

The tourism challenge

Tourism in Auroville has increased considerably over the years. What is its impact upon the community? Does it help or harm us? Should it be controlled and, if so, how? Does the community need to develop a strategy regarding tourism?

These were some of the questions addressed during a round table discussion convened by *Auroville Today* and *La Revue d'Auroville* in the aftermath of the recent 50th anniversary celebrations.

Sam is a member of the Auroville Security Service; Marc and Matilde manage Auroville coffee shops; Cristina, Dhanya and Susan are involved in guest services; Nicole manages the Visitors Center; Gilles coordinates the Auroville Archives; Akash Kapur has expressed himself about the dangers of tourism; and Christine is an editor of *La Revue d'Auroville*.

Tourism in Auroville has increased tremendously over the past ten years. How has it impacted you personally?

Sam: Tourism has a huge influence on the work we do in Security. For example, some of the day tourists who come to see the 'golden globe' walk on the road between the Visitors Center and the Matrimandir, which is dangerous for them and for drivers. And on Sunday afternoon when the Matrimandir is closed, we often have a crowd at the Saraswati gate who are trying to get a glimpse of the structure, and this can also become dangerous for road users.

In the minds of some guests and tourists, Auroville is like a second Goa: they see it as a place to chill out and party. There are fewer parties now, but they still want to come inside Auroville to enjoy themselves and they resent it when we block them. We also have non-Auroville restaurants as well as a private hotel in the middle of Auroville and we cannot stop tourists going there. All this makes big problems for us in security.

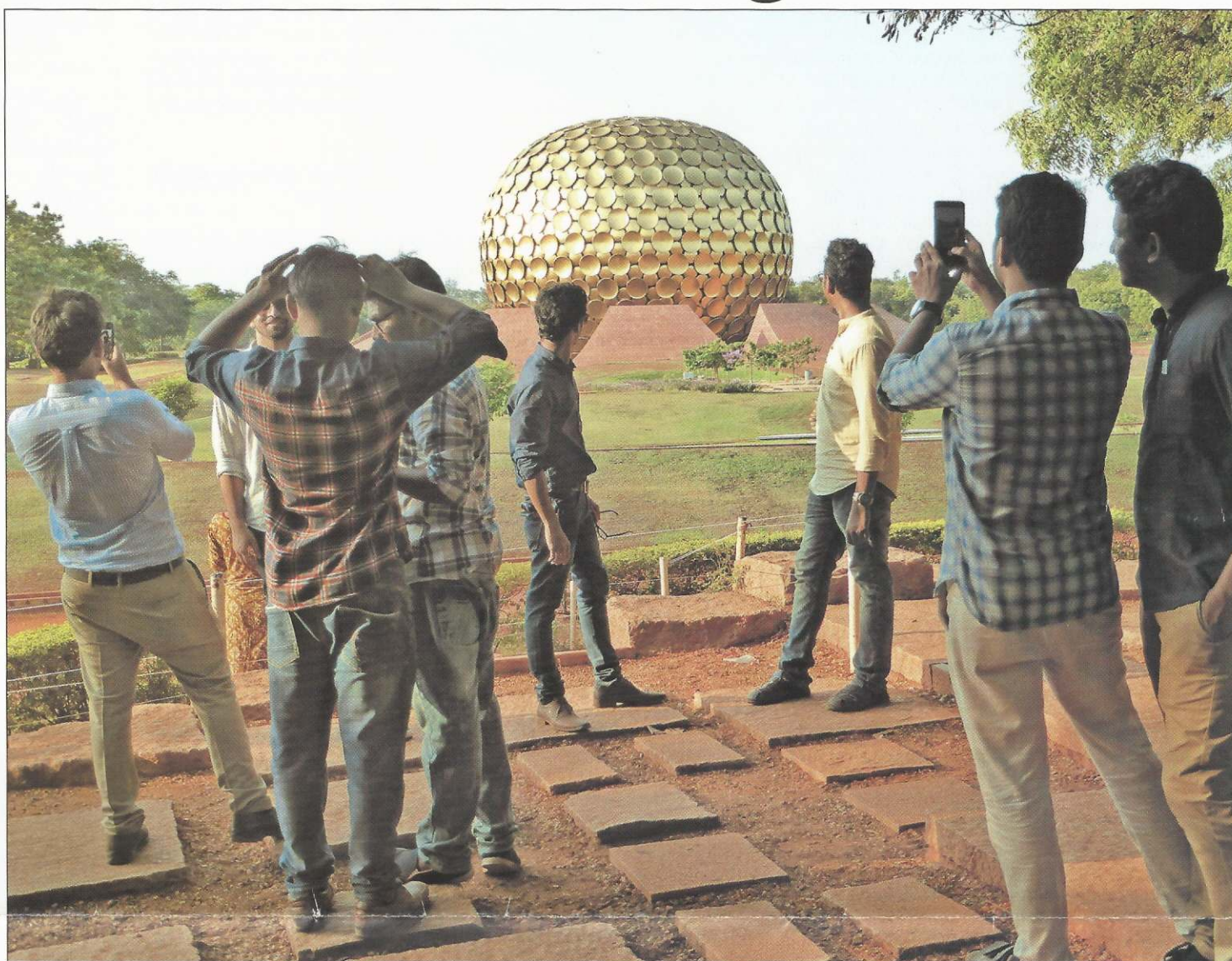
Cristina: I find that having guests around brings a breath of fresh air because sometimes we are caught in our daily routine and small conflicts to the point that we tend to forget why we are here. The guests make me aware of how important and inspiring Auroville is for many people around the world. I also like to have exchanges with people who are living in other realities.

Marc: As we have three coffee shops, we are constantly dealing with tourists and it is very positive. If you know how to handle tourists, it can be a great experience for all concerned.

Dhanya: I think when we talk about 'tourists' we need to make a distinction between daytrippers, weekenders from Chennai or Bangalore, and longer-term guests who stay in Auroville or in the nearby villages. These are different categories which present different challenges.

Susan: I think there is a big difference between weekenders who are staying in Auroville and those who are staying outside Auroville. If people are staying in an Auroville guesthouse, the likelihood that they are going to meet Aurovilians or other long-term people who will be able to educate them about Auroville is much higher.

Nicole: But even though there is a code of conduct in Auroville guesthouses that alcohol is not allowed, some guests will purchase it outside and bring it into their room. I've had



Day visitors at the Matrimandir viewing point

friends of mine staying in an Auroville guesthouse who said it was very unpleasant because of people drinking there. This was not the atmosphere they were expecting.

Sam: In the end, there is no way to police that.

Dhanya: But are we behaving in such a way as to provide an example and to attract the right people? It's obvious that guests will tap into some of the present undercurrents of Auroville and say, for example, why can't we drink in an Auroville guest house because some Aurovilians are also drinking in their houses.

Akash: For me, it's a question of sheer numbers. When somebody is coming at you like a missile on the wrong side of the road, you're not bothered about whether they are there for the day or for the week. Clearly, however, the traffic on our roads is very inflated by the day-trippers, so if there were fewer of them and it was more controlled, it would be better for everybody.

Nicole: We have this feeling of invasion, of being swamped by tourists, because when we go to the Solar Kitchen we have three times the normal queue. And when we drive on the roads we have many people on mopeds who don't know how to drive in India, while cars are trying to sneak into Auroville through the back roads to discover the place on their own terms. These are the things we have to address.

Matilde: It's this feeling that you don't want to go to certain places because of all the tourists. How can we manage it so that the Aurovilians do not feel they have to hide away in the busy months and only come out again in the low season? Auroville should not become like Barcelona, my home town, which is full of tourists now.

Gilles: Mass tourism all over the world

tends to destroy what the people come to enjoy. It can happen here, too.

Matilde: The internet makes it worse. For example, Google Maps shows Auroville cycle paths as roads so tourists easily get lost and wander into Auroville communities looking for directions.

Nicole: Google Maps put Sadhana Forest on top of the frisbee sports ground near Gaia, which is many kilometres away, so we have people walking into Gaia looking for Sadhana Forest. It's not surprising that nobody wants to have their location marked on the map of the new 'Discover Auroville' app, because this just attracts tourists.

Sam: But we need to keep a certain perspective on this. I was expecting the fiftieth anniversary in February to be overwhelming because of the numbers of tourists coming, but I don't feel that happened. Actually, according to Visitors Center data, we did not have many more tourists during these months than last year. So perhaps tourism in and around Auroville is not going to increase as much as we expect.

How many tourists are visiting Auroville annually?

Dhanya: At present, around 800,000 people come to the Visitors Center each year, around 2200 every day. This may not include everybody who stays in a guest house but it gives an idea of what we are dealing with on a daily basis.

Christine: But it's not just the numbers. I feel that increasingly there is a commercialisation of everything: it's like a corruption or contagion. People who do not understand this place find it so nice that they want to buy into it.

I've had people come to my house who want to buy it because it was designed by Roger Anger!

How did we become such a magnet for tourists?

Susan: We made this beautiful, shiny, golden thing that attracts thousands and thousands of people every day, besides all the other things that attract tourists.

Nicole: Clearly, one of the main attractions is the restaurants, the food. It used to be Auroville products but this is declining now for some units because many people find them too expensive. The fact is that we have more and more Aurovilian and non-Aurovilian outlets in this area which act as a strong magnet to the crowd who spend some months in Goa and some months here. Here you have what people expect to find in a tourist place: certain kinds of food, certain kinds of clothing shops, certain facilities.

Gilles: The shops, the attractions, are not just outside Auroville. There are many things inside Auroville that are open to tourists, like shops, workshops, movies and music performances.

Christine: The greenery is also a factor, because the Indian cities have become nightmares. When people come here, they see trees and space and they feel they can breathe again.

To what extent is the growth of tourism in Auroville influenced by changes in the larger India?

Nicole: A lot. The growth in tourism is also happening because India has changed tremendously over the past 25 years.

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The Tourism challenge

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There has been a very rapid growth of a middle class with disposable income and a four-wheel-drive who have to take the family out somewhere on the weekends. We see this in the different type of people who are coming to the Visitors Center nowadays.

Pondicherry has been making a lot of publicity for the growth of its tourism sector. But once you've done the beachfront and the old city tour, that's about it in Pondicherry, so then the tourists come to Auroville because here there is something to see.

Dhanya: If Pondicherry had not been there, the situation would be very different. My assumption is that the increase in our tourism is largely due to the Pondicherry Department of Tourism who want a big part of the Pondicherry economy to be supported by tourism. At the moment, 1.6 million tourists come to Pondicherry annually, and this increases by 10% in year. In 3-4 years around 2 million people will be coming, of whom about 150,000 will be foreigners. Half of them will find their way to Auroville. So can we face the reality that this is much bigger than us and meet it with a mature response? And if we don't want tourism, what other enterprises do we want to develop?

Clearly, we are influenced by something happening in the larger India. But to what extent are we ourselves encouraging people to come as tourists?

Gilles: Mother said we have to inform people about Auroville but we should not advertise it. Mother explained the difference by saying we should only speak to those who are able to receive the message, and we should keep the message at its highest level. If we lower it to make it more understandable to people, we are advertising. However, Auroville is being advertised at the moment by some Aurovilians.

Sam: I think that as a community we are confused about whether we want tourists or not. Some units and eateries definitely want tourists to come to their places inside Auroville and we have events that are open to outsiders. However, we also don't want them, which is why Security tries to prevent people coming into Auroville to roam around. It's a contradiction.

Increasing importance of the Hospitality sector in Auroville's economy



Auroville Commercial Units Contribution by Sector

Year	Total	Food	Guest Houses	Food + GH
09-2008	484	20	11	31
10-2009	484	35	12	47
11-2010	505	43	15	58
12-2011	389	53	6	59
12-2013	467	56	86	142
2013-14	493	60	69	128
2014-15	480	76	50	126
2015-16	559	105	63	168
2016-17	792	160	98	258

Auroville Commercial Units Net Surplus by Sector

Year	Total	Food	Guest Houses	Food + GH
09-2008	340	32	11	43
10-2009	288	11	15	26
11-2010	291	39	28	67
12-2011	221	54	-3	51
12-2013	449	48	33	81
2013-14	391	138	-33	104
2014-15	355	57	43	101
2015-16	730	252	27	279
2016-17	1283	309	116	425

Auroville Commercial Units Turnover by Sector

Year	Total	Food	Guest Houses	Food + GH
09-2008	7695	708	245	954
10-2009	8102	766	258	1024
11-2010	9485	839	295	1134
12-2011	9569	1051	296	1347
12-2013	10939	1142	444	1587
2013-14	12669	1377	431	1808
2014-15	13426	1722	495	2216
2015-16	14512	1954	600	2554
2016-17	15968	2472	739	3211

Gilles: For me, the main problem is the total lack of clarity inside Auroville concerning what Auroville is about – I believe that more than 50% of Aurovilians do not understand this – and this reflects in our confused attitude to tourists. This is the deeper problem.

One of the key problems is that Roger conceived the Galaxy Plan at a time when Mother was saying that money would still circulate in Auroville. This is why, in 1967, Roger was talking about the Crown Road being full of restaurants, galleries and shops. However, in 1969 she made a fundamental change by saying that there would be no exchange of money in Auroville. This requires major changes in the Master Plan concerning where tourists can come to spend money and do business but we do not understand this, and our town planning groups have not been able to solve it.

But some Aurovilians argue that we should encourage tourists as they are benefitting the Auroville economy.

Nicole: This idea that tourism should be encouraged as a way of making money for Auroville should be debunked because actually it is bringing us a lot of problems. Look at some of the present developments in the guest sector. Are they really benefitting Auroville? For example, there is a big increase in the number of home stays in the community. At present, according to City Services there are 61 home stays but only 38 are contributing something to Auroville. Aurovilians create these facilities so they can manage financially, but what problems does this create for the rest of our society? We need to look closely at this.

What are the possible solutions?

Matilde: Many people who come to the coffee shop ask me, Why are you here? What attracts you? This we can address. They may come here on a day trip but after three months they may come again and the conversation continues. So I think places like these can be good information and guest service points.

Dhanya: I think we need to apply filters for the different populations – day visitors, guests, etc. – that are coming to Auroville.

I think the first practical step is to maintain the strong filters that prevent outside traffic coming further into Auroville because this gives us the breathing space to come up with more creative ideas.

Sam: I don't like the idea of Auroville being a closed space but if we don't filter the traffic coming inside Auroville, we have incidents where Aurovilians are harassed or worse. In the last two years, the number of such incidents reduced considerably because the guards are much stricter than before. So I think there is a phase we have to go through where Auroville is protected from outside traffic, and for this we have to control all the entrances.

Gilles: In my view, Auroville has to be organised like a traditional Tamil house where the postman and casual visitors cannot go further than the outer door, but the closer you are to the family, the more you can come inside.

Dhanya: I also think there should be a dialogue with the Pondicherry Government and the Department of Tourism. Their orientation is very different from ours, but we need to emphasise that the only tourism we want in Auroville is that which relates to wholeness, wellness and ecological tourism. These would be filters.

Matilde: For me, a typical tourist is somebody who travels but who wants to remain in their comfort zone. However, sustainable tourism is about experiencing the local culture, talking with the local people, and rather than taking advantage of a place, giving something back and sustaining the local lifestyle. This is the kind of tourism we should be encouraging in Auroville.

Gilles: I think, ideally, the only people who should be welcome to visit and stay in Auroville should be people who are willing to experience Auroville.

But how easily can they experience Auroville at present?

Nicole: That's a good question. Visitors can take a walk through the International Zone and see some of the public buildings, but some of those places no longer welcome visitors and all of them had to reflect upon how they handle visitors. None of the potteries and only a few of the units will accept visitors being sent to them and the schools do not want to receive them. There are a few places where you can send people, such as Botanical Gardens, and some places organise visits once a week.

Increase in tourism

People getting a pass for the Matrimandir viewing point
 2015: 5,68,762/- + 5% = 5,97,200/-
 2016: 6,49,962/- + 5% = 6,82,460/-
 2017: 7,24,654/- + 5% = 7,60,887/-

Note: Most visitors get this pass but not all, because, for example, some people arrive on Sunday afternoon when the Viewing Point is closed or arrive too late in the day to get a pass. The + 5% accounts for the number of passes given for the Viewing Point that are not logged.

Most of the people who visit Auroville come to the Visitors Center. The vast majority of them only want to see the Matrimandir and we handle them in such a way that the rest of Auroville is insulated from these tourists. The Center also acts as a very strong filter because anybody who comes with a car needs to leave it at the parking area. So I think that the filters we have in place today are good filters.

Can the Visitors Center cope with an increase in tourists?

Nicole: I believe we can absorb two to three times the number we receive at present and still channel them to Matrimandir in a way that the rest of Auroville is not affected.

But then you have the three guys on a motorcycle who like to roam around Auroville on a Sunday, or the people who would like to have a nice lunch somewhere in Auroville because they have heard about the good food. As long as there is a possibility for them to pay in cash, as long as there is a possibility of money exchange inside Auroville, you will get these aspects of tourism as well.

Mother gave us some very practical answers. She said that Auroville is a city without exchange of money, and suggested that people interested in visiting Auroville would be issued with coupons.

But this would require an organisation and a clear idea about what visitors could have access to.

Dhanya: We could easily develop an app that allows Aurovilians to charge visitors without any direct exchange of money. But this would not solve the problem as it would still allow visitors to go anywhere in Auroville.

Nicole: If the feeling of being swamped and of Auroville becoming unrecognisable is due to too many people coming inside Auroville, looking for a restaurant or a yoga class, etc., then we have to take a decision as a community about what we actually want. Do we want these magnets to be inside Auroville or outside?

Gilles: If we can deflect tourists by saying there are plenty of things for you outside, but inside Auroville there is nothing for you, they will probably not come here. We are not going to stop tourism in the larger area. Even if we succeed in closing Auroville completely, the area around Kuilapalayam and the beach will continue to develop as tourists sites and, in a way, this is protecting us.

It seems we are suggesting closing off most of Auroville to tourists...

Gilles: There is more than one way. In Auroville we are expected to be working towards two transformations: the individual transformation and the transformation of society. A transformed society would not have problems with tourism because it would automatically attract only the right people. But we are not making much progress in this because it requires us to do the yoga.

What are the next steps?

Akash: We have created groups in the past to address real problems, and this is a real, even an existential, problem. Do we need a group that looks at tourism in a cohesive, systematic way because, clearly, we can't be relaxed about this anymore?

Christine: At present, we have no strategy at all concerning tourism in Auroville.

Susan: I think a lot can be done with simple strategies, like restricting visiting times, but we also need data to tell us about the economic impact of tourism on Auroville, and if we can live without it. All these questions require more than a couple of roundtable discussions. I think that if a group is created, it has to include people from many different areas because there are so many dimensions to the tourism issue.

How optimistic are we that we can solve this issue?

Nicole: It's for the community to decide. If we can all agree on a strategy, we can do it. We have done it for Matrimandir, where everybody takes it as a given that there are specific timings with limited numbers and visitors have to book in advance. So if we say the main problem is there are too many day visitors then, for example, we can decide we will restrict the number of passes for the Matrimandir viewing point on any given day. There are such mechanisms that can be put in place.

Susan: If we are here for the Charter then I believe we have to be optimists! But we need to take effective action soon. And if we Aurovilians ourselves are not living up to the Dream, how can we expect to attract only the 'right' kind of tourists who are really coming for Auroville, and filter out the rest? I think this question will come back to haunt us again and again.

Alan

Architect B.V.Doshi wins Pritzker prize

On March 7, 2018, architect Balkrishna V. Doshi, former Auroville Governing Board member and Chairman of the Auroville Town Development Council (TDC) between 2009 - 2016, was announced as the Pritzker Prize Laureate, 2018. This is often referred to as the Nobel Prize of architecture and he is the first Indian architect to receive this honour. Mona Doctor-Pingel, one of his former students who also collaborated with him on town planning in Auroville, shares some recollections.

The eminent jury for the Pritzker Prize, comprising architects and architectural critics from all over the world, stated that "with an understanding and appreciation of the deep traditions of India's architecture, Doshi united prefabrication and local craft and developed a vocabulary in harmony with the history, culture, local traditions and the changing times of his home country, India."

On receiving the award, Doshi commented: "My works are an extension of my life, philosophy and dreams, trying to create a treasury of the architectural spirit. I owe this prestigious prize to my guru, Le Corbusier. His teachings led me to question identity and compelled me to discover new regionally-adapted contemporary expression for a sustainable holistic habitat."

B.V. Doshi has long been known in India as one of its most eminent architects and has been much sought after internationally to be on various forums, juries and schools of architecture. He received the Padma Shri in 1976. With this latest addition to his accolades, he finally gets an international recognition of his 70 year old practice and its contribution to India.

Doshi is also a great educator and has been responsible for setting up and shaping one of the best schools of architecture in the country (now part of CEPT - Center for Environmental Planning and Technology University).

I have been fortunate to have studied at that

as the external examiner for the final *viva voce* of my Diploma Thesis on a comparative analysis between The Matrimandir and The Great Pyramid.

However, I really got to know him better when I was a member of the TDC and he was coming more often to Auroville.

Once when I asked him what he considers his most interesting projects he answered, "I am very lucky. I see my most cherished projects every day - Kamala house where I live, CEPT where I teach and Sangath, where I work."

Doshi is a story teller who likes to weave many stories together, each time with a different narrative. In one conversation, when I mentioned how he had given me three completely different stories about his conceptualization of the iconic Hussain-Doshi Gufa in Ahmedabad, he laughed vigorously and said, "You see, I believe that without a good story there is no good architecture!"

One of his most endearing qualities is his insatiable curiosity. He is not one to pretend to know everything; from every situation in



B.V. Doshi interacting with Auroville architects and townplanners

about to graduate). Kamuben, his wife, is a steadfast support, always gracious and kind, keeping in the background, but being a strong presence in his life throughout. They share a 65 year old bond that is astounding.

He first came to Auroville in the early seventies. Later, he recalled, "My first impression of Auroville was related to the purpose of living – an experiment with frugality, reverence, togetherness, tolerance, sharing and searching for an integral way of purposeful life. I was completely bowled over by the kind of architectural experimentation that was happening. Here were houses with thatched roofs, houses built half into the ground and with arches made out of bricks and ferrocement. At that time, Indian architects were asking themselves how to make do with the minimum of resources yet develop something else, like the long-term overall sustainability one sees in nature, biodiverse yet harmonious. When I looked at Auroville then, I thought it was probably the most important architectural pioneering work happening in India."

After that, he visited Auroville many times, more recently as a Governing Board member, and he continued to observe and critically examine the complexity of manifesting a city like Auroville.

During this time, he often stayed at Afsaneh Guest House, where I had the pleasure of bringing him a hot cup of Gujarati *chai* early in the morning before breakfast. Those were cherished conversations in a quiet atmosphere after his regular practice of *pranayama*.

Eventually the earlier aura of Auroville waned as he felt that the dynamism was missing from more recent constructions. In fact, he noted that when he first saw images of new apartment

buildings in *Auroville Today*, he thought he was reading a review of buildings in 1950 Germany! "I began to worry because the world has moved on. What happened to Auroville's spirit? If you build a city like this, will it really be a model for the world?"

At the same time, as his interactions with Aurovilians representing often opposing views about development increased, he began seeing the futility of "planning" a city like Auroville in the normal way. He is reported to have said that one of the biggest things Auroville taught him is patience!

However, he remained optimistic about Auroville's future. In an interview in 2009, he mentioned that, "The most important thing for you to do is to develop your values, to evolve an Aurovilian way of life. Only then will an Aurovilian way of expressing it evolve. The most important ingredients are belief, faith and perseverance and all of these exist in abundance in Auroville. So if at the moment I'm saddened, in the long-term I'm very optimistic that if Auroville looks at itself afresh, profoundly, it can truly become a project of global heritage."

Doshi will be delivering his Pritzker Acceptance speech, titled *Paths Uncharted* (after the autobiographical book written by him with the same title published in 2011), on 16 May this year at the University of Toronto, and the architectural fraternity in India and abroad will be keenly looking forward to his words of wisdom at the age of 90.

With Doshi also being included in *Fortune's* 2018 ranking of the top 50 greatest world leaders, this will be a fine culmination of a unique career.

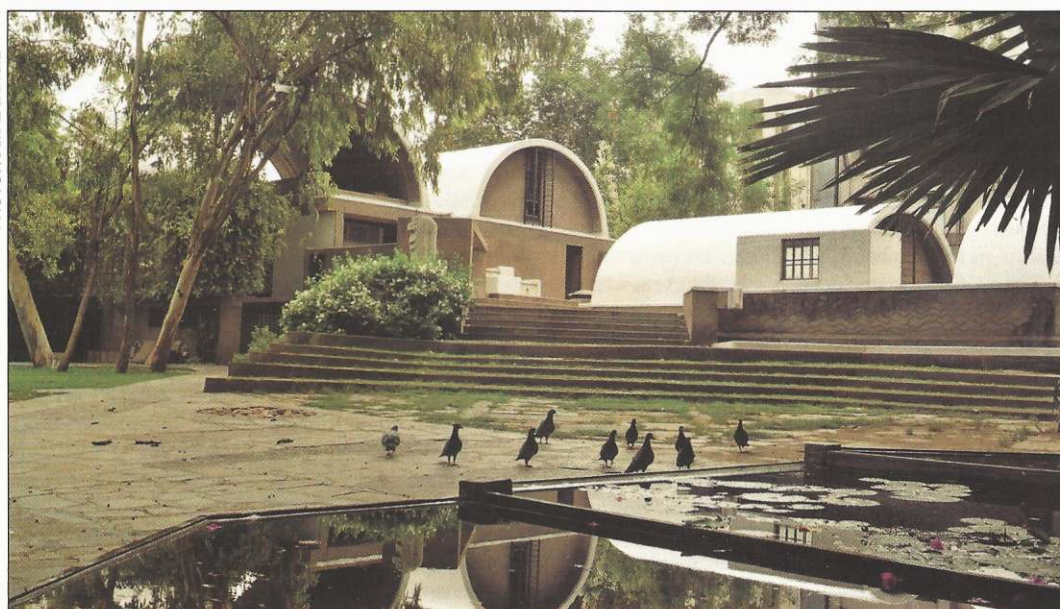
Mona



Indian Institute of Management, IIM, Bangalore, completed 1983

school and have had several opportunities to observe and learn from him. For many years, I saw him taking his regular early morning walks, my parental house being only a few streets from his residence. His simplicity, discipline and inexhaustible energy have always been a source of inspiration to me. I was lucky to have had him

life he is ready to learn and move on with greater strength. His trademark little black diary and pen are always ready to take notes wherever he is. Even today, he goes to his studio every day for a few hours. Being the patriarch and inspiring personality that he is, there are six architects in his immediate family (including two grandsons



Sangath, Doshi's studio, Ahmedabad, completed 1962



Hussain-Doshi gufa, Ahmedabad, completed 1995

Hive on hold

The manifestation of the Hive, which was sanctified with a Bhoomi Puja on February 26th, has been suspended.

“With a heavy heart, and after much deep reflection amongst our team, we have decided not to proceed with the Hive for this year 2018,” wrote YouthLink on April 10th in an email to Auroville’s Town Planning Department, L’Avenir d’Auroville, to the Forest Group, the Working Committee, the 50th Anniversary Team, and to YouthLink’s mentors. All were taken by surprise: it was a decision nobody had expected.

YouthLink then explained the numerous reasons why it had taken this decision. What stood out was its wish to stand for integrity: YouthLink didn’t want to proceed without the agreement of all the groups. “This tension between groups is one of our biggest reasons for not wanting to move forward. We do not want to repeat old patterns of forced development in Auroville,” wrote YouthLink. “It is important for us for it to manifest thorough a harmonious collective process ... we are not upset or pointing blame to any one individual or group.” The maturity and wisdom of its reflections did not go unnoticed. As one long-term Aurovilian commented, “It is an example for all of us.”

What happened?

The YouthLink Hive started off as a campus project, following the suggestion of the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation in 2015 that on the occasion of Auroville’s 50th anniversary a 100-bed Golden Jubilee Youth Hostel should manifest. This project was scuttled due to two factors: the expected funds never manifested, and there was fierce opposition by members of the neighbouring community to the site allocated by L’Avenir d’Auroville. These discussions took about two years.

By November 2017, a Rs 10 crore (approximately US \$ 1.5 million) special grant from the Government of India for the occasion of Auroville’s 50th anniversary was received. YouthLink was allocated Rs 1.24 crore (approximately US \$ 186,000) for the Hive. After evaluating three sites and with the approval of YouthLink and the site stewards, L’Avenir d’Auroville then decided that a site in Bliss Forest, which was marked in the Master Plan as ‘Vocational Belt’, would be allocated to the project. In a buoyant mood, and in view of the upcoming meeting of the Governing Board, YouthLink invited the Chairman and the Board members, all Aurovilians and the public to attend the Bhoomi Puja on February 26th. [see AVToday # 344 March 2018].

However, at that time the feedback that L’Avenir had meanwhile received from members of the Forest Group had not yet been processed. The Forest Group had expressed concern about the presence of valuable trees and a water catchment area; they proposed an alternative site. In view of time constraints which

For each problem there is a solution that can give satisfaction to everybody; but for finding this ideal solution each one must want it instead of meeting the others with the will to enforce one’s own preference. Enlarge your consciousness and aspire for the satisfaction of all.

The Mother 1971

made considering another site not feasible – the project would need to start by mid April 2018 in order to spend the majority of the funds by the deadline of September 2018 – and to respect their observations, on April 2nd L’Avenir d’Auroville gave a No Objection Certificate (NOC) for only a part of the initial plot with the intention to start work on finalizing the site development guidelines in consultation with the site steward. But the NOC was neither to the liking of the Forest Group, nor to the architects of the Hive, nor to YouthLink itself.

Evaluating the NOC

The Forest Group reiterated that their considerations had not been fully respected and that their alternate proposed site has not been considered. L’Avenir, wrote a Forest Group member, was enforcing theoretical concepts and plans made decades ago that are disconnected from the reality of today.

Imago, the Hive’s architects, concurred with the views of the Forest Group. Moreover, it said that a project like the Hive could not be completed within the given time frame. As an aside it expressed the architect’s dilemma: architects only get paid when a project materialises. Imago had been working on the Hive for 3 years, and this project is now very much in the red.

YouthLink found that the allocated reduced area did not answer to its needs. “YouthLink is a space for young adults who yearn for a transformation in their life. It is a platform for the collective manifestation of Auroville, led by the dreams and aspirations of young adults (18-40) to explore themselves and discover their role in a collective context. It is a space to support young adults in integrating into Auroville and kick-starting their lives as empowered individuals and teams. It is a space to disseminate wisdom from older generations to the younger generations. It is a space to cross-pollinate between young adults in Auroville, the bioregion and the world, to highlight Auroville ideals globally.”

In order to allow this vision to manifest, YouthLink needs a multi functional hall for education, an outdoor learning space, an outdoor hands-on workshop space, a co-working space for project start ups, a cafeteria, an accommodation for Auroville youth caretakers and some accommodation for visiting students. The allocated

ed site, said YouthLink, will corner the youth and not allow them the possibility to thrive. The space would soon be outgrown.

Trust in the future

“We are grateful for the tremendous amount of thought and support that has gone into finding us a space in Auroville,” wrote YouthLink. “Although letting go of the 1.24 crore has been very difficult for us, we didn’t want money to be the leading force, the ‘sovereign lord’, pushing us. We trust that our dream is valid and that we will find the support in the near future to build this space for Auroville. We do not know where we will receive future funds from (Government of India grant or other donors), it may even take us longer, but we trust that our vision is true and that the money will come. In other words, ‘good things take time’, and we want to do this properly in coherence with the Auroville ideals.”

YouthLink also expressed the hope that the case study of the Hive will help us learn as a community. “We have explored various plots for this project over the last 3 years, and still have a challenge locating a space adequate for this project. We hope that in the near future, when we propose to construct the Hive again, that we are not left to fend or fight for this project ourselves. We hope that we can nurture a deeper collaboration between Aurovilians and groups to find harmonious solutions that provide win-wins for all,” wrote YouthLink.

This hope was not expressed in vain. At the initiative of one of the members of the Working Committee, a meeting of all stakeholders was called on April 23rd with the objective to extract lessons for improvement for the future. There was unanimous agreement that the Hive must manifest in future. A second agreement was that all stakeholders need to work together to evaluate projects. They need to sit at the table from the start and at all stages to come up with an decision together.

The true spirit of Auroville is collaboration and must be more and more so.

The Mother 1972

“We are not letting go of the Hive dream, but we want to start again, with a fresh process,” wrote YouthLink. “Like many of you have experienced, The Mother has often found ways to guide us, or slow us down, simply because we have something deeper still to learn. We feel that by taking more time we will be able to listen to this divine intention, and thus manifest something even more beautiful than any of us could initially imagine.”

Carel

INAUGURATION OF AUROVILLE

The day the heavens kissed our earth

I do not remember when and from whom I heard about the idea of Auroville, but it appeared to me natural, almost inevitable, in the context of The Mother’s Dream of a place where people could lead a life according to the dictates of the highest and also her warning that it had become imperative for men, countries and continents to choose between Truth or the Abyss.

That was a time when nobody in the Ashram cared about who sponsored a project. If it was The Mother’s wish or had her sanction, one, must work towards its fruition according to one’s capacity. At Navajata-ji’s bidding, I used to join the team, after my classes, to survey the proposed site. JIPMER did not exist even in its blueprint. But I heard that the surveyors had been advised to exclude that area from their exploration, for The Mother had foreseen some useful institution would come up there. I do not know whether the rumour was apocryphal or true.

Fifty years ago Pondicherry was a much smaller town, surrounded by agricultural lands, large patches of water and numerous small canyons amidst red earth and acres of grass and bushes. We surveyed the lands on both sides of the old narrow road heading towards Tindivanam. A superstition prevailed that nothing purposeful could flourish on those wastelands. But things changed rapidly and by January 1968 one could feel a throbbing new life pervading the air.

From mid-1964 I used to visit Chennai (then Madras) once a month to give a talk to a small but regular audience on a Sunday morning. The group included Shri J. Dayanand, a senior executive in the Forest Department and Smt. Anjani Dayanand, IAS. We became friends and the unassuming bright couple became my regular kind hosts for month after month. In 1967, Anjani-ji became Secretary to the Pondicherry Administration and became its Chief Secretary before long. Shri Dayanand resigned his job and came over to serve The Mother. Both of them took great interest in the project.

One day, Anjani-ji informed me that the Mother would like me to take up the task of arranging for the news coverage of the event. I

knew well that the Mother did not give importance to any publicity. But this was a necessity.

During the 2nd week of February 1968, I camped at the vacant MLAs’ hostel in Chennai for about five days. My invaluable helper was a young and energetic government employee, Shri Varadharajan, an unfailing member of the afore-said monthly group and an ardent devotee of The Mother. (He joined Auroville afterwards.) He took leave from his office and together we met the editors or the management of all the newspapers, English and Tamil, as well as the All India Radio. We visited the local offices of all the Delhi, Mumbai (then Bombay) and Kolkata (then Calcutta) based major newspapers and also the News Agencies.

While some of the journalists felt inspired at the prospect of covering an event that was off the beaten track, some were curious or a bit skeptical. I was a contributor to several English newspapers and magazines and this facilitated our mission. Shri N.S. Ramaswamy, a senior Assistant Editor of *The Indian Express* was a scholar and he used to appreciate my articles. But he was a reluctant traveller, at least then. However, I had a feeling that he would understand the vision behind the adventure better than many others. He agreed to comply with my request if his boss agreed. The chief of the editorial management of the *Express* was an elderly gentleman, kind and courteous, popularly known as Master-ji. I requested him to depute Shri N.S. Ramaswamy for the event. “Ramaswamy is excellent at covering Sports event, not events of this nature!” said Master-ji. “But, Sir,” I asked, “how many events of this nature have taken place?” Master-ji laughed sweetly and agreed to my request.

Ramaswamy came by car with Shri Amal Ghose, Chennai Bureau-in-charge of *The Amrita Bazar Patrika* of Kolkata who was a poet. Because Ramaswamy travelled by car, he wrote the report



During the inauguration ceremony, February 28, 1968

of the event on his return journey and his *Auroville – A “World City” is Born* was the main item on the front page of the *Express* released at midnight of February 29th, 1968. We reproduced it in *Mother India* of March 1968. Once again it has been published in the January 2018 issue of the magazine for the current celebrations.

Most of the other journalists started from Chennai in a comfortable bus leaving an appointed spot near Hotel Connemara at about 2 A.M., led by Varadharajan. I received them at the site. Adequate arrangements had been made for them to freshen up and volunteers were ready to treat them to breakfast. Those who wished to return to Chennai immediately after the event were presented with packets of lunch. Others were entertained at the Society House, along with D. Malcolm Adiseshiah, the Dy. Director General of the UNESCO, Dr. Salah-el Bin Tewfic, the UNESCO Chief of Mission in India, Shri B.D. Jatti, the Lt. Governor of Pondicherry, Shri R.K. Talwar, Chairman of the State Bank of India, among others. Navajata-ji performed his role as the host with dignity and humility. We also arranged for the accommodation of the journalists who had arrived a day earlier from Kolkata and other cities, and I had to answer varieties of their queries.

I do not intend to describe the main event here.

It was as if a chunk of some celestial world had descended on our tired earth and had unexpectedly transformed its mood into that of a grand expectation and assurance. Thousands of people from the nearby areas had collected, apart from hundreds who had arrived from different parts of India and abroad. A pregnant silence prevailed well before The Mother’s voice was to enliven the atmosphere in a live broadcast from her room in the Ashram. I heard that the engineer who was directing that most important operation was nervous and The Mother calmed him down with her Blessings. In fact I think all concerned were nervous. The only one who was calm and confident was The Mother. Even though all the problems, major or insignificant, were heaped on Her with abandon, She had time, patience and compassion.

Throughout the event not a leaf stirred. Sunil’s serene music and the mantric words uttered by those entrusted with the task by The Mother, enhanced the magic of that hitherto unknown silence – a silence that could cast a spell over multitudes.

The coverage of the event by the Tamil and Hindi press, was quite satisfactory and some of the articles were very good. But Ramaswamy’s charming narrative excelled all.

*Manoj Das
Sri Aurobindo Ashram*

The Mirra Group's sports events

A number of women from the villages that surround Auroville and come to Auroville for work feel that the Tamil Aurovilian women are somehow different from them and there is a lack of connection. The Mirra Women's Group Activity Programme is a practical way in which women can experience the sisterhood which exists all around them and build bridges of friendship and collaboration.

One of the Group's initiatives was to organize sports events in Auroville for Tamil women from the bioregion and Aurovilians in the Auroville. These one-day programmes began in 2002. Every year between 250-350 women participated.

This year, for the first time and to celebrate Auroville's 50th year, events were held in a number of local villages. This was part of the Bajaj Fund and Auroville's 50th anniversary Sports Programme. The number of people who turned out were far greater than expected: from Morattandi village there were 300 participants, from the Kottakarai area 250 participants and from Edyanchavadi 300 participants.

The sports events are an opportunity to have fun, play together and experience a spirit of team collaboration through cooperative games and mutual encouragement. Furthermore, the participants can try out new activities, build awareness through the body and grow in self confidence in an environment which is safe and supportive. For this is a time when the participants can let go of the daily stresses and tensions of their lives.

In addition to the energetic physical activity, there was also space for conversations around education, sanitation, fitness, health, employment and women's empowerment.

Afterwards, our friends in the bio-region expressed how much they had enjoyed the events and the opportunity to come together in this way. And they commented that they felt honoured that Auroville was coming to them, and providing this opportunity for fun and togetherness. Much gratitude was also expressed to Auroville for improvements in living conditions that have come as a result of its efforts in the bio-region.

Madhi, Usha, Grace



The collaboration game



Kolam competition



Water pot running

PHOTOS COURTESY MIRRA GROUP

Kokedera – Moss temple of Kyoto

Flashback to 30 years ago: A 10 year old Auroville child comes across a haiku in a book of poems that describes the moss temple of Japan. It sounds so beautiful and the little girl imagines that this must be a place in a fairytale where everything is possible ...

Fast-forward to March 2018: Aurovilian Monna Maier presents her first photo exhibition at the Pitanga Cultural Centre on 'Kokedera – Moss temple of Kyoto', with twenty six photographs, capturing the beauty and mystery of this temple.

Monna is not new to photography and has been a serious amateur for years. But this is the first time she has chosen to share her works in public. "There was never the time, but more importantly, I never found a subject that felt right. But then I realized this is what I wanted to share with my fellow Aurovilians."

Two years ago Monna had the opportunity to travel to Japan with her husband, Japanese Aurovilian Jyoti. Through the internet, they were able to find out more about the Kokedera temple. The procedure for visiting is complicated. Potential visitors have to write by post requesting permission to visit, and the temple will allot the date and time.

Monna explains how all visitors are made to perform some form of service to the temple before being allowed to "encounter the moss garden". On the day they visited, instead of meditation or chanting, it was to copy Japanese sutras with a calligraphy quill, with the inks to be personally ground by each participant.

The Kokedera or Saiho-ji Temple of Kyoto, dedicated to Amitabha Buddha, was built between 729 and 749 CE. In the 1800s, the area experienced several episodes of flooding and the entire garden and forests surrounding the temple became covered in moss. This sudden colonization of moss was recognized as a miracle by the monks who started nourishing and encouraging it. The temple allows 70 visitors per day. The moss temple was declared a UNESCO Heritage site in 1994.

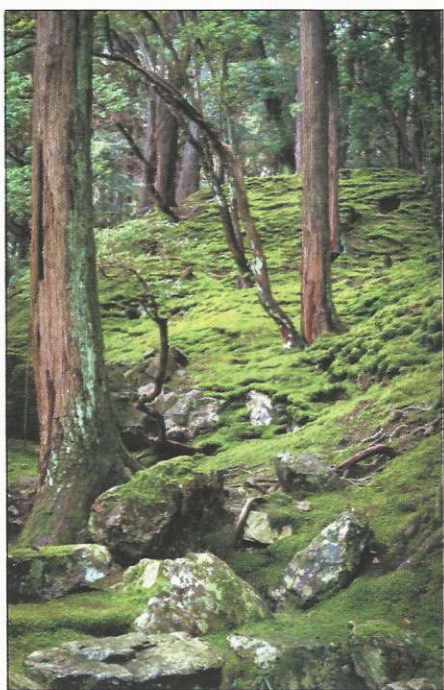


PHOTO MONNA MAIER

The visit to the garden was an unforgettable experience. Monna reminisces.

"We were given two hours to be in the garden. There are dedicated pathways, and you can really just enjoy and take your time. There is no one watching and there are a few places to sit.

"What stands out is an immense stillness and an incredible embracing of Nature. You experience the power of nature at its strongest. It has been nourished because these monks put all their energy into it, and you feel that. This place has been a holy site for a thousand years. Monks have walked in this garden praying. In terms of density of energy it is like the Chamber. It is something that takes your breath away.

"People come day after day to concentrate and find this inner peace.

"Then you realize that you don't need a concrete structure or a crystal; any place can become charged. This is a moss garden, with moss, water, rocks and trees. And it is so refreshing, incredibly refreshing."

In conversation with Priya Sundaravalli

Chudamani in Auroville

March 30th saw an unusual theatre production, an English adaptation of seven short Tamil stories by the late renowned writer, R. Chudamani. The Madras Players, Chennai's acclaimed English theatre group, presented the 90 minute-long production as a seamless narrative of intimate peeks into the lives of orthodox urban middle class Tamils.

Chudamani, who passed away in 2010, has written more than 600 short stories. Considering that she wrote them in the 1960s and 1970s, her themes are very contemporary, and often focus on the challenges of women and their unspoken sensitivities.

In 'A Trace of Envy', an old man looks to get his aging daughter married and instead confronts societal pressures. 'He Came as a Guest' deals with a young woman married to a man many years her senior, who experiences a sudden attraction to a young visitor. It is momentary in nature but supported by an understanding husband. In 'The Visitor', a young widow who gets proposed to by her daughter's prospective suitor feels shocked, yet secretly flattered. 'Seeing in the Dark' deals with a daughter facing the dilemma of wanting to look after her blind father yet also wanting to have a partner and lead a life of her own. In 'The Fourth Stage of Life', two ex-husbands discuss the life and life choices of their ex-wife after her death. In 'Tirumanjanam', a priest's young, widowed daughter wants to adopt a low caste boy, and the ensuing conversation between father and daughter on God and divinity



The Madras Players in Seeing in the Dark

PHOTO COURTESY THE MADRAS PLAYERS

leads to a transformation. In the last play, 'The Image', a young woman on the threshold of an arranged marriage struggles with her identity and finally discovers it.

For those in the audience of similar background or upbringing, the stories were rich in nuance and subtleties, as the unsaid and implied had as much impact as the spoken words, something that many non-Tamil Aurovilians may have missed. What made the production particularly powerful was the 'physical presence' of Chudamani herself, played by actor Nikhila Kesavan, who also had adapted the stories for stage. It was a brilliant technique to weave the disparate stories together, as Chudamani plays different roles in different stories – listening, observing, acting, narrating, being the inner voice, or an invisible friend and catalyst. The presence of Chudamani's own writing table and chair, loaned to the Madras players, brought a subtle aura.

The plays and the actors made a strong impact on the Auroville audience.

Several years ago, I came across Chudamani's obituary in *The Hindu*. It made a deep impact on me. Suffering from spinal tuberculosis, Chudamani had been confined to her room for decades; yet she continued to write her empathetic prose showing resilience and a tremendous strength of character.

I commend the Bharat Nivas organizers for bringing this play to the awareness of the Auroville residents. I hope that many more Tamil and other Indian language plays in English translation will be performed in Auroville as it provides valuable insights into Tamil and Indian culture.

Priya Sundaravalli

Prabha Sridevan's book 'Seeing in the dark' was the basis for five of the seven plays in this production. It contains English translations of twenty-five short stories by Chudamani, and is available from Amazon.in

Pebble

Meenakshi, our acclamer Tamil poet, has just brought out a bi-lingual collection of her poetry to coincide with Auroville's 50th birthday. Pebble contains one or two poems that have been anthologised elsewhere – like the lovely *I am the golden flame* – but many are new, at least to this reviewer. Meenakshi has a poetic temperament that encompasses many aspects of life. It includes social issues like bonded child labour, as in the poem *They walk on damp ground*:

We appeal to you
With broken hearts
We want just a corner
On the streets' side pavement
Where we should be free
From the drunken wolves...

There is also her sensitive celebration of the feminine:

A woman and a river
Are twins.
For she walks like a river
Lies down like a river
She is now here
And now there.
She is, and is not.

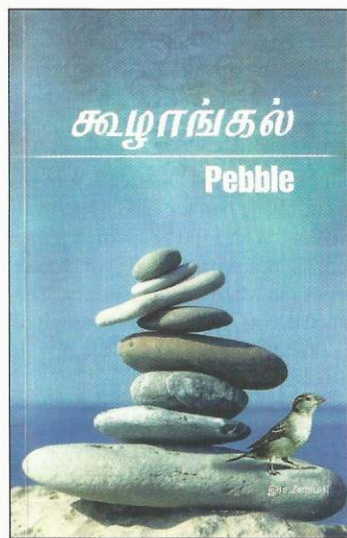
But perhaps Meenakshi is most associated with her lyrical nature poetry that draws upon a rich Tamil literature on the subject. *Our lovers* is a wonderful example of the intimate intensity with which she experiences the natural world:

The bamboo shoot
Dips its fingers
Into my ribs' side.
The life breath of the breeze
covers me.
A single ray of the sun
Embraces me and flees away.
Oh, how many lovers I have!

This is a very charming collection, marred only by some erratic punctuation and a few infelicities and misspellings in the English translation.

Alan

Pebble by R.Meenakshi. English translation by M.L. Thangappa. Dream Space Publications, India, 2018. Rs 150, \$6.



கூழாங்கல்
Pebble



PHOTO: ALAN

"I haven't anything spectacular to say"

In 1968 a young woman landed in Pondicherry, attracted by nothing in particular but her interest in India. She has stayed ever since, except for a two year period from 1970-1972. Here is Janet's story.

I was born and grew up in Newfoundland, an island off the east coast of Canada. I went to university in Nova Scotia and then moved to Toronto. In 1967 I left my job as a social worker in a psychiatric hospital and got myself an around the world ticket. I toured Japan, then came to India, a country I had been longing to visit all my life. I was 26 years old. I landed in Calcutta in December 1967, travelled around for several months and came to Pondicherry in June 1968, a few months after the inauguration ceremony of Auroville.

I knew nothing about Auroville or Pondicherry. On the first day of my arrival, I visited the Auroville office, located opposite the post office of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where I met Alice, the late wife of Navoditte. I had met both of them a few months earlier in a *ryokan* (Japanese inn) in Kyoto. She said that I had to see the Mother. I asked 'who is the Mother?' She smiled and arranged a visit through American Arindam, who, in turn, talked to Udar. I met the Mother around ten days later.

That one silent meeting, where she just looked at me and smiled, changed my life, although I did not know it at the time. I noticed after a few months that my plan to return to Canada had disappeared from my mind. I stayed because of her, and I stayed in Pondicherry. But I had no idea about yoga, or about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's teachings. I started attending classes with Arindam Basu, and in the afternoons was reading Sri Aurobindo's books in the Ashram library. In the morning, I would be hanging out in the Indian Coffee House on Nehru Street, together with some early Aurovilians, such as Gene Maslow, Francis, Frederick, and Arindam. But this hanging around didn't seem right, and I asked Udar if I couldn't have a job. He asked Mother, and she told him that I could start working for the Senteur perfume unit of the Ashram.

Moving to Auroville

Just before I was to begin work, Gene asked me to come to Auroville and help him build his house in what is now known as Sincerity – this was the name the Mother had given Gene for his house. I came on the daily Landrover service to Auroville and worked all day. But that evening the Landrover didn't show up to take us back to Pondy, so I had to spend the night in one of the huts left over from the inauguration ceremony. I returned to Pondicherry to ask Udar to ask Mother if I could go to Auroville instead of joining Senteurs, and she said, 'Yes. Blessings.'

At that time, there were only five other non-Tamil people living near the centre of Auroville. Bob and Deborah, and Gary Miller were living in Forecomers and Gene and Arindam were staying at the Centre, which Mother later named Peace. There were others living further away near Morattandi. Gerard was at Auro Orchard and Piero and Gloria and a few others were in Promesse. Aspiration did not yet exist. After a few weeks, other people started to arrive, such as Francis, Rod and Constance. As we could not all live in one hut, we each started to build our own huts. With \$100 I built myself a small one-room hut near a mango tree, which later became part of the Matrimandir Nursery. The Mother named it 'Joy'. Later Constance built a hut close by, although there was a piece of village land between our huts.

A blank sheet

What I loved the most about those days was the empty barren land, which held so much promise. It felt like we were being handed a blank sheet where no mistakes had been made, and the ideals of the Charter seemed like something that were easily attainable. I found the Tamil people to be so open, simple and always smiling. We had a lot of contact with them because they were the only human beings around. One main contact was with the children who minded the endless herds of goats that roamed everywhere. The goats would eat the trees we had so carefully planted and watered, and the children would laugh at our irritation and frustration, and tease us by letting more goats inside the fence.

They were extremely poor and malnourished. Most of the men were even shorter than I am. They lived a life that seemed no different from what they would have lived a thousand years ago. The only things they had that came from the modern world were the occasional bicycle and wristwatch. One or two people had a transistor radio. The nearest bus stop was at Koot Road, so many people had never been as far as Pondy, and there was no electricity or running water. People drew their water from the village well with a bucket. I always felt completely

safe, even though there was no one else around, and I never felt they regarded me as a woman or a sexual object.

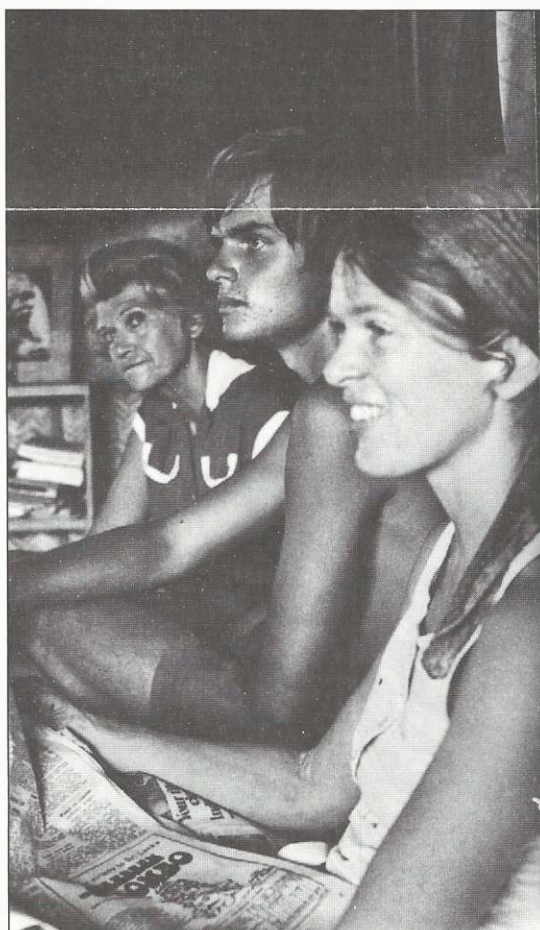
Meeting Mother

I must have met Mother six or seven times, besides the regular darshans. I always met her on my birthday, then when I built my first house in Auroville, and again when I left in 1970 for Canada and when I came back to Auroville. Those meetings were usually in absolute silence, but once she asked me if I could speak French, and I felt blessed and protected every time I left that room. That sense of protection has never left me.

I stayed in Auroville for two years, then went back to Canada to try to persuade my father to support me in Auroville. It cost so little to live here in those days that it would have been no problem for him. He was quite upset that I had decided to live in India and put my life in the hands of an 'old woman'. When I explained things to him in person he remained unsympathetic so I had no choice but to get a job and earn some money before returning.

Return to Auroville

When I came back in 1972, there had been a small population explosion. When I left there were around 100 people, and when I returned, there were about 300! As my house was occupied by someone else, I stayed in Pondicherry for a few months. Then 'Lady Jean' (Jean Finney), a dancer who had built a house in Centre Field, asked me to be caretaker while she was out. It was a simple hut, but made very beautifully. Jean never came back. I transferred the name Mother had given to my first hut to my new home in Centre Field. I stayed there until 2008, when I moved to Arati and my daughter L'aura Joy took over the house and its name.



From left: Klara, Toine and Janet

There was no Matrimandir when I left Auroville in 1970, but when I returned in 1972, work was in full swing. I cycled every day from Pondicherry to paint pipes for the scaffolding, which I continued to do after moving back to Auroville. The all night concretings were particularly memorable. The feelings of joy and human unity were very strong as *chetties* of cement were passed along from person to person – Ashramites, Aurovilians, villagers, guests. It seemed like all of humanity was represented.

In 1973, I started teaching village women from Alankuppam and Pettai how to crochet. I would cycle to Pettai every day, and sit on the porch of one of the ladies and distribute the work, which I got from Lisa, mother of Aurora and founder of Aurocreation. They had never done anything like this before, and their first attempts were pretty awful, but they learned very quickly, and soon the work was good enough to sell in Aurocreation Boutique in Pondy. In addition to earning money, it was an opportunity for the ladies to do something different from their normal routine, which included rising very early, getting water from the village well, starting the fire and cooking.

Mother's passing

I was in Auroville when news reached us of the Mother's passing. I was in my hut, and someone came to my door. Someone had phoned from the Ashram to the one phone we had in the Matrimandir Camp. We went to Pondicherry as fast as we could. We knew that Mother had not been well for several months, but we never imagined that she would ever leave. It was a huge shock. But we entered an atmosphere that was intense, sombre, yet at the same time very beautiful.

But her leaving her body didn't change why I wanted to be in Auroville, though decision-making became more difficult. Before she left, any questions we had would be written and sent to the Mother for her decision. After she left, we had to figure things out for ourselves.

I was never very actively involved in the struggles with the Sri Aurobindo Society which started shortly after Mother's passing, and lasted throughout the 70's and early 80's. I supported the Auroville side, went to all the general meetings (less civilized, but more lively and action-oriented than the ones we have today), but that was about it, except for having to appear at court in Tindivanam a few times on charges of trespassing, if I remember correctly.

Motherhood

The next phase of my life was motherhood. Sukrit was born in 1975 and L'aura in 1978. I no longer cycled to the village to crochet, but built a workshop next to my house, where the ladies came. In 1978 Skye and her ex-husband Philip built Centre School, which became Centre Kindergarten several years later after Transition School started as the middle school. I remember Suzie was the main teacher and both of my children loved her. They both remember having very happy and carefree childhoods in Auroville. They did not have many toys, but didn't miss them either, as nature and the things around them were so interesting, and the sense of community was very strong among the families with children, and there was a lot of visiting back and forth.

I continued running Handicrafts Joy until 1992, when the ladies moved to Auromics to work with Bobby and Heidi, and the buildings were turned into a guesthouse, which still exists today, under the management of Giovanni, Stefania and Sara. When I ran the guest house, it offered very simple accommodation for backpackers and students.

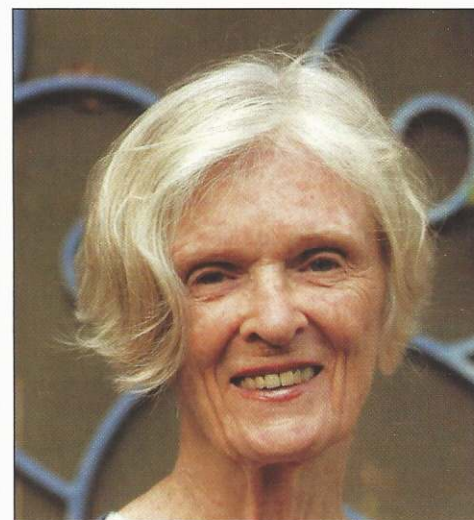
Educational programmes

In 1993 we ran a trial educational programme aimed at three groups of students, from Auroville, from travelers and guests, and from the surrounding villages. [see *Auroville Today* June 1993]. All of the lectures were given in English with a Tamil translation. This programme was not repeated because of lack of interest from Auroville at the time, but we began to host student groups, such as Living Routes. We usually had a night watchman from one of the surrounding villages, who was a college student, to interact with the foreign students in a learning environment. Some of these students have gone on to become Aurovilians, such as Kumar, a teacher at Transition School and founding member of New Colours in Edayanchavady, and Sathyaseelan, now a lawyer, who has become a legal advisor on land matters.

Organisational matters

In the 1980s, I started to develop an interest in the organisation of Auroville. Before the Auroville Foundation came into force in 1991, Auroville had what was called an Executive Council, which I belonged to for a while. Much of its work was about solving problems, which I felt was not what it should be doing. A few years later, some of us proposed that the Council should be a coordinating body for all of Auroville's internal affairs, with problem-solving to be dealt with by a separate group. When this concept received community approval, it was clarified that the Working Committee, a statutory body of the Auroville Foundation, was to deal with 'outside' matters, and a separate group, called the Auroville Council, was to take care of internal issues.

Although there were attempts to have a separate conflict resolution group, they did not last and the Council continued to deal with conflicts. The reality was that we didn't have the people with the right skills. There was an American mediator called Rabhiya, who did it for a while, and gave several mediation workshops, but when she left there was nobody really qualified. Kathryn, aka Swaha, came



later and did some mediations. However, a professional approach to conflict resolution only started many years later, when Elvira started Koodam, which today has 3 trained mediators. In 2011, my daughter L'aura started sharing Restorative Circles in talks and workshops, but it wasn't until late 2015 that we committed ourselves full-time to this work of hosting regular circles. I am happy that both of these systems have now been accepted in Auroville.

Restorative circles

For the past 10 years I have been a member of the Aikiyam School Support Group but my main work today is with the Restorative Circle team and I am increasingly impressed by their potential to hold space for difficult conversations in which a relatively large number of people can participate. In this process, people listen very deeply to each other and then reflect what they have heard, not just the words, but the feelings and longings behind the words. Sometimes not only the conflict, but also the underlying animosities get resolved. I think Restorative Circles can also become a tool for decision-making, for finding solutions together. "You must all agree. That is the only way to do good work", Mother said to Roger Anger, Auroville's architect. That applies to all of us in Auroville.

Cross-cultural issues

In September 2016, inspired by a film we saw of Restorative Circle principles used in very emotionally charged meetings between Maoists and those loyal to the government during the Nepali civil war, we invited Duke Duchscherer to Auroville to co-host with us a Restorative Dialogue across Cultures. More than 50 people came; half were Indian and half were from a Western background. More than half of the Indians had originally come from the surrounding villages. People spoke very openly. One thing that really touched me was when a Tamil village Aurovillian described how he felt when non-Tamil Aurovilians didn't seem to know or care that Auroville existed in a context, and how this attitude is so hurtful to the people who have lived on this land for countless generations. Everyone present, regardless of background, wanted to be seen above all as a unique individual rather than put into a box and labeled a Tamil or a Frenchman.

A second Cross-Cultural Dialogue is scheduled for the end of April, particularly to address a perception of some people that there is racial discrimination in Auroville. This issue came up after the visit of the Prime Minister, when two Tamil village Aurovillian members of the Working Committee were not given proximity passes. They attributed this to discrimination by the organizers, an accusation which is flatly denied by them. I am not so much interested in discussing who is right or wrong in this particular case, but would rather encourage the underlying issues to come to the surface so that they can be looked at and dealt with.

The future

I do not know where we are going, but I believe in Auroville, and I continue to be very happy being here. On the surface, it seems that Auroville is far from its ideals, and perhaps that is true. But can we really judge? I can't. Someone might say that we have many conflicts in Auroville as compared to elsewhere, but I think this is due to what we are here for. In Auroville, you can't run away from a conflict, you have to face it. Each of us carries so much baggage that it is not amazing that development takes time.

Speaking personally, I have become a lot more humble and tolerant. I am not very spiritually evolved, I do not have any great realisations, but I do have that absolute sense of certainty that everything is developing as it should.

In conversation with Carel

"I knew I was at home"

Emma describes how she came to Auroville

I grew up in rural England: a very normal life. Until I realised, sometime in my teenage years, that I felt something was missing from me. It wasn't until I was 24 that I discovered there was more colour in the world than I had ever imagined. I started my journey in India and travelled through Asia to Australia. I discovered diverse experiences and cultures, full of different faiths. My perception of life opened up and I returned home with a feeling of awe.

It took another few years in England to understand that I would not find peace within myself if I continued to reside in my home country. I left when I was 27 to move to the other world.

I chose India, as I had left my heart there on my first journey. I bought an old broken-down house in Goa and rebuilt it with hopes of making my dream a reality. I married a man from India, we had two beautiful children and for seven years I tried to believe that I was happy. I was not, so we decided to live apart for some time. I rebuilt my own life with my children and slowly I looked deeper inside of myself to try and understand who I was.

Four years ago I was called to my first real purpose. The school my children attended, The Yellow House Pre-School and Holistic Yellow, was desperately in need of new management. Without someone to step in and take over, the school would have been in trouble.

For over three years the school's director Karl and I worked together with passion and commitment to reinvent the future vision for the school. We had to teach ourselves our desired approach to holistic education. We worked purely on faith and Google.

Goa is a unique place where people from across the globe gather to find a creative, holistic existence; the school reflects this. We believe education should inspire and that implementing a more open and holistic educational system incites inquiry and creativity. We encouraged the children to explore and discover their environment, learning through experience, and we supported them in realising their own potential and finding their own balance in the world.

Starting with a small school of around 50 students, with no fixed curriculum or any kind of structure, we



Emma (right) with her children Evangel (left) and Luca

changed every aspect, from the physical to administration procedures. We introduced the Cambridge Curriculum and began working towards recognition. We built a new pre-school and created an amazing, magical space for our children.

We were challenged every step of our journey from every direction. It was inspirational and emotional. After three years I realised my work of reviving the school, was complete. The school had been my life. Every breath. Every moment. But it had taken me far away from the need for self-discovery.

I have spent the last year quietly uncovering the real me. It has not been easy. I have had to let go of a lot. What I didn't want became clear. What I was looking for I could not find. Knowing that peace comes from within, I let go and surrendered.

A few months ago, I decided that nothing would change inside of me if I stayed in Goa. I had worked so hard to discover my light but found it constantly extinguished with the energy I was surrounded by. I had no idea where I would go but I knew I had to find a new place to call home for my children. I did not know much about Auroville. I had briefly looked at the website last year when I was research-

ing schools in India. I have a few friends who grew up here and I see the Auroville products in every supermarket in Goa. So I had some idea of the community but not much knowledge of the vision. I had no idea there was a Matrimandir or a Mother.

In February, I decided to face my fear of the unknown and start my search for a better life. I planned to journey alone for two weeks by train to Bangalore, then by bus to Auroville and afterwards fly home from Chennai.

I arrived by chance to experience the Mother's birthday, Prime Minister Modi's visit and the 50th Anniversary in the eleven days I was here.

My first time in Auroville was magical and full of synchronicity. I finally felt the peace inside and knew my answer as I sat for the first time in the Matrimandir. After my experience, I introduced myself to my guide, Tim, and asked him where do I begin? He was full of wholehearted stories and advice. He took me to Entry Service and then he took me for lunch and coffee at the Solar Kitchen. There it all began. Tim was one of my synchronicities and is now my friend and my mentor. A few days later, I was blessed to be at the 50th morning meditation in the Amphitheatre I felt the peace inside growing. I knew I was home.

Whilst in Auroville, I realised my passion for astrology was not only a significant element in guiding me through my own realignment process, but also I found a faith in my ability to support my close friends on their own inner journey. I discovered, using astrology, I could assist others in initiating self-transformation, change perspectives and give insight into the depths of our beings. My enthusiasm increased. I felt I knew a little more of who I am.

I returned to Goa for three weeks to pack up my house and say goodbye to the few precious friends I have. I packed everything I could into my little car and alone drove to Auroville. My children came a few weeks later.

We will now explore our new world together. I know they will love it here and thrive in the forests. I want them to understand that life is not defined by money or success, but by reaching into your soul to create a beautiful vision, and that is the reason why we came to Auroville.

Emma

Crowd funding for the lands

The Land For Auroville United team has launched a crowd funding campaign to acquire the lands for Auroville. An estimated 200 million dollars will be needed to purchase all the land in Auroville's Master Plan area – but right now, it says, "we could do a lot to safeguard Auroville with 20 million dollars!" Direct donations to crowd funding can be made via <https://www.globalgiving.org/projects/auroville-land-funding> or visit <http://land.auroville.org/donate/> or the Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/Aurovillefunding>.

Auroville 50th stamps

On the occasion of Auroville's 50th anniversary, the postal authorities of France and The Netherlands have also issued a special postal stamp.



From discrimination to unity in diversity

In order to address the issues and feelings related to discrimination in Auroville, the Auroville Council decided to form a subgroup. Together with members from the community, it plans a year-long focus on this theme through events, courses and multicultural happenings "that celebrate our unity in diversity and enable us to hear and understand each other on a deeper level." The first event will be the Cross Cultural Dialogue hosted by the Restorative Circle team that will take place on April 28th and 29th.

Stray dogs menace

Stray dogs constitute a public health hazard, sometimes acting aggressively towards people and other pets and disturbing the peace at night by barking. The Auroville Council has constituted a group to conduct a dog audit through mass mail which, it hopes, will lead to a supportive and responsible group of dog owners and dog lovers. Jointly with this group, the Council also intends to write guidelines to help dog owners; find solutions for spots where dogs tend to congregate; and raise funds to be able to sterilize and vaccinate at least 70% of stray dogs in the area to keep the dog population stable.

All USA Meeting 2018

Between 2nd – 5th August, the All USA Meeting 2018 will celebrate Auroville, Matagiri and the California Institute of Integral Study in their 50th year. The gathering will be held at Matagiri and the Ashokan Center (<http://ashokancenter.org/>). The theme is "Art as a Bridge". "Auroville House", part of Matagiri's new infrastructure, will also be inaugurated during the event. For more information and registration visit www.matagiri.org/events/.

Return of the speed breaker

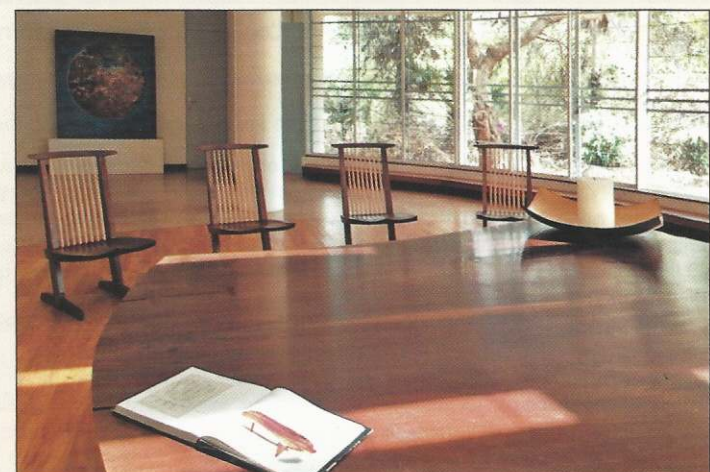
Since the removal of all speed breakers on Auroville roads for the visit of the Prime Minister, an increase in the speed of both 2 and 4 wheeler traffic has been observed, highlighting road safety concerns. Auroville's Town Planning Department, together with the Auroville Safety and Security Service team, has identified locations where traffic-calming measures are needed and are studying solutions to allow for ease of driving while reducing speed.

Road concerns

In response to complaints about poor road quality, the Auroville Earth Institute has clarified that the poured earth concrete road stretch between Certitude and the Solar Kitchen roundabout was made hastily as it had to be opened before the visit of the Prime Minister. Citing technical and human problems as the main reason for the premature erosion, the Earth Institute clarified that the parts that are eroding will be repaired. The 788 m long road was made in 22 days at a cost of around Rs 24.5 Lakhs, or Rs 777 a square metre. This makes it the cheapest and fastest executed road ever made in Auroville.

Conoid chairs for Hall of Peace

The Hall of Peace, with its magnificent Peace Table for Asia, envisioned by late George Nakashima and crafted by Nakashima Woodworkers, New Hope, USA, has finally been completed with the installation of seven Conoid Lounge Chairs. Also referred to as Meditation Chairs, these are among Georges Nakashima's most famous designs, and are also on display in the George Nakashima room of the Metropolitan Museum in New York. The seven chairs have been a joint donation by the Nakashima Peace Foundation, the American Foundation for World Education, the Dutch Stichting Aurofonds and an individual donor. The chairs were inaugurated on February 26th in the presence of members of the Nakashima family.



BOOK REVIEW

Wildlife Great and Small of India's Coromandel

Here's a paradox. Although Auroville remains a predominantly rural community, many Aurovilians have little knowledge of the wildlife that lives around them. Tim Wrey, in his recent book *Wildlife Great and Small of India's Coromandel*, sets out to remedy this lacuna.

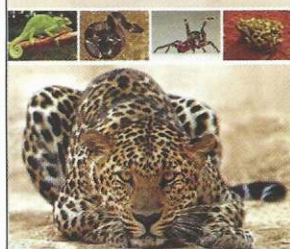
Over the years, Tim has been one of our foremost wildlife educators. In this, he has complemented the educational efforts of other early Aurovilians, like amateur ornithologist, 'Big Piet', with his bird surveys and Dietra from Gratitude, as well as, more recently, Rajeev Bhatt, who published an invaluable guide to the snakes of this area.

I first came across Tim's work 30 years ago in the Aurelec in-house magazine, of which he was the editor. Almost every month, for two and a half years, he published 'Environmental Notes' featuring fascinating information about the animals, big and small which, largely unnoticed, creep, stalk, fly and slither around us.

Later, he expanded and augmented these notes into a handy reference book, *Footsteps through the Salad: wildlife profiles and natural phenomena of Auroville*. His latest book expands this one to include the wildlife of the Coromandel, a strip of coast running along the south-east edge of India which is a unique bioregion.

Written essentially for the layperson, the book contains detailed profiles of a selection of the mammals, birds, reptiles, flying insects and other creatures that inhabit this region. Here you can learn about the distress call of the mugger croc-

Wildlife great and small of India's Coromandel



the market that offers an overview of the different forms of wildlife of this region.

Richly illustrated with photographs, drawings and cartoons (why should the acquisition of knowledge be solemn?), this is an invaluable and entertaining reference work. Tim's hope is that by awakening the public to the wonders of the wild world, such books will act as a powerful antidote to the worldwide extinction of wildlife that is underway at present.

Alan

Wildlife Great and Small of India's Coromandel by Tim Wrey, 401 pps. Published by PRISMA, 2018. Available from PRISMA and auroville.com Rs 950 plus p.p.

The Morning Star Birthing Centre is born

On the morning of February 21, at a beautiful ceremony held behind Santé, the Morning Star Birthing Centre was dedicated. The Centre, proposed to be ready by 2020, will provide Auroville with a specialised space for maternity and childbirth. Paula Murphy, the project holder, talks about her experience of working as a midwife in Auroville and how it led to the birth of Morning Star.

What is the philosophy behind Morning Star?

Paula: I strongly believe that physiological, natural birth is the way birth is meant to be. Our mission at Morning Star is to offer women safe childbirth experiences in the centre of Auroville that manifest the highest spiritual qualities during pregnancy, birth and in the months after birth.

Birth is an eternal thing. And the ability to hold that space and to protect that space is the work of a midwife. So I'm happy to be able to create a place in Auroville where I can manifest that highest aspiration of being a midwife.

How did this project come about?

When I started to work as a women's health provider in Sante, I began to hear stories about women's lives or about important people in their lives – their daughters and friends. And I heard a lot that disturbed me. They spoke of early initiation of sexual activity, young women seeking abortions and unpleasant, overly medicalized birth experiences. In December 2016, I developed a research project to examine women's health in Auroville. A total of 216 women participated. The areas explored included puberty, sexual health, maternity and personal safety. In the maternity section we asked about details of place of birth, type of delivery – normal or caesarean section – quality of care received, time off from work and breastfeeding.

The responses showed that 41% of women felt that Auroville was not very welcoming for pregnant women. Many women expressed that they didn't get enough time off to be with their babies or that they wished they had a better situation when they gave birth. One woman said, "It was a hospital birth – highly medicalized – not what I wanted". Other comments include, "I did not get enough help while the delivery was happening," "There were so many people around me making sounds that it made me uncomfortable," and "I wish that there would have been more consciousness in the community about what mothering means." Because of that study I realized that there was much more work that was needed to be done in this area.

I then went to the Human Rights in Childbirth Conference in Mumbai on birth in India. This made me curious about what it's like to give birth in the Auroville bioregion. From my research I found that often the women are isolated, no family members are allowed and they are not treated with dignity or the respect due a woman in childbirth. While it is difficult to get accurate statistics because hospitals are not required to report their caesarean section rates, it is estimated that 60 to 80% of childbearing women in India have a surgical delivery. Granted, a caesarean can be life-saving. However, when it is unnecessary it is the ultimate violence in childbirth.

For me, the mistreatment of women during childbirth is a basic violation of human rights. It is, of course, a violation of the mother's rights. But it's more than that! What about the baby's? And what about fathers? How did fathers get so removed from the birthing experience?

Also, on the level of the human micro-biome, when the infant is born through the vaginal canal, it begins the colonization of the baby by the mother's flora, and when it is put on the mother's skin and gets breast milk, this helps the transfer of healthy microorganisms from the mother to the baby. In hospitals, they tend to disturb this process. They want to bathe the baby, they want to wash the mother. And if you've had a caesarean section, it is very



Paula Murphy

Krishna who studied midwifery in the UK, Shanti who is interested in breast feeding and midwifery, Rotem who is a doula (a woman who gives support to another woman during pregnancy and after birth) and is learning midwifery and Osnat who is a physiotherapist with training in women's postural needs. I wouldn't go ahead with this project if I didn't have a team of women working with me.

What facilities will this space provide?

The birthing centre will have two birthing suites with a birthing tub. There will be an open space for family members, a small kitchen, an office for the midwife, and a large space dedicated to multipurpose use such as classes, meetings, and presentations. We want to create a welcoming, homelike ambience.



Inauguration of the Morning Star

difficult because many aspects of the natural process have been disrupted.

When did you conceive of an Auroville birth centre?

It was when I helped Sindhuja and Michael to have their baby a little more than a year ago that I started to imagine a dedicated space for this work in Auroville. Once I had the idea, everything unfolded very fast.

It felt like the right time because there are young women here in Auroville who really want to be midwives. There is

So we'll have all the comforts of a home but with facilities normally not available at home – a permanent, easy to clean birth tub with warm running water and a neonatal resuscitation area. We'll also have equipment like birthing balls, and loops of material hung from the ceiling to enable different positions during labour – things that promote natural birth and vaginal deliveries. And then we'll have enclosed gardens and a walking path on the grounds, where a woman can move and be with nature during labour within a protected, private space.

We want the form of the birthing room to encourage her to give birth naturally.

How did you choose the name?

"Morning Star" is from a passage in Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. I had read *Savitri* even before I became a midwife. This particular passage means so much to me because it's so hopeful for mothers and for humanity:

*I saw the Omnipotent's flaming pioneers
Over the heavenly verge which turns towards life
Come crowding down the amber stairs of birth;
Forerunners of a divine multitude,
Out of the paths of the morning star they came
Into the little room of mortal life.*

What does the experience of assisting in birthing mean for you as a midwife?

I try to be a touchstone of reality, a touchstone of reassurance and of knowledge, for what can otherwise be a very tumultuous, emotionally-charged and fearful time for the woman giving birth and her partner. Even for women who feel the most prepared, the actual intensity of the birthing process can be unnerving.

Midwifery is considered a science and an art. The science has certainly been highly developed in the West, and I value that. It's incredibly important when you have an opportunity to learn that you use this knowledge. But what I also love is the art. The art is in witnessing, supporting, confirming and reassuring the woman that the process is on track, while allowing her to be at the centre. It's her birth, her creation.

It's a beautiful work. It has the intellectual aspect, the emotional component which is to have sympathy, empathy and compassion for your patients and for their families, and then the actual hands-on skills of being able to determine what position the baby is in, to determine dilation, and help with the actual delivery. It's everything – it involves your head, heart and hands all at once.

What does it mean for you to be doing this work in Auroville?

To me, the practical is the spiritual. I stay within the realm of the possible, the realm of what I see and what I know. And the reality of the situation is so profound that it doesn't require any embellishment. My focus is to be safe, careful, and attentive to the moment by moment details of the work that needs to be done and then consecrate that work in the spirit of Auroville.

Anusha



Concept design of the Morning Star

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Editorial team:

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

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