the service.

Of course, if we have a longer relationship I always encourage people to visit.

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From left: Kumbha, Kathy, Abha and Alain

continued from page 4

Many do, and you can feel their eyes opening wide: they are struck by the beauty and they often sense that something bigger is going on here. Then we can explain that what we are doing in menstrual health and hygiene is an integral approach that comes from the spirit of Auroville.

How would you describe Auroville's relationship with the Central and State Governments?

Alain: I think that the passing of the Auroville Foundation Act in 1988 by the Indian Parliament surely had a Force behind it; a friendly high bureaucrat who did help a lot even said it was a miracle. But then there is the question of what we make of it. When it comes to our relationship with the Central Government, I think in a way we benefit from benign neglect. In that sense, I think we are far freer than we think we are to make experiments. The other reason why we are free is I feel that in India, if you are really sincere, no government will block your way.

As for our relationship with the Tamil Nadu Government, I think the planned Sustainable Livelihood Institute marks a new possibility, even though it is still early days. One very important aspect is to bring people of the State administration to Auroville to study what is being done here in the field of sustainability and understand that things can be different. I think there is some general understanding at the top that things have to change, and that Auroville can play a role in this.

In terms of your contacts with people outside, do you feel you are representatives, ambassadors, of Auroville?

Abha: For me, it is totally like that. I am aware that each one of us, each Auroville product, service, represents Auroville, and that Auroville is continually being judged on the quality of these things.

Kumbha: I am always an ambassador for Auroville when someone shows an interest, and I hope I give the best possible impression. But I

never push it if it doesn't come up. One reason is that it can lead to a very long discussion: it is not easy to explain this place.

When you talk about Auroville, do you feel you need to be protective of it, to project a positive image?

Abha: I always say we are not perfect, we're just walking the path, because people will come upon the contradictions for sure. Generally, people are wonderfully impressed on their first visit to this place. On the second visit already, they begin to see the shadows.

Alain: At a certain level we do not live up to the ideal, but at the same time I know that even the present Auroville has an impact on people. When I told my father-in-law, who had been quite a big industrialist, that the fixed assets in Auroville do not belong to anyone, he was impressed. "That makes a difference", he said.

Kathy: Some people seem to think some super-body is coordinating Auroville, but then

they do not understand why so many things are difficult to reconcile or contradictory. Explaining how decentralised Auroville is helps people make sense of it, even if the contradictions remain.

Why is Auroville not better known in India?

Alain: It is partly because it is so difficult to explain this place. I was able to speak much more about Auroville years ago. Today, I don't know what to say because, ultimately, what is Auroville? It is a mystery. What is really being done here?

J.R.D. Tata once said it was a wonder that a grandmother sat in a room in Pondicherry and called the young people of the world, and they came.

Kireet said the fact that Auroville has survived is a miracle. How was it that a government, who saw people fighting during those difficult years, did not go for the simple solution and send everyone home? It is a miracle, a string of miracles.

From an interview by Alan

A gateway for the media

Outreach Media plays a crucial role in how Auroville is communicated to the larger world. How does it function and what are the challenges it faces? Elaine and Fabienne, the two members of the present team, explain.

How would you describe the role of Outreach Media?

Elaine: I see it primarily as a gateway for visiting researchers and media. We help them understand the aspect of Auroville that they want to cover through putting them in contact with the appropriate people. With filmmakers, we also send them material beforehand and look after logistics, like arranging to have them picked up at the airport. And it is a requirement from the Auroville Foundation that we accompany them the whole time they are filming in Auroville. This can be very tiring but the filmmakers appreciate us being around because we make their time here more productive.

Fabienne: Foreign film crews have to get permission from the Indian embassy in their country and from the Auroville Foundation to film here. It's a long process in which Outreach Media plays a key role as we have to decide if the project fits with the Auroville purpose.

What does this mean?

Elaine: It has to be about Auroville. It cannot be a feature film or commercial that uses Auroville just as the background: like shooting a car commercial in front of Matrimandir.

Fabienne: We are selective. We study what the filmmaker wants to do, and we reject it if it is very shallow or if there is very little research involved. Actually, we always recommend that the filmmaker comes in advance to do research, but this rarely happens.

Elaine: If we are not familiar with the foreign film company or TV station we will ask Aurovilians from that country for more information. Recently we had a film crew from a Colombian TV station wanting to make a programme about Auroville. We asked a Colombian Aurovillian about them, she recommended the station and it turned out to be a very good experience.

Are you getting more and more requests to film or write about Auroville now?

Fabienne: Yes. Now there is a race to film Auroville for the 50th anniversary: we have three separate film crews working on this topic. Somebody from a French TV crew came here for three days. He got incredibly caught up with it, read everything he could, watched every movie on Auroville made in French, and then he sent us the most exhaustive synopsis for a film on Auroville we have ever received. It was very impressive. And we didn't even meet him!

What are the kinds of things in Auroville that interest the media?

Fabienne: We get many requests from TV travel channels and magazines in India, and there is also a little interest in education, but the foreign media are interested in sustainability and economy. Both of these topics are difficult grasp



Elaine (left) and Fabienne

because there is a big gap between the ideal and the reality.

We claim, for example, that we tend to have a cashless economy inside Auroville but practically we know it is not true. Recently we had an embarrassing experience with a magazine focussing on different ways of eating and well-being in Auroville. They wanted to eat in an Auroville restaurant, but I explained they did not take cash there so it would not be possible for visitors to dine at the restaurant. But when the manager heard who the journalist was, he suddenly said that they did take cash! It was very confusing.

Then again, a filmmaker from France came to learn about sustainability. He spent half an hour at Gaia's Garden and was fascinated by how Kireet had transformed a barren piece of land. But the next stop was Matrimandir where she saw huge lawns being watered. 'Hey, guys,' she said, 'is there something wrong here?'

So the Aurovilians themselves contribute to giving a confused picture about this place?

Fabienne: Absolutely. You could make Auroville look like a farce when you see all the inconsistencies that are here.

How do you explain contradictory situations like these to the media?

Fabienne: We say we have all the problems of the world here, all the good and all the bad, and we have to deal with it because this is a laboratory. They respond to this honesty, and they do feel something different here. These people are very sharp, very bright. The other day, one of them asked us, 'When you grow bigger, do you think you will become very ordinary like any other place?' And I said, 'Yes, The Mother herself said it might be like this. Unless we find the new consciousness, we should forget about being different.'

If you are not touched inwardly, it is difficult to understand this place. So when we try to explain Auroville to them, we keep it simple.

There are so many layers in Auroville that need to be put into perspective if Auroville is to be understood properly. This requires also some integrity, honesty, from the journalist.

Do you feel you need to be protective of Auroville when you accompany these media teams? Do you give them any kind of guidance or direction?

Fabienne: Once we have identified the Aurovilians who are willing to be interviewed, we step back. We let the Aurovilians say whatever they want. But we choose the interviewees carefully because they should be people who are 'carrying' something of Auroville. It is easier with education but for business, for example, it is rare to hear somebody explaining why business in Auroville is different.

Do journalists and filmmakers send you a copy of their work before they go public with it?

Elaine: We ask them to send articles and final cuts so we can correct any inaccuracies, but they very rarely do this. And we cannot enforce this.

Fabienne: One consequence is that every six months there are one or two shockingly inaccurate pieces about Auroville.

Elaine: One young freelance journalist came recently, and an Aurovillian let her stay in her home for some weeks. We and other Aurovilians spent time with her. But then she wrote an article about Auroville for the online magazine *Slate* in which we, as well as the Auroville Foundation, were misquoted. Everybody was upset. We wrote to her and said you have misrepresented us and Auroville, and she said she was very sorry. We wrote to the magazine to point out the inaccuracies, but they only changed two photo captions.

In other words, once you have given permission, you cannot control what people film or write about Auroville.

Fabienne: We can't and we don't want to, that is not our role. But we are aware that there

are many levels in Auroville and it is very easy for a journalist with malicious intentions to stay on the surface and misrepresent us.

Elaine: We also deal with the issue of people misusing Auroville's name. For example, a jewellery store in Pondicherry was using the Matrimandir as their logo.

Fabienne: Then there are the tour operators. One was claiming that Mango Hill is an Auroville guest house, and that if you stayed there you would have open access to everything in the community – as if Auroville is a theme park.

Elaine: And a yoga training workshop promised participants they could go daily for a concentration in the Matrimandir as part of their programme.

When you take up these issues with them, how do they respond?

Elaine: If you approach it in a non-confrontational way, most people respond positively. If it requires a stronger message, Vinodhini takes care of it on a more legal basis.

Many people in India still seem ignorant of the existence of this place, in spite of all the films and interviews and our website, and in spite of the fact that many Aurovilians are interacting with India through their work and activities. How do you explain this?

Fabienne: One of the reasons is we badly miss a well-educated Tamil speaker on our team. We have very good contacts with all the English language newspapers; they want to know more and more about Auroville. We also have a contact with the editor of one of the biggest Tamil dailies who wants to do a weekly article on Auroville. But no Aurovillian is coming forward to write articles for him or to cultivate a relationship with other Tamil newspapers.

We also need somebody on the team who can write good press releases in English and Tamil. However, we do have two newcomers working with us. One of them will assist us in filling up the gaps in our image bank. We were funded by the Foundation for World Education to do this, and now we have catalogued all the Auroville photographs and films, working together with Matrimandir and Auroville Archives.

All of this sounds like a lot of work for a team of just two people.

Fabienne: Outreach Media is understaffed and we don't have the appropriate office space: we need to expand or move to a new building. One reason is that we are not getting any budget from the Budget Coordination Committee: we get only two maintenances. Where are we going to find an educated Tamil speaking person who doesn't need a maintenance?

We have been given the very important responsibility to supervise Auroville's relationship with the media, yet we had to fight tooth and nail to get those two maintenances. Auroville Radio is another important communication channel that gets no financial assistance from Auroville. What does this tell you about our priorities as a community?

From an interview by Alan

Probiotics in Ceramics and Natural Soaps

Natural soap 'muffins', bars and laundry powder detergent are stacked on the demonstration table of the Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC). A notice board explains what 'natural' is all about: they are free of palm oil, additives, parabens, phthalates, phosphates, preservatives, sodium laureth sulphate, animal products, and synthetic colours. For Aurovilians without a chemistry degree, a three-page explanatory leaflet gives detailed information. Margarita summarizes: "They are environment-friendly, free from genetic engineering and, because of their probiotics content, have regenerative effects wherever they are applied." To those showing more interest she explains how palm oil plantations destroy the tropical forests in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia and Brazil and that India is following suit by indiscriminately cultivating soap nut plantations across the country, destroying forests. "Soap nut is the new rage in Europe, but it isn't part of our products. We forgot to include that on the notice board."

Margarita, jointly with Guidelma, runs MG EcoDuties, an activity under Auroville Activities Trusts. MG EcoDuties researches and manufactures



The demonstration table at the PTDC

All Natural, Biodegradable, Non-Toxic Cleaning and Well Being products that are 100% eco-friendly ("this means truly 100%, and not just a bit," says Margarita), economical ("especially for Aurovilians who live on a low maintenance"); do not add to the landfills ("as people can fill-up their own bags and bottles"); are not damaging washing machines, fabrics and pipelines or are clogging septic tanks; and are beneficial for human health. The unit started in 2011 with liquid household products such as multi purpose cleaning fluids, grease busters and laundry cleaning enhancers, followed by fruits and vegetables wash, and hand and body liquid soaps, all containing probiotics. Now it has added hand and body solid soaps, dishwash solid loaves, compost and washing powder containing probiotics in two forms, liquid and ceramic powder.

"I am a chemical engineer by profession and have been working with probiotics for 17 years in 56 countries," says Margarita. "Nowadays, the big wave in Europe is using probiotics in cosmetics and household products. In Poland, I came to know about a product made with probiotic ceramic powder which, mixed with algae, is used in face-masks. I got inspired to develop our own probiotic ceramics."

Together with Guidelma

she set about researching probiotics ceramics. "If clay can be mixed with probiotics before it is fired, then the ultra-sonic benefits of the probiotics can indefinitely be incorporated into the ceramics. For ceramics have the unique ability to remove the pollution imprint from the memory of the water molecules. By removing the pollution memory from the purified water, the molecules revitalise it".

Their probiotic ceramics were tested by specialists from Missouri University in the USA who confirmed that the ceramics contained live probiotics.

"Then we started to produce probiotic ceramic powders and extruded rings." More testing followed, with similar positive results. The rings are used to energise - revitalise - and improve the quality of the drinking water ("just add them to your water bottle and/or water filter"), and the structured water is used in manufacturing. The ceramic powder is added to the soaps, washing powder and well-being products.

Asked for more details, Guidelma explains that "for making soaps and washing powder, coconut oil is saponified with our structured water. This saponified coconut oil is then mixed with baking soda, borax, probiotic ceramic powder and, for fragrance, certified essential oils. That's all". The natural products are beneficial for human health, she says, as all soaps and washing powders leave a residue on the skin or in the clothes. "Many of the commonly available soaps contain ingredients that are on the cosmetics red list. Some people are allergic to them and develop skin problems. But our products embrace your skin."

"Because of all their additives, ordinary washing powders are amongst the main pollutants of groundwater," explains Margarita. "Ours are beneficial. The probiotics in our products remain active even after having been washed off. They are good for your washing machine and water pipes as they prevent calcification, and good for your septic tank as they limit clogging, so that there is no need to desludge every two years because of the use of polluting products."

The Matrimandir laundry department, which washes the socks all visitors use in the Inner

Chamber, serves as the team's testing grounds. "We use our washing powder detergents in the pre- and main wash. You never have a smell".

For the time being, MG EcoDuties' products are only available at the PTDC. The reception of the new products ranges from 'mixed' to 'enthusiastic', with a few critical notes on the fragrance ("this stinks - do you have lavender?"), questions about if the soap bars turn soggy at the end ("it depends on the water quality, the harder the water, the longer the soap's lifetime") and about the soap's shelf life without preservatives ("6 months, probably up to a year, we are still testing."). Requests for well-being and cosmetic products including shampoos, shaving cream and aftershave, are coming in. "We can do it, but not in our present set-up, which is the kitchen of our apartment in Creativity," says Guidelma. "We'll need to expand."

Their thoughts in that direction are slowly developing. Requests from Auroville guesthouses, schools and restaurants are coming in but are still on hold. "We are not yet ready," says Margarita. "We'll have our hands full with research for the next few years and we are not business people." But the increased demand and the enthusiastic and



Handsoaps (top), ceramic rings and ceramic powders made by MG EcoDuties

positive feedback, says Guidelma, has reaffirmed their vision and mission to become a unit to support Auroville financially, and involve more Aurovilians. A capital injection and marketing strategy would be required to make this dream reality. "Indian society is changing a lot, and consumers go increasingly for natural products. We do have the responsibility to provide products that are natural and labeled with honesty and integrity. It would be good if more of these type of products could be provided by Auroville."

In conversation with Carel



Guidelma (left) and Margarita

COMMERCE

E-tailing Auroville

Auroville.com's website appears a tad conservative for an e-tailer (or e-commerce) unit. "Expect a lot of changes," says Stephan. "In a few months, it will be all different!"

Stephan, the on-line store's new executive, who took over from Suzanne (Lumière) in April, is taking major steps to change the e-tailer's concept and got together a large team of Aurovilians to do so. Abhi looks after website maintenance; Vera and Ayesha are in charge of customer care; Luise does marketing; Panneer courier services and general affairs; Ulli 'all the bank stuff'; and seven employees do the order processing, packaging and accounts.

So what's changing? "We are personalising our website: who we are and what we stand for," explains Luise. "We do not want to be a Flipkart or Amazon. We are part of Auroville and we see ourselves as one of Auroville's windows to the world. This means that we do not only sell Auroville products, but that we also give information on Auroville." The customer care team replies to questions about the opening times of the Matrimandir; gives information on mud-brick architecture; tells how to become a newcomer, where to find a guesthouse, or the background of Eco-Femme's product. "You ask, and they'll answer. And of course, they also provide all the product information requested and may even give a call after a product delivery to learn if the client is satisfied."

The website will interlink with other Auroville websites. "Some of



The Auroville.com team, from left: Stephan, Abhi, Luise, Ayesha and Vera

Auroville's commercial units have opened websites but the expected sales did not follow. We propose to those units to provide only information on their website and let the sales happen through Auroville.com," says Stephan. "Customers can go from our website to the unit's website to learn more about the unit and its products, and come back to us to place an order. We also plan to carry links to Auroville's informational newsletters such as Auroville Papers, The Auroville Earth Institute, Savitri Bhavan, Auroville Village Action and, of course, Auroville Today."

"Our customers do not distinguish between Auroville and Auroville.com, and neither do we," explains Luise. "We do not see ourselves as a purely com-

mercial undertaking. Auroville.com is not about pushing sales. We want to give more than the products: when a customer buys something from Auroville, something of Auroville's aims and ideals should be shipped along."

Part of those ideals is that Auroville.com does not spam. "We have a database of 14,000 email addresses and we respect our clients' privacy. People get our regular emails and can unsubscribe at will." That option, it appears, is rarely used. Compared to the industry average, unsubscribing is minimal while the opening rate of the emails is between 25% - 30%, considerably higher than the usual 10%.

"This is also a result of the email content," adds Luise. "We inform our

clients that we have new products, and at the same time how those products have been made. For example, with Upasana garments, we informed about the difficulties of the Varanasi weavers or of the Madurai cotton farmers. Sometimes we get feedback. 'You made my day, this was beautiful, thanks for sharing' - read one response to our emails. That really made my day as well!"

Having a popular website and doing mass-emailing is but one part of successful marketing. To know your customers is another. Luise, who holds a sociology degree from Germany, recently did a survey asking customers who they are, what they want, how they know about us, and what their connection to Auroville is. "We found that 50% of our customers know about Auroville through a personal relationship, either because they have family or friends here or because they've visited. Most European customers know Auroville personally; many customers from India have visited the Matrimandir or seen Auroville products. And then there are those who just find us by googling because they are looking for special products, such as sun dried spirulina or Maroma's products."

Auroville.com is also active on social media. It has a Facebook page

(aurovilledotcom), which Luise peppers daily with short stories about Auroville. "We're also on Pinterest, will be on Instagram soon, are still discussing joining Twitter and will probably start a blog. We are involving young Aurovilians and artists in advertisement spots, and we plan on doing short 15-second video clips on Auroville. It's a lot of fun," says Luise.

The change has already shown results. "The turnover has been rising by 15-20% compared to the previous year and will soon cross Rs 10 lakhs/month with sales worldwide. The larger team is justified and necessary to step up to the next level," says Stephan. "Today, Auroville.com carries the products of 42 Auroville units, over 2,500 in all. Soon, there will be many more."

Amongst the new products will be paintings, sculptures and ceramics by Auroville's artists. "We want to promote Auroville art. Our website will have pages on individual artists, with information on the person and a select offering of their works. This will be unique for Auroville, and in this way another aspect of Auroville will become better known," says Stephan.

Before deciding to add a new product to the website, Stephan inquires about how and where the product is made and what role the unit plays in the economy of Auroville. The product as well as the conditions under which it is made must be aligned with the ideals of Auroville. "Our website carries the slogan 'Made with love in Auroville'. That's the one thing that won't change."

In conversation with Carel

The fourth Auroville Film Festival

In October, the fourth Auroville Film festival took place. "The aim of the Auroville Film Festival," says the Festival brochure, "is to connect with people and cultures within and beyond Auroville and to further the aspiration of human unity by showcasing films that develop the theme of human unity."

This year, a record number of films were screened from Auroville and the local region as well as from around the world. But the Festival was more than just films. There was also music, food, panel discussions and, of course, colourful installations like Well Paper's papier-mâché camera and OK's DVD waterfall.

So how did this film festival compare with the previous ones? Sasi has been involved in the organization of every Auroville film festival so far. He feels that this year many interesting films were shown, and the food and music were definitely a success – "they create a festive atmosphere". However, he concedes that perhaps there were too many films. "In previous festivals, we showed some of the most interesting films twice, but this time we couldn't do this. Some people may have missed seeing them because the screenings were not always at a convenient time."

Tom was one of the organizers of this festival. One of the highpoints for him was a Skype link-up with a California director that enabled the audience to discuss a documentary by him: "This went really well". Another coup was getting the well-known French filmmaker Philippe Borrel to show his film and participate in a panel discussion. "We really want to build on this for the next festival, to get the directors or editors of big films to come here to show their films, answer questions from the audience and take part in panel discussions. Visiting professionals could also come and give a class on cinematography and sound. Bringing star names or big films will also encourage a bigger turnout."

The attendance this year was, indeed, rather poor for some of the films. Tom feels that one reason for this is that while many excellent documentaries were shown from all over the world, the issues they raised tended to be depressing. "Obviously these need to be discussed but it can be a little heavy for the audiences. So, in future, we need to temper these with something more uplifting in order to pull in bigger crowds."

"This time we were very underfunded. There were at least five or six films that we really wanted to screen but the distributor wanted quite a lot of money for them, and it was not within our budget." They did, however, manage to screen the well-known documentary, 'Girl Rising', which tells how girls in different countries successfully battle against cultural and social barriers, after convincing the distributor that the Auroville Film Festival is



Students film-making, from left: Londen, Gaia and Tenzin

non-commercial.

"And we are clear that we want to keep it that way," says Tom.

Underfunding may have been a factor in the variable quality of the films shown, but there is also another consideration. Sasi points out that quality has two aspects: the technical quality of the film and the content. "For both of those to match all the time is difficult, particularly for our Auroville and outreach students who are still learning film-making. It would be unfair of us to reject these films, particularly as we have a special category for them and we want to be inclusive: we do not reject any films made by our students because we want to acknowledge the effort that has gone into them."

In fact, for many people the films made by the Auroville and outreach students were one of the highlights of the Festival. Not only were they fun, they were also imaginative and, at times, deeply moving, like the film about the young girl whose friend died of cancer. And some, like the Kottakarai Cycle Race made by the Udhayam students, were also technically quite advanced (deservedly, this film won two prizes).

"We didn't have many student films this time," says Sasi, "but the ones that we had had markedly improved in their quality over the last festival."

One of the reasons for this is the film education classes Tom, Sasi and Claire are running in the Auroville and outreach schools. Tom confirms that many students are interested in joining these courses. However, one of the constraints on expanding them further is a lack of equipment. "We now have three iMacs for editing and better cameras, thanks to the generosity of people like those at the Foundation for World Education, but there are still huge gaps."

SAIER does contribute to film education, but the programme remains underfunded. Is this

because film education is still considered, by some people, as less important than academic subjects? "I have encountered this attitude," says Sasi, "particularly in relationship to our work in the outreach schools. I'm told that our efforts there are wasted because these kids are never going to be able to make movies."

"But this misses the point," says Tom. "Everybody studies science at school but that doesn't mean everybody will become a scientist. Besides, the skills we are trying to impart through film education are actually life skills. To make a film you have to be well organized, to use imagination and develop writing skills, and you have to learn technical skills like how to edit film and use a camera. To tell an engaging story in a way that the audience appreciates is a real skill, it is learning how to communicate effectively."

And there's another important aspect of film studies: through studying how to communicate through images, the students learn how to avoid being manipulated in a world where they are inundated daily with images trying to influence them. "This course allows them to read the imagery, to discriminate between what is true and not true," says Sasi.

So what do the young film-makers choose as their subject-matter? Sasi grimaces slightly. "I don't stipulate a particular story-

line, but invariably they want to make a horror film or a film with big fight scenes. I try to dissuade them from doing this as we don't want a horror film from the Auroville film Festival, and trying to create these kinds of films is not at all easy. I prefer them to make stories that are more meaningful, more to do with the Auroville ethos."

"In the end, though," says Tom, "it is their choice. And, actually, you can use themes like violence or horror to push the students to explore the technical aspects of making films. Arranging and editing a fight scene is quite a complicated thing to do. And for horror you have to know how to build suspense, so you could get them to study all Hitchcock's films to learn how to do that."

Do the outreach students differ from the Auroville students in their choice of content? "The Auroville kids are trying to understand themselves, where they are coming from and what they are doing here," says Tom. "You don't get that so much from the local school kids."

"The outreach students like to focus more on social subjects, like cleaning up the village," says Sasi. "They tend to be more socially-conscious, more moralistic, whereas the films made by Auroville kids tends to be more philosophical."

How do they see the future of film studies? Are they still dreaming of establishing an Auroville Film Academy? "Very much so," says Sasi. "We would like a place that has a large hall for watching films, an editing room and a studio where you can set up sets and lighting."

"Actually," says Tom, "Last School is developing in this direction. They already have a full-time film programme, a full-time film teacher, and they have almost all their own film equipment. It's a good beginning."

From an interview by Alan



Tom (left) and Sasi

NEW FILMS AND PUBLICATIONS

New film on Auroville

Auroville's Land Board has released a new film *Landing Auroville*. Created by Rakhal and the Auro-Image team, in cooperation with Auroville's land fundraisers, this 8-minute film is a stirring call for completing Auroville's body – its land. Over shots of the barren land that once was, *Landing Auroville* begins by asking "Who could imagine a poorer and more desolate land to create 'the City the Earth Needs'?" The film then traces the work of the "good-willed forerunners" who responded to The Mother's call. Fifty years later and the land transformed, this lush green space now hosts a growing city, the creative mix of nationalities and cultures, greater prosperity for villages, a magnetic "fresh wind of progress", the inspiring example of new generations "determined to carry the experiment forward" – with the Matrimandir at its heart and center.

Landing Auroville is a homage to the work, optimism, and success of Auroville so far.

And it holds a warning for the future! Urban spillover, speculation, and encroachment are serious ever-present threats to the City of Dawn's body. The film ends: "Auroville is a cradle for the future. To fulfill its role, it needs its physical body to be complete."

Landing Auroville can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/143531655>.



Matrimandir Calendar 2016

The Matrimandir Calendar 2016 has 12 beautiful panorama photos made by Giorgio and Tine with The Mother's handwritten 'blessings' on the back and quotations from Sri Aurobindo's Savitri on the photo page.

The spiral bound calendar, format is 21.5 cm x 14.7 cm., has a cut-out stand to enable see-

ing the photos and the calendar pages in one glance.

On the calendar page, the months and days are printed in English, French, Sanskrit, and Tamil. Darshan days and other important days as well as moon days (full/new) are indicated. The price is Rs. 150 excluding packing and postage. All proceeds from the sale of the calendar will be donated to the Matrimandir. For info contact tine@auroville.org.in



Auroville Planner 2016

The Auroville Planner 2016 has a slightly increased width so that appointments can more easily be noted down. It has 174 pages (spine stitched and glued) and 12 double page colour photos of 'Auroville life' taken by Giorgio and Tine. Darshan days, holidays and

full/new moon days are indicated. The price is Rs. 170 excluding packing and postage. Profits of the Auroville Planner 2016 will be donated to an Auroville project.

For more info email: tine@auroville.org.in

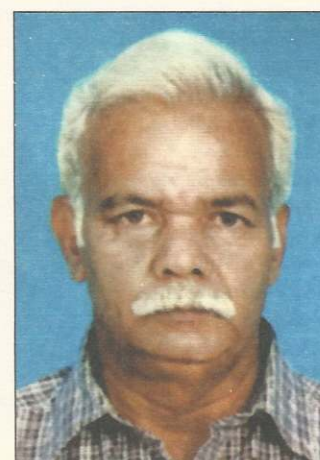
Honouring Piero

On August 28th, the one hour film *The Matrimandir: Honouring Piero* Cononesi (Part 1) part) was shown in Cinema Paradiso. The film is about Piero's work for the Matrimandir which, say the film makers, would never have been built without his quiet and unceasing efforts, day after day, for twenty five years. "Every morning, he would come with the drawings and the calculations he had made at night, without any computer or electronic device. He was there from the excavation till the installing of the crystal globe in the Chamber. This beautiful Inner Chamber we owe to him."

The film is now available online and can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-YTcmofbj8g>

PASSING

Vinod



On October 3rd, S. Vinod Kumar left his body in Nallam Clinic in Pondicherry, due to high blood sugar and pneumonia fever. He was 55 years old.

Vinod, who hails from Andhra Pradesh and lived here in Prayatna, first came to Auroville in 1990 and became accepted as an Aurovilian in 1992. Almost from the very beginning, he started organising a little stall with organic fruits. He would bicycle up and down to obtain the best wares he could find. Over the years, the stall grew out into the small but pukka, well functioning HERS supermarket in Kottakarai – a multi-supply point for the area.

Vinod's remains were cremated at Adventure's burial grounds.

Auroville initiatives in outreach education

Auroville, a melting pot of arts, culture, science and society, has been involved in many educational outreach initiatives since the 1980's. While the Auroville schools follow an alternative education system, many of the educators and enthusiasts of the Auroville community have also developed alternate resources for the mainstream government school systems.

Pad for Pad programme with Ecofemme

"There are mixed messages we give our girls about menstruation," share Harishini and Kathy from Ecofemme. "For instance, in Tamil Nadu, the family members celebrate the onset of menstruation with a grand ceremony and invitations to the entire neighbourhood, announcing the sari-draped young girl's womanhood, and then they ask the girls to never speak about their periods, or even hang a piece of menstrual cloth for the family to see for the rest of their lives." This unhealthy silence, backed by studies across India about the skewed cultural norms and rituals that shun menstruation as a 'dirty' ordeal and reinforce decades of negligence towards building facilities or even conversations around female anatomy, reproductive rights and menstrual management, gave Ecofemme the vision to channel their profits from international sales into developing the Pad4Pad program.

The target beneficiaries are girls from public schools in and around Auroville. The typical programme lasts three months, starting with a 1.5 hours session addressing knowledge gaps around the body and menstruation. It introduces menstrual hygiene products including the Ecofemme cloth pad kit which is later gifted to the girl students, with a follow up evaluation to understand the comfort of the girls with the products and their understanding of menstruation.

Harishini pointed out how the girls used to be extremely shy at first, but later they open up and actively engage in voicing the burning questions they always had around the 'taboo topic'. This sometimes includes things as basic as if periods are a sign of illness. Additionally, Ecofemme faced challenges convincing the school authorities of the importance of such sessions. The breakthrough came when the Ecofemme programme was endorsed by the Chief Education Officer of Villupuram district owing to the positive influence of past outreach Auroville initiatives like *Awareness Through the Body*.

Today, the Pad4Pad programme is running in 14 schools in the bioregion, and also in 13 partner NGOs in nine States of India. The Pad4Pad programme has set itself an ambitious target of reaching out to 10,000 schools by 2017 as well as training people across India to help women switch to eco-friendly alternatives and create a behaviour change in the outlook towards menstruation.

Garbology 101 with Wasteless

Chandra and Ribhu, siblings raised in Auroville, have developed



Teaching about menstruation

Garbology 101, a catchy programme developed to help school children evolve a consciousness towards waste. Garbology 101 was first tested in about twenty Auroville and local schools in 2012. The curriculum focuses on creating awareness around multiple dimensions of waste so that the children and eventually the schools understand the need for a behaviour change. For instance, in one of their pilot testing schools the children started questioning the use of plastics for food packaging and switched from PVC lunch boxes to stainless steel tiffins and water bottles.

The beautifully illustrated and engaging Garbology 101 kit has 7 levels comprising information on waste reduction, waste recycling, waste recovery and activities like story sessions and games.

Having already reached out to 13,400 students in schools in and around Auroville, Chennai, Hyderabad, Bangalore, Kodaikanal and Kasargod, the team is now preparing a crowd-funding campaign to launch their 'Pick-it-up' toolkit. They hope to take it to 5000 schools across the country.

The year ahead looks intense for this young team of four (including visiting interns Darius and Kaya), with ongoing research for developing Garbology 'light', a programme in Tamil for public schools, especially around Auroville, to tackle the challenge of waste management in low-income groups. They are also collaborating with a few schools to co-create a waste audit system to help institutions tackle their waste issues and consumption sustainably.

Holistic healing with Thamarai

Stemming from the need to bridge relations between the residents of the bioregion villages and Auroville, Bridget and Kathy started a playgroup for the children of the working women from these areas in 2006. Subsequent

and health education. A practitioner from Canada trained the village women in natural healing techniques for children and adults. Thamarai also offered basic health checkups for BP and anaemia and give massage therapy and energy treatments to the villagers.

After realizing that addressing individual health needs was insufficient, Bridget contacted Lourdes to understand what more could be done. On his advice, she embarked on an ambitious environmental programme for the village children associated with Thamarai. The children have been introduced to concepts of ecology, health and environment by exposure visits to botanical gardens and sanctuaries, as well as field exercises like water testing and surveys on the natural resources in the village. Muthukumari, a Thamarai facilitator, realized that the problems children face in education can be additionally

focuses on building a safe space for the children to explore their minds and express themselves through their art. Her initial work at Thamarai helped Krupa understand how puppets, masks and dolls could be powerful educational tools and drew her attention towards reviving traditional art practices related to this. Now Krupa is exploring ways to develop art as a tool that can be incorporated in daily life, as a means to learn about social justice, respect and humility. However, especially for young girls who have to perform household duties, it is difficult to make time free for such activities. Krupa tries to tackle this challenge by communicating the value of art therapy as a help in career building in these competitive times.

Peace education Rita

After twenty years of working as a filmmaker in war and crisis areas, Rita realized that the story of conflicts is the same everywhere. Rita could not understand what could change this until she came across Sri Aurobindo's writings and Auroville. "It was a revelation", said Rita, "here's a man who had spoken words decades ago that resonated in my thoughts."

She quit her job and together with a friend in Sri Lanka decided to work on peace education for children. When the war started again, her friend was called back, but Rita returned to Auroville and with people like Emmanuel, Vishanka, Selva and Maya as well as volunteers, she developed a school curriculum around peace education named "Be True Not Violent".

Having first piloted this in Aikyam school in 2011, the programme is now fully fledged. It has been translated into six languages and used by over a hundred teachers and 5,000 children in schools, community centres and kindergartens in and around Auroville. In the coming year it will partner with the Auroville Teachers Centre, Peace Mission and earth&us to reach out to more schools across different states in India.

The education programme includes training for teachers in facilitating learning without fear, solving conflicts and developing empathy towards each other. Rita points out that violence is everywhere; it is part of our daily lives even though we do not always realize it. What she finds most shocking is that in India, things like ragging and bullying are often an accepted norm to 'toughen up' the students. It is this culture and attitude that the programme aims to address.

Other activities

A few other initiatives like STEM education by Sanjeev and his volunteer group, Upcycling Studio of Ok, and Nathalie's Play with Painting, are also emerging with child development activities in the local schools around Auroville. Education around the world is currently being questioned, tested and experimented with. In such changing times, what we could offer our future generation is probably not solutions, but an alternative perspective to life and living through recreational and innovative educational tools.

Shradha



Drawing classes at the Sankalpa Art Project



Farming class at Thamarai



The proud owner of a WasteLess certificate

addressed through connecting body awareness, yoga and the natural environment, so she runs classes combining these five days a week during the children's lunch hours.

The concept is new and often challenging, especially when it comes to convincing teachers and parents of the need for an extra-curricular programme like Thamarai. Muthukumari believes that, through perseverance, a lot could be translated into meaningful collective action for the betterment of the community as the children's consciousness grows.

Sankalpa Art Project with Krupa

Krupa's Art Projects (the latest being the Art Cart at the Visitors' Centre) are much loved by children and adults alike, especially those adults who never got to play with colours and paintbrushes in their childhood owing to parental supervision. But art as a healing tool? Krupa narrates how her western education in art healing and India's harsh reality of youth suicides (especially in the East Coast region), often due to exam pressure or fear of failure, helped her choose art as a therapy for developing the self and self-esteem. While art is mostly offered in Indian schools as another performance-oriented graded programme, Krupa's art centre

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