

## The Auroville Earth Institute working for Auroville, working for the world

**As the Auroville community concludes its 50th anniversary year, the Auroville Earth Institute is looking ahead towards its own 30th anniversary milestone in August.**

**S**pecialised in sustainable soil-based building techniques, the Earth Institute has become a familiar name in Auroville as a result of construction projects like the Visitors' Centre, Vikas Community, Deepanam School and Realization Community. The Earth Institute attracts over 300 students a year who come to its campus as short-term trainees, interns and researchers. At a time when many architects are trying to characterise their buildings as "green" and "sustainable", the Institute's expertise is sought by organisations and private individuals around the world because of its proven ability to offer truly low-carbon building technologies, favouring soil and other locally sourced building materials that also energize local economies by providing sustainable livelihoods. To date, the Earth Institute has executed a variety of building projects and training missions in 36 countries and has received 15 national and international awards.

The story of the Earth Institute began in 1989 when HUDCO (the Housing & Urban Development Corporation, Government of India) provided a grant for the creation of a training centre for building technologies and the construction of a visitors' centre in Auroville to showcase sustainable building technologies. Satprem Mañi, a French architect who had been working for CRAterre (the International Centre for Earth Building at the École Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture in Grenoble, France) and who had already formed a deep appreciation for Auroville and its spiritual aims, was invited to Auroville by Suhasini Ayer and Gilles Guigan to share his years of experience in the earth-building field. "I didn't want to be working only on short-term international projects anymore, and so I immediately agreed," explains Satprem. The design for the Visitors' Centre developed into an ambitious structure incorporating a series of arched elements and domes, all built with compressed stabilised earth blocks and other low-cost sustainable building technologies.

Satprem provided the needed expertise and became the director of the "Earth Unit" of the new Auroville Building Centre (AVBC). From its founding in 1989, the AVBC / Earth Unit engaged in research, construction and training to provide modern and adaptable soil-based building technologies for India and the world. Later, as the team evolved and the number of activities expanded, the name would change to Auroville Earth Institute. Today, the institute is still led by Satprem, along with co-directors T. Ayyappan, a highly skilled technician who has worked alongside Satprem since the very beginning, and Lara Davis, an MIT-trained architect and structural masonry specialist. The team has grown to over 25 members, including masons, architects, engineers, office staff, and construction workers, many of whom have been working with the Earth Institute for one or two decades.

### Fostering earth building techniques

The Institute's team finds that promoting earthen architecture is

actually a task of reconnecting people with their own traditional building methods. "If the discipline of architecture can begin to study the complexity of the vernacular, then we have an infinite palette of sensitive, context-responsive and sustainable solutions to draw from," Lara explains. India has a rich tradition of earth construction, and modern adaptations such as stabilisation and reinforcement can make it competitive with conventional building technologies.

The building technology that the Earth Institute has advocated and implemented the most is compressed stabilised earth block (CSEB). Composed of soil excavated from the construction sites and a small percentage of cement to increase the strength and resist the monsoon climate, the blocks are compressed manually and cured, resulting in an adaptable masonry building material that can be used for load-bearing walls of up to four storeys. The production of CSEB creates livelihoods for unskilled labourers and does not require firing – a cause of deforestation and pollution – or, as the materials are locally sourced, long-distance transport, which means 10 times less embodied energy and 13 times less carbon emissions than country fired brick. In combination with Robi Trunz and the Aureka team, a manual block press was developed and dubbed the Auram Press 3000, which has been marketed internationally. Operated by a small team of seven people, it can produce 850 to 1,000 CSEBs per day and has been used in projects around Auroville, in the larger India, and the world.

In order to promote stabilised earth building and the usage of arches, vaults, and domes for roofing systems, the Earth Institute developed short awareness programmes and one- and two-week courses on the production, design, and usage of CSEB; the theory and practical construction of arches, vaults, and domes; and the production of ferrocement elements (ferrocement being a low-cost building material that was first introduced to Auroville by Roger Anger). Over the past 29 years, these courses have attracted over 13,000 students, primarily from India, but also from 87 other countries.

These training courses have had the desired effect of popularising

earthen construction. When asked if the students go on to build with earth, Ayyappan says, "Not all of them; some come for study purposes only. But for every ten students that come, at least one or two will go on to build with our technologies."

Continually seeking new and improved techniques for earth construction, the Earth Institute has multiple ongoing research projects. It has led important research into the poured earth concrete technology, which also offers a low-carbon alternative to concrete construction. "I see poured earth concrete as a very promising area for research as it is less expensive and faster to implement than CSEB masonry. We are researching both slabs and beams," says Satprem. Ayyappan also speaks to its current success, adding, "It has been adopted by other architects within Auroville. Suhasini is using it and Dorle has used it for the RE-CENTRE campus."

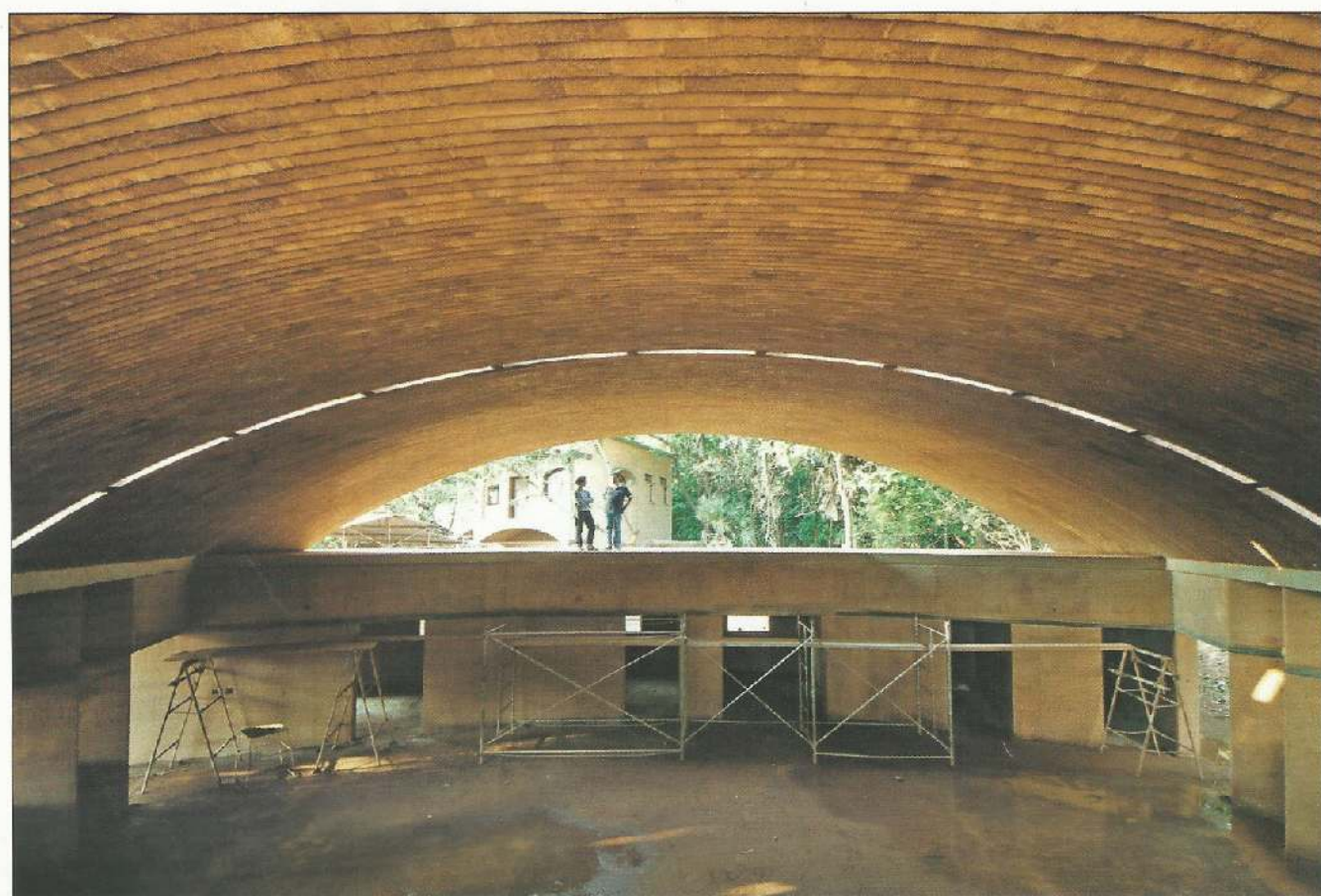
Other research at the Earth Institute aims to improve the sustainability and usability of its current techniques. To avoid the use of sand and cement, the Earth Institute has explored quarry dust, lime, and natural binders as alternatives. Other topics have included biodegradability of CSEB, thermo-insular properties of vaults, social acceptability of earthen buildings, earth-bamboo technologies, and use of waste materials in earth mixes.

### Earth construction in Auroville and abroad

Construction projects in Auroville have provided an excellent opportunity for the implementation of the Earth Institute's technologies, including CSEB, stabilised rammed earth, and roofing systems with CSEB vaults and domes or with ferrocement channels. One of the Earth Institute's first projects was Vikas Community, an apartment complex of four floors made with CSEB. Designed to encourage a strong community lifestyle, it had a community kitchen, sustainable energy, and water recycling and harvesting. Other projects soon followed, including Mirramukhi School (now known as Deepanam School), which incorporated stabilised rammed earth walls for the classrooms and a 10 metre span vault over the amphitheatre. Individual houses were built by the Earth Institute in Utilité and Auromodèle, featuring beautiful domes and vaulted spaces. Later in 2008, it took on again a full-scale housing complex, Realization Community, which was enlivened by a semi-participatory process for the block production.

The Earth Institute has also been regularly invited by governments, international development organizations, and environmentally focused initiatives in a leading or partnering role to implement projects. This is often in the context of a "technology transfer" to train local building professionals how to use stabilised earth technologies and encourage social acceptance of earthen buildings.

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Vault of the Conference Hall at Sharanam Rural Development Centre

PHOTO: COURTESY AUROVILLE EARTH INSTITUTE



Students learning to use the Auram Press 3000 to make CSEB

PHOTO: VIMAL, AUROVILLE CONSULTING

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After the Gujarat Earthquake of 2001, the Earth Institute was active in developing a disaster-resistant prototype and training local teams for reconstruction efforts using a system of reinforced hollow interlocking CSEB, which could be used for seismically-resistant buildings and which was approved by the Gujarat Government for reconstruction of structures up to two floors. As a result, the Earth Institute assisted the Catholic Relief Services to build 2,698 houses over the course of a year.

This prolific work and dedication to research and teaching in the field of earth-based building techniques has earned the Earth Institute the role of representative and resource centre for Asia of the UNESCO Chair "Earthen Architecture, Constructive Cultures and Sustainable Development" in 2000. This network is headquartered at CRAterre and unites 40 members in 23 countries to promote the dissemination of scientific and technical know-how on earthen architecture at an international level. The Earth Institute publishes training manuals, construction guides, and case studies, attends many national and international conferences, and is involved in research partnerships and providing guidance to researchers and students from around the globe.

#### Prospects for earth construction

And yet, while interest in earthen architecture is increasing globally, the situation in Auroville is



The completed Kaza Eco-Community Centre in Spiti Valley

different. Despite initial enthusiasm for the use of CSEB and other earth-based building techniques in the 1990s and early 2000s, the majority of today's buildings are once again made with conventional building materials. Many of Auroville's architects received training from the Earth Institute – including Anita Gaur, Shama Dalvi, Tejaswini Mistry-Kapoor, Fabian Ostner, Bertrand Desalle, and

Mirra Prajapati – so why has raw earth as a building material fallen into disfavour?

According to Satprem, a few isolated examples of poorly designed earthen buildings in Auroville have resulted in a negative public perception about the thermal comfort and durability of earthen buildings as a whole. Independently-run CSEB block-yards not following production guidelines has also led to poor quality CSEB being on the market. He says, "The buildings constructed by the Earth Institute are not always perfect, but they behave well and demonstrate longevity with a minimum of maintenance." Ayyappan blames a bias against earthen housing projects in some quarters of the Auroville establishment for the shift away from CSEB. He adds, "Sharanam is probably the best example of our work."

Sharanam Rural Development Centre is the Earth Institute's latest project in Pondicherry, where it designed and built the one- and two-storey dormitories and a conference hall. The hall showcased poured earth concrete pier walls and has one of the largest earthen vaults in the world with a maximum span of 15 metres, a feat that required extensive stability studies and meticulous masonry work. Another recent project, the Kaza Eco-Community Centre in Spiti Valley in north India, demonstrated a beautiful synthesis of traditional rammed earth, earthquake-resistant CSEB, and passive design strategies, and was recognized with a low carbon architecture award during the 2016 United Nations

Climate Change Conference (COP22).

International projects continue to call Satprem, Ayyappan and Lara out into the field. The Earth Institute has been collaborating over the past years on the "Homes not Houses" project, funded by the European Union, to complete feasibility studies for earthen construction in areas affected by Sri Lanka's civil war and to provide comprehensive training for CSEB production and construction methods for the construction of 950 CSEB houses.

Another significant portion of the Earth Institute's legacy is the sheer number of the trainees, interns and collaborating architects who have gone on to implement their own earthen buildings and to become earthen architecture specialists. Each of these individuals have a small ripple effect that counters the rampant growth of the concrete-based construction sector.

Tirelessly researching new innovations for earthen construction and offering its technologies to Auroville's practitioners and "humanity as a whole" through training and knowledge sharing, the Earth Institute enters its fourth decade as a leading example of Auroville's accomplishments in research and outreach.

Hilary

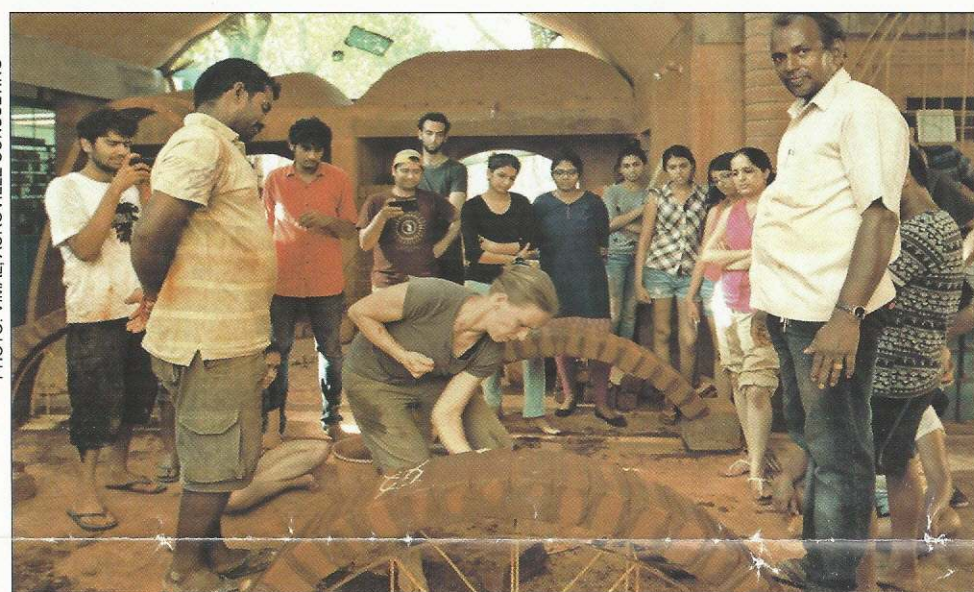
#### Noteworthy projects of the Earth Institute

##### International:

Primary School, Kinshasa (Democratic Republic of Congo)  
MINE House, Istanbul (Turkey)  
Jantanagar School, Jantanagar (Nepal)  
Al-Medy Mosque, Riyadh (Saudi Arabia)  
Model House, Simunye (South Africa)

##### India:

Dhyanalanga Dome, Coimbatore  
AUM House, Delhi, Gujarat, and Orissa  
Shakti Vihara School, Pondicherry  
Handicrafts Showroom, Pondicherry  
Community Training Centre, Marakkanam  
Sri Karneswar Nataraja Temple, Chinna Kalapet  
Ermitage, Chinna Kalapet  
Kaza Eco-Community Centre, Spiti Valley  
Sharanam Rural Development Centre, Pondicherry



Training course on arch construction with CSEB

#### CELEBRATIONS

## A youth reflection on the 50th celebrations

Special events are celebrated in all parts of the world. Have you ever been in a big city, like Paris or London, when they are celebrating something like Christmas or the New Year? If you are a visitor, you enjoy the bars and restaurants, the bright lights and fun activities. But many residents go out of their way during those periods to avoid the touristy places because of the glaring lights, blaring music and endless queues.

In Auroville we have now come to the end of our year-long jubilee to celebrate our 50th anniversary. The question is, did Auroville do it differently from the rest of the world? After all, we are not here to repeat old patterns, are we?

I'm not at all sure we succeeded. In fact, during this past year, the amount of self-inflation, shoulder-patting and trumpet-blowing I witnessed made me believe that I had landed on another planet! But I was curious to know if this was only my own reaction. So I questioned 20 or so young adults (mostly between 25 and 35 years). All were children of Auroville who had lived several years abroad. I asked them four questions: What did you experience of the 50th celebrations? What went well? What would you have wished for? and What could have been done differently?

#### What was their experience of the 50th celebrations?

Most of the youth managed to get on with their lives almost as normal during this time because they avoided

the main roads and public spots to preserve a feeling of peace. In fact, most of them chose to avoid the majority of the special 50th-related activities because they felt there was a lot of 'stress' generated around them.

Some did not attend any events at all, as they felt that Auroville's irrepressible need to showcase itself, the 'bragging' about Auroville's achievements and the overly pompous presentations, were not in line with the spirit of Auroville. They felt that the way the 50th had been highly publicized and VIPs and politicians invited was no different from celebration events held elsewhere.

"I felt that greed had taken over this request (to celebrate the 50th) and it embarrassed me to be associated with it," was one response. "Although it was clear to everyone that something out-of-the-ordinary would be done for the 50th, in the end it was still all last-minute and rushed," was another. Another hard-hitting sound bite was, "The prevailing feeling after the 50th anniversary is one of extreme unease; it's still stuck in my throat."

#### What went well?

Generally, the youth responses to the 50th celebrations and how well we had handled them were overwhelmingly negative. However, it was conceded that the events did effectively showcase a wide array of activities and aspects of life in Auroville and this led to a certain feeling of unity, and of returning to our roots. Certain collateral 'upgrades', like the repair of roads and the provision of additional

street lighting, were also appreciated.

Of the special activities that were attended (and even partially organized) by the youth, the most popular were the SEAS performance ("a symbolic reflection of our socio-cultural fabric all connecting to a spiritual dimension"), the Auroville Choir performances, The Bridge seminar, the construction of the universal earthen wall at the Unity Pavilion ("participatory, accessible to everyone, with a beautiful spirit"), the Walk of Hope and, of course, the bonfire and water ceremony.

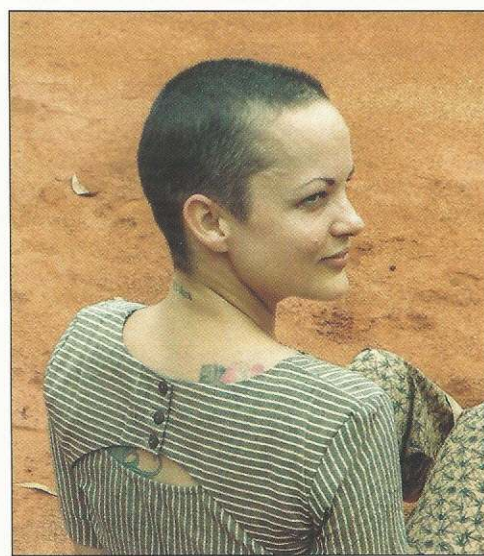
However, some felt even the dawn bonfire was disrupted by the buzz of the 50th: "there were too many people there who were not connecting to it with a quiet spirit."

#### What would you have wished for?

Many of the youth felt this was a missed opportunity to build community and celebrate together what we have achieved. "Most of the events were created for 'the outside world' and it would have been more beautiful to create these things for Auroville, to celebrate ourselves." "It should have been a moment that gathered us all together in a thankful and joyous atmosphere, to remind us where we come from and where we're heading."

Others longed for "a more peaceful and quiet atmosphere, more in sync with the actual year-round (lives of the) inhabitants of Auroville".

In fact, most of my peers agreed



Divya

that they would have preferred my radical alternative proposal of shutting down Auroville completely to all 'outsiders' for the entire birthday week so that we could have come together again as a community, as a family.

#### What could have been done better?

Generally, there was a feeling that we could have done much better. After all, "the sky is the limit here".

Those people involved in the events regretted that everything else in their lives, such as spending time with visiting friends and family, had to come to a stand-still. This left many stressed out, tired and disconnected. However, nobody suggested an alternative that would have reduced the stress.

It was observed that everyone, including the teams who were meant to be in charge, was overwhelmed by the enormity of the task and this led, at times, to haphazard coordination and communication about events and last-minute changes. However, there was appreciation of the work of the event organizers and others who helped out.

On the positive side, some of my peers said they realized they are finally ready to step up to the challenge of taking on activities which the pioneers, their parents and extended family have been doing since the beginning: I guess this is all part of 'growing up'. A brilliant example of this was the Auroville Choir which was led by both Nuria and her daughter Anandi.

It is important that the issues raised here by the youth are discussed openly so we can move on together. We should all ask ourselves what lessons we have learned from the 50th experience, and how we can apply them. Above all, as a community we need to come together to do serious introspection about where Auroville is today and where we want to go in the future.

Divya Lieser

Divya was born and grew up in Auroville. Later, she studied hotel management and translation in France. On returning to Auroville, she worked in town planning and now shares her time between Future School and OutreachMedia.



# Feel here, sense now: discovering the hidden treasures of Awareness Through the Body

Aloka and Joan talk about their approach to awareness in the body and how they have initiated a much appreciated programme to develop this in children and adults.

**AVToday:** How did both of you become involved with movement, and how did that impact your relationship to your bodies?

**Aloka:** My work with the body began with Hatha Yoga when I came to live in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram forty seven years ago. A few years later, in the Ashram, I started to learn Rolf Gelewski's improvisation techniques and Tai chi, as well as breathing techniques. It was by working with these different approaches in combination that I began to develop my own understanding and insights on exploring and expanding consciousness by using the body. My training as a Watsu therapist added a lot to my research on embodying consciousness. In the past, I thought that I would never be able to live without dancing. By plunging deeply into Awareness Through the Body (ATB), however, I feel I have discovered another type of dance. While there isn't much movement outside, there is a tremendous amount of movement inside the body and the being.



Attention rings

**Joan:** My relationship with movement started with Judo. It was the first time I got in touch with the sense that working with the body, and specifically with attention in the body, was important for me. Over the years, I worked with several traditions of bodywork and mind control, including the Gnostic tradition, Silva mind control, Aikido, Taoism, Chi gun. I learned Shiatsu and worked with people trained in Somatic disciplines, like Alexander Technique and Feldenkrais. Over the years I went deeper into several body work techniques including Strain-counterstrain, Hanna Somatics and Living Somatics. This wide canvas of experience led me to see the common threads that these traditions offer us about ways of inhabiting the body consciously. I started working with people, exploring questions like: How is attention felt in the body? How does it impact the body? What is consciousness? How, through the body, can we have access to a deeper sense of self?

**What motivated both of you to develop Awareness Through the Body (ATB) courses?**

**Aloka:** Our process began in 1992, when we were asked by some teachers at Transition School if we could work with their students to help them improve their posture. As we began interacting with the children, we realized that in addressing alignment we first needed to support them in developing some basic but essential faculties, such as the capacity to sense and listen to what was happening in their body, sustained attention, concentration and relaxation. Soon our concerns extended beyond good posture. We began to ask ourselves how we could enable children to become more self-aware. How could we empower them to better manage their emotions, exercise self-control, and develop the faculties of self-direction and responsibility. At the very core, we asked ourselves how we could help them develop the faculty of attention, the fundamental building block of our experience. How could we offer them sensorial, tangible experiences of attention in their bodies, so that by discovering how attention felt, and how to use it, they could begin to get to know themselves. This became the foundation of the work in ATB.

**Isn't attention at the foundation of all disciplines, all approaches to the body?**

**Joan:** Yes! Yet, often disciplines overlook it. They assume that you have an inherent capacity to pay attention. How you know yourself depends, crucially, on your ability to focus and sustain attention, on your capacity to listen. But this basic ability is taken for granted and normally people do not ask themselves what attention is! What is the sensation of attention? What happens when you move attention? Are you paying attention? They take for granted that we are able to sustain soft focused attention and to sense, to listen. But are we

really paying attention? Are we really listening? Or are we following our mind or entertaining our emotions, filters that we may not be conscious of? And more importantly, who is listening? What is the source of conscious, non-polarized attention? We often go through life having very little sense of ourselves. When we refer to our 'self', we are often not sure who we are talking about.

**Aloka:** Since we follow Sri Aurobindo's teachings, the ultimate aim is to find the innermost centre or the psychic being, and then to align ourselves around this core. Our self is so complex and diverse; the easier parts to access in this amalgam are the physical part, the subtle physical, the vital, the mental and all their intermingling combinations. ATB offers a way to come to know these different parts of one's being, to discover how we are made, and how we function. This, in turn, empowers us to develop self-knowledge, self-direction and self-control and allows us to exercise real choice and freedom. Of course, this may take a lifetime to achieve! Our intention is to provide space for that to begin to happen, to offer the tools and exercises through which one can work on this, starting from wherever one is.

**The observer stance seems to be central to the practice of ATB. Can you tell us about that?**

**Aloka:** Yes, the Observer or the Witness within us is an important aspect of the work. In order to truly explore the different parts of our being, we need to be able to observe all that is occurring within us without identifying ourselves with it, without judgment or analysis. This offers an opportunity to refine and internalize the senses, to become aware of our own perceptions, and to practice freeing sensations and perceptions from judgments and preconceived ideas. When we remain in this detached "observer mode", we are able to notice all our inner and outer movements more clearly, without filters, and over time we can more identify our core, our deepest centre, from our thoughts, feelings, emotions, reactions and physical sensations. Ultimately, this is the goal of all the work in ATB.

**Joan:** For this the body is a powerful tool. It offers us simple, tangible sensations through which we can listen to what is present in our whole being, to notice changes and to differentiate between the levels and layers of perception and experience. We can, in this way, make more intimate contact with what it is that we are and what is happening around us.



Inwardly focussed

**How did you develop the repertoire for ATB? From where did you source your material?**

**Aloka:** Both Joan and I have been influenced by all that we have learned and practiced. I use my experience with breath, Watsu, and Hatha Yoga in ATB. In my practice of Hatha Yoga, for example, I consciously looked for what each position offered, how it affected my breath, the way I perceived myself in it, and how the asana brought me in contact with my inner being, my centre. All this awareness and consciousness has found its way into ATB. However, while we may have borrowed tools from diverse sources, it is Sri Aurobindo's precise mapping of the human consciousness in *The Synthesis of Yoga* that has provided the framework for ATB. Throughout our process, this text has been our manual.

**Joan:** In ATB, a specific tool or exercise is never an end in itself. It is how these tools are used that is most representative of the work. We use it to bring awareness to the moment. Everything is designed to assist the child to ease into the present moment, to be aware of what he or she is sensing, feeling, thinking and perceiving in the now. Ultimately, the aim is to assist him or her in becoming aware of being aware, and thereby developing self-knowledge and self-regulation.

In this sense the real material of ATB is attention and awareness, and how these are sensed in and through the body.

**Can you explain what you mean by that?**

**Joan:** In ATB, our first task is to find ways to make people feel attention as a sensation. We do this by using combinations of exercises that cause individuals to use their attention in different ways - they can focus it or spread it, move it or share it. For example, we may ask people to work in pairs, with one person blindfolded and the other "pulling" her towards him with sound as they move around the room. An exercise such as this would produce focused attention and create a sensorial reference for it. Another game, through which people can experience moving attention, involves them running from a wall in the room to the opposite wall a few times. The facilitator then asks them to sit down next to a wall, close their eyes, bring the attention into their body and now move only their attention to touch the opposite wall, stay there a moment and then bring it back to their body. Once people are able to move attention consciously, we can ask them to share their attention with several senses simultaneously. For example, they can look at a particular place and listen to a far-away sound, while noticing their posture, easing into being aware of all three at the same time.

As we do these exercises, we ask individuals to scan their bodies and notice the sensations, as well as the changes in the sensations. We ask them questions like, what is the sensation of paying attention? How do you know that you are paying attention? What happens in your sensations and perceptions when you move or share attention? Are you able to tell when your attention gets stolen away? This helps them gain an embodied experience of attention and build their own personal sensory landmarks for different kinds of attention and for being present.

In facilitating such a process, many means, many tools may be used. If we are attentive to that, and if a particular tool is not working, we can return to the tool box and get a different one. This distinguishes ATB from other approaches. Having said that, we have some basic exercises that we use consistently because we found them to be very useful and very clear when practiced.

**How does this process unfold when you work with children?**

**Joan:** When we do this work with children, we first make sure that they are interested, that we have their attention. Without this we have nothing! We do this by combining different kinds of games in quick succession. Some games produce quick, automatic attention and reactions, others generate focused, quality attention on one particular sensation, such as balancing a toy or balloon on one finger tip. In the beginning, we don't look to sustain attention for long stretches, but rather for quality attention, even if it is only for a few seconds. We also make sure that there is a lot of variety in what we do, so that the element of novelty and surprise keeps the children interested. For this reason, ATB has a very vast repertoire. There are exercises that focus on different points of attention and concentration, others that bring awareness to the sensations of breath, weight, balance, touch, inner and outer space, to the senses as well as to the subtle physical body.

**Aloka:** As facilitators, we juggle between the existing capacity of the children and their potential to develop that capacity, between following the interests of the children and expanding their interests over time. Gradually, the balance between quick dynamic activities and exercises that generate quiet focused attention is reversed. Where earlier the majority of the time was spent in games, as children spend more time and gain experience with ATB, longer periods of time can be given to activities that require quiet, sustained attention and exploration.

**Several children in Auroville have been practicing ATB for a long time. How have they benefitted? How has it affected them in their everyday life?**

**Joan:** We get many different kinds of feedback. At the end of the school year, children are asked what they use in their daily life from ATB. While some children have quickly found its application in life, others have not seen that link so



Joana and Aloka

clearly. Often the impact is difficult to measure as what children have practiced and experienced in ATB becomes ingrained in them. To pay attention and hold awareness in certain ways has become natural for them.

**Aloka:** At the same time, children notice changes in themselves. One boy, who had difficulty managing his emotions, reported that now he was almost always able to refrain from getting into fights with other children. This meant that he was

beginning to be able to observe and manage a part of his being that was earlier out of his conscious control. Others have said that they are more aware of their actions and the consequences of their actions. Some children use this work to protect themselves in challenging situations with friends, in school or at home, to focus their attention when they feel scattered or stressed, or to relax and fall asleep. There's a lot of work in ATB on "me and the group", where children build awareness of others and of themselves when amongst other people. Over time, they realise that they blame each other less, communicate better, and cooperate even with people they do not consider their friends.

**You also offer ATB as a practice to adults. How do you adapt the work to adults?**

**Aloka:** Our work with adults began when we proposed sessions for teachers at the schools where we were taking classes. We offered teachers a space where they could meet each other in ways that were different from the meetings and discussions they were accustomed to. We believe that adults are very similar to young people; the difference is that they are bigger. Everyone, no matter the age, needs to work on developing, or further developing, the capacities to sustain conscious attention, to be present, and the abilities for sensing and self-sensing. So, though adults have a longer attention span, and are able to travel further within themselves due to their life experience, we have not felt the need to change the exercises themselves.

**Joan:** On the other hand, ATB brings out some marked differences between children and adults. Children tend to be very malleable, while adults have more deeply ingrained programmes. Also, some adults think of themselves as fully formed, which creates a subconscious resistance to new sensations and perceptions as they take to granted that they are able to pay attention and be present.

**Both of you have worked together to create ATB for nearly 3 decades. How has the collaboration worked?**

**Aloka:** Working together is like dancing together. Sometimes you have the power and lead, at other times you follow, sometimes you move and at other times you help the other move. Of course, there are moments when one steps on the other person's feet and where it hurts. But that too is part of the dance! We have learned to dance together with respect, adapting and adjusting to each other.

**Joan:** And the fact that the focus was on the work has helped a lot. We did not have a finished product that we took to schools to test. Instead, we were constantly pulling things together, arriving at things and slowly giving them form. It has been a flexible, organic process.

**Aloka:** I always think that ATB in reality is not ours. We are like the people who, looking for gold, suddenly hit upon a vein. We are just following the vein. We keep going and it keeps unraveling. On and on.

From an interview by Anusha



# Youth unemployment in the villages

A recent survey of students in the villages surrounding Auroville found that 73 per cent of college graduates are still unemployed within one or two years of graduation.

The survey was conducted by Yen Kalvi, translated as "My Education", an initiative under Auroville's Life Education Centre (LEC). Driven by Devi Namasiyayam, LEC's coordinator, the initiative offers career guidance and information sessions for students from disadvantaged backgrounds, so they can make informed choices about college courses and careers.

Devi highlights the rising aspirations of youths in the villages around Auroville, many of whom prefer to do college degrees instead of vocational training, even though there are more vocational jobs available. "A college degree is a fancy aspiration now," says Devi, "even for parents, who motivate their children towards higher education. And youths want a different career from their parents, and they think that going to college is the only way to get the sort of job they want."

Of the 98 students surveyed (aged 16-23), 100 per cent of students were interested in college education. Yet, as the first generation of college-goers in their families (only three per cent of surveyed students had parents with college degrees), they faced challenges in gaining adequate guidance around courses and career choices. And this is where the Yen Kalvi initiative aims to step in and help.

Devi was prompted to start Yen Kalvi in 2015 after two young women from disadvantaged backgrounds approached her for advice. The first woman had completed a course in lab technology, but had decided soon after starting the course that she would not work in the field because she could not bear the chemical smells. "Her grandmother was sponsoring her, so she finished the diploma," says Devi, "but it was clear that she only did the course because someone told her to do it. No one had properly guided her." Another student approached Devi for help with the online application to study medicine at JIPMER government hospital in Pondicherry. "The mother wanted to educate her daughter, but when I looked at her scores, I could see she wouldn't get into JIPMER, and it was too late for her to apply to other universities." LEC supported the "very motivated" student to do the entrance exam, so that she could gain the valuable experience, and she went on to study radiology later. "If she had applied earlier, she would have gotten into a good programme," says Devi. "So these experiences led me to investigate the situation with these first-generation college-goers in the surrounding villages."

## Popular choices

The survey aimed to capture these college-goers' goals and challenges, in order to see what kind of help is needed. It confirmed Devi's sense that students tend to default to the most common career choices. 34 per cent of students wanted to study commerce, a popular career choice throughout Tamil Nadu, followed by engineering (27 per cent including electrical, computer, mechanical engineering), and nursing/pharmacy (14 per cent). "Everybody thinks a commerce degree will get



Devi giving career guidance to students

them a job immediately," says Devi. "And to some extent it's true, as accountants are needed in Auroville and Pondy, but it's not always a guarantee of a job." Studying to be a Tamil teacher is a popular option amongst women, while very few students study politics, administration or law. "The choices are limited because they don't receive much information," says Devi. "I met a group of girls who were able to mention other fields, like archaeology and gynaecology, but they didn't really know about what those jobs involved or how to have a career in those fields. But the fact they knew a bit more was great!"

## Why unemployment

Nationally, youth unemployment has been linked to the proliferation of new colleges in the rural areas, the rising aspirations of youths, and the increased number of college graduates, leading to an over-supply in fields such as engineering. The Yen Kalvi survey's finding of 73 per cent graduate unemployment, although done with a limited number of subjects, reflects the national trend.

Devi highlights the local characteristics and reasons behind unemployment. The first is that village youths are at a disadvantage due to the kind of education they receive when competing with city graduates from Chennai or Bangalore to get jobs in fields such as engineering. "The city students are more educated and receive more support in terms of tuition, preparatory courses and parental support than the village students," she says. "Village students go to colleges in the hinterland where the infrastructure is quite poor. The education they receive is more theoretical and it doesn't really prepare them for work." College students are generally required to complete a practical project in their final year of college, but Devi points out that the colleges do not help students to make their projects useful for

the industry so it's a wasted opportunity. "While the project is an opportunity for students to gain experience in the real world, the professors don't give the project a lot of significance or encourage them to apply knowledge. So the students go about the project very theoretically."

Another reason for unemployment is that prospective employers expect graduates to have some work experience. 25 per cent of the graduates in the survey noted that their lack of work experience was the foremost reason for being unemployed. "It's a chicken and egg problem," says Devi. "Which comes first? If they had a job, they'd gain the experience. So, when I meet a group of students, I tell them about internships, which they generally haven't heard of. Some people don't want to volunteer - they just want a job immediately, which is not realistic."

Devi also points to the way in which college graduates from villages are at a disadvantage in interviews in terms of social skills. "These days, all interviews are in English, and their English is limited so they're not confident enough to communicate their skills. The survey revealed they know they lack communication skills, and want to strengthen this in order to get jobs." Devi concedes that many Auroville employers understand the local context and challenges, and are more prepared than outside employers to focus on graduates' strengths and to give them opportunities to learn on the job. But she points out that Auroville can only absorb a limited number of graduates into paid employment.

## Auroville schools different

The importance of cultivating qualities of confidence and curiosity is vital according to Devi, pointing to the difference between village students who have been educated in Auroville schools and those in non-Auroville schools. "The government

education system is not oriented towards developing the person. It is focused on preparing students to sit for exams and on the school getting a good reputation for having a high percentage of students who passed. But the outreach schools of Auroville are different with their experiential learning. Udaivi students have more curiosity and confidence than the ones who come from government schools. The bright students can really go far with support." However, Udaivi school ends at 10th standard, after which students generally switch to mainstream schools that focus on passing exams, which draws them into "another mode", according to Devi. "They get sucked into the system of examinations. They adapt to the new system, and they're not the same children with a lot of curiosity anymore." Devi cites an example of a computer science graduate who could not find a job. "She was sponsored by someone in Auroville and she had a computer at home, which is a rare thing. But she did not know the specifications of her own computer. Her education did not encourage her to be curious to know more than what she had been taught. Her degree was so theoretical, she was not able to apply it. This is one reason why many graduates find it hard to find jobs."

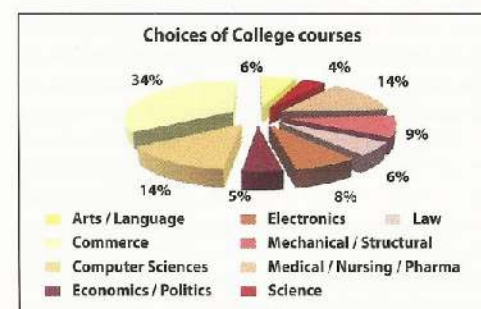
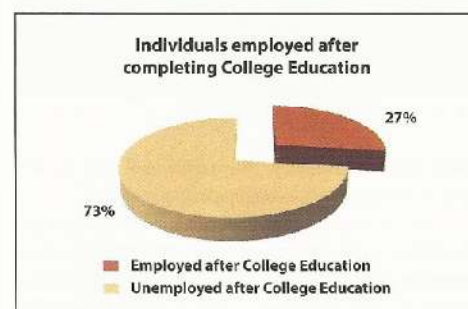
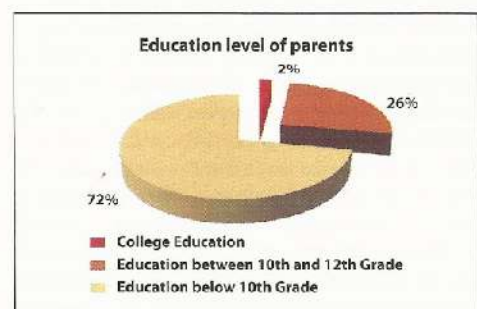
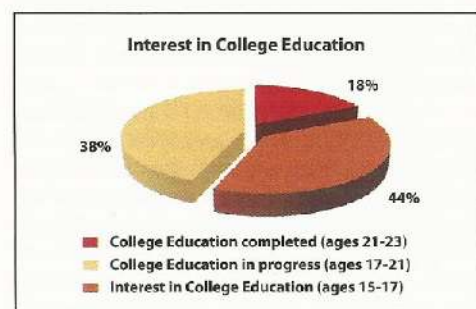
Devi highlights the value of other life experiences in building confidence, pointing to a few college students who work part-time delivering pizzas, earning about Rs 3000 per month. "Those guys are more confident because they're meeting customers, and are able to talk without shyness, and their social skills are very different from other students."

Another challenge in getting employment is the family restrictions placed on young women's mobility. "Parents don't let them go to Chennai or elsewhere," says Devi, "And sometimes the girls choose to stay close to their parents because they are not confident. One girl was offered a job in Cuddalore, a 45 minute bus trip, but she thought it was a long way. And it's not easy to find jobs in Pondy or the local area. So a lot of them end up doing jobs not related to their fields. There are lots of engineering graduates who are now working in Auroville in totally different fields."

In the final survey report, Devi argues that the high unemployment rate in the Auroville bioregion will worsen without appropriate intervention. "We need to see what programmes we need to avert unemployment before it becomes huge. Auroville could open certain volunteer positions, if there's a willingness to experiment. The students could contribute to Auroville and grow. There are nice bright kids who can aspire to good careers as scientists or civil service officers. They have the capacity to do it. It's a matter of giving them the knowledge, support and guidance for them to get there."

Lesley

The report titled *Research on Education, Skills, Employment, and Employability among Youth in the Auroville Bioregion* is published by SAIIER. A shorter version of the report is available at Auroville's wiki page: <https://tinyurl.com/y3fx5s5p>



In its 27-year life span, the Life Education Centre has been through different phases since its establishment as a centre to meet the needs of neglected children. As school attendance became a more common practice for village children in the Auroville area, the centre turned to addressing the needs of adolescents and young women who had dropped out of school. For a couple of decades, it provided peer support through activities such as group discussion, yoga, dance and singing, as well as training in tailoring.

As LEC Coordinator Devi Namasiyayam explains, the educational expectations of young women have changed in recent years, and this has brought about a change in the profile of women attending LEC. "Previously, parents thought that 8th grade was enough



Devi Namasiyayam

education for girls who were going to get married and to stay at home and look after cows, children and in-laws. And those girls came here to learn some skills and to receive emotional support. Times have changed. Mothers now don't want their daughters to go through the same lives with alcoholic husbands and getting beaten and not being able to stand on their own feet without education. So now they borrow money to send daughters to school and college. This is a positive change in society, and it's brought about change at LEC because fewer adolescents are coming to the centre."

The centre now attracts

married women with young children. "15 years ago, these women would have been told to stay at home," says Devi. "Now there is a need for women to earn. They have school fees to pay for their children. This shift in the profile and needs of attendees created the need for reflection about the reasons for LEC's existence." As the team began to redefine the deeper purpose and goals of LEC, they were also forced to take into account their funding situation. LEC receives some support from SAIIER for educational activities and individual well-wishers, yet operational costs were consuming most of the funding. "At one point, we thought we might have to close down. The realities had to be taken into account. These

women want to earn, and we needed to provide livelihood opportunities. But we also didn't want to steer away from providing opportunities to discover oneself and expand. So we realised we needed to integrate learning and earning."

In order to meet the women's need for income, the centre launched a new social enterprise in 2018. It consists of a range of products under the brand-name *Sakhi*, meaning female friend in many Indian languages, in order to emphasise the friendship amongst the women who attend the centre. "Earlier, they would receive tailoring training, but the quality of the work depended on the individual's ability," says Devi. "Now, much attention is paid to the

## Learning and Earning at



# Creating livelihood opportunities for village youth

**T**he vocational training school, the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology, has now been running for over 15 years. What does it do? How successful has it been and what challenges is it facing today? Lavkamad, the Principal, talks about its evolution, present status and his dream for the future of technical education in Auroville.

*Auroville Today: What was the motivation to start the Institute?*

Lavkamad: Around 2000, Karen and Bhavana of Village Action were worried about the youth in the neighbouring village. They had nothing to do and were roaming around, creating problems. So they suggested these youth should receive skill training so they could find a job.

To begin with, the idea was to provide very simple skill training for carpenters, electricians and computer mechanics. Karen requested funds from the Government of Germany to set up infrastructure for such a training and this was approved.

It began quite well, but in 2004 when I came into the picture I found the situation was not sustainable because each student was being paid a stipend of Rs 500 a month, which meant that the money we had would soon run out. So my first action was to stop the stipend and then to make a long-term plan of how to become sustainable.

I recognised it was essential that the courses were officially recognized so that the local people, when applying for a job, would have something to show as a qualification. So we decided to offer a professional training in four trades – electronics, computer science (hardware and software), and secretarial studies – for which the Tamil Nadu government would issue a professional certificate.

They were one-year courses, at the end of which the students had to take an examination. After they passed, we agreed to help them get a placement with a company.

It began well. We had a good response from the village people and our students were performing very well. In fact, we were recognised as one of the best technical training schools in Tamil Nadu. But slowly the intake of students came down because the Tamil Nadu certificate was not recognized all over India and students wanted a certificate recognized by the Central Government.

With fewer students, covering our running costs became a big problem. The Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIER) never supported us and the German Government grant was a one-time grant for infrastructure, so we relied on support from friends. Our students come from the poorest families so initially, after stopping the stipend, we offered them loans to pay for the training. But these were never repaid, so we had to start charging course fees. Initially, this was Rs 10,000 a year but that was more than some could afford.

For a short period after 2005 we ran some short-term courses financed by the Auroville Tsunami Fund and by government schemes for fisher people and women's development. But it was always difficult dealing with the government, and we would only receive some of the funding much later.

We decided we needed to run a larger range of courses to attract students, so we applied to the German Government again and received funds to build a computer laboratory and a second phase of classrooms so that we could run courses in civil draughtsmanship and electronics.

The electronics and computer courses were

well subscribed but we never managed to get many students for training in civil draughtsmanship.

We never had a problem finding placements for the students. We prepared them very well, firstly for passing the examination and then for the job interview, telling them how to communicate, how to dress etc. Computer companies were calling us and telling us they needed so many students, and local firms, like GK electronics, were good friends so we were also sending our students there.

*So this training really made a difference to the lives of your students.*

Yes, but it wasn't easy for them. Students from this area have to overcome two big problems. One is financial. They come from very poor families so even though they may have wanted to study at a higher level in a college or university, the fees would have been too high so they had no choice but to come for us. In fact, at first they expected Auroville would pay for the training.

To begin with, we charged Rs 10,000 a year and now we charge Rs 20,000 a year although the cost to us of each student is actually around Rs 30,000. Rs 20,000 a year is a lot of money for a poor family, and although we distribute some scholarships when we receive donations, the dropout rate of our students in the past was quite high, around 25%.

Another challenge we encountered was that the students could not read or write one sentence in English and could not multiply or divide, even though they had passed Tenth Standard. So we had to start from scratch teaching them English and mathematics.

*How could you do this as well as impart skills training in just one year?*

It was too difficult. This is another reason we shifted, in 2016, to Central Government certification, because these are two-year courses.

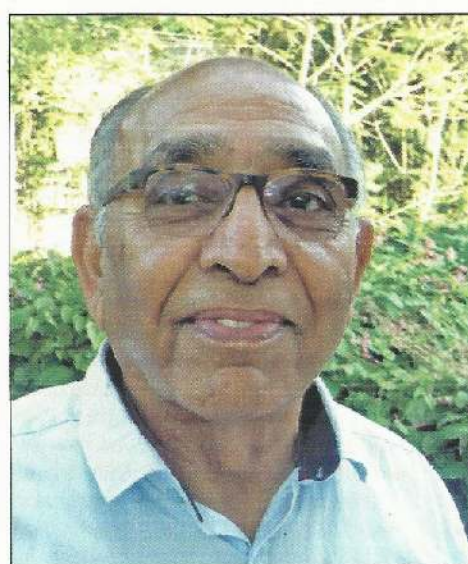
*Which courses are you offering at present?*

Electronic engineering, computer hardware and fitters. The fitters course is happening at our new campus in Palmyra. We also offered training in welding, but this course was very expensive because of the materials involved, and this year there has been no intake.

*It must be frustrating for the teachers when there is a high dropout rate or courses do not take off.*

Of course, but the quality of the teaching has been another challenge. In the past, the teachers were always complaining that the students were so bad that they could not achieve better results in the more difficult subjects like electronics and civil draughtsmanship. However, the teachers were teaching in the traditional way and I realized from my own experience of studying and working in Germany that good teaching requires two things. Firstly, teachers have to be inspirational and, secondly, they need to interest the students by showing how their knowledge can be practically applied.

So I did some research on teaching methods and I found that one of the ways of creating interest is practical, project-based learning. We started with this but the staff were always resisting. But then we had the chance to get assistance from the Germany Senior Expert Service. This is a German government programme that enables qualified



Lavkamad

people who have retired from their jobs to teach young people. I've seen it done in Germany and was very much impressed by how they get the students to do independent work, so I thought it would be good if these teachers could come and train our teachers.

Now this is happening and our results are much improved. For me this was the breakthrough in terms of improving the teaching.

The German government covers the expenses for this programme but the big problem that remained was the cost of the course fees to the students. We were racking our brains for ways in which we could help poor people gain access to these courses. Then I remembered the German 'dual-training' system. Under this system, students on a two-year course spend one third of their time in school and two thirds working in a company, for which they receive a stipend. So I thought that if we could institute the same system here, students could pay our course fees from the stipend they received by working in a company.

Fortunately, in 2016 the Indian Government came up with a scheme which enabled us to do this. For the two-year courses, every year students would spend seven months in the Institute and five months working in a company. We started our first dual-training programme in electronics and fitting in July this year, and we are working with businesses like Grace Infrastructure, GT electronics and Auroville's Sunlit Future. The students get Rs 6,000 a month stipend from the businesses which allows them to pay our Rs 20,000 course fee.

Forty two students are participating and the scheme is working very well. The students are more interested because they are doing practical work – there are no dropouts – and the companies are happy.

However, we have not been able to include the computer hardware course in the dual training, so there is still a financial problem for the students on this course.

In fact, financially for the past three or four years it has been very hard for us to cover the Institute's running expenses. We expect the dual-training programme will help, but this year we have 130 students in the Institute, many of whom are not in the dual-training programme and their course fees do not cover the full cost of their training. The Dutch Foundation, Stichting de Zaiier, has helped, but they only give for infrastructure, not running expenses. With no financial support from either the Government or from Auroville, we rely upon donations from contacts I have in Germany to survive.

*Why doesn't Auroville support the Institute?*

We applied to SAIER but they told us they only receive government funds to support non-formal education. Also, Auroville wants to be different in everything. We can teach our programmes in less formal ways – they can be student-centred, interdisciplinary – but in the end mathematics is mathematics, engineering is engineering, and this cannot be different in Auroville from anywhere else.

But for me the larger picture is that the growth of Auroville is dependent on the growth of the surrounding area. As long as there is poverty in the area, we should find ways of helping these people. Village action is already doing very good work but there are a lot of people not getting any support and we can help them better their livelihood through our skills training programmes.

Moreover, we need a skilled workforce in this area to help us build the city. In fact, many of our ex-students are working in Auroville. For example, the accountant at the Financial Service was trained by us, also the senior technician at Aquadyn. Others are independent contractors working on Auroville projects or draughtsmen and secretaries in our units.

*How do you see the future?*

In India, many of the engineers coming out of university are useless, unemployable, because they have no practical experience. This is why, some years ago, I began talking with Mike and Lalit about having an applied science university in Auroville. India does not have any applied science universities, so this would be unique. And Auroville offers so many possibilities here. We have a 100 acre campus at Palmyra, and we have professional designers, architects, computer programmers, and people skilled in water management and agriculture. We could run courses in all of these where we can combine academics with technical application.

Of course, at the end of the course there has to be a certificate, but we in Auroville should overcome this mindset of not wanting qualifications, of trying to be different all the time. We should build upon what is already there, and define what is needed both for the local people and for Auroville.

*The Institute began with the intention of making a difference to the situation of poor, unemployed youth in the villages. Has it succeeded in this?*

Definitely, there's been a lot of change. Over the years, we have trained more than 2,000 students and I know of many ex-students coming from very poor families who are now doing very well. So I think that for a small group of society we are contributing to change this area for the better.

This is actually the reason I came back to India in 2004. I could have stayed in Germany where I was a project manager for one of the largest projects in software development with Airbus but I had the feeling that I had to return to India. My parents were very poor. They put all their money together to send me to Germany to study. When I arrived I only had money for six weeks. However, during the whole time I was in Germany I got support from different people, some of whom I never even met. They helped me find a job, learn the language, supported my studies. I received so much help there, I wanted to give something back to society by helping the poorest. This is why I returned to India.

*From an interview by Alan*

## the Life Education Centre

training and the quality, and the products are sold so that they can get an income. So, they take some responsibility for generating the stipend. The products include garments, home décor items, accessories and stationery. The items are sold at the new Anjali store at the Visitors' Centre, a vibrant shop made from mud bricks and stocked with products from LEC, and Village Action Group and Kolamandala. The income from the sales goes to the women and in the long run could help in making the Centre self-sufficient.

The new model is proving to be viable for LEC, and Devi is optimistic about its future. "We now provide the opportunity to earn, as well as the opportunity to grow inwardly and

collectively. Life and work are not separate, so it is important to provide opportunities in work places to share, grow and integrate as a community. So we also have regular time for activities – learning, unlearning, art, group discussions, bodywork, and role plays – some of which LEC has done for many years, where women can express their emotions and receive understanding. The women are able to directly benefit from activities like Aviva and yoga, healthcare and traditional herbal medicines that impact the physical body, and activities like group discussions that impact the mental and emotional being. Other subtler activities like *yoga nidra*, meditative art, work with the twelve qualities given by the Mother that

impact the vital and the spiritual parts of the individual take time to penetrate. Many people experience medical conditions that were not present in the previous generations. The women really appreciate the value of health care and nutrition education as they can see immediate benefits in not only applying the new knowledge, but also reverting to some of the traditional food practices. Many women have the support of their husbands, but some men don't care."

LEC has also focussed on collective events in the past year, such as a quilting event that involved 25 people who worked together to stitch a quilt for Auroville's 50th birthday. This quilt is now on display in the LEC's main hall, and a smaller quilt made by six LEC women hangs in Anjali store. "We like to focus on what people can do

together, and not just have women doing their own thing on sewing machines," says Devi. "The public quilting event will be held annually, as an opportunity for people from outside to interact with the women here, and for

the women here to communicate more. We are thinking about how we can open ourselves to receive, and not only about how to provide to the villages."

*Lesley*



Women learning tailoring



# A full and fulfilling life

Francis was one of the first settlers on the Auroville plateau. Since then, he has been involved in many activities in the community.

Francis was born in Brooklyn and spent his formative years on the west side of Manhattan, before moving out to Long Island. "I didn't get much education, mainly because of my attitude: I was the kind of kid who no teacher would want in their class. In school, I had the feeling I was always in a cage."

"I came out of high school totally ignorant, and pretty untameable. When I was 17, I joined the Navy; nothing noble, I just needed a place to sleep! Because I lacked a certain discipline, I had some problems with authority. The fact I got through those three years with minimum damage was an achievement."

In 1968 he travelled with a friend from east Asia to India. They landed in Calcutta, then took a train to Madras.

"We were there for three or four days and I got so tired of rice and dal. Then I learned there was good French cuisine at Pondicherry. I got on one of those red and yellow buses. The fare was only three rupees, so I thought it couldn't be far. It took 6 1/2 hours!"

He stayed at the Hotel de l'Europe where he had a "half-way decent meal". But after a few days he had to leave because the room was booked. The manager said he should go to the Ashram to see if he could stay in an Ashram guesthouse. Francis's first encounter with the Ashram was not exactly smooth.

"The first guy I saw in the Ashram was Madhav Pandit and he took one look at me...well, I was a bit raggedy and we ended up having words. He was basically saying 'Out, out'. Then Amrita ran in because of the noise. Madhav explained I wanted to stay in the Ashram but I had no money. But I had a stack of money because we had just sold our cameras, so like my usual charming self I pulled out a wad of rupees and waved it in front of them."

They sent him to Reg's guesthouse. "He took one look at me and said 'out, out, out'". Then they sent him to Parc à Chabon (today's Park Guest House), where he took a large family room. Francis and his friend always travelled with games, so they turned this room into a popular game centre.

"We had been on the road, so Pondicherry was basically rest and relaxation. There were Europeans around, it was a clean, sleepy town and I was curious about the Samadhi, about all these white figures and incense. I was sure Federico Fellini was around."

## Meeting Mother

One day, Maggi Litchi, one of Mother's secretaries, invited him for tea and during the conversation asked him about the date of his birthday. He told her it had been two days before. She said he had to see Mother and she would arrange it.

"I went to see The Mother with an attitude similar to the one in which I went to see the Egyptian pyramids and the Taj Mahal: just one more experience. Maggi took me up a narrow staircase. It was all cheap plywood, and we passed these tiger skins which looked as if they needed to be refreshed."

"I walked into Mother's room and they told me to kneel. I remember I knelt down but I was a little uneasy and wanted to get up again. But then I looked up and she was smiling at me."

"The last thing I remember was hearing the screen door close. And then I got sucked up into those eyes.... The next thing I knew I was standing outside the Ashram post office with this gigantic bouquet of red roses and a stupid little grin on my face. And everybody's walking by me, giggling, 'We know where you've been!'"

"I didn't know what had happened but I knew it was something significant. Before that, one of the main objects in my life was to get high and The Mother got me very high! I wanted to stay in the Ashram to be close to that energy, so I kept coming up with reasons why I had to see her again, and kept writing letters. Finally, I got a message from her, conveyed through Maggi, saying too much contact with her was not good because I was living off her energy and not creating my own. The spark had been lit and now it was up to me to create the bonfire."

## Early Auroville

One day, Jean Maslow asked Francis to help him build a house in Auroville. "I said, 'What's Auroville?' He said 'It's the city of the future'. Next morning at some ridiculous hour I got into a Land Rover and we went through nothing, and nothing continued, and finally he said, 'We're here'. I looked around. Nothing. I said, 'You're kidding!'"

But Francis enjoyed the physical work. One evening he missed the return journey and Arindam, another early settler, invited him to sleep on his

kitchen floor. Sometime later, Arindam announced he was going to America and told Francis he could take over his place.

"Next morning there was somebody outside banging on a 55 gallon drum and demanding water. There was a drought because the monsoon had failed the season before, so I basically spent all my days filling up barrels on bullock carts from the local village because Arindam's well was the only bore well in the whole area."

Around May, the friend who had accompanied him to India came to visit and invited him up to Nepal for the summer. "I went. It was one big party but I was missing something. Towards the end of the summer, I decided to go back to Pondicherry. I remember walking into the Ashram dining room, weary from travel, but I was insanely happy to be back."

Francis returned to his watering duties in Auroville. One day Bob Lawlor, the first settler in Auroville, came by asking for help in building a dam. Francis volunteered and moved to the community of Forecomers.

"We were up before dawn, wearing just a loin-cloth and *tundu*, and we carried earth and bricks twelve hours a day in the tropical sun. We lived on kor and eucalyptus tea and in my whole life I've never been in better shape."

"We were all crazy. At one point, Bob decided that everything had to be painted. So we had a blue kitchen, a white meditation room, a yellow theatre, and one day I got an ex-race horse and built a barn, which I wanted to paint red but it came out pink. There was a door with many stripes, and when people would ask for the toilet, we would show them the door. When they opened it, all they saw was a toilet in the ground and the distant horizon."

"Everybody had so much fun it was unbelievable. We put on two performances which people from the Ashram came out to watch. In one, everybody walked through the canyon and people would pop out from behind rocks or out of a barrel and read some poem about a cat."

"All this was happening in the middle of nowhere. It was like a moonscape, and on full moon nights with these canyons around it was just exquisite. There was a magic in the air, we were all so influenced by Her energy: it was definitely Her energy that kept it all happening. In spite of sunburn, worms, jaundice, we were all smiling because we were so happy."

## Mother leaves

But in November, 1973, Mother left her body. "I couldn't believe it, I couldn't accept the fact she had left her body. I felt abandoned, devastated. My street kid background had made me sceptical by nature but everybody was talking about Mother transforming the cells and I really thought it would happen. In our beautiful ignorance and arrogance we anticipated that within 20 years Auroville would be built and we would all be supramentalised!"

Some people left Auroville, but Shyamsundar, who Mother had appointed as the Auroville liaison, asked Francis to assist a visiting American who wanted to write a project to get funds for Auroville.

"This project was gigantic; it was for building schools, hospitals, forests, dams. Getting caught up in this kept me in Auroville."

Francis went around gathering information from the settlers. One day he wandered over to the Matrimandir construction site. "Somebody said, 'Hand me a clamp' and I said, 'What's a clamp?' That was the beginning. There was such an electric current in this place, I was hooked. I would get up early and go to work there seven days a week, mornings and afternoons. We were high as kites on the energy; it was such a beautiful experience."

The dream was to be disrupted, however, by an increasingly bitter conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society. "I'm an apolitical guy but I totally got pulled in. I was in the centre of it all, chairing meetings. I get frightened just to say it now, but at the time we thought we were Mother's warriors, fighting for 'truth'."

"Actually, it was Navajata, the Chairman of the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), who made me a hero in the cause by getting me and Savitra deported from India."

Within three months Francis and Savitra were back. Later, however, Francis left Auroville of his own volition.

## America

"In 1979 I was tired. I remember coming home after an all-night concreting and knocking over a kerosene lamp and kerosene going all over my bed and I thought, this can't go on. I was broke so I decided I had to go to make some money."

This took much longer than he had anticipated.

"Mother gave me the one thing I could least afford if I wanted to make money in America — a conscience."

For eight years Francis took various jobs, travelling all over America with Lila, his partner at the time. "I was looking for a place where I felt I belonged, and never finding it." One day Lila said she wanted to go somewhere. "I said, great. Where? She said, 'Auroville'. Part of me didn't want to go back so I said we had to sell the house first, which I thought would be very difficult, but everything fell into place."

"At three o'clock one morning we returned. We pulled in outside Joan Tomb's house. The moment I stepped out of that car I knew I wasn't going anywhere else. The feeling I had been searching for during eight years in America was right here."

But Auroville had changed. "What I found most troubling was the disharmony at the Matrimandir. I was looking forward so much to get back to that vibration but now there were two groups in conflict. I tried to go back to work there but couldn't: it was like an extension of the SAS conflict."

Instead he became involved with the 'Newsreal' video project. "We had a great time producing this weekly news update. In those days everybody was in their isolated little area, there was no Internet, so this was a great way to inform people about what was happening in the community."

## The bakery story

Then Francis was asked to find out what was happening at the new Auroville bakery in Kuilapalayam which the bakers, Otto and Jean-Denis, had built but left before baking could begin.

"I walked into the bakery. Everything was in place but all these people were sitting around because nobody knew how to operate the ovens."

Francis heard that the Ashram bakery used the same kind of ovens, so for several weeks he drove to Pondicherry every morning at 3.30 am to observe how the Ashramites baked bread. "It was amazing how many people were involved. People would come in, clean one or two pots and then leave. Finally, everything would be ready for baking. Then this old man would descend the stairs on the arm of an Israeli woman. He opened the oven and then another guy handed the old man a piece of Ashram handmade paper. He crumpled it up and the lady threw it in the oven. The old man watched, and he could tell by how fast it combusted whether the heat in the oven was right or not. If everything was OK, he would nod, go back upstairs, and the baking would begin. Nobody seemed to have thought of a thermometer..."

The Auroville bakery began functioning, but that was not the end of the problems. "During the season the villagers would bring their compost to the field next door, and from the compost came trillions of flies. We were covered in them and we had to cover everything. I decided to put screens on the windows, but this cut down the ventilation and the workers started passing out because of the heat. So then we fitted extractor fans, but then the current never worked. Finally, I had to get a generator, build a generator house, and we had this incredibly complicated electrical system to allow us to switch from the mains grid to the generator. All to get rid of the flies!"

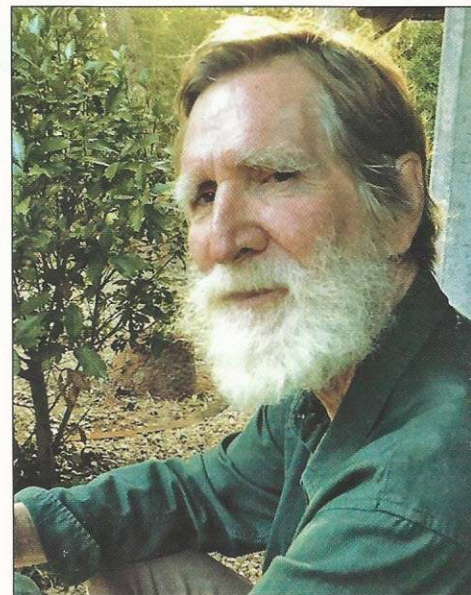
Francis spent 4 1/2 years at the bakery. "It was a success. We all got along in the team because there was no doubt I was in charge. I'm a terrible employee but I have a good sense of coordination logistics, and although I can be very pushy, I know when to back off."

## Newcomers housing, land

Francis's organizational skills were clearly much needed in Auroville. When Jean Pougault had an idea to create Newcomer housing, Francis decided to take it on. "It was a pyramid scheme. At that time you could build a liveable structure for one to one and 1/2 lakhs. The Newcomer would pay this money, and we would repay 80% if they left after one year and 70% after two years. The balance would allow us to construct new ones. I went to America and explained the concept to the Foundation for World Education people and they provided a few lakhs of rupees to get it going."

It was worked well, and over the ten years he was involved they created 24 Newcomer houses. But then Auroville stopped taking Newcomers for some time and the Housing Service allocated a number of Newcomer housing units to Aurovilians. "It broke the chain, so the project collapsed."

Francis became involved in construction with Rolf and Brigitte, doing accounts and administration. Then he was asked to take up land purchase. "I did it between 1995 and 2000. Guy ran the



Francis

fundraising aspect and we raised a lot of money. We bought more land in those five years than Auroville had done in the previous twenty. However, a new Secretary said we were paying too much and froze the whole process. He threw the switch on all the hard work that had gone into building up momentum and credibility around the world."

## Youth and the state of Auroville today

In recent years, Francis has been involved in making videos about Auroville. It began when Doris, his partner, said she wanted to make documentary on the building of the Matrimandir. As she was a Newcomer at the time, she asked him to open doors to allow her to talk to the right people.

"That's how the latest video thing began. It was all about documenting our history, trying to capture a time period."

Two of the documentaries were about the experience of the first children born here. It's a generation about which Francis has strong views.

"Their parents were driven to create Mother's dream but all they seem driven today to create is their own dreams. We have got some very bright people here. They are taking care of themselves and their families very well but they are not participating in the Auroville project."

Does this mean he is pessimistic about Auroville's future?

"I feel the direction of Auroville has been hijacked by the Aurovilians. At one point we all came here for the same reason but it's not so today, and the Dream is some fantasy off on a pedestal somewhere. The goal now is to build a city not human unity, whereas we understood that building the city was just to keep us busy while we worked on the unity. Anyway, we failed; we are more divided than ever before."

"Something has to change to just take us to the next step. And I'm not talking about achieving the supramental. We have to get out of pre-crèche and into the kindergarten. I'm sure there are people here who are growing as individuals, but collectively we are hopeless."

Francis has vast experience in different domains of work in the community. If somebody asked him to join one of the working groups today, would he agree?

"It's happened, and I refused. I wouldn't want to engage at the level at which the game is being played. Also, the work has become so much more complicated, you have to be much more knowledgeable and you need an energy that I no longer have."

And yet... in his Auroville tag Francis describes himself as "Healthy and Happy with small cynical attacks". So which is the real Francis?

"It's about having faith. If I look at Auroville with the mind, it's depressing. I see a New Age retreat that is totally dependent upon tourism, and the government. But the fact that Auroville still exists after all the rubbish that we have poured upon it is a miracle. So how can I not have faith that Mother is who she says she is? But does doubt, cynicism, enter me periodically? Yes, I would like to expunge it but it is still present."

Francis has now stepped back from almost all his activities, including video production. Does this mean he favours a more contemplative perspective these days?

"It has to do with trying to increase my receptivity to that special energy, to experience exquisite moments and to extend those moments more and more while trying to keep the personality out of the way to allow the opening to grow."

He concludes, "I can't imagine anything as fulfilling as what I've experienced in the last 50 years and I'm utterly grateful for this. I didn't become supramentalised, but did I have a very beautiful experience? Yes, I did. Do I have any regrets? No, I don't."

From an interview by Alan



# Watch your Waste!

The WasteLess team's efforts to bring the issue of waste into our consciousness and inspire change in social behaviour through education have recently been taken up by the Tamil Nadu government. We interviewed them about their journey.

**Auroville Today: How did you get interested in waste?**

**Chandrah:** My interest in waste began in 2009 when a few of us young Aurovilians started Soma Waste Management. We decided to study Auroville's management of waste. Our goal was to replicate Auroville's waste management system in one of the surrounding rural villages. We soon realised, however, that though our waste management was very advanced in the global context—our recycling rates were high and organic waste was removed and converted into compost fairly efficiently—the Eco Service (that manages Auroville's waste) was still facing several challenges in further separating the types of waste that were coming in. Evidently, separation of waste at the community level in Auroville still left much to be desired.

This led us to conduct a community-wide survey within Auroville to understand our attitudes to waste and assess our levels of awareness. The questions we were asking were: Do you know where your waste goes? How many categories do you separate your waste into at home? What infrastructure for waste management do we have in place in restaurants, units and health clinics?

**What were your findings from this survey?**

**Chandrah:** We realised that many improvements were possible in Auroville. We did not know, for example, how to deal with medical waste. We did some research on safe biomedical waste handling and disposal and helped the clinics in Auroville manage this complex type of waste.

Our biggest challenge, we realised, was one of perception. We urgently needed to get more people thinking about and involved with waste. Auroville's waste composition had changed dramatically between the early nineties and the end of the decade. By 2009, many more plastics were ending up in the waste stream.

**Ribhu:** As a result of this survey, we decided to launch a big awareness campaign, the litter-free campaign, about the issue of waste in the community. Our goal was to reach at least 50 percent of the community, targeting different age groups through education programmes, exhibitions, clean-ups and events.

**How did your work with schools start?**

**Ribhu:** We reached out to over 1,250 children in 14 Auroville and outreach schools. It was here that we realised the power of the youngest people in our community. The children between 6-15 were responsive, passionate and the quickest to change habits and shift collective behaviour in their homes. They were stopping their parents on the streets to pick up floating plastic bags. They were challenging their parents' shopping habits. It became obvious to us that if we wanted to raise awareness, education was the way forward.

**Garbology 101 was the first tool kit you created for raising awareness about waste in schools. Tell us about how and why you created it.**

**Chandrah:** In 2011 we decided to create an educational toolkit for schools. The idea was to create an interactive and engaging set of activities for children that would present a holistic perspective

with multiple lenses through which the issue of waste could be understood. Several months of background work went into creating this. We researched not only a range of existing curricula on waste, recycling and environment, but also child development. For example, learning styles and capacities, skills and interests at different phases of development.

Providing a broad range of activities that could be used for a diverse profile of students was very important for us. We sought inputs from teachers from a range of schools to understand their vision of a curriculum, preferences with regards to materials and presentation, and the resources their students use and have access to. The result was a collection of 101 activities that could be offered to children between the ages of 6-15 years. Whether in Auroville or in the outreach schools, teachers could select and tailor a curriculum to best suit the needs and capacities of their students.

**How is Garbology 101 different from other existing curricula on waste?**

**Chandrah:** Many of the existing educational programmes on waste management focus on recycling and safe disposal of waste. We found it important to address waste as a system and look at other aspects, such as the players in the system, the issue of natural resources and consumerism. Moreover, we think it's crucial to stress the leading waste management model in which avoidance and reduction of consumption are the most effective strategies to combat waste.

**What was the impetus to create Garbology Lite?**

**Maya:** Garbology Lite was the result of a shift in focus from quantity to quality. We realised that ensuring an excellent qualitative educational experience was crucial if we wanted to inspire change in attitude and behaviour towards waste. Encouraged and guided

would radically improve the experience of an activity by introducing their own strategies or ideas. We would take this information from them, apply it to our structure and test it again. This approach of participatory research action, where teachers and students have a high level of structured input into our lesson plans, has become the backbone of our methodology. It has enabled us to continually refine the material, making it more engaging and powerful each time.

**What aspects of waste do the activities in Garbology Lite cover?**

**Maya:** We have activities that range across different aspects of waste, from an introduction to waste, learning how to

separate waste, discovering how long waste lasts in our environment, to learning about different batteries, tackling packaging. The programme also includes a school level litter clean up. We have 9 activities that are currently online and we are looking at developing more from the Garbology 101 toolkit in the future.

**Disposable plastics are one of the biggest culprits, aren't they?**



The kNOW PLASTICS Game

separate waste, discovering how long waste lasts in our environment, to learning about different batteries, tackling packaging. The programme also includes a school level litter clean up. We have 9 activities that are currently online and we are looking at developing more from the Garbology 101 toolkit in the future.

**You have chosen to make Garbology Lite accessible to teachers on the net.**

**Ribhu:** Yes, Garbology Lite is available to teachers and institutions free of cost. The print version (Garbology 101) was too expensive and limited the use of the programme to about 50 elite schools in India. Online, it still has a participatory action framework. You can download one of the nine activities for free to begin with. And it's only when you fill in the feedback form that we unlock the rest of the activities. The feedback we receive gets plugged back in, constantly improving the activities. The idea is to create a relationship with teachers who are passionate about it and make them partners and co-creators in an ongoing feedback loop.

This has meant that we changed our model from a sales-based organisation that creates content and sells it, to a research based organisation that, using Auroville's scale and familiarity to our advantage, can carry out detailed and sustained research on the impact of such educational models on attitudes and behaviour.

**How do you track the impact of these curricula in schools?**

**Chandrah:** We keep receiving information from teachers about the students' initiatives, like convincing their parents to buy them a stainless steel bottle in place of a plastic one, or installing garbage bins in schools. But measuring specific behaviour change over time is a nut we're constantly trying to crack.

It is for this reason that in developing kNOW PLASTICS, an education programme focussing exclusively on plastics, we chose to design the evalua-

**Ribhu:** Single use plastics, such as resin code #4 LDPE are used to make most plastic bags. They are bad for several reasons and across different disciplines. Marine biologists tell us that Sea Turtles eat them because they look like jelly fish in the ocean, they block drains and increase the chance of flooding, and they're so lightweight that there is no financial incentive to collect them for recycling. They're so cheap and convenient we're using a trillion of them each year and 97% of them never get recycled. Through fun games and experiential learning, we teach children the latest science. We don't sugar-coat the situation but we build experiences that are empowering and show them that they can indeed be part of the solution rather than the plastic pollution.

**How does a child learn to change their behaviour regarding plastics?**

**Ribhu:** We identify issues that are intimately connected to the daily life and environment of the child. In kNOW PLASTICS, we teach children about resin codes. This is the 'secret' language for understanding plastics and how safe, questionable or unsafe they are. This makes children curious. It also gives them agency. A child can flip over her plastic water bottle, figure out if it's a good or bad plastic, and empowered with this knowledge, make conscious decisions about what she uses! When we find something that is so close and relevant to the life of a child, we've found a powerful key to inspire behavioural change.

Around these comprehensive learning activities we have, together with Auroville teachers and students, designed powerful experiences to carry this learning into the home. For example, one take-home activity asks each child to bring one plastic item with an unsafe resin code from his home. He then takes it back home with a handout to show his parents, thus increasing the likelihood that the new awareness reaches the family and behavioural change will follow.

**Maya:** One of the ways to make learning fun and engaging for children in the kNOW PLASTICS educational programme is a memory game. From our extensive research on plastics we narrowed down the key messages to

convey to children about plastics. Alongside information about the impacts of plastics, their lifecycle, good/bad practices regarding plastics and the problem of disposables, children explore usable, sustainable alternatives to these disposable plastic items. One take-home activity requires them to bring one of these single use plastic items from their favourite restaurant, be it a straw, a cup or cutlery. Then they look for reusable alternatives so that they can continue to eat the food they enjoy while avoiding the use of detrimental plastics.

**Chandrah:** We believe that the key is to empower students by providing information that is accurate but not overwhelming, while offering solutions that they can implement in their own life. That's what we've improved on in Garbology Lite and kNOW PLASTICS. We have learned to think from the children's perspective, linking it to their life and home. When they can relate what they learn to their own individual experiences, it touches them and they want to exercise choice.

Our goal is to empower children to believe that they can change at the individual level and that they have the ability to initiate change in their family, school, the larger community and join bigger movements. At the end of the day, we want policy change and children need to know that they have the agency to affect that change.

**In how many schools are these curricula being used?**

**Chandrah:** In November last year we trained 210 government school teachers for Garbology Lite in Rajapalayam and Cuddalore and 96 teachers for kNOW PLASTICS in Trichy. This is in partnership with the School Education Department of the Tamil Nadu Government. Our target is to reach a minimum of 60 students per school in this academic year.

**How have you been funding this work?**

We have received support from Stichting de Zaaier, a Dutch foundation, and the American Foundation of World Education. Both of them have supported us through all our stages of working and reworking. SAIER supported Garbology Lite and our work to develop the kNOW PLASTICS educational programme. AND RAMCO, a cement company, in whose schools we have been running our programmes since 2012, has helped us build connections with the Tamil Nadu State Government and education departments.

**You are currently working on preparing content for the Tamil Nadu School Board. This must be a dream come true!**

**Ribhu:** Yes, it is! When the Tamil Nadu Government installed a ban on one-time use/throwaway plastics, they asked us to write content on waste for their curriculum! We've been working on the subject for a long time and it's easy for us to adapt it for their use. We've written two chapters so far—one on waste in general for class 6 and one on chemistry for class 9. This content will reach 1.5 million students in each grade in English and Tamil from January 2019 on. We couldn't have asked for a better opportunity! We look forward to establishing more partnerships and sharing the research and consciousness developed in Auroville with classrooms around the world. Our plan is to do this until the concept of waste no longer exists!

*From an interview by Anusha.*

For more information visit [Wastelessindia.org](http://Wastelessindia.org)



## Mediation takes a front seat

Congratulations flowed in when Chennai-based senior advocate and mediator Sriram Panchu learned that he had been appointed as one of the three mediators in the Ayodhya-Babri Masjid controversy which has been plaguing the nation for decades. The appointment by the Supreme Court of India was a confirmation that mediation has now a firm footing in the justice system of India. It was also honouring Sriram, who has been called “the high priest of mediation”, for his untiring work of promoting mediation to resolve conflicts, so replacing lengthy, costly and often bitter court cases. Sriram founded India’s first court-annexed mediation centre – The Mediation Chambers – in the Madras High Court in 2005; assisted the Supreme Court and other High Courts to create similar centres; trained over a thousand mediators; and has authored three books on mediation, including a comprehensive manual, *Mediation: Practice and Law*.

It was therefore not surprising that on the evening of March 16, the auditorium of the Chennai International Centre overflowed with eminent people from the legal fraternity. It included Justices of the Supreme Court of India, justices of the High Court of Chennai, other eminent jurists, public personalities and many personal friends. The formal occasion was the launch of Sriram’s newest book, *The Commercial Mediation Monograph*. The informal one, doubtless, was to express gratitude and appreciation for Sriram’s work.

Sriram has gained a special place in Auroville. Not only has he offered invaluable legal advice countless times, he has also been instrumental in

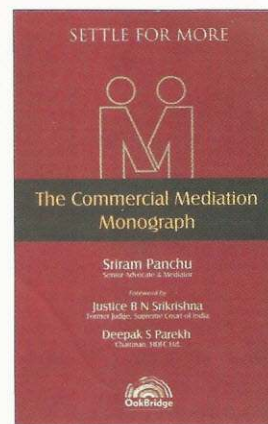
setting up Auroville’s own mediation group in 2007, which is now known as Koodam. For mediation, coming jointly to an agreement which is acceptable to all, is a concept which is close to Auroville’s spiritual ideals. In various messages, Mother stressed the necessity of harmonious collaboration. “The important thing is to find the point on which you can all agree – and after this is firmly established each one must be ready to yield his personal will in order to keep intact this point of Harmony.”

His newest book, *The Commercial Mediation Monograph*, Sriram shows the depth and breadth of the mediation process, and the creative and innovative solutions that can flow from mediation. At the book launch, he stressed the benefits of mediation – “Mediation introduces a consensual concept where the parties need to come to an agreement themselves. They are not at risk as they can step out at any time” – and the limits of litigation: “Litigation in court or in arbitration brings in an adversarial mind set and imposes the risk that one party loses as the decision is in the hands of a judge or arbiter.” He explained that mediation allows for a far wider participation than is possible in litigation. “Family dispute mediation can involve more people than the two parties; it can include an extended family, many of whom have no specific part to play in the conflict. As participation gets wider, the potential for conflict resolution becomes larger. Mediation can also be a powerful tool for healing and improving broken relationships. Commerce too can benefit from mediation. While courts and arbitration go by process of law only, during mediation the mindset and the feelings can get involved and issues can be

brought up which are not central to the case but are important to the individuals – and in this way a solution can be reached.”

He stressed an important part of mediation, the art of listening. “We often don’t do that. But understanding that each one in a dispute comes from somewhere, and has something to say, even if what they say is incorrect, opens a door. As a mediator, you don’t say ‘yes’ or ‘no’, you just listen. And you listen as long as they want to speak. For it is important for that person to vent that feeling. And unless you allow that feeling to be vented, the person will not move to the next step in the conflict resolution. The litigant does not necessarily want you to agree to what he says. He wants to be understood. And to give him that, you listen as long as he speaks.”

In the open discussion that followed the book launch, the question was raised if mediation could be used when there is a mismatch of power, a negotiation imbalance, between the contesting parties, such as when a government is involved. For “settling” means giving something up, and that often is a problem in government circles where bureaucrats are held accountable and could easily be suspected of having taken a personal advantage for allowing the settlement. Sriram offers a solution. “I have suggested a high level clearance committee, to which the outcome of the mediation is presented for its approval: is it acceptable, is it not, is a modification required? Once that clearance committee has approved it, the individual bureaucrat is cleared from all suspicion.”



Sriram not only advocates that mediation becomes part of the curriculum of law and business schools and of the All India Services training academies, but also that the government passes legislation that makes pre-court mediation mandatory. This, he says, is the only way to resolve the enormous backlog of cases now pending in Indian courts.

One question highlighted a lawyer’s concern. “There is a crying need for more trained mediators, but wouldn’t more mediation reduce lawyers’ fees?” Sriram disagreed. “Mediation lawyers need to put in a lot of work preparing for the mediation and assisting and helping the party through. This work has to be professionally remunerated.”

“Mediation is a concept whose time has come,” writes former Supreme Court judge B.N. Srikrishna in his foreword to *The Commercial Mediation Monograph*. “Its greatest advantage is that, since the parties are themselves entering into an agreement (with no more than the encouraging presence of the mediator) there could be no further litigation, nor appeal against such instrument.” Sriram stresses the beneficial aspect for the persons involved. “No matter what the complexity and stakes of the dispute, mediation helps. An amicable settlement is, after all, the best way to end a dispute.”

Carel

*The Commercial Mediation Monograph by Sriram Panchu, 108 pages. Available from Amazon.in. Price in India Rs 270.*

## REFLECTION

Recent disagreements in the community about the status and form of the Galaxy plan made me wonder about our belief systems in general. What do we believe in, and why?

First of all, we need to distinguish different kinds of beliefs. There are fundamental beliefs, which include beliefs about the status of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, and more relative ones like the belief that democracy is the right mode of governance for Auroville at present.

While we clearly differ over our relative beliefs, we tend to assume that all Aurovilians share the same foundational beliefs. In other words, that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are our guides and that Auroville is intended to further the next step in evolution. But is this so?

I’m not so sure. Some of us seem to have very little understanding of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother or the purpose of Auroville. And even those who have a better understanding do not necessarily relate to Sri Aurobindo and Mother in the same way. For example, we can approach Mother as the intimate Mother, or the Kaliesque Mother, or the eternal Goddess Mother, or the path-breaking, evolving Mother, and in many, many other ways.

Some people have no problem in encompassing all these different aspects of Mother and seeing them as one. Others may relate to certain aspects much more than others.

Does this matter?

Well, the aspect of Mother we most relate to can have a very real influence upon how we approach or align ourselves on certain issues that occupy our

## What do we believe? And why?

community process. For example, those who feel that whatever Mother ‘blessed’ or expressed represents some kind of eternal truth will tend to defend this to the death, while those who relate more to the ‘evolving’ Mother will be more likely to say that “if Mother were here today, she would do things differently”.

Again, those who take ‘Truth or the Abyss’ as her core message may approach decision-making in a very different way from those who focus upon the Mother of “You must all agree”.

But why do we differ in how we relate to Mother?

Sometimes beliefs are the result of a profound and overwhelming revelation, which I imagine was the case for many of those who met Mother. Sometimes beliefs are arrived at through a dedicated process of self-exploration and surrender. But sometimes our beliefs may be influenced by our existing predilections. In other words, subconsciously we may gravitate to the beliefs that fit us best, the ones that bolster our existing assumptions about the world or our sense of ourselves. And, as we have seen, Sri Aurobindo and Mother provide many different ‘doorways’ through which we can approach them.

For example, if we are already attracted to democracy we may enthusiastically embrace Sri Aurobindo’s perception in *The Renaissance of India*

*What I meant by acceptance of all the effective idea of democracy, – the thing itself, never fully worked out, was present as an element in ancient Indian as in ancient European polity and soci-*

*ety, – is that I find its inclusion in our future way of living in some shape, to be a necessity of our growth.*

while ignoring Mother’s comment *I don’t think democracy is AT ALL, at all an organization in accord with India’s spirit – not in the least.*

If it is the case that some, at least, of our beliefs are intimately identified with our sense of ourselves, of our ego, then it becomes much harder to change them; for to change them threatens to undermine our sense of who we are.

But what are the kinds of assumptions that may shape our fundamental beliefs? One fairly common one is that whatever Sri Aurobindo and Mother did, from birth onwards, must have the stamp of what we understand to be perfection.

Sri Aurobindo cautioned against such a simplistic view:

*When (men) think of a manifestation of Divinity, they think it must be an extraordinary perfection in doing the ordinary human things – an extraordinary business faculty, political, poetic or artistic faculty, an accurate memory, not making any mental mistakes, not undergoing any defeat or failure....All that has nothing to do with manifesting the Divine.*

*At that rate Rama would be undivine because he followed the Mayamriga as if it were a natural deer and Krishna would be undivine because he was forced by Jarasandha to take refuge in distant Dwarka. These human ideas are false.*

And, again,

*Why the immortal Hell should the*

*Divine be tied down to succeed in all his operations? What if failure suits him better and serves better the ultimate purpose?*

This belief in their ‘perfection’ allows us to manufacture a Sri Aurobindo or Mother who effortlessly surmounted difficulties and who never changed. Yet Sri Aurobindo once remarked that he had changed his entire outlook four times and Mother, after the descent of the ‘surhomme’ consciousness, said “my vision and understanding of the world, of life, of everything, has completely changed”.

But underlying this desire for their ‘perfection’ is perhaps a deeper need, and this is our need for a point of stability, for something to rely upon in a chaotic world. Hence the tendency of some of us to set them far above us as examples of unchanging perfection rather than – and here I have to choose my words very carefully – divine works in progress. As Sri Aurobindo put it,

*I had no urge toward spirituality in me, I developed spirituality. I was incapable of understanding metaphysics, I developed into a philosopher. I had no eye for painting – I developed it by Yoga. I transformed my nature from what it was to what it was not. I did it by a special manner, not by a miracle and I did it to show what could be done and how it could be done.*

The problem is that by deifying, worshipping, them we evade the responsibility of making progress ourselves. This, no doubt, is why Mother once remarked that it is better to become than to adore.

And here, perhaps, lies the key. For if, as Mother remarked to a school child “Truth is a living, changing thing, which expresses itself every second”; and if, as Sri Aurobindo explained, they never had a prearranged mental plan for the development of the Ashram for “The whole thing has taken birth, grown and developed as a living being by a movement of consciousness (Chit-Tapas)”, then perhaps one way we can distinguish the ‘eternal’ truths from the more temporal ones, or navigate the belief clashes that bedevil our communal process, is by trying to identify ourselves with that “movement of consciousness”, with that evolving ‘truth’.

This is not a matter of debating the pros and cons of any position, or of trying to work out a compromise between competing approaches or beliefs. Mother gave the clue.

*“...one who has completely dedicated himself to the Truth, who wants to live the Truth and serve the Truth, will know EVERY MINUTE what he has to do: it will be a sort of intuition or revelation (more often than not wordless, but sometimes also expressed in words), which will every minute let him know the truth of that minute.”*

And until we achieve this, both as individuals and as a community?

Perhaps it would be wise to hold our beliefs a little more lightly and with more humility. Rather than asserting that we are possessors of the real, unchangeable truth and that everybody should listen to us, perhaps we could honestly examine why we hold certain beliefs and be prepared to rest a little bit more in doubt, in the ‘unknowing’ necessary to subjugate the ego and prepare us for receiving that ‘Something Else’.

Alan

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

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Editorial team:

Alan, Carel. 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](mailto:avtoday@auroville.org.in)

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