

Harvesting rainwater for Auroville's water needs

According to a new study by Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research, 95% of the city's water needs can be supplied from harvested rainwater.

Few issues have been so well researched as the Auroville water situation. Over the years, more than ten studies have been made [see *Auroville Today* #259, January 2011]. At the request of the Chairman of Auroville's Town Development Council, Shri B.V. Doshi, a new one has now been completed. On February 12, 2013, Auroville's Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) published a 107-page study 'Surface Water Resource for Auroville City Area integrating Matrimandir Lake', authored by Gilles Boulicot, Pierre Taillandier, Pierre Veillat and others.

What is the reason for one more study? "It is to explore the feasibility of capturing surface rainwater, storing the water resource on the Auroville plateau, and using it as part of the drinking water supply for the Auroville city," says Gilles. "Additionally, we wanted to study to what extent the Matrimandir Lake could be an integral part of such a system. Ultimately, we want to show that Auroville can be developed as a city which is self-sustainable in its water needs, and so set an example for the world."

Groundwater

Groundwater is the only drinking water resource that Auroville and the surrounding population uses today. But the resource is extremely fragile. Already in 2007, French scientists warned that the aquifers underneath the Auroville region will turn saline. "We have not been able to do a detailed groundwater monitoring since, but we know from recent government data that the situation around Auroville has deteriorated and that seawater is already beginning to intrude into the aquifers," says Gilles. "We are sitting on a time-bomb. When it happens, it will be sudden rather than gradual. Then, 400,000 people in our bioregion will be affected."

Auroville, to a small extent, may benefit from all the bunding work that has been done. "The bunds and check dams that Auroville created have a positive effect on the aquifer," says Gilles. "They ensure that rainwater percolates into the aquifer, which benefits the villages downstream. Auroville benefits indirectly as the recharge augments the groundwater volume and so delays saline water intruding into the aquifer. But it will not prevent it. We had lots of rain in 2010 and 2011, which created a better protection than usual. But the rainfall in 2012 was

deficient, so the groundwater may turn saline in some places. Previously, in dry summers, the wells in the Repos beach community were drawing brackish water. This year it may happen again. We are in the danger area. Auroville's work is commendable; but if we look at the total area, Auroville's environmental impact is no more than 1%."

In Pondicherry, the local situation has slightly improved because of two reasons. One is that the tank rehabilitation programme conducted a few years ago with the help of Auroville has considerably enhanced Pondicherry's rainwater catchment capacity. A second is that, due to the shift in the land use from agriculture to urbanization, water extraction has dropped substantially. Ousteri Lake, for example, which is the largest artificial water body in the region, was created for irrigation. But today, there is no longer any irrigation to speak of.

"But such a change of scenario cannot be expected in the rural Auroville area, even though we witness increasing urbanization around us which may result in less water demand. For Auroville, we have to look at different options."

Rainwater harvesting

One of these options is rainwater harvesting, which makes up the bulk of the study. "It's nothing new," says Gilles. "The ancient Tamil kings created a whole interconnected system of erys and lakes which got filled with rainwater. This water was then used for agriculture. Even today some of these erys are being used, even though many have fallen into disuse and are no longer maintained."

"For the urban areas, too, the ancient kings developed rainwater harvesting structures. But during the last centuries the approach has changed to trying to get rid of rainwater as fast as possible. Rainwater is considered a nuisance rather than a potential resource. Then, paradoxically, gigantic efforts are undertaken to bring water back to the very same urban areas, often from far away and at tremendous cost."

In Auroville, rainwater harvesting is only being done to recharge the aquifer (with the exception of Annapurna farm which uses it also for irrigation). "But we found that rainwater harvesting can be one of the major water resources for the city," says Gilles. "Even

though our monsoons show very large and unpredictable

variations, looking at Auroville's topography, and assuming a population of 15,000 people in 20 years, we calculated that 95% of the drinking water requirements water could be supplied from harvested rainwater." This, he says, would require one or more storage tanks with a total capacity of 300,000 cubic metres, which would be filled through appropriate drainage systems. For water security reasons, it would be better to create a number of storage tanks.

But how to fill such a tank or tanks? "The design for capturing and storing rainwater needs to be planned and integrated within the city layout," says Gilles. "It means that drainage conduits and rainwater capturing zones will have to be designed as part of the urban landscape, using existing topographic features. We propose that a network of natural waterways is created all over Auroville which would drain the rainwater into the storage areas. This could lead to a very nice urban landscape, where the waterways would be filled-up during monsoons and be empty during the rest of the year. As rainwater is prone to pollution, these waterways would help in the cleaning process through appropriate designs, landscape and vegetation. A final water treatment system would cleanse the water before it would be fed into the drinking water supply."

The function of the Matrimandir lake

"In our study we took the Matrimandir lake as a given, not to be questioned," says Gilles. "The lake, which surrounds the Matrimandir and its inner gardens, has a symbolic and aesthetic value. Such a large structure needs to be studied from several points of view in relation to the ground reality and the way it can be integrated in the topographic context. So we studied the ways and potential to sustain the lake in its three functions: aesthetic, symbolic and practical, e.g. to what extent it is possible to use it as part of the Auroville rainwater harvesting network. We then found that the lake has never been well-planned. The surrounding buildings,

such as the Town Hall, which were created about ten years ago, are situated about two metres below the planned lake level. We calculated to see if harvested rainwater could be used to fill the lake, and afterwards maintain its water level when there is leakage and evaporation. We found it cannot. The topography around the

lake is such that one part is lower and another higher than the lake [see contour map on page 2]. The only rainwater that can be harvested is from the latter area and from the Matrimandir's inner gardens. But that run-off would be insufficient to compensate for the losses, even with a lake level fluctuation of 75 centimeters as allowed by late Chief Architect Roger Anger. Additionally, there would be no possibility to use the lake as part of the rainwater harvesting network.

"To solve the problem you can either redesign the topography – which means a lot of earth movement – or use the existing topography. We chose the latter option and explored the potential of designing a 'step-lake' or a 'terraced lake' like the rice fields in Bali, so that there is a much larger area which can drain into it. Such a lake would have three to four levels or more, with 50-100 centimeter steps, each proportional to the corresponding drainage catchment area. It could be very beautiful. The aesthetic aspect of such a lake could include waterfalls and moving water and the design could integrate the already grown-up trees around Matrimandir on islands. In this way the lake can be maintained naturally from an effective drainage area of 1,446,000m² (356 acres) bordering Matrimandir.

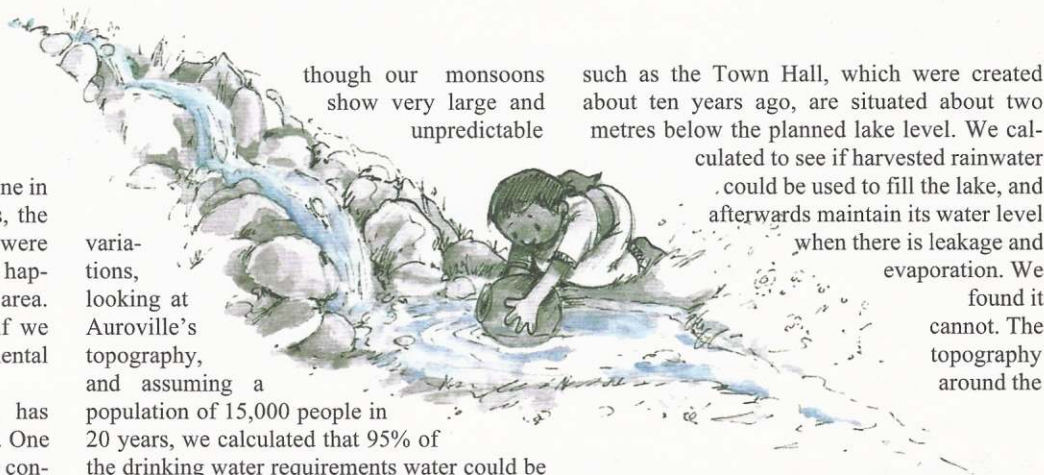
"Such a drainage area, however, will at times provide more water than the lake can store. So there will be a very large overflow which will need to be stored in a secondary reservoir, which can be emptied as required. We calculated that this reservoir, with a capacity of 150,000 cubic metres (or a surface area of 30,000 square metres of 5 metre depth), would not only be useful to help maintain the levels of the lake in the dry season, but also in combination with Matrimandir lake, be able to supply a population of 15,000 people for, on average, 220 days a year." The calculation, he explains, is made on the basis of a projected consumption of 107 litres per capita per day (lcd), which is less than half the 270 lcd as indicated in the Indian National Building Code.

"But it is in consonance with the Green Rating for Integrated Habitat Assessment which takes into account that wastewater is being recycled for flushing or other similar usages, in order to optimize the freshwater use." In comparison, the average water use in the USA is almost 600 lcd – it has a high share of outdoor water use largely because of landscape irrigation and swimming pools – against 200 lcd in Germany and 100 lcd in China.

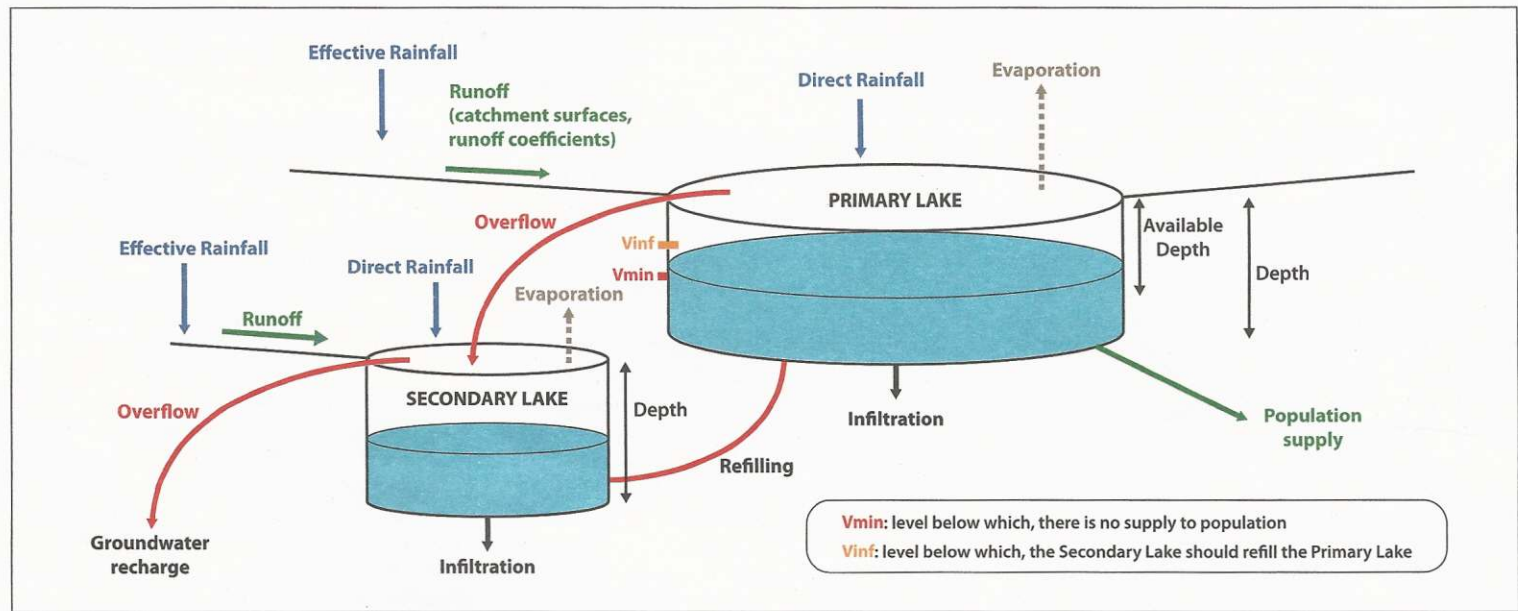
Multi-sourcing

Though rainwater harvesting can be the major water source, the study does not recommend relying solely on it. Instead it proposes using a combination of resources.

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CARTOON: LEE



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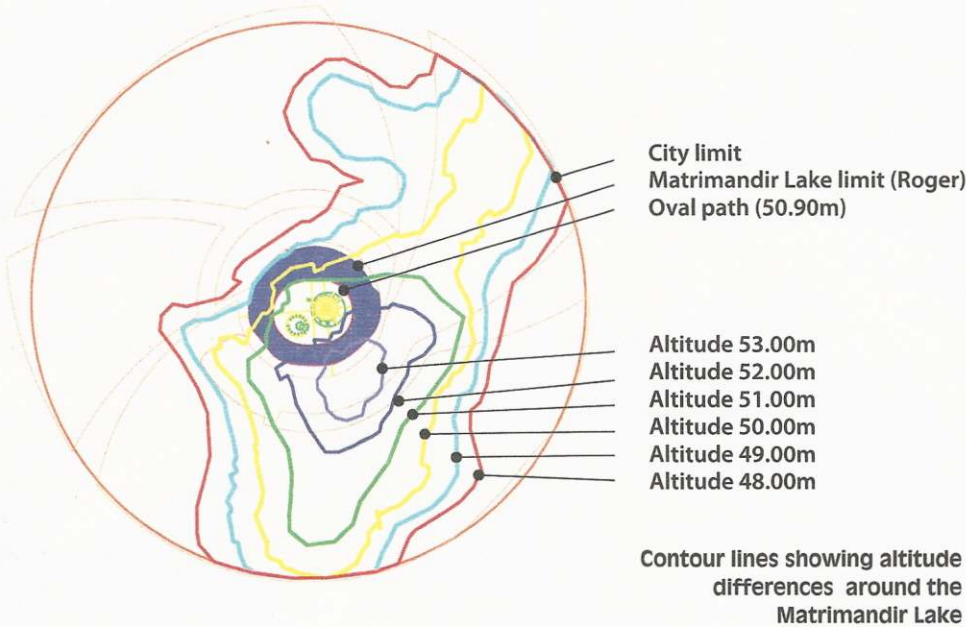
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"This," says Gilles, "has a lot of advantages. It makes the system very sturdy and allows for flexibility to keep pace with the population growth; there is no need to invest in systems which are meant for a much larger population."

"So a multi-sourcing strategy is essential. Based on a population model of 15,000 people, a combination of resources has been examined. Our technical and economic evaluation shows that fresh groundwater is the cheapest source, followed by harvested rainwater, then desalinized brackish groundwater, while desalinized seawater is the most expensive. Taking into account the investment and running costs over a 20-year period, a mix of rainwater harvesting, desalination of brackish water and a back-up of groundwater – e.g. extracted from pockets of ground water that are not threatened by seawater intrusion and which can be recharged and maintained – will be the most feasible solution to achieve water security for Auroville."



The study concentrates on the city area and its estimated water demand. It does not deal with the greenbelt and the outlying areas. "In future, more rainwater harvesting systems can be created there to supply the additional population," says Gilles.

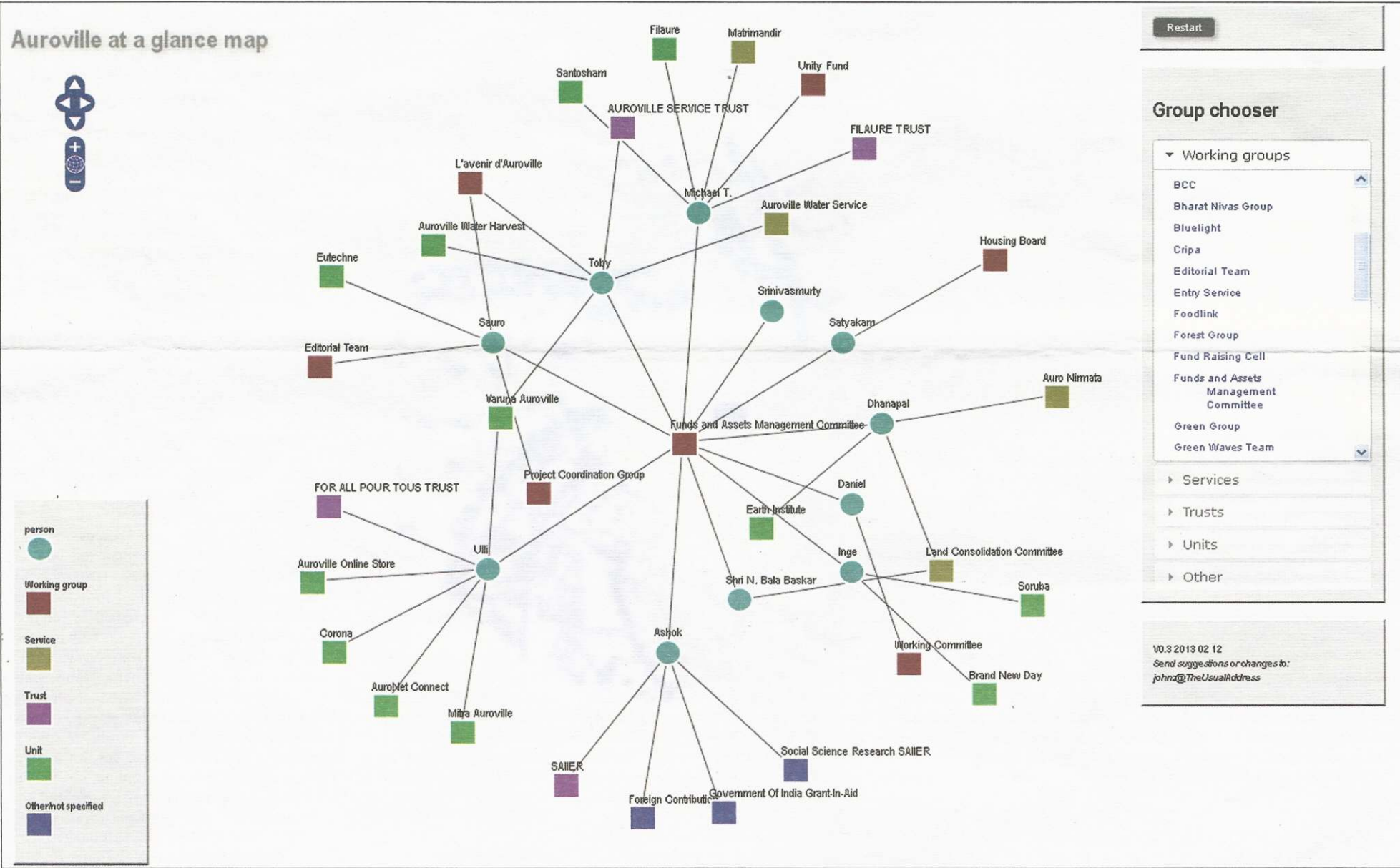
But all that is for later. Now that the technical part of the study is completed, the team has started work on how to translate its proposals into the reality of Auroville and integrate them into the city layout. The next step is for Auroville to decide if this is the path to be followed. Says Gilles, "Tim Rees, an early Aurovillian who made the first hydrological study of Auroville, told us that Mother said to him in 1972 that there is enough water and that the Aurovilians will have to use their ingenuity to collect it and make use of it. That's what we are trying to do."

In conversation with Carel

The study will soon be accessible on the Auroville web site.

INTERNAL ORGANISATION

Mapping Auroville



Over the years there have been many different maps of Auroville. The early maps of the land tended to be schematic or conceptual – 'wish maps' – as not much had yet been established on the ground. Today, there is more emphasis upon mapping the actual topography – settlements, roads and natural features – although these maps often still include conceptual elements, like the curving lines which demarcate the Zones and the perfect circles which enclose the city and Greenbelt.

But there have been other kinds of maps. For example, there have been a number of attempts to map Auroville's actual or ideal organization. In this line, John Z. recently posted a link to his new map on Auronet. His 'Auroville At A Glance Interactive Map' shows who is in which group/service/unit, and how these groups/services/units are linked through shared members. As one keeps clicking on different groups, a richly interlaced network of hubs and interconnections emerges; a kind of Auroville web.

It's far from perfect – there are a number of inaccuracies and omissions (which John is busy

correcting) and the map floats untethered around the screen – but it's a very useful map. Apart from telling us who is in which group, it shows how very many of our major groups are organized around money and commerce. It also shows that some Aurovilians are members of more than one group (ten seems to be the record), and that while some groups – like the FAMC – are connected to many other groups through their members, others – like the Entry Group, for example – are relatively poorly connected.

The difficulty comes in interpreting this information. For example, the knee-jerk reaction of some Aurovilians to the news that someone is a member of multiple groups is that he or she is power-crazy and/or powerfully influencing policy in many sectors. This may be true. On the other hand, members of groups like the Working Committee automatically become ex officio members of other groups. It might also be assumed that the more linkages a group has with other groups through common members, the better it is able to understand the whole and, therefore, the more likely it is to make wise decisions. But this is not necessarily so. Just because somebody is a member of

two or more groups does not mean that he or she is sharing information between the groups, nor does it necessarily imply that he/she has any wider sense of community needs.

In other words, many of the connections indicated in the map may be conceptual or potential rather than actual.

The attempt to better understand how our organization works is a worthy and understandable one, and we should keep on trying to improve that understanding. John Z. has made a valuable contribution here. Ultimately, however, all such maps are limited in their usefulness because they cannot capture many of the elements involved in the famous 'Auroville process'. For example, the information given in this particular map is only about the structure and membership of 'official' groups. It doesn't include 'non-official' groups, nor does it explain how individuals and groups take decisions. To begin to do this, you would need to understand not only the hierarchy of groups in Auroville and their preferred mode of decision-making. You would also need to know which individuals, ideals or dogmas are influential, and upon whom and why.

This would be a huge study in itself. But if you

were trying to understand our process, even then you wouldn't be finished, because you would also need to include the effects of the larger cosmic forces which are constantly pushing and pulling each one of us in unique ways. And you would also need to take into account the evolutionary Becoming which unfolds moment by moment, creating new realities, new possibilities.

All this is impossible to do, of course, which is why maps work best with relatively static things like landscapes and roads rather than with complex dynamic entities like the Auroville process and an evolving universe. In our present consciousness we cannot do without maps, and John and his fellow mapmakers are to be sincerely thanked for their efforts. But we must never forget, as I think we sometimes do, that Auroville cannot be reduced to its mappable elements – its buildings, roads, projects, income and expenditure etc. – nor should we assume that today's maps can be any guide for the future. For Auroville is, primarily, a Being, an evolving group soul and, as such, cannot be confined to any convenient category or predictable path of progress. It is to be lived, not analysed.

Alan

Tibetan holidays

Thirteen Tibetan children between 14-17 years lived for one and a half months in Auroville.

‘Spinach momos with dried chilly chutney, serves six’ is the first of the eight recipes in *Simple Recipes from the roof of the World*, a Tibetan cookbook made by Tibetan children during their holidays in Auroville. “This is the fourth time that children from Tibet have come to Auroville during their winter holidays,” says Kalsang, the caretaker of the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture. “They come from the Tibetan Children’s Village in Suja, in the Himalayas in North India.”

The Tibetan Children’s Village, she explains, is a community in exile which takes care of and educates orphans, destitutes and refugee children from Tibet. “These children were sent by their parents to India to get a better education. They all escaped over the mountains to Nepal, walking for weeks with a guide. The tracks are dangerous; the children carry food, clothing, bedding and shelter, but much has to be abandoned on the way. Mostly, when they arrive, they have little more than the clothes they wear. Some children suffered frostbite; one girl lost three fingers, others nearly lost their feet. It was only when they arrived in Nepal, where they were received at the Tibetan Refugee Reception Center (TRRC) in Kathmandu, that there were treated.”

The TRRC helped the children to go to Dharamsala in India, where they were sent to the Tibetan Children’s Village (TCV), to live in self-contained family groups called *Khimsang* of 20 girls and 20 boys, with two foster parents. “Most foster parents and teachers have gone through the same traumas as the children and know the life story of each of them. This creates very strong bonds. The children are raised together as brothers and sisters and the school, in fact, is home.” Kalsang knows what they went through; she herself is a refugee from Tibet, walked the gruelling miles across the mountains to Nepal and was brought up in the Tibetan Children’s Village.

“This school-family is all they have,” says Kalsang. “The Chinese authorities do not permit the children to meet their parents – they haven’t seen them since 2008 – which becomes particularly painful at Tibetan New Year, which is the traditional time for family. All communication is blocked – telephones, emails and letters. A friend of mine visited Tibet and carried a letter from one of the students. In Lhasa he phoned the mother to tell her to pick up the letter. Fifteen minutes later the Chinese army was



The Tibetan children singing a song at the farewell party

standing at the door, demanding to see the letter. The mother only got it when they were satisfied that there was nothing against China in it. That’s still the situation today.”

The Pavilion of Tibetan Culture offers these children a holiday home and some education, jointly with the five Aurovilian Tibetan children. “Increasingly, Aurovilians become aware of what we are doing, and help is growing. This time there were seven volunteers,” says Kalsang. “They taught the children arts and crafts, theatre, fencing, laughter yoga, music and English communication. They also helped the children to make a small booklet, *My Fatherland Tibet*, dedicated to the martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the country, and a small Tibetan cookbook with recipes of Tibetan dishes – vegetarian, in order not to offend Aurovilian sensitivities. While the TCV takes care of the costs of transport and food, we in Auroville provide free accommodation and education at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture.” Is financial help required? “Yes,” she says. “We’ve managed this time, but only just.”

The interaction with Auroville children was particularly poignant this time when there were sharings with the students of Future School and Last School. “Two Chinese students have recently joined Auroville and there was an emotional interaction,”

says Kalsang. “The Chinese girl burst into tears, saying that she was not responsible for the plight of these Tibetans. And, of course, she wasn’t. In fact, neither the Chinese nor the Tibetan people can be held responsible for these developments. She said that at school in China they were told that Tibetan people are very violent. That was very painful to hear, for the Tibetans see themselves as full of love and compassion. But the Auroville children learned a lot, the sharing widened their world view and we got many phone calls from parents who noted that this interaction had changed their children.”

Next year again children from Tibet will spend their winter holidays in Auroville. “It has become a fixed programme which we couldn’t have imagined when we started the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture many years ago,” said Claude Arpi, the founder of the Pavilion. “I would like now to go one step further; I would like to also invite a number of Chinese children to interact with the Tibetan children here in Auroville. Auroville, after all, is all about human unity.”

Carel

For more information and help contact Kalsang Dolma at bodkhang97@gmail.com

BUILDING THE CITY

Reviewing the building permission process

On January 28th, the Auroville Town Development Council organized a workshop on building guidelines, as part of its review of its building permission process. It was guided by Helen Eveleigh, an expert on the development of sustainable communities in the UK.

“During my previous visits to Auroville the Town Development Council (TDC) asked me to look at revising the building application process,” says Helen. “I have been developing built-environment policies, practices and guidance in the UK – I was policy advisor for built environment of the Sustainable Development Commission in the UK – and have 12 years of experience supporting the delivery of large-scale sustainable communities. I undertook a review of this area in 2011 and now came back for a couple of months to support delivery of the recommendations. This finally resulted in the half-day workshop at the Unity Pavilion to get community input to the development of guidelines for buildings in Auroville.”

“The TDC had been experiencing problems with the existing building permission process. People complained about lack of clarity regarding requirements; about being sent from pillar to post; and many got very frustrated with the process which, in some cases, would last more than one and a half years. Even at the end they were not sure if their project was going to be approved. There was a backlog of pending applications, both of small projects such as house extensions as well as of larger ones such as the creation of a new block of apartments. The TDC wanted to become more effective and get clarity on how to make decisions.”

“I had long discussions about the permission process with a number of TDC members, architects and other users of the system. We agreed that the process should aim at helping the project and not be a bureaucratic hurdle. Someone who comes with a project proposal should be supported in a collaborative manner so that the end product is an improvement on the original design; a building that support’s Auroville’s aims and aspirations. The system should inspire and, as regards sustainable buildings, encourage experimentation and innova-

tion and the sharing of best practices, and be simple and have clear and transparent decision-making criteria,

“We agreed that a number of issues have to be addressed. One vital missing ingredient from my experience is a set of clear statements outlining what the community wants from its buildings.”

“These guidelines should embody the community aspiration to build in a certain way and reflect agreed community goals and vision. They would also give clarity to the decision-making process so applicants understand the criteria against which their projects will be reviewed. But guidelines are a checklist; they should not be understood as ‘obligations’. If a project does not follow a guideline, the TDC should know why not, and instead of refusing building permission, should try to help the project incorporate that guideline if it is appropriate for the scale of building or specific site. As all buildings belong to the community, there is a logic that project-holders, as far as possible, comply with the guidelines, and that if they can’t, the community finds ways to help. For building in Auroville is a common responsibility: there should not be a sense of a private individual and a permission-giving ‘authority’; but instead of project-holders and community representatives working together to manifest an asset.

“Another issue which was proposed is peer review – the review of the design proposal by key stakeholders, including the community. I have been told that this had been tried before, but that it had not worked as senior architects felt frustrated if their ideas were not heeded and less experienced architects felt imposed upon. Perhaps we need to change the name from ‘peer review’ to ‘collaborative planning’ to emphasize the purpose of the review – to pool and utilise our collective expertise and experience in order to improve future development in Auroville. We should not reject an idea simply because it hasn’t worked in the past.

“Last but not least, the TDC should consider how minor organisational changes could improve its functioning. For example, in England one person in the town planning department is usually in charge of a project, and helps carry it through. This greatly improves the relationship between applicant and the decision makers, making it easier for applicants to gain the information they need and enabling a more in-depth understanding of the project by the planning team.”

“In the workshop we concentrated on the guidelines. I presented best practice guidelines on sustainability that are in use in the UK and in India – such as LEED and GRIHA (India) and the Code for Sustainable Homes (UK) and the 10 guiding principles of ‘One Planet Communities’. The participants discussed them and then voted on those which, in their view, were of importance in Auroville.

“They agreed that buildings should promote happiness and spiritual growth. Houses and apartments should be designed as simply as possible, so that they could fit all and not be tailor-made to the requirements of the person who pays for it. They should be adaptable and affordable, and, if possible, innovative. As buildings don’t stand on their own, they should be in harmony with other buildings and the landscape around it. Common facilities should be clustered together, at walkable distances, and there should be guidelines for the shaping of landscapes and wider urban areas. The need for collective spaces was stressed, but also the need to respect privacy and find architectural solutions for issues such as

Guidelines for Development in Auroville

To ensure that the development of Auroville meets the needs of current and future users, the Building Application Group will consider how effectively proposals:

1. Reflect Auroville’s context (existing buildings, topography, climate, landscape, galaxy, concept, vision, etc.).
2. Minimise use of non-renewable energy (in materials, usage, and transport).
3. Protect water quality, preserve water and minimize its use.
4. Minimise solid waste rejected through prevention, re-use, recycling and recovery.
5. Reduce impact on land and natural systems and promote diversity.
6. Provide good value for money and are easy and affordable to maintain.
7. Deliver economic, environmental or social benefit to the wider community.
8. Provide buildings and places which enhance the health, well-being and spiritual growth of users and are accessible to every one.
9. Demonstrate use of best practice and/or innovation in design.
10. Promote collective living and social interaction whilst providing privacy.
11. Deliver buildings and places that are simple yet beautiful.
12. Plan for the future (adaptable design, adaptation to impacts of climate change).

noise pollution.

“Many other issues came up as well, such as the need for sustainable community transport; the usefulness of a handbook on the do’s and don’ts of construction in Auroville; and the need to promote urban agriculture. Lastly, it was felt that the Auroville Master Plan might need to be adapted to better reflect Auroville’s values at the urban planning scale.”

Helen’s work has borne fruit. A few weeks after the workshop, the TDC published the Guidelines for Development in Auroville and announced that it is working on creating practical guidelines which will be incorporated in the building application forms.

In conversation with Carel

Developing Entrepreneurship

Chandresh, an ex-student of the Ashram school who later worked in the Silicon chip industry in the US for twenty-two years, tells of his life before Auroville and his work here supporting new ventures

Auroville Today: How did your experience in the Ashram school influence and shape who you are today?

Chandresh: My parents and uncles were all freedom fighters, so from them I was quite influenced during my early years in the social aspect of India's development. I joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram school in 1968 when I was 11 years old. In the Ashram, there was such an intense atmosphere, so it definitely had an influence. In the school, there was a strong discipline, and although it was flexible in the sense that you could choose what you wanted to do, it was very structured. That helped in developing the ability to focus and plan. The focus there was not on passing exams, but on getting a rounded education. In engineering we had a five year course and were exposed to the three main areas of mechanical, electrical and civil engineering, and because computers were just coming up at that time, I also took computer science and digital electronics. Being so broad it was not like the engineering courses outside, but it gave a very rounded background with a hands-on emphasis.

Were you also much involved with physical education?

In the Ashram, physical education was mandatory. Every day the students had to be involved in different activities – combatives, aquatics, gymnastics, athletics, games, and then, of course, there were competitions. There was a very structured programme.

That emphasis on athletics is something I have maintained. This week over three thousand runners are competing in the Auroville marathon. I started the marathons in Auroville in 2008 for Auroville's 40th anniversary, and even this year it is based here and I am the race director. It is a huge effort, with about 20 team members and about 250 volunteers. When I was in the US I used to run marathons, and when I came here there were no marathons in the area. My original plan was to have a run from the Matrimandir to the Ashram and back again; that would have been about 30 km. But then I decided that we needed a marathon course within Auroville itself. It has been very successful; each year the number of runners has been growing.

After your education in the Ashram, what did you do?

I worked in Pondicherry for four years with a company that was started by one of the founders who had helped start Aurelec. The company was designing and manufacturing leather processing machines and I helped develop some new digital electronic design products for the company. Later it also moved into design and manufacture of computers and I worked with the design team on these new projects. I was happy doing this work, but my brother who was in the US kept saying that I should come and check it out.

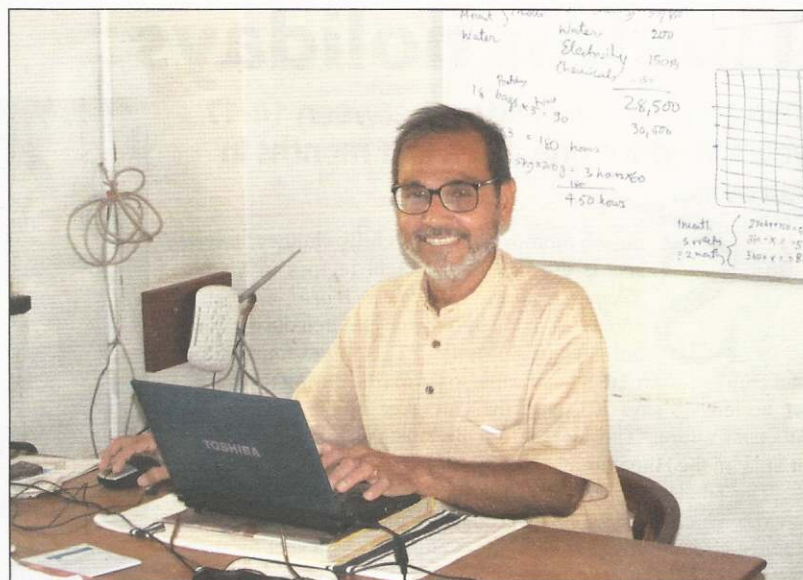
India. Already for a long time I had been thinking of going back, but that was my turning point. It took me some time to wrap things up, and in 2006 I joined Auroville.

Briefly take us through some of your projects since coming to Auroville.

I started SaraCon as an entrepreneur development centre. I came from Silicon Valley where many new companies had been started with venture capital. The idea here was to create a kind of social venture pool to help young Aurovilians or newcomers who had ideas to start an activity. It is very difficult to find a place in Auroville to start something, and even if you find something you have to deal with the cost of setting it up and the rent. So the SaraCon campus was to become a hub for entrepreneur development, with workshops on business planning, project support writing, and things like that. Once some activities had started they could cross-pollinate and support each other. The idea was to initially support a team for a year or two, and if the team becomes successful, then any income over and above what they need for sustenance would be split three ways, one third to the unit to expand and grow, the second third to sustain and grow the community, and the third would go to the pool from which we fund other projects. But that part of the vision has yet to materialize.

Also, the idea was that we would support three types of projects. One type would help the community as a whole. The community transport system is one of those. We did some research but the cost of a general transport system was too high and we couldn't support it. However, we developed Quiet Transport, an electric bike project, and Auroville Community Transport (ACT), a bus service as part of that. Both of these enterprises are struggling to gain traction, however – the bus service because it needs more users, and the bike service because of the unavailability of sufficiently durable batteries in India.

Blue Light with which I have been involved started off at SaraCon but has now moved to Town Hall. Blue Light represents the open source movement in Auroville. Usually in India when you buy a computer, the operating system and other software that is bundled with it are copied versions and not legal. So the idea was that at least all the services in Auroville could use Ubuntu, which is an open source operating system, and Blue Light also supported other tools that can be used on open source. Blue Light has a team that would go to the units and services and convert their systems to open source, train their staff, and do networking so that backups could be done remotely. The Blue Light team converted almost 40 units to using Ubuntu. They also gave courses at the SaraCon office for people working in the units to learn how to use these software



Chandresh

The third type of initiative was to support local Aurovilians and local artisans. One example of this type of project is Wellpaper which had an office in SaraCon for two years, and now has moved to their own building. I have been involved in another initiative – growing mushrooms – using the same method of training local people and microfinancing them through the Village Action Group, and also helping with the management, quality control and marketing. Another project that has moved to SaraCon is Eco Femme, which is making reusable sanitary napkins for women; they moved into our complex about two months ago. Auro Creation which makes compressed earth block also has their management office here. Tapasya Design Studio had a sojourn at SaraCon for some time before they moved to their own offices in the Humility building which they designed and built. Many initiatives have started off here and then moved on their own places.

For some time I have had in mind creating a space for product development. Today if you want to create a new product in Auroville, it is impossible to find a workshop or an affiliate to do the job work. There also are not many skilled artisans who can do this work. I am trying to set up a product design space adjacent to Udavi school campus, where there are four big industrial sheds which need sprucing up. Building a team to do the product design work is challenging, however, as is securing the funding to set this up. We want to have facilities for wood work, metal work, and fabric making. We have found a team leader for carpentry work, and a team leader for fabric, we also have interest from some designers to be part of this new setup. We can provide a place and some logistical help, but each activity will have to be self-sustaining. There are possibilities and we are trying to realize them.

How do you view Auroville's overall development?

The socio-economic development is a big challenge, including the availability of housing and a sustainable maintenance for the residents. There are many young and skilled people who come to Auroville but they do not stay because there is no place for them and no maintenance for them. Even the volunteers who come have to contribute to the Central Fund while maintaining themselves from their savings. This is in contradiction to common sense. In SaraCon we provide the volunteers with their basic needs – transport from Chennai and back, meals, an electric bike to get around, a little bit of pocket money. But other units are not doing this. In terms of housing, there is a resistance to building temporary housing because it tends to become permanent in Auroville, as people don't move out because they don't have the means or the will in the future. What is promised is readily forgotten. Today, in Auroville most new structures are using reinforced steel and concrete. These rigid structures cost a lot of money and take a lot of time and energy to build. Recently I found out that the life of costly reinforced concrete structures is only about 60-70 years, and yet in Auroville these are the types mostly promoted.

When the early pioneers came to Auroville, the land was uninhabitable. By default their main effort was greenwork. But now the second and third generations of Aurovilians are here and the socioeconomic situation is as barren as the land was for those pioneers. There are not enough people, and so the community is struggling with problems of money and cash flow, and many residents go abroad to work or build guest houses in their residences to earn extra money. There is little money to move the economy forward, little to create new jobs and wealth. Forget about creation, you create when you have the basics, but the basics are still lacking.

There is not enough concerted effort towards socio-economic development. The Auroville Board of Commerce (ABC) is mostly focused on regulating whatever units there are with procedures, rules, taxes and loans, but it is not able to set aside any money or time for the development of entrepreneurship or new projects within Auroville. This is left to the initiatives of individual residents or newcomers. There is no group within Auroville reviewing business plans or encouraging teams, no corpus money to support new initiatives. For Auroville initiatives, bank loans from outside generally are unavailable, and there are no means to raise loans within Auroville, except through a private party. The economic situation in Auroville needs concentrated effort to germinate new enterprises in a variety of fields with ongoing support, guidance and networking. Without this we will not be able to create a knowledge society. Due to the low population density, the cottage industry model will not work for our residents, and it is not practical to move workers in and out each day for low margin industries. Other micro-enterprise models have to be set up to leverage skills where the best resources may be mobilized and optimum returns are possible.

In conversation with Larry



The Saracon building in Kottakarai, Auroville

In the U.S. I worked in the electronics industry, first on the East Coast where my brother was and later on the West Coast. Slowly I moved into designs that spanned microprocessors, computers and later networking. I worked in many companies there and afterwards started a company which did design services consulting for bigger companies, mostly on networking, wireless switching, and things like that.

Outside of technical work, in the mid 1990s along with some friends we started a weekly Sri Aurobindo study circle, which eventually expanded to having several evenings of readings and a sports activity on Sunday mornings. In 1995 our group also started going to the Lodi Ashram for their monthly retreats. Through this group I became a board member of the Sri Aurobindo Association of California which was involved in coordinating the All USA Meetings (AUMs), publishing the journal *Collaboration*, and helping to promote Auroville and other projects within US. In 1999 our group, along with AVI-USA, organized fundraising for the Village Action Group and land purchase in Auroville.

Through this fundraising work I was invited to join AVI-USA, and after joining I went to the general AVI meeting in Germany in 2000 where I was invited to join the general AVI board.

Then in 2003 President Bush started a preemptive war in Iraq, and I decided that was it, I am getting out of here and going back to

packages, and also developed open source software for some of the activities in SaraCon, such as for our bus transport logistics.

Another project of this type is Urban Networks for which SaraCon provided a space in the complex until recently when they moved to Town Hall; they are doing regional planning [See *Auroville Today*, December 2012]

The second type of project SaraCon wants to support is those which would give maintenance to Aurovilians. In 2000 I started Avitra, a translation service. We have people from about 30 countries here, so it is an ideal place for website localization, voice-overs, translations of books and brochures. That unit is doing okay; we have about 25 Aurovilians who get their maintenance through that system. Another project of that sort was AurovilleArts.com, an online gallery for Auroville artists so that their art could be exhibited online and sold. After three years of effort, the website was good but we had to close it because most of our artists were not open to the idea.

We also started Auroville Consulting to offer management consulting services to companies outside using Auroville expertise. The idea here was to create a knowledge-based industry for Auroville. Auroville has a lot of expertise in greenwork, for example, and the idea was that if companies outside wanted to take some initiative in this area, Auroville could provide some project management for them.

The Changemaker

Gijs, a social entrepreneur, farmer, teacher and consultant, joined Auroville in 2010. Here's his journey.

Auroville Today: What are your early memories of your turning-points which clarified the direction of your life?

Gijs: My parents are filmmakers. They had made a documentary on children in Rajasthan. I was 10. The story was about twins – a brother and a sister. Due to sex discrimination, the girl wasn't allowed to go to school. However, when her father and brother went to the Pushkar fair to sell their pottery toys, the girl would wear her brother's clothes and sneak into school. The story was magical: my reality in Amsterdam where I was living was so incomparably different.

There was a farmer from Rajasthan, Inder Dan, who helped my parents make this movie. He came to the Netherlands to promote it and visited us at our home. I remember very clearly the image of this man – big bright turban, long beard, white gown, there he was standing in our very Amsterdam kitchen making his rotis (chapatis) on the open fire, without using a pan. 'Wow, I want to go to where you come from,' I told Inder Dan. All he said was, 'Finish your education and then you can come work in my farm.'

So that was it, I knew that this is what I wanted to do! This idea stuck in my head for the next 8 years. When I was finishing high school I started preparing to go to his farm. I had no farming experience, so I looked at some local organic farms in Amsterdam to gain some experience in farming. I also took a Hindi course and finally went to India and worked for a year at Inder Dan's farm.

Inder Dan is a multi-talented guy. He is a farmer, poet, playwright, historian, manager and inventor. All my experience in farming and insights into politics, economy, entrepreneurship stem from the time spent with him.

UnLtd Tamil Nadu

On 15th February, 2013, Gijs Spoor gave a presentation on "The Social Entrepreneurship movement in India: how can we join from Auroville." He explained how UnLtd Tamil Nadu can serve as an incubator for aspiring changemakers by offering access to coaches and mentors and providing training and funds for two categories of start-up projects. Level 1 – to start a new initiative from scratch UnLtd Tamil Nadu offers up to Rs 80,000 of seed funding + 160 hours of hands-on support in 12 months; and Level 2 – to propel an existing high-potential project towards greater impact and sustainability it offers up to Rs 200,000 + 220 hours of support over 12 months. UnLtd Tamil Nadu wants to raise Rs 30 lakhs (approx. US\$ 60,000) in two years to support 30 social entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu.

I had so many experiences and memories of this one year in India. All of these have shaped my life to make me what I am today – a changemaker. Inder Dan had these great ideas, he was a social entrepreneur who was always experimenting with business models and institutional forums. I was interested in grounding his ideas. I would always tell him, 'Let's do it.'

I remember saying that just selling raw products wasn't going to bring the farmers a livelihood; we decided to go up the value chain and have a retail shop. Inder Dan had been doing research and he knew how to make bread in a traditional way with a wood fired oven, and other exotic healthy bakes. One brilliant idea he had was to cook healthy meals for rickshaw pullers, and in return they would do some advertising for him. He gave them t-shirts to wear which advertised our shop on the back. All the tourists would come to our shop.

After this year in Rajasthan, I went back to Holland to get myself a university degree.

Did anything significant change in your belief system after this year? Did you face any challenges in Holland?



From left: Jessamijn, little Sijmen, Liesbeth and Gijs

Yes, definitely. What changed was that I was determined to implement change where it was required. At my university I became very active in the student movement for voicing the truth. We realised the system was chronically sick, it was always trying to restrict thinking. So we did everything to resist the politics in the system and implement effective actions. We were quite successful in standing our ground.

How did you come to Auroville?

We were a few friends from university who had all studied organic agriculture. Two of them, Dave and Natasha, who today are Aurovilians, were also part of this circle. They got married to each other in India and it is through them that I came to know of Auroville. While we were all in India attending their wedding, Dave, who had spent his career in Tanzania, Africa, convinced us that Tanzania was the place to start our own organic farm. We thought of buying a large 1,000 acre farm to grow organic Fair Trade herbs. So I went there to prepare the transaction and to make a business plan. It was very challenging because the system there was corrupt. We identified the land. It was beautiful land, it had a national wildlife zone, spring areas and an agriculture zone where the soil was rich rich rich; we could grow anything there. But there were five legal claims to the same piece of land so we decided to leave it. Our other obvious option was India, so I came back.

Dave and Natasha were already settled in Auroville, at Evergreen. I came to spend 6 months with them in 2003, working with the Farm Group doing research and preparing their first 5 year plan. But the more I explored Auroville, the more I felt that it was too inward-looking and disconnected from the world outside. I really wanted to experience India. So I left Auroville and went to Hyderabad.

I started working with farmers in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Kerala. Everything I did was to do with organic farming and Fair Trade, which meant mobilising groups of small farmers and helping them to get access to high-end value markets. I set up two companies. I wanted to experience the mainstream corporate sector, and I did. However, I also realised that what I wanted to do in the business world is actually to bring a change based on values, and I couldn't find a space to do that there. I still remember meetings in Mumbai with these huge textile conglomerates. We were not communicating. I couldn't express that what really matters is to use all this factory set-up to change the world rather than to just make money. Five or six years after I had first left Auroville I realised that, actually, Auroville is the place to explore how to insert values into business.

By now I was married to my wife, Jessamijn, who was also in our agriculture friends' circle from university. We already had a child and the second one was coming. I had been working too much and neglecting my family. We decided to quit Hyderabad and come to Auroville. It was a decision to spend more time with family, with values, with passion. It was 2010."

So what have you been doing in Auroville since you returned?

I came back to work with the Farm Group again. I was supporting them with planning, what to grow where, how to increase consumption, matching supply and demand. After charting the next 5 year plan, I wanted to do something practical as well, so I worked at Foodlink distributing vegetables. Now I steward a 9 acre forest in Udumbu, where we also try to grow food, but I am not a very good farmer.

Meanwhile my daughter started going to TLC, The Learning Community. This is a school where parents also dedicate their time to teaching children. So I got involved with TLC, teaching biology and science. After the first batch of kids graduated from TLC and went to Last School, I continued teaching them the same subjects at their new school. It was very important for me to start infusing values at a very formative age in a child's life. I even tried including systems thinking in the classes.

At Evergreen we started a systems thinking course called Systemic Change. It is a three-day workshop where we help people articulate the change they aspire to bring about, and build the vehicle that will help them reach their goal. Last time we had professionals from Bangalore who work with CEOs of big companies like Wipro, Voltas etc. By the end of it some of them realised they needed a change in themselves. One of them decided to quit his job altogether. He wants to come back to explore what he should do next.

My main passion is to be associated with a change in society. When we did these courses we realised that in three days there's very little you can

accomplish. In order to consolidate or ground these different practices or perspectives, we need to spend at least 10 days together, if not longer. So the idea came that instead of giving courses, why not provide regular coaching and support to those who want to bring about a change in systems?

I decided we should get associated with UnLtd India, a launch-pad for social entrepreneurs. This is an Indian setup which 'finds, funds and supports exceptional individuals whose ideas, passion and entrepreneurial skills can bring about long-term solutions to India's social problems'. Right now we are in the process of becoming affiliated to UnLtd India. My targets are to raise 30 lacks (approx. US\$ 60,000) in two years to support 30 social entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu. As soon as such milestones are achieved and we have proved to be a worthy UnLtd India affiliate, we can officially call ourselves UnLtd Tamil Nadu. Once this happens, UnLtd India matches 100% of the money we have raised in the 1st year and 50% in the 2nd year. This will really help us in achieving our goals."

Have your views on Auroville changed since you first left Auroville?

"Yes, they have. Today I believe Auroville has a great potential to be a R&D hub for the world by experimenting with different models. Compared to when I first came to Auroville ten years ago, I see more initiatives in Auroville now in reaching out to the rest of India in the field of rural development. SEDAB, for example, the enterprise development programme in Auroville's bioregion, could create a serious impact [see *Auroville Today* # 278, September 2012]. Another programme, IRD, Integral Rural Development programme, is still being considered by the central and Tamil Nadu governments. If it is approved, we can work with 20,000 rural families, and Auroville can become a hub for rural development for Tamil Nadu, and maybe even for India. The question is whether we have the management capacities to deliver that promise.

Auroville can bring a special flavour to the rural development sector. One example of a methodology we can introduce is "presencing" – leading from the future as it emerges. This concept is developed by C. Otto Scharmer from the MIT Sloan School of Management, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. What he believes is that if you are very clear about what you want to see happening, and if you have also checked it wants to happen, then it will happen. The question is how you can collaborate effectively with its materialisation and support it so it grows.

I want to be connected to the collective, the outside world; that is my mirror. I see that as my karma yoga. When we talk about changemaking, inner work is half the job, but the other half is being effective in the world!"

In conversation with Mandakini

LETTERS

Dear Editors,

This has reference to your article 'Treating aids patients with homeopathy' in the February 2013 issue. Harry van der Zee's presentation in Auroville on the new remedies for epidemic diseases, trauma and chronic ailments was a big eye-opener for the Auroville professional homeopaths and laypersons alike. The development of the remedies is a farsighted evolution and we are thankful that Harry donated 80 remedies to the Auroville Institute for Integral Health and taught us how to work with them.

Together with Harry we are developing a "basic remedy kit" for rural India, similar to the one he has been using in rural Africa. This kit will be introduced in the Auroville village outreach programmes; it will have remedies against tuberculosis, HIV and trauma-related issues. As their use requires only basic skills, and as there are no side-effects, this will be a great means to address social and health challenges around Auroville.

A topic not addressed in your article is the development in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville of the *Harmony* and *Samata* homeopathic remedies which are carrying the energies of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. We have been experimenting with them for over 10 years now, and have created documentary evidence that they provide energetic support, lead to intensified meditations, heal or ease physical ailments and have other beneficial effects, regardless if the patient was made aware of the quality and name of the remedy or not. We therefore propose the use of *Harmony* and *Samata* to enhance the yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Mother in Auroville and all around the world.

Sigrid

For more information visit harmonysamata@gmail.com or contact sigrid@auroville.org.in

Building Bridges: the Thamarai experiment

The Thamarai project began in 2006 in a renovated house in the middle of Edayanchavady village. Over the years it has developed, among other things, educational programmes for the children and empowerment programmes for women. It has also opened a Healing Centre. Auroville Today met with the core team to evaluate the project and to explore what it really means to attempt to build a closer relationship with the village.

What was the initial inspiration behind the Thamarai project?

Kathy: It was a number of things. It was realizing that while we in Adventure community were living next to Edayanchavady village, we knew nothing about that village: it felt so close and yet so far. We also had a conflict in our community with somebody from the village and this led to some villagers coming and creating an intimidating situation. This brought home the feeling that if things don't go well with the village, things can turn hostile very quickly, so there is a need to build bridges between these two very different cultures. There was also the feeling that if we could find a way to support the women and children – the quieter, less heard voices in the village – it could perhaps create the conditions for something different to flourish there.

How did you set about bridging these two very different cultures?

Kathy: We went in assuming there was a lot we didn't know. We started by meeting women from 22 existing women's microfinance groups and asking them what we could do together that would have value for them. When they told us that education for their children was the top priority, we started creating programmes for the children. The first such project was a crèche. After a while, some young men approached us and said they would also like to participate. Some of this group had been educated at Udavi School. They could appreciate what Auroville was trying to do and yet were very aware of the limitations and problems that existed in the village. Later, young men from the Youth Club came in to help and they have been helping us ever since. They became our main advisers; we more or less deferred to them on every decision that we made. At the same time, we were aware that a small group does not represent the whole village, so we also tried to reach out to other people in the village.

lage make this contribution. Some time ago, the village elders put a lock on the door. We, the youth of the village, gathered to discuss the issue and then we broke the lock. After that the Centre reopened. But it is still an issue with the elders because they feel we are not respecting them. But now the president of the panchayat is my relation and he and his wife, who is very interested in social projects, are helping us, so things may change. Also, the addition of the Reach for the Stars project which is housed in Thamarai has helped bring stability, as eleven students are being supported through full tertiary education at a cost of 5 lakhs annually and people really value this.

How successful have you been in empowering village women?

Kathy: I don't think we've been very successful. We tried many things, we offered health education programmes, experiential art sessions, dance classes, tours of Auroville, but there was very little attendance. The only programme which generated a lot of attention was the energy healing programme, and this led to the Healing Centre being established.

Segar: I notice that in my village, Kottakarai, the energy comes and goes. We have provided a nice place for the Women's Group, we have told them they can use it whenever they want, and for some time they were very active. Then, suddenly last week, nobody turned up and it seems they are not meeting anymore. One of them joked, 'We are like the kurungi flowers, we come once every 12 years'. I think all we can do is provide a place for them and wait. But I don't want to complain against the village because it's natural for them; it's been like this for so many years.

Balu: The older people grew up in a certain environment and they don't want to change, that is why projects like Thamarai are facing many difficulties. Even the local Tamil Aurovilians don't support us – in my village none of them have come to help and some of them only came to look at the Thamarai project once. They could help so much in educating the people about Auroville and Thamarai because there is still so much ignorance. For exam-



Schoolchildren doing physical exercises at the Healing Centre

our projections of what was needed and to try and inquire and feel into what has value for them. We learned this in one of our first workshops when Yuval asked the women, 'What are your dreams in life?' They began to open up but then it became too much for them. Some of the women went home crying as the experience had opened up a place in them that seemed impossible to explore further in their current reality. But the next generation, the kids who are coming through now, will be much freer and their lives will be very different. I am sure they will have much more personal choice.

Interestingly, some of the stuff that the children are learning at the Healing Centre, where we also offer things like teenage cookery and hygiene courses, is getting passed on to their parents. The girls say they tell their mothers how to cook local herbs or to use yoga asanas for menstruation pain and the mothers are very happy to learn about this. It really has an impact.

Kathy: I have seen a change over the last two years because now a couple of young women who were originally students at Thamarai are teaching in the night school and starting to show a potential for new leadership.

What are the most important lessons that you have learned so far?

Balu: I learned that you need tremendous patience because it is very difficult to work in the village. Also, when you begin a project like this you need to be very clear about what you want to do, and you need to communicate this to the whole village. When we started this project, we didn't communicate much. We didn't present our project properly to the village elders and to many village residents, so even today there is some ignorance and suspicion about what we are doing here.

Segar: In Kottakarai it was also very difficult in the beginning. We decided to renovate an old house as a community centre but the neighbour was not happy because he was using it as a dumping place. He got together some of his friends to try to stop us, but we youth explained to the village what we were trying to do and we just kept on working. It's very important to build up positive energy and to keep going. If we had stopped because of these problems, we would never have achieved anything.

Bridget: I think initially we had ideas about what we thought would be good to do, so we projected what was going to happen, like dance classes. But often these ideas didn't take off. So one lesson I learned is to feel more into what the needs of the people are. At the same time, what has also been important to us is to keep pushing an edge, pushing for change, growth. So we need to find a balance between those two aspects.

Kathy: We know that the villagers wanted more employment, more infrastructure, but these were things that we were not in a position to deliver. And if you make promises and don't deliver on them it's not good. In fact, the villagers told us many things had been promised by Auroville in the past and many were not delivered, so the expectation was we were just going to be like the rest. So we felt strongly that if we only did one thing, we had to do it well and follow it through. We should not over-commit and expect immediate transformation because this is a long-term thing.

It's a delicate line to walk when you open up this process and ask the people what they want. I've learned that it's a negotiation process. They can ask

but it doesn't mean that that is what you have to do, because you're not just there as servants of the village. It is a co-creative process and we also want to do something that brings us joy and satisfaction. If we had just submitted to everything that the village wanted we could easily have got exploited. So I think the key with a project like this is to have no expectations, to go in with some ideas but be flexible and see what is possible. But you also need a certain amount of thick skin and firmness, otherwise you can find yourself getting pulled in many different directions.

Segar: Practically, we need to create a support group so if tomorrow we are not here, the work will continue. We have to identify the young people who can do this. Also, it is important to understand that what Bridget and Kathy can do is different from what Balu and I can do. When village issues arise – and this happens all the time – you really need to have people from this village on the team, people who can go and talk to the villagers and find out what the real problem is.

Bridget: It was a very conscious decision to have a mixed team of Aurovilians and villagers holding this project together because our main reason for setting up in the first place was to bridge relationship and grow in understanding of each other. Having a mixed team certainly creates an environment for this. It's so interesting at times how decisions emerge from this environment. It can be very challenging at times but somehow it always works out. Also, on a very practical level, if there's ever an accident or something like that, instantly we call the guys and they deal with it with a much deeper understanding than we would have been capable of. I think it was also important for us to be on the ground in the village rather than servicing the village from inside Auroville. Somehow there is more of a sense of being part of the village

You began by wanting to build bridges. How far has the bridge-building progressed?

Balu: I think the bridges are the educational programmes and they are already built. We just have to make the people aware that they are there and for them.

Kathy: I knew at the beginning we may not see the fruits of this project in our lifetime, that we are building a very long bridge, but I thought it was important to start. But I do feel some difference even now. To me it is obvious that the lives of the children and the people who have participated over the years in this project have been enriched. I can't say exactly how and to what extent, but all have had a contact with something that has opened their minds and hearts. I feel that the girls who are working with us now are motivated to keep working for the transformation of their village. At the same time, they have come to appreciate Auroville much more as well as the volunteers who have come in to offer programmes and work for them. They are touched that this effort is being made in their village.

Bridget: On a personal level the village is closer to me now. I go in and kids call out 'Hello' as I pass, and it feels very nice.

From an interview by Alan

For more information about the Thamarai project and its current funding appeal, visit www.thamarai.org or contact Kathy@auroville.org.in. See also Auroville Today issue # 214, December 2006 and # 279, January 2012.



From left: Balu, Bridget, Kathy and Segar

How successful were you in doing this?

Kathy: Not very. We tried many things over the years, like celebrations and sending the kids home with special invitations for their parents to visit us, but there was little response.

Balu: Recently we organized an Open House in Thamarai. We went to each of the village elders' homes and invited them to come and see what we are doing there, but only one came. When I asked them why, they said they had decided not to visit because they were not getting rent from the Healing Centre. This Centre is an offshoot of Thamarai and began in 2008 after an agreement with all the then villager elders that Thamarai could freely use the building if it renovated it and offered the service free to the community. The elders now keep asking rent for the house but the donor is very clear that she's not giving rent as the Centre is providing a service for the village and she feels it is important that the vil-

ple, some people think that Thamarai is just a project to benefit Aurovilians. They can't believe that this is something for them.

As for the women, after finishing their work in the home they want to take a rest, or just to gossip with their neighbours. There may also be pressure from their husbands for them not to participate – they tell them, 'Don't go there, it's a waste of time'. Also, when two men are in dispute they don't want their wives to be going there together. There are so many issues like this!

Bridget: It is a lot to do with social pressure. When a woman gets married she is expected to take up a particular role in the family and there isn't so much time for her to do things outside the house and family. These women will come to a class if they see an immediate value in it. For example, we are offering English classes at the moment and they are popular because this will help them get employment.

So in Thamarai we learnt to hold back more on

Promoting the habit of reading

Thousands of children visited the sixth Auroville Children's Book Fair which was held at Ilaingnarkal from February 8-17.

The five stalls at Ilaingnarkal School, named after India's greats such as Bharati, Tagore, Vivekananda and, of course, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, teem with children handling books. It's the sixth Auroville Children's Book Fair, an annual event made possible with a grant from the Government of India to the Tamil Heritage Centre. On average 4,000 to 5,000 children from the neighbouring villages and Auroville schools attend the Fair each year. This year, says Meenakshi, the event drew over 4,000 children, some of whom came from far-away schools.

"The reason we are doing this is simple," she explains. "Many schools, particularly government schools in the small villages around Auroville, do not have a good library. So the children don't get into the habit and joy of reading. Their evening entertainment is watching TV, mostly adults' programmes on commercial channels. The children from Auroville zone schools fare little better. Usually the children are pressed to pass exams and get maximum marks and book-reading is not stimulated. To counter this, we started the Children's Book Fair to make quality books available to children."

It was easier said than done. When the Ilaingnarkal team contacted publishers, it found that, unlike the West, there was a shortage of good children's books. "The exception is the Ramakrishna Mission," says Meenakshi. "They publish, at low cost, some excellent children's books such as those on India's great spiritual leaders, like Ramakrishna and Vivekananda, and books with stories from the Panchatantra, the Mahabharata and the Ramayana. The India Book House is another high-quality publisher that publishes books for children and there are a few more such as the National Book Trust and Balbhavan. We also bring information-oriented books that target specific needs expressed by the



Children from the Panchayat Union Middle school of V.Parangini village near Mallam browsing through the books

children. When a child says that he wants to become a doctor or an engineer, we want to have something on that subject for them. And then they come with their parents, and ask for a cooking book for their mother and a book on Lord Krishna for the grandmother. We also carry English books translated into Tamil, but we have noticed that traditional Indian books score far higher than western imports."

The lack of books for children is, meanwhile, being addressed. "In 2010 the Sahitya Academy introduced the Sahitya Bal Puraskar, an annual prize to honour writers of children's books," says Meenakshi. "The award recognises the authors for their contribution to children's

literature in all the Indian languages. In 2012, eight writers won that prize, and we, of course, attempt to have a copy of the book of the Tamil winner here at the fair. The push for this award, by the way, came from Dr. Abdul Kalam, the former President of India, who himself grew up in poor conditions. We also carry his book 'Wings of Fire' which is very popular."

Apart from organizing the Book Fair, the Tamil Heritage Centre also publishes its own books. They include *The One World Concept* in Tamil and two bilingual books, one on Tamil sangam poetry, the other an edition of saint Tiruvalluvar's *Thirukkural*. "The *Thirukkural* was praised by none less than Sri Aurobindo,"

says Meenakshi. "He referred to it as 'gnomic poetry' and wrote that it was the greatest in plan, conception and force of execution ever written." The Tamil Heritage Centre has also published short books in Tamil on specific Tamil heritage issues, such as on the wooden-wheeled bullock cart, on the *kolam* floor drawings and on the palmyra tree, which are very popular with children and adults. This year the Centre will bring out the short stories for children written by Subramaniam Bharati, with illustrations by one of the Centre's school teachers."

In conversation with Carel

For more info contact tamil@auroville.org.in

WORKSHOPS

Compassionate Listening

Compassionate Listening was a workshop held in Auroville on the 29th and 30th of January, 2013.

Eleven of us, from various nationalities, all residing in Auroville, sat in a circle. As we introduced ourselves, Susan Partnow, a facilitator from Seattle, asked us to share our reasons for coming to the Compassionate Listening workshop. Mine was to explore if this method can resolve conflicts. I'd read from the hand-out given to each one of us that "The intention of Compassionate Listening is to access our deepest wisdom to transform separation and conflict into an opportunity for connection, healing and peace." I was wondering how one can accomplish this intention and if Compassionate Listening practices can, perhaps, stop the very birthing of conflicts.

After the introduction, Susan spoke about the importance of mutually agreeing to an understanding that would help the group steer through the workshop. Our set of agreements consisted of participating fully, speaking from the heart, respecting and sharing time, caring for oneself, retaining confidentiality, permitting the expression of strong emotions and suspending judgement. As we established this understanding, a very supportive environment was naturally created.

Looking around I noticed a smile on many faces. Eyes, half-shut, were radiating peace. There was a soothing atmosphere but I found myself doubting the genuineness of some of those expressions. However, remembering that I had agreed to allow strong emotions, I refrained from forming a



Compassionate listeners

judgement. This made me realise how a set of agreements can help in holding back the sub-conscious human tendencies from running loose. Deciding to participate fully, I started to concentrate on what our facilitator was saying.

"Compassionate Listening", Susan explained, "serves four purposes: a personal practice - to cultivate inner strength, self-awareness, self-regulation and wisdom; a skill set to enhance interpersonal relations and navigate challenging conversations; a process to bring individuals or groups together to bridge their differences and transform conflict; and a healing gift to offer a compassionate listening session to a person who feels marginalised or in pain."

She elaborated that five practices are very useful: 1) Cultivating Compassion - for ourselves and others; 2) Developing the Fair Witness - by remaining open in conflict situations; 3) Respecting the Self and Others - by developing boundaries which protect yet include; 4) Listening with the Heart - by allowing divergences and finding a deeper point of connection and 5) Speaking from the Heart - with language which reflects a healing intention.

Then followed the exercises. Susan staged challenging scenarios and guided us in how to implement the practices. There was a mix of individual introspection and identifying one's triggers, couple and small group interactions and finally larger group

discussions. The structure was such that the speaker would share in brief his most challenging situations and the listener was asked to consciously refrain from the natural urge to judge or suggest solutions and remain quiet. While the role of the listener was to assimilate and gather information, he/she was also allowed to ask deepening questions in order to support the speaker. The most critical thing was to remember to check with the speaker to what extent the listening and deepening questions were helping him/her.

These exercises offered us an increased understanding of conflict. As a result, sometimes the speaker found a solution, at other times found himself/herself in a better position to find a solution or simply felt better.

I didn't find it too challenging to be a listener, although I was tempted

to interrupt and give advice at times. However, I realised that because I was not the cause of the other's challenge or pain, being a listener was relatively easy. Would I be as good a listener to someone who is blaming me for their problems? It would be very tough. I figured the way to overcome this would be by removing one's ego-self from the situation; in other words by developing the 'fair witness' as Susan puts it.

When I was the speaker, I experienced relief when speaking to my supportive and concentrated listener. I felt my pain was reduced considerably just by being heard. In one exercise, I struggled to hold back my tears but to no effect. Emotional with relief, humbled with gratitude, I realised how well this practice served me as a healing gift.

The impact of the workshop was rewarding. It's a globally-accepted fact that communication has always been the key to resolving conflicts. However, to me, this workshop was a good reminder that communication alone will not help resolve anything; it can only be effective if listening is given equal importance and attention.

Mandakini

About the facilitator

Susan Partnow, M.A., organizational development and training consultant (www.PartnowCom.com) participated in an early trip to Israel/Jordan/Palestine in 1992, and served as a board member for The Compassionate Listening Project from 2000-2004. For over fifteen years she has facilitated dialogues, networking, and community building in organizations, government agencies, and the community to promote positive social change, 'out of the box' thinking, collective wisdom and teambuilding. She co-founded Conversation Cafes and Let's Talk America, and founded Global Citizen Journey in 2005.

(from www.compassionatelistening.org)

What can we expect from UNESCO?

“Auroville is spreading the message of UNESCO,” said UNESCO’s Secretary General Ms. Irina Burkova during her visit to Auroville in January 2010. She referred to the ideal of human unity which had led the General Assembly of UNESCO to pass resolutions in 1966, 1968, 1970 and 1983, inviting member states and international non-governmental organisations to participate in the development of Auroville. In 2009, more explicitly, the Executive Board of UNESCO adopted a resolution inviting each member state to contribute a permanent or temporary exhibition in Auroville’s International Zone.

UNESCO also demonstrated its support for Auroville by celebrating Auroville’s 35th and 40th anniversaries in UNESCO’s headquarters in Paris and hosting exhibitions on Auroville. UNESCO, moreover, sponsored some of Auroville’s projects, such as co-hosting seminars and conferences and providing financial

support for the study *Recovering the Voice of Women in Villages* in 1998, by the Life Education Centre (US \$ 5,000); in 1999 for the project *Preservation of Local Tamil Culture, Heritage and Language* of the Ilaignarkal Heritage School (Rs 250,000); in 2003, for supporting the Auroville Language Lab (Rs 900,000); and, in 2005, for the Nadukuppam Environmental Training Education Centre, (US \$ 30,000) a project of the Pitchandikulam Bio Resource Centre.

But after Ms. Burkova’s visit, the contacts with UNESCO have come to a standstill. Is there a way ahead? Auroville Today asked Dr. Karan Singh, who is India’s representative on UNESCO’s Executive Board as well as Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, for his views.

Dr. Karan Singh said that “There is probably no other organisation which had so much support from UNESCO in terms of resolutions and birthday celebrations. I do not think we can expect more. The initiative for manifesting the national

pavilions has to come from the Aurovilians, possibly in cooperation with the Auroville International Centres, who have to approach their governments. Auroville cannot expect that UNESCO will play a pro-active role here.

“On the issue of financial help, I’m afraid that here too we cannot expect anything from UNESCO. The organization is experiencing budget difficulties ever since the United States cut-off funding when the members states, in October 2011, voted to admit Palestine as its newest member. For example, last year UNESCO decided to create the *Mahatma Gandhi Institute of Education for Peace and Sustainable Development* in India. But this project is not funded by UNESCO. It is almost completely funded by the Government of India.”

Responding to the question if Auroville should apply for ‘World Heritage status’ – an issue which is being discussed in Auroville – Dr. Karan Singh said that he does not consider that applying for this status for the township is

feasible. “There are views that such a status would hamper Auroville’s independence of development and planning. It might, perhaps, be possible to apply for World Heritage status for the Matrimandir, but I do not see what benefits that would bring to Auroville. In any case, such a request would have to come from the community before the Board would consider it.”

While a good relationship with UNESCO certainly should be maintained, Auroville will need to develop a strategy concerning how to approach and convince the various countries in the world to create their national pavilions for the International Zone to be realised. The resolutions passed by UNESCO will help to show Auroville’s importance. The ball is in the court of Auroville and the Auroville International Centres.

Mandakini and Carel

For more information on Auroville as a World Heritage Site, see *Auroville Today* # 252, February 2010.

EMPLOYEES’ VILLAGE

Learning from the Sangamam experience

Joseba and Meenakshi talk about an interesting social and environmental experiment which is coming to a close.

On Tamil New Year, 2002, an innovative experiment began: the Sangamam community was officially opened. Sangamam was set up to provide accommodation for those Auroville workers who had a particular interest in the community, and who wanted a different living experience from that provided by their villages.

“The time was right,” says Joseba, one of the initiators and managers of the project. “Mother had indicated there should be a separate ‘labourers’ colony’ for our workers and we had been discussing for years the possibility of creating a separate category for those workers who wanted to have a closer relationship with Auroville. This concept finally evolved into Sangamam, meaning ‘confluence’, a meeting place for the villagers and Auroville. We envisaged Sangamam not only as a social experiment but also as a demonstration centre of how a village could be planned, using low-cost building technologies, an indigenously-designed water treatment plant and creative eco-friendly architecture. On this basis we received funding from some agencies of the Spanish Government, and this allowed us to lay down the infrastructure and construct a community centre and the first houses. The idea was to start with this and see how it would develop.”

For about ten years, it ran well. The inhabitants, who were selected by members of the Sangamam Trust (Joseba, Meenakshi and Ponnuswamy), did not own the houses. They paid a monthly contribution of Rs 250 per household, which covered electricity, water and other infrastructure costs. While the project didn’t grow as fast as anticipated – at its peak only eleven families lived there – everybody was happy with the experience and contributed to making it a success. “From time to time on Sunday mornings we would meet with all the inhabitants to decide things together,” explains Joseba. “They came from many different vil-



Two houses in Sangamam community

lages, and even different castes and religions, but there was no problem because of this. Of course, there were some minor personal conflicts but we in the managing team took care of these. Here the presence of Meenakshi, who was looking after the social aspect, was particularly important.”

However, over recent years it became clear that Sangamam was not developing in the way it had been envisaged – the project originally had been planned for 60 houses but only eleven were constructed, and when some of them became available when their occupants left, they were occupied by Aurovilians and Newcomers in urgent need of accommodation – and at the end of last year the project managers held a series of meetings to reflect upon the situation. “Finally,” says Joseba, “we decided to stop the

project and offer the infrastructure and space to the ‘Transit Lounge’ project, a temporary housing facility for Aurovilians and Newcomers in urgent need of accommodation. However, later we came to know that much of the Sangamam land would be offered in exchange for village-owned land in the Auroville area – it seems we were the only people in Auroville willing to offer land for this purpose – and the land left will be insufficient for the construction of any more houses.”

The Sangamam project was promising in many ways, so why didn’t it develop as its initiators had hoped? Lack of funding was a prime reason. Joseba explains that while the initial funding was sufficient for the first phase, the project managers expected that funding for further development would come from three sectors: the Auroville administration,

the Auroville business units and individual donors. This did not happen.

“There is a scarcity of financial means in Auroville today,” says Joseba, “which means we don’t have enough money to provide sufficient housing for Aurovilians and Newcomers, let alone for projects like these. So we never received clear support from our major work groups, and the commercial units, which we had expected to contribute towards housing for some of their workers in Sangamam, wanted it to be provided almost free.” “Many workers want to live near Auroville,” adds Meenakshi, “going beyond caste, religion and economic status. But the response from Auroville employers was not enthusiastic and the few who wanted to avail the facilities in Sangamam for their unit workers were unable to make any monetary contribution.”

Over recent years Joseba and Meenakshi have asked themselves if they had made a mistake by embarking on this project. “The plaza, community hall, and facilities for recycling wastewater and harvesting rainwater were all too ‘ideal’,” says Meenakshi, “they were too good for such a small community to manage. It was a ‘dream project’ which failed because of a lack of a critical mass and because it lacked a spirited and devoted Aurovilian willing to live in the community and provide leadership.”

“My conclusion,” says Joseba, “is that the concept remains very relevant, that it is an idea which we should not give up, even though, in the prevailing circumstances, it may have been a step too far. If you look at the most advanced sector in India, which is the information technology sector, this is exactly how they look after their workers. They provide houses and common facilities as part of the salary. This, I think, was very much part of Mother’s concept of the labour colony. And with wages climbing higher and higher, perhaps the only way we will be able to get good workers in future is by providing houses, health care and education as part of the remuneration package.”

If funding was forthcoming, the only modifications he would make, in the light of the Sangamam experience, would be to make the houses more comfortable and to offer them free, without expecting contributions from the workers’ units or work groups. “Also, I would not include in the project Aurovilians who are in need of housing as this complicated matters. While Sangamam was only for the workers, it worked well.”

Joseba pauses. “But I believe that the real reason why this project did not take off is that Auroville is not growing in the way it should. Today there is a lack of leadership and direction in the larger community, so any innovative projects of this nature find it very difficult to take off. This has to change.”

From an interview by Alan

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