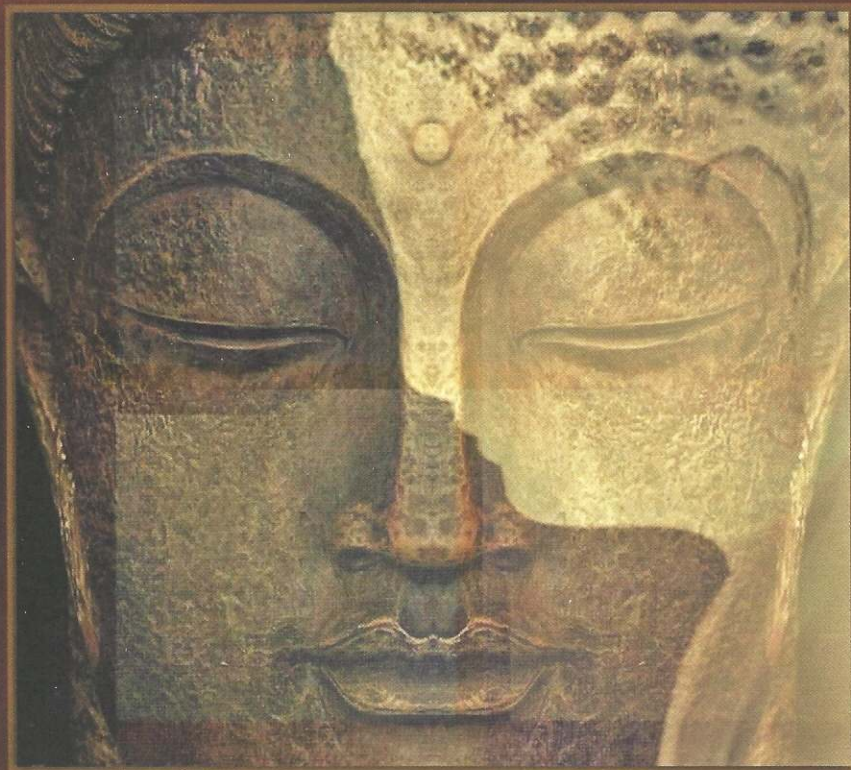


## The hidden dimension of sustainability



TWO BUDDHAS - ARTWORK BY JÜRGEN

Spiritual sustainability is the key pillar of the sustainability movement

**'S**ustainability' is a slippery term. Today it is used in so many different ways and contexts that it has lost its precision. In its simplest form, it says that if we are to sustain life in all its forms we need to live within the means of the planet. But how to achieve this?

The disagreements began at the first U.N. Conference on the Environment in 1972. The developed nations argued that the prime need was to protect the environment through the developing nations controlling their population. The developing nations retorted that the root problem was poverty – as Indira Gandhi put it, "Poverty is the worst form of pollution" – and poverty could only be eliminated through industrial development.

It's a debate which still continues, in one form or another, today (see, for example, recent international disagreements over what should be done about climate change). But one of the immediate effects was division in the sustainability movement as the environmental and the social (or developmental) perspectives clashed over priorities.

In 1983 the UN set up the World Commission on Environment and Development (also known as The Brundtland Commission after its Norwegian chairman, Ms. Gro Harlem Brundtland). Its brief was to see if continued global economic development could be equated with protecting the environment, something which had been called into question by the seminal study *Limits to Growth*. *Limits* warned that continued economic growth based upon the industrial model would lead to catastrophic environmental and, therefore, social collapse at some time in the 21st century.

Brundtland, in its 1987 report *Our Common Future*, however declared that industrial growth and environmental protection could go hand-in-hand, as long as development was 'sustainable'. And they defined sustainable development as "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Brundtland seemed to have squared the circle. However, many remained unconvinced. It was pointed out that as long as 'needs' were not defined, the definition was next to useless. And how was one to apply this definition in practice? Could one always predict how present developments would

impact future generations?

In fact, dissatisfaction with the Brundtland definition led to many new attempts to define sustainability and sustainable development, incorporating new parameters like economic and cultural sustainability. The result is a more integral concept but it has also led to much confusion and even doubts concerning the validity of the term 'sustainability'.

### Auroville and sustainability

Auroville has all the elements of a sustainable community. From an environmental perspective, it has worked successfully on land restoration; it has developed water recycling and sustainable building techniques; renewable energy systems are widely used; and the city is planned to be at least 50% 'green'. From a social sustainability perspective we can point to the fact that in Auroville today over 45 nationalities live together without discrimination based on caste, class, sex, religion or nationality. From an economic perspective, the fact that all immovable assets belong to the community; that Aurovilians offer their services to the community at a rate far below the market rate; and that there is an aspiration to eliminate cash transactions between Aurovilians and for the community to be self-supporting, are all indications that Auroville represents an alternative to the present unsustainable global economic order.

However, Auroville has very far to go before it can boast of being truly sustainable in environmental, social and economic terms. To take just a few examples, Auroville is far from being self-sufficient in food; our present transport pattern is dominated by individually-owned fossil-fuelled vehicles; Auroville still reflects the money-based value system of the larger world; the population and ethos is not truly international; and the fact that it is expensive to live here determines, to a large extent, who can join the community.

So why haven't we done better? We can point to factors like limited resources, to a poor communication culture and to the challenge of dealing with such a diversity of cultures and points of view. But the root cause seems to be something else.

### Towards a Sustainable Future course

A group of Aurovilians discovered what this might be while running a course called 'Towards a

Sustainable Future'. The original idea was to promote sustainable change in India by inviting people to hear about and see Auroville's environmental achievements. Participants would first be given a global overview of deforestation, energy, water and waste problems and then be taken out and shown Auroville's forests, solar set-ups, natural water recycling systems etc.

The courses always proved popular with the participants, but when the organizers investigated how much change it was effecting in their lives, the answer was very little. The obvious reasons were that most of the participants came from cities and many of the Auroville experiments were not replicable there or were simply too expensive.

In fact, what participants tended to remember from their Auroville workshop experience was inspiring encounters with Aurovilians as well as the particular energy of this place. But this was not enough to change the participants' perspectives once they returned to their cities and the habitual patterns of life reasserted themselves.

So what could change this? What were we missing in our workshop on sustainability?

### Mind is the problem

Einstein put his finger on the problem when he wrote that, "You cannot solve a problem with the same mind-set which created it." And what is that mind-set? Among other things, much of modern humanity has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered and can no longer find its way... Man has created a system of civilisation which has become too big for his limited mental capacity.

But is Einstein correct in suggesting that we merely need to replace one mind-set with another more appropriate one? Sri Aurobindo disagrees, pointing out that the mind itself is the problem:

*At present mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny; for a stage has been reached in which the human mind has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered and can no longer find its way... Man has created a system of civilisation which has become too big for his limited mental capacity.*

In other words, humanity is at present inherently unsustainable because it is relying upon the mind to solve the present global problems whereas the need is for a fundamental change of consciousness. As the cosmologist Brian Swimme puts it, "The need now is not simply to diminish the devastation of the planet but to alter the mode of consciousness that is responsible for such deadly activities".

### The key pillar

In this sense, 'spiritual sustainability' or 'consciousness evolution' can be seen to be not only the most neglected but also the key pillar of the sustainability movement. If we don't change our consciousness, the way we experience and live in this world, no amount of technological advances, recycling initiatives and fossil fuel replacement programmes will prevent us from destroying civilisation as we know it. In Auroville the same lesson applies. In sustainability terms, many of our failures can ultimately be seen to be failures to evolve the new consciousness which Sri Aurobindo and Mother speak of.

It is, of course, one thing to identify the problem, quite another to act upon it. In terms of the 'Towards a Sustainable Future' course, while we still show participants what we are doing here in land work, alternative energy etc. we have shifted the emphasis from 'hard-edged' technologies to approaches which promote inner change. These include meditation and sessions on body awareness, developing energy consciousness and identifying one's unique spiritual task in the world.

The immediate response of the participants to these new courses has been enthusiastic. We have also seen that, as a result of this deeper work, they are far more likely to involve themselves in genuinely life-affirming activities when they return to their homes and workplaces. Some have even changed their work because it was no longer consonant with their new and deeper aspirations, and one group of past participants is purchasing land to set up a community on sustainable lines.

There is still much scope for improving the course. But at long last we feel we are on the right track. For consciousness development is the only truly sustainable path.

Alan

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*Aravind* *20 Jan*



# Auroville education: opportunities and challenges

A brief look at Auroville education today

According to Sanjeev, Director of Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Education and Research (SAIER) there's a distinction between education and schooling. "Schooling is what happens in the schools during a certain period of one's life, while education, in The Mother's world, is unending, lifelong, not restricted to any predetermined syllabus," he says. He goes on to explain that education is also the influence that the environment and adults have on children. These experiences help develop a child's emotional growth.

Auroville is a safe, open environment where children can move around on their own. People interact with the children even if they don't know them. "I sometimes compare that to the joint family system in India," says Sanjeev. The natural surroundings, the greenbelt, the Matrimandir, the gardens, are all nurturing environments for a growing child. There are a lot of extra-curricular activities, such as music, dance, art, theatre, outdoor games, sports, horse-riding, forest walks, mountain-treks and cycling that take place in Auroville, and as almost every child is involved in some of these activities it makes for an integral education.

However, Sanjeev points out that if parents learned the basics of child psychology and took some training in the nurturing of children it would enhance the positive experience at home. As to teachers, ideally Auroville's teachers ought to be in contact with their psychic being: according to The Mother, teachers should be yogis. Many Auroville teachers have this as their aim. "There are also many teachers who have learned on the job," says Sanjeev, "but who need to learn the theoretical underpinnings of their profession. To achieve this, a group of experienced teachers are going to start a teacher-training programme in Auroville."

Recently SAIER sponsored an integral education workshop with Partho, who is experienced in integral education. It was decided to ask him to work with different schools to align their programmes to The Mother's vision.

## School systems offered in Auroville

What are the education systems in Auroville? Until the fourteen-year-old age group, Auroville schools approach schooling using varying degrees of free-progress. The Learning Community (TLC), Deepanam and Transition schools all have their unique approaches towards schooling. Depending on the child's needs, the parents decide which school to pick. At the High School level schools in Auroville have broadly two streams. One is the free-progress education, offered in Last School, which doesn't lead to any certificate but where students are engaged to some extent in determining their own programmes. The other approach, offered by Future School, is the syllabus consisting of the 'O' and 'A' levels of the Cambridge system, in addition to non-examination subjects. The GCSE qualification is globally-recognised and enables students to be admitted to universities practically anywhere in the world.

## The student experience

Smiti, an ex-student of Last School, is currently apprenticing in dance, art installation, and backstage lighting design. Talking about her Auroville education experience, she says that all the schools she went to had free-progress. She studied many languages – English, French, Spanish, Sanskrit, Tamil, Hindi, and even Japanese for a while – and literature and poetry in French and English. Her other subjects were Maths, Biology, hands-on nature sciences, History, Geography, the Indian culture and current affairs. "The teachers were great," she says. Smiti is very involved in sports and extra-curricular activities and likes it that Auroville provides immense opportunities to explore oneself. "The difficulty was that there was never enough time in the day and the week to cover everything I wanted to do," she says.

Ashwin, an ex-student of Future School, is currently pursuing a bachelor's degree in Information Technology Engineering at Vellore Institute of Technology (VIT), Vellore,

South India. "The school gave us enough time to learn our desired subjects and we never experienced pressure or deadlines," says Ashwin. "The teachers were good friends to us, in and outside school, so we could ask them anything. If there was a question about a subject, they made sure that everyone in class understood before moving ahead with the subject." Apart from a good student-teacher relationship, he says that each one of them had a mentor, one of the teachers, who would guide them in anything related to school or other matters.

Like Ashwin, Manjula passed out from Future School after which she graduated from Madras Christian College in Chennai. Upon her return to Auroville, she wanted to gain work experience. For a year she worked with Auroville Consulting as a project assistant and for the past four months she has been a teacher of Biology, Geography and Maths at Last School. In Future School she studied Biology, Geography, English, French, Math, History, English Literature and Cooking. She took her time in preparing herself and sat for the A level exam in three years instead of the usual two years.

To what extent were the students taught about the fundamental ideals of Auroville? Manjula says that for the first year the Auroville philosophy was a mandatory subject. They would discuss with their teacher the writings of Sri Aurobindo, The Mother and Auroville. However, in the second year it was an optional subject. The school also recommended that they enrol in extra-curricular activities and she chose Odissi dance, frisbee, women's football, Hindustani music, tennis, and badminton. "The whole day was packed," she says.

Very often, the transition from Auroville secondary schools to colleges outside is challenging, as was Ashwin's experience: "I struggled to cope with the workload and deadlines." He says that at his university everything had a deadline. Each class consisted of more than 50 students and the student-teacher relationship was non-existent. He explains that the entire aim of education was to score well in the exams, whether one understood the subject or not. However, going out of Auroville was a good experience for him. "I learnt how to handle pressure, how to adapt and deal with sticky situations and how the world outside functions."

As for Manjula, she felt the teacher-student relation was very formal in the college she went to. "I missed that one-on-one connection which I treasured so much in Auroville schools," she says, "but I adapted very easily to the system there and found my own way."

## Challenges

At the primary and higher primary level, some Aurovilian parents choose to send their children to schools in Pondicherry since they issue certificates which are recognised outside. Sanjeev recalls that The Mother has talked of no certificates but "The challenge is that many parents still do not subscribe to a new way of thinking about the education of their children," he says.

Education in Auroville is supposed to be free. Aurovilians and Newcomers are not expected to pay for their children's education, except for external examinations. However, the Auroville economy is not able to fully support the schools, and now schools are being forced to raise funds, sometimes asking parents to contribute a minimal amount.

## Higher education in Auroville

"The pressing question right now," says Sanjeev, "is what happens in terms of formal education after high school." It is evident that there is a high educational content in the activities that go on in Auroville. Interns/students come to Auroville from all over the world to study architecture, town planning, fashion design, sustainable living, land regeneration and organic farming. Now SAIER is trying to turn this informal learning set-up into a formal post-secondary learning experience for Auroville students so that those who want to continue their education in Auroville have the possibility to do so.

"What is holding this back is the lack of a team to take it up. But surely the people will show-up."

Freedom to explore one's being through umpteen extra-curricular activities, a mixed bag of cultures and nationalities and an atmosphere founded solidly on the ideal of human unity are some of the important aspects of Auroville education. What matters is that the students here continue to pass out as confident, self-dependent and conscious adults.

## What do you treasure most about being an Auroville student?

The attitude that learning never stops and that one can always do better.

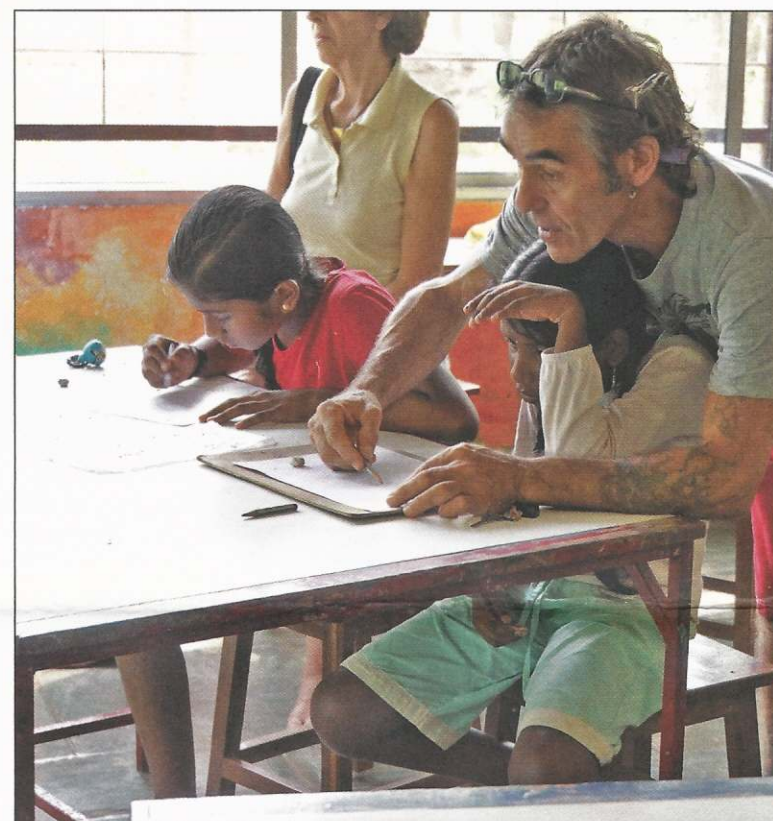
*Smiti, Last School*

I feel very lucky to have gone through Auroville education and the community upbringing. In fact, it is the core factor that defines who I am today. The one thing I treasure most about Auroville education is the gift of learning from and with people from all around the world.

*Ashwin, Future School*

The atmosphere is here is such that whether you like it or not, you are growing.

*Manjula, Future School*



From top: Intake discussion at Deepanam primary school; Art show at an open house of Transition

School attendance figures in April 2013 (excluding AV Outreach Schools)

Level	Name of AV School	Age Group	System	Children
Pre-Crèche	AV Pre-Crèche	1 - 2 yrs.	Free-Progress	52
Crèche and Kindergarten	Aha! Kindergarten AV Kindergarten Nandanam Kindergarten	3 - 6 years	Free-Progress	108
Primary	Transition School Deepanam School The Learning Community	7 - 14 years	Free-Progress with various approaches	219
Secondary	Future School Last School	15 - 18 years	GCSE + Free-Progress Free-Progress	85
Total				464

Mandakini



# Building bridges with art therapy

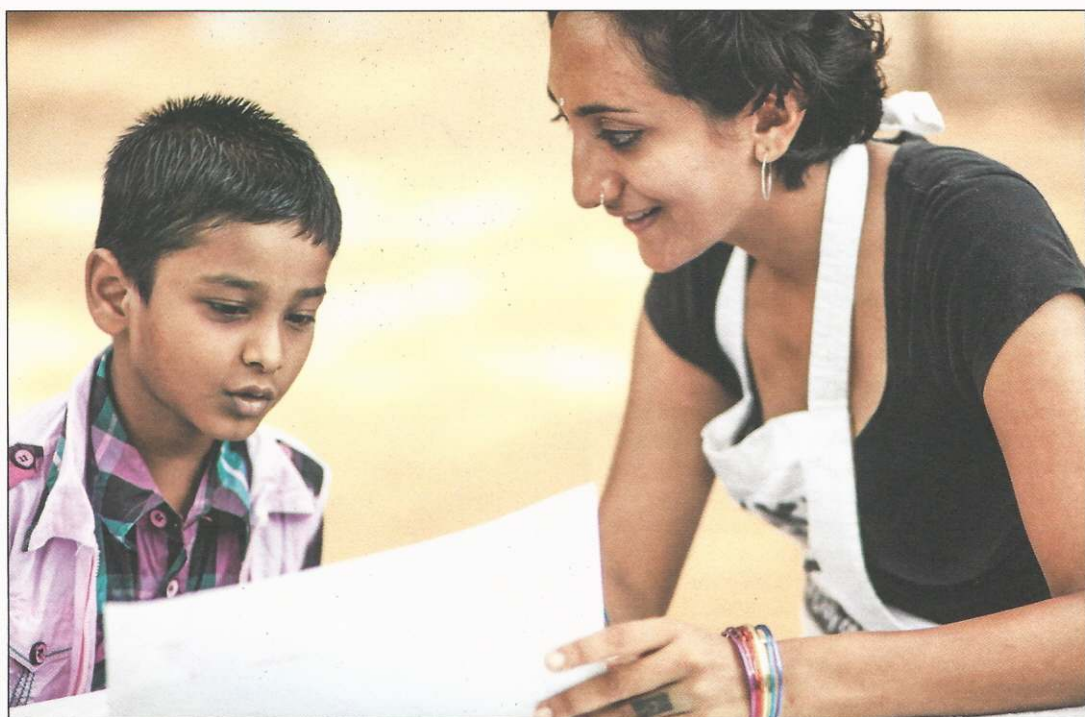
Krupa discusses her work in Auroville with art therapy and bridging communities through art.

When Krupa decided to settle in Auroville four years ago, it was not on a whim. Born in the United States to Gujarati parents, Krupa received an undergraduate degree in Graphic Design from Parsons New School of Design in New York and a master's degree in Art Therapy at the School of Visual Arts in Manhattan. After living for 10 years in New York City, she wanted to return to her roots.

She travelled to more than 80 places throughout India and Nepal, visiting schools and NGOs to get a better idea of where art therapy could be applied. Auroville was one of her stops, where she stayed for 10 days in 2009. Upon returning to the US to think about her experiences, she realized that Auroville was a good place to start out as a volunteer. Six months later, she felt this was home.

"The arts are supported here, and already there was some semblance of art therapy happening. So it seemed like a really good place for me," she says. Besides, being in an international community was important to her. "I saw how much the children appreciated and benefited from participating in the art sessions, and I loved being able to give them the tools to express themselves."

Krupa's passion is to create a bridge between Auroville and the villages. Low self-esteem is a major issue for many village children here, she noted. Due to the pressure to perform, they often just try to please the teacher or their parents.



Krupa with a student discussing a drawing

make dolls, giving them the basic pattern, and then they each created one, and it became a character. Then they wrote stories about them, which for the book were translated into English."

Now Krupa is working at the Life Education Centre with a group of about 14 girls. "I wanted to find something that would work for all of them, so we started doing mandalas, creating images and

She works with some adult women who come to the Centre as well.

Krupa sees art as something that can benefit the whole Auroville community. Recently she organized a community art event at the Visitors Centre and helped in winning a grant of US \$500 for art supplies, part of an international event held in 19 sites around the world on the same day. People were invited to sit down and make art for free. It was a huge success. "It was wonderful to see this mixture of more than 200 people from every culture sitting down at tables together and painting and drawing."

Krupa is now working to create her own space that would more intentionally be a bridge between Auroville and the villages. "I have a network of connections of art therapists working around the world, students and colleagues who are interested in how it is being used in this context. I am continuing to support the projects I have been part of, but I would like to do this work in a more focused way."

Her mission is to provide the tools and resources that are needed to express oneself, to show people how to use them, and to facilitate awareness, insight, and empowerment through that process. Another aspect of her mission is exchange with others through the art. She explains, "Recently I have been working with students from Turkey, Delhi, and Edaiyanchavadi in one room doing art together. In the future I would like to have students from an Auroville school and students from a village school doing art activities together. In addition, the centre could be a place for professional exchanges between art therapists working in different contexts or settings."

The next step is fundraising, she says. She has already lined up a friend who is going to help and she also has a network built-up over the last four years, sharing the work that she is doing. "I am confident that this will come together."

Larry

Info: <http://www.sankalpajourneys.com>



Krupa's students decorating the walls of a bridge

Consequently, the sense of self is sometimes damaged.

In art therapy, any of the media can be used for creative expression, she explains. "Part of my responsibility is to have a wide range of media available as tools for self-expression, and then to find the right fit for the person." Depending on the situation, the creative art work can be supplemented with story-telling about the created object. If she is working with a young child, sometimes the work itself will tell the story.

"Art therapy also works better over time, whether individually or with a group, when they come back repeatedly at regular intervals. That helps to create a feeling of safety. The process of art therapy requires a lot of trust, especially here where there are often different cultures involved, and often not much openness to this kind of thing." Also, she finds a short guided meditation at the start of the session is helpful in opening up the children's imagination.

Krupa started out in Auroville working at Thamarai in the After School Programme. She was doing weekly sessions with teenagers and with some children between six and 10 years old. She learned a lot during that experience and started a basic creative literacy programme in which children would just experiment with using colours, for example.

From the Thamarai After School Programme, Krupa shifted to the Thamarai Healing Centre. Here the children were already learning about their bodies and the role of nutrition. Art therapy became an extension of this work. In 2011, they published a book called Blooming Thamarai, which is based on an affirmation doll project. [see Auroville Today # 270 of January 2012]. "The project involved in-depth sessions with small groups that were coming regularly. I showed them how to

symbols within a circle. Then I had them create journals, and inside the journals they expressed the symbols from the mandalas that were relevant for them. Then they selected images from those mandala journals and painted them on the bridge outside the entrance to the centre."

The work helped to strengthen a sense of sanctuary, and it also cultivated a sense of legacy in that a part of them stays there. All art has some therapeutic aspect, she explains. Sometimes she sits individually with girls who need more attention and helps them work through their processes.

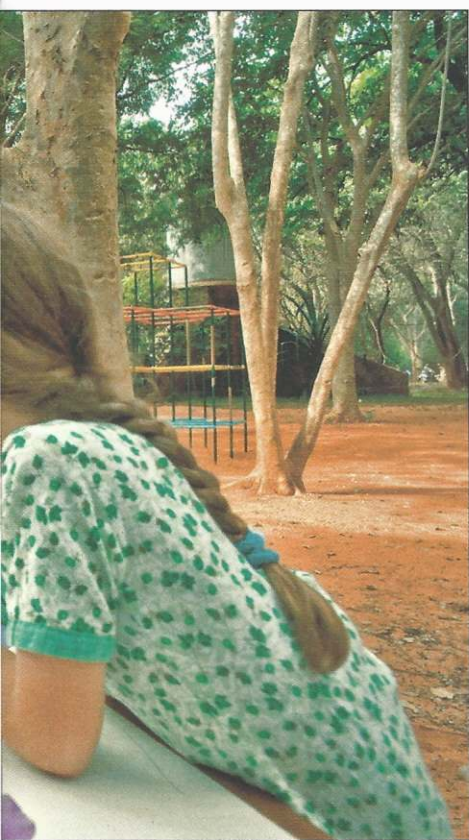
## Using art therapy for trauma healing

While working at the After School Programme, Krupa also got involved with the Child Protection Services, and was the coordinator for the group during her Newcomer period. The group was composed of five Aurovilians and a visiting specialist from Canada who has been in child protection for 35 years. Last year they organized a series of six workshops in Vérité so teachers and parents could learn more about the topic.

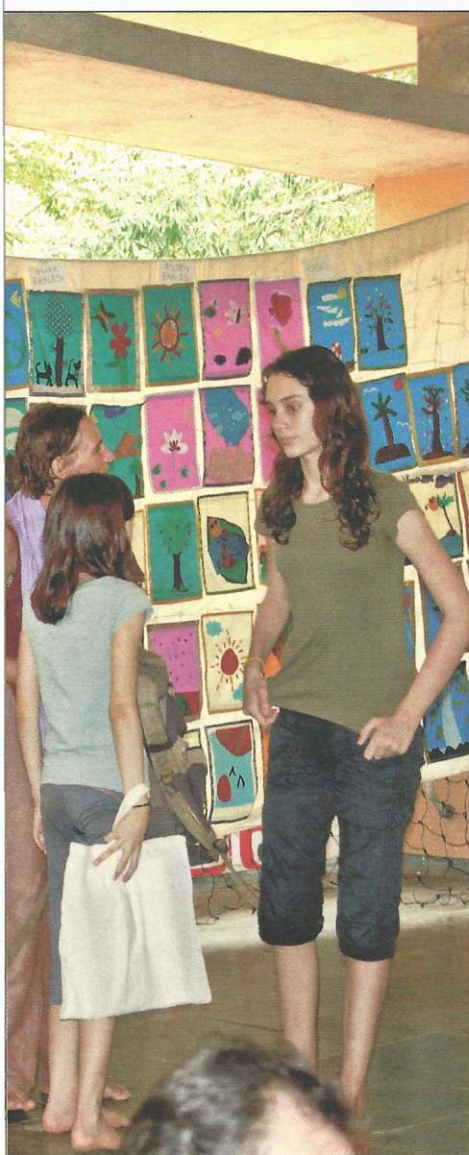
"We work on these issues with affected family members and just guide them through the process," says Krupa. "Some individuals in Auroville have bravely sought help for physically and emotionally abusive situations in their homes, recognizing the need for assistance."

Another aspect of this work is educational outreach. Two members of the group are teachers who go into the schools to talk about very basic topics, such as how to say no if someone is trying to touch you, and even about anatomy. Their sensitive approach to such a difficult topic, which allows the children to ask questions, has been effective.

She is doing both one-on-one sessions with children as well as family sessions, applying art therapy for a mix of situations which the children are dealing with. "This gets really sensitive," she explains, "especially in a multicultural context, and there has been a lot of tension and resistance about these topics. Art therapy can be useful in these situations, because instead of having to verbally explain whatever trauma or emotion or difficulties might be there, the art offers a tool where these issues can be expressed in another way. It provides something concrete that helps the person to ground whatever emotions or issues that are coming up, and then those symbols can change as the process unfolds."



PHOTOS: GIORGIO



Mirco teaching a drawing class; primary school



# NESS and CBSE

Although Auroville's education is shaped by the Mother's guidelines, there is much scope for experiment and interpretation.

According to Heidi Watts, Professor emerita from Antioch University New England, USA, "There is no distinct Auroville educational programme. Each of the Auroville schools is distinct, and indeed many were started to offer different choices for students." Heidi has been coming to Auroville for many years to work with the teachers and has authored the book *Little by Little – The evolution of schooling in Auroville 1966-1980*. She observed that "What the schools have in common is a commitment to the ideals of Sri Aurobindo and Mother and a desire to offer an 'integral' education; but almost by definition that means there will be different interpretations of how best to do it, and different constraints which make it difficult to achieve the ideal".

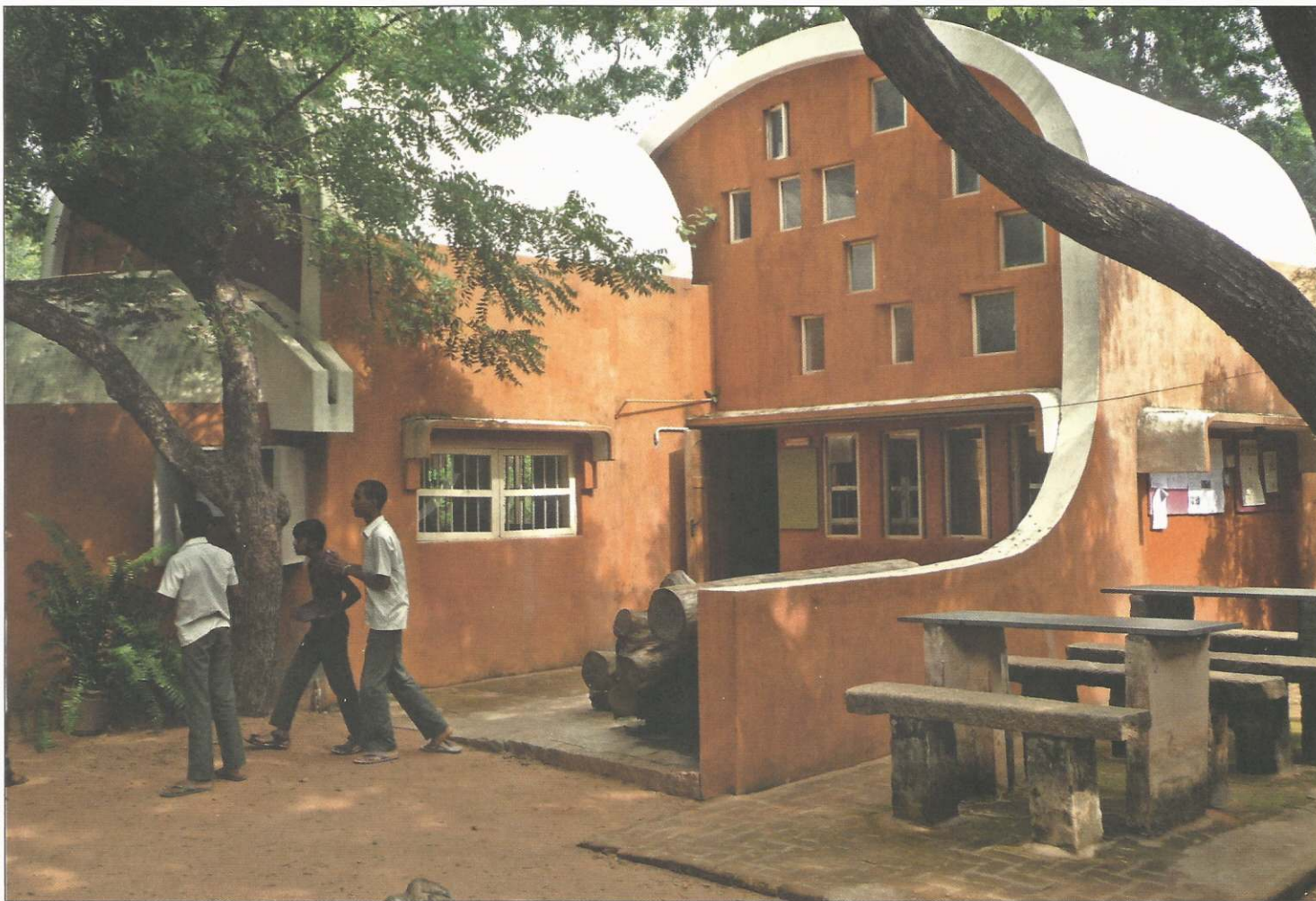
These different interpretations and the needs of children from different cultures and countries have led to the development of various programmes for higher schooling. Last School follows a Free Progress system, while Future School prepares the children for the British O and A level or the GCSE system. The New Era Secondary School (NESS), at the initiative of Rod Hemsell who was its principal until 2011, follows the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) programme. It benefits Aurovilian and non-Aurovilian Tamil students by offering the school diploma that is needed to pursue higher education in India.

There seems to be a prejudice against CBSE in Auroville, probably because it is exam-oriented. But in fact, the CBSE program has much in common with integral education, according to Professor Watts. "If you read the CBSE manual you cannot help but be struck by the similarity in ideals between CBSE and Integral Education."

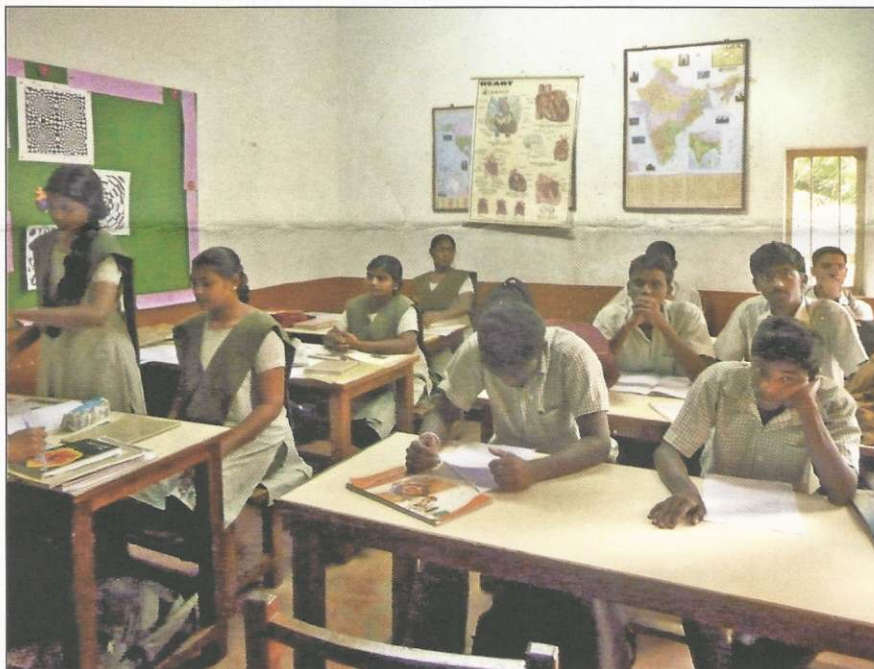
The prominent feature of CBSE is its system of continuous comprehensive evaluation. Françoise, who has been teaching in Auroville for many years and now advises teachers on the fine aspects of pedagogy, says that though it is a government programme with many rules to be followed – prescribed books, curriculum, pace of learning, holidays – "it aims to shift from an exam-oriented, teacher-centric system of learning to an activity-based and pupil-centric process."

Whereas most Auroville schools have no exam system to test the progress of a student, in the CBSE system exams are important, but they are relatively stress-free as there is continuous 'testing' throughout the semester in the form of projects, debates, etc. The emphasis is on developing the child's confidence in his or her own abilities. Twice or thrice a year the students face Problem Solving Assessments (PSAs), usually multiple-choice questions. The PSA papers come directly from the CBSE board and are designed to test the overall preparedness of students. They have no immediate relationship to the textbooks prescribed for various standards, but test the general skills of the pupil.

CBSE is different from the traditional Indian approach to teaching. Shankar, the principal of CBSE-based Aikiyam primary school in New Creation community says that CBSE, "pioneers novel ideas, since it gives more freedom for innovation compared to other educational boards". In CBSE, a student has to be ready for the unexpected, to think out of the box.



Part of the NESS school campus. The buildings are old and the classrooms too small to cater to the needs of new students



"One of the hallmarks of the CBSE programme, as carried out at NESS, is activity-based learning in the form of field trips and practical learning in ecology, archeology, art and culture, sanitation, language, renewable energy, history, physical education, etc." says Selvaraj, who is the director of NESS. Such an approach greatly adds to the development of each student by providing practical experience supplemented by the curriculum's theoretical dimension. "Also our students benefit from the exceptionally rich talent pool available within Auroville", he says.

Like all Auroville schools, NESS is struggling. "In fact the main problem is the attitude of the teachers", says Lisbeth, an Auroville educator with an experience of more than 30 years in Auroville education. "Most teachers have been trained in the Indian School Board's methods of lecturing, where the students tend to learn by rote." Professor Watts agrees: "A programme can have the highest goals in the world, but if the teachers do not share the same values, really share them, and do not have the skills to implement them, of what use are they?" Gordon Korstange, an American educator who taught in Auroville in its early days, warns that "learning to create a student-centered classroom is a long process full of trial and error, especially when the teachers themselves were taught in teacher-centered classrooms."

There is always ample scope for improvement. In NESS and Aikiyam this drawback is being worked upon with a teachers training programme conducted by Françoise and Lisbeth. "But change takes a long time," says Professor Watts, "and the results are slow in coming." Wouldn't it be better to attract Aurovilians as teachers? Gordon is convinced that "CBSE and Auroville teachers can and should work together on this grand experiment." Selvaraj feels that it would be great to have willing Aurovilians teach the programme, "but we can't find enough Aurovilians because for many, the level of the Auroville maintenance is too low. Only three



Aurovilians and two newcomers work in NESS so we have no choice but to look for teachers from outside Auroville." However, outside teachers do not want to work for the equivalent of the Auroville maintenance, which is below government salaries. This results in a shortage of teachers and a slow-down of the development of the school.

NESS currently prepares students for the humanities on the CBSE curriculum. There is a demand to include the sciences. "We would love to as it would benefit many Auroville children. But we need a properly-equipped science laboratory in order to get the science stream affiliation," says Selvaraj. The NESS building, which is 40 years old and has only four dark classrooms, each for about 10 students, is already too small. "We need at least five new, large classrooms to cater to the needs of the growing number of students who are eager to join. To launch sciences, an entirely new building would be required."

To solve the problems, NESS is attempting to obtain funding from the Government of India, so far with little success. Selvaraj is undaunted. "NESS is doing a great job as can be seen from the fact that in year 2012, some students scored a high 90+ in the twelfth grade final examination."

Charudutta

For more information on NESS contact [ness@auroville.org.in](mailto:ness@auroville.org.in)

## The characteristics of learning according to the CBSE

The characteristics of learning according to the CBSE are:

1. All children are naturally motivated to learn and are capable of learning.
2. Understanding and developing the capacity for abstract thinking, reflection and work are the most important aspects of learning.
3. Children learn in a variety of ways – through experience, making and doing things, experimentation, reading, discussion, asking, listening, thinking, reflecting, and expressing oneself in speech or writing, both individually and with others. They require opportunities of all these kinds in the course of their development.
4. Teaching something before the child is cognitively ready takes away real learning. Children may 'remember' many facts but they may not understand them or be able to relate them to the world around them.
5. Learning takes place both within the school and outside school. Learning is enriched if these two arenas interact with each other. Art and work provide opportunities for holistic learning that is rich in tacit and aesthetic components. Such experiences are essential to be learnt through direct experience and integrated with life.
6. Learning must be paced so that it allows learners to engage with concepts and deepen the understanding rather than remembering only to forget after examinations. At the same time learning must provide variety and challenge, and be interesting and engaging.



**M**enaka Deorah is an ex-student of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry. She recently completed her Masters, through correspondence, in Sri Aurobindo's studies at Sri Aurobindo Centre for Advanced Research (SACAR-IGNOU). Passionate about Integral Yoga Education and Conscious Parenting, Menaka works with children, parents and teachers in Mumbai and has developed a children's programme for self-discovery called "Finding MEMO."

Menaka says that in integral education the key component is the psychic. Often we think of integral education only as a form of education that addresses the physical, vital and mental parts of the being. This is not enough. We need an education integrated around the psychic being and at the same time an education that integrates effectively the relative with the absolute, or the sphere of "problems" with the domain of harmonies. We may not be "psychicised" as yet but nothing stops us from making the psychic our pivot, our reference point and the uncompromising orientation of our life and education.

What this means is that the physical, vital and

## Integral education

What is integral education in the light of The Mother's vision?



Menaka with children in her "Finding Memo" class

mental need to be educated to become fit instruments of the psychic.

If a psychic-centric education is to be established, it calls for a triple approach which includes the school, the home and an R&D centre that innovates, integrates and experiments constantly in order to make the psychic not just a conceptual background possibility but part of a living culture. This centre would stand for the best in motivational research and training and serve as the liaison between home and school.

Regarding Auroville education, she believes the decision makers must be a team of dedicated psychic trend-setters. They must be clear that we are here to tend to the birth of a new world and not to the whims and fancies of a truant vital. What needs urgent attention is a psychological training that deepens our understanding of the parts of the being and their true purpose. This self-discovery needs a planned approach. If this is offered to the children early and systematically in ways that are natural and interesting, then perhaps we will avoid some of the unmanageability of later years.

As to the role of parents or guardians, Menaka says, "If you can look into the child's eyes and find there the Living Presence, you've done your job, and you've done it well!"

extracts from an interview by Mandakini

## Studying Sri Aurobindo in Auroville

**A**s an Ashram student I have grown up in an environment immersed in Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's consciousness. Everywhere in the Ashram was charged with Their energy. I believe it was because we studied Their works at a very impressionable age that I found myself closely connected to the message. Today, as an adult I am grateful to be able to continue diving into depths of Their wisdom. The Ashram education provided me with a mind, vital, body and heart strong enough to serve the spirit within.

While I am aware that the ways of the Ashram and Auroville are different, the former being consecrated to individual yoga and the latter to a collective one, I believe that children growing up in Auroville should also be exposed to Their works.

Deepti from Last School points out it is critical to create new material for conventional subjects in schools based on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's perspective on education. In the 1980's, Deepti and her team at Last School created new material for the subject of history. The material summarises the lives of great historical personalities and spells out their contribution to human progress in the books *The Aim of Life*, *The Good Teacher and the Good Pupil*, and *The Marvels and the Mysteries of the Human Body*, as well as in a series of monographs of historical personalities.

Deepti recalls that some time ago a group of youngsters fresh out of high school in Auroville came to her and said they wanted wisdom. They asked her who they should read. "Only Sri Aurobindo can give you that," she replied. So they started reading Sri Aurobindo together. "For more than fifteen years now, for 4 hours a week, I have had a group of young adults, between the ages of twenty and forty, coming to read Sri Aurobindo. The group chooses which works of Sri Aurobindo they want to read, and then they discuss and try to apply it in relationship to Auroville and their lives here.

"I strongly recommend that one reads Sri Aurobindo," she says, "but if you don't wish to you have this freedom in Auroville."

Actually, it is not a question of "teaching" Sri Aurobindo as He cannot be taught, and there is no expertise in this field except what one has embodied through reading Him. "When I am reading and explaining something it is Sri Aurobindo who is guiding me," says Deepti. Reading Sri Aurobindo does not mean we are in danger of it becoming a religion. On the contrary, it shows we are opening ourselves to His immense wisdom in order that we may collaborate more fully in letting Their Will be done.

Mandakini

## The fire within

On November 29, 12 Auroville youth staged 'Discoveries of Fire' at the Visitors' Centre. Bhavya, 14 years old and one of the performers, writes about the experience.

**F**rom the beginning of 2013, there had been a buzz in our small juggling group about doing a performance. We sat together and came up with a story, one very intimate to us: how we found joy and beauty while becoming one with the fire and how we found little parts of our souls placed within it.

Our story begins with the discovery of fire by man. He starts to play with its power and grows in courage as he makes use of it. Then steady fire,



PHOTO: CORIOLAN

### The caveman lights the first fire

flame-less, multi-coloured, cold fire appears. It is the conversion to modernity, electricity, industrialism, and uniformity. But something has been lost, the life that created that primeval fire. As cold fire begins to flicker-off, a new flame appears: it is the rediscovery of the innocent flame, the child's soul within. The fires are lit once more and brought to life.

After thinking out the story we concentrated on the materials. The fire sticks hadn't been used in a long time and new sticks had to be bought and

made capable of handling fire. But we also wanted electric light sticks that changed colour at our will. Our teacher, Aurévan, wrote a project and SAIER agreed to provide the funds. Things started coming together. We prepared the materials, chose the music and started composing our choreographies, learning to throw flaming sticks to each other and how to make human pyramids. We practised and prepared and rehearsed and trained until we all felt pretty exhausted. But even though we complained often enough, we were overjoyed to spend so much time with our beloved sticks and choreographies and music and (of course), snacks and food.

The best part about working in a group is that, without knowing, you become a bonded family. We attend different schools, have different nationalities, and our ages vary from 11 to 17. But we all love fire-juggling. We got to know each other, found out who likes what and who is allergic to chocolate (can you believe it!) and we started accepting every one as our companion. We learnt how to cooperate, how to work in a team.

The performance, of course, gave us nervous chills. It seemed unfair that, even after we had worked so hard, all it gave back to us was a sense of fear: 'What if I drop a fire-lit staff on the audience or on my companions? What if I miss my entrance? And worst of all, what if I forget to smile?' But when Aurévan went on stage to announce our



PHOTO: BRUNO ONESTA

group and brief the audience on the story, we felt that we would manage to get away with just minor heart attacks.

Our moments of anguish came to an end when the calm melodic music that we had become familiar with began to play. One of us, playing the cave-man, walked-up centre stage to light the first fire – and so our performance began.

The show went as scheduled and we were rewarded with rounds of applause. We couldn't help smiling with pride. Even though there had been little problems back stage, when the wrong stick was dipped in kerosene or when some of us were late for our entrance, we had done it at last.

## VISITING STUDENTS

## Devising sustainability indicators for Auroville

**I**n late December, a group of graduate students from Queens University, Ontario, Canada made a public presentation of their work on drawing up sustainability indicators for Auroville.

They called their project ASIS – Auroville Sustainability Indicators System – and explained that the intention is to create a dialogue among Aurovilians to allow the community to move faster towards sustainability.

But how do the students define sustainability? Admitting that it is difficult to define it exactly as it is an umbrella term which covers all aspects of development, the closest they could come to defining it in the Auroville context was "truth to the Charter".

The students began working on the project in Canada, but their ideas changed radically after they arrived in Auroville and got feedback from residents. Realising that they could not use sustainability indicators employed elsewhere because Auroville was unique, they created a customized system for the community. Describing it as a "nuanced, mixed-method approach", this involved developing qualitative indicators as well as performance-based ones in order to capture the more subtle aspects of the Auroville experience.

ASIS addresses six areas: sustainable design, accessibility, physical connectivity,

integration with the local culture, human resource management and physical resource management. The sustainability indicators include:

- the percentage of local materials used in buildings
- the accessibility of buildings for people of all ages and physical capabilities
- the efficiency of the public transportation system
- the degree to which developments are mixed use (residential, commercial, cultural etc.)
- how developments are integrated with the local conditions and culture
- Aurovilians' sense of self-worth and belonging
- the degree to which renewable energy is used
- how waste is disposed of.

The students made a special study of the Town Hall area, which comprises ten buildings, from a sustainability perspective. The Town Hall complex did well in terms of building design, mixed development and connectivity between the different buildings. The students were also impressed by the grid-connected solar systems and waste disposal facilities, although they felt that both should be further developed in the future.

However, they noted that accessibility to some of these buildings and spaces was very limited, something which they had also noticed in many other developments in Auroville.

Finally, the students made general recommendations for Auroville as a whole. These included to involve all Aurovilians in the planning process; use architectural design and construction methods which reflect the needs of the users rather than just architects and planners; make the Auroville accessibility code mandatory for all future developments; make the integration of the community with the surrounding region a priority; and continue to promote equal access to education, employment, and knowledge and skills training.

What were the most important lessons the students learned during their two week stay here? One of them noted that, "the biggest things we've learned here was, firstly, a sense of the importance of wide participation in planning. Also, the challenge of struggling to address multiple viewpoints – everybody here seems to have a different opinion on everything! – and to come up with something that acknowledges all these viewpoints without imposing our own ideas. This made it a very interesting experience."

The university plans to send more graduate students next year and asked Aurovilians to come up with topic areas they could study.

Alan



**'Koodam', which means 'gathering space' in Tamil, is a new initiative designed to improve conflict transformation and to promote better communication. Auroville Today spoke to the two coordinators, Elvira and Sacha.**

*Auroville Today: Over the years there have been various attempts to come up with conflict transformation groups and many workshops have been run on the topic. Yet this work has never quite anchored itself in the Auroville environment. Why?*

**Elvira:** The approach so far has been to try to relieve the Council of this heavy workload by creating a separate conflict-transformation group. A working group would be responsible for receiving the conflicts and solving them. This didn't work because the group dynamic that always kicked in with such a group was the sense that "We have the power now, all conflicts belong to us. We are the judges of what is right and wrong," and this turned off the larger community.

The other thing that happened was burnout. If the same people are always dealing with conflicts they get bogged down; there is no new energy. And, related to this, these conflict transformation work groups never received any training: they never got new tools to solve the conflicts or to look after themselves. So I think this is why this approach never took off, and why people continued to dump their problems on the desk of successive Councils.

*Also, the people on these conflict-transformation groups became frustrated because often one party wouldn't abide by their decision, and there was no way of implementing it.*

**Elvira:** Exactly, the lack of implementation is a big problem. But this has to do with the way we have been trying to solve conflicts.

*So how is the Koodam initiative different?*

**Elvira:** Koodam is not a 'power' group that solves peoples' conflicts. It is more a conflict transformation facilitation service. This is how it works. If you have a situation in your life when communication breaks down with someone else or with another group, you can contact the Koodam office. You will be received by someone who will listen to your story. That person is trained to analyze the situation, and to know which conflict transformation process or other processes are good choices for you. The options could include Non-Violent Communication training, empathetic listening, couple counselling, restorative circles etc. If it's a neighbourhood thing where people have been fighting for years about issues like sharing water, mediation might be the most appropriate tool. If it's a working group that is having problems with internal communication, they might need a workshop training.

Koodam will lay out the alternatives and help you to choose. Once this is done, you can pursue that option. Koodam will then be out of the picture, although it will keep a database of who came, their situation, whom they were referred to and the result.

## The Koodam initiative



Elvira and Sacha, leaning against the Peace Table

**Sacha:** If it doesn't work out, the individual or individuals will be referred to the Council or back to us. Then, depending on the feedback of the person who had been counselling or mediating, another conflict transformation option might be proposed; or the Council might decide, for example, to refer the case to arbitration.

**Elvira:** The database will give us an idea of the most common conflicts and the process which people choose most. If we see that we need more people practicing facilitation or mediation, we can offer training courses for individual Aurovilians and for groups. In this way, we will try to gradually lift the level of skills and knowledge of alternative dispute transformation methods in this community.

*How will this solve the implementation challenge?*

**Elvira:** In a process like mediation or restorative circles, the participants work out their own solutions. If it is your own solution rather than one which is imposed, you are much more likely to take responsibility for it and abide by the outcome. We are also trying to make a paradigm shift, to move away from the simplistic idea of 'right' or 'wrong', 'winners' and 'losers', towards the idea of multiple truths.

**Sacha:** Offering alternatives rather than imposing a solution really fits with the ethos of Auroville where we try to open up new options in alignment with our ideals, not create new rules. However, if people refuse to abide by a decision after a process like this, I think the community needs to have a deep conversation with them about why they are here in Auroville. At some point, the community also has to put a time limit on the process. Otherwise these things can drag on for years.

Hopefully, if we have taken many of the conflicts off the Council's table, they will have more time to focus on issues like this.

*Isn't one of the problems the fact that most people have a very negative sense of conflict and may be embarrassed to bring it to a group like Koodam because, in terms of the yoga, they feel they have 'failed'.*

**Elvira:** The first mantra of this kind of work is that conflict in itself is not bad; it is how you react to it that can be bad. I hope Koodam will help people understand that conflict is a warning light telling them that something in their inner journey needs attention, and it is their responsibility to give it that attention. I hope that they see that dealing with it is an important part of doing the yoga.

*But in terms of conflict resolution, Mother often talked about the need for the individual to take responsibility for solving the conflict in him or herself without involving the other party.*

**Sacha:** Ideally you sort it out yourself. But I don't think we're quite there yet.

**Elvira:** But what we are advocating is a step towards that because the first step is to take it away from a third-party to solve it for you, and that is what we want to do. These alternative conflict transformation tools are shifting the focus from "What did he do wrong?" to "What is my part in this and what can I change?" I also think we need to become more nuanced in how we interpret this as "your personal work". Because I can work together with you and still look at my part in creating a problem: it's me looking at myself through a process with someone else. Perhaps in the long run we won't need mediation any more, but at the moment we're at such a low level we need these things.

**Sacha:** We tend to forget how many different people from so many different cultures are living and working together here. I think a lot of the conflicts are communication difficulties which result from cultural differences, from our different ways of looking at things and expressing ourselves.

*In this context, do you think there is a danger that Koodam may be seen as a very Western-oriented approach to conflict transformation and therefore not appeal to other cultures?*

**Sacha:** This is a very important point. I really don't know how well this will work with the Tamil community or with all cultures. Maybe the

approaches will have to be adjusted to work with different people from different cultures. Nothing is set in stone. This is going to evolve as people use it, and it will evolve into what it needs to be.

**Elvira:** In terms of Tamil culture, I have observed that there is a tradition of conflict-transformation and there is the present day reality, which may be something quite different. The traditional approach is reflected in the word 'Koodam', which is a gathering space where hierarchy falls away and where decision-making happens in a collective setting. People like Lourdes, who is working in the local villages, tells us that this system is still working there, although today it is a little different. So this has to be researched and, if necessary, the processes adjusted to make them more effective for this culture. We can't do this, which is why we are heavily relying on people coming forward and helping us take up various pieces of the work.

*Do you think there's a change in Auroville? That people are more willing and open to participating in this work now?*

**Elvira:** I have just come out of a four-day mediation training with Aurovilians, and I was touched to see how enthusiastic people were to have learned a little bit about conflict and how to handle it, even if they only use it in their personal lives. I have six mediations on the waiting list just now, and I get a request for another one each week. So, yes, I see a huge change. The Council understand and support what we are doing, and Aurovilians now accept that things like mediation are a neutral tool and not a power trip.

And then there's all this other stuff happening which seems to be tending in the same direction, like the new proposal for the selection of the working groups and the open platform meetings.

*On the other hand, the community has just been through a voting process to resolve certain controversial issues, and some Aurovilians felt this was a retrograde step. How could we have resolved the land exchange issue without resorting to a divisive community vote?*

**Elvira:** I would have advised the people managing this process to have designed five or six small facilitated conversations in which representatives of the different camps sat together. Then I would have broken down the issue into smaller pieces, and tried something like the Quaker process where you first look at facts, then at opinions, then emotions, and at the end you try and see the higher truth above facts, opinions and emotions.

The fact that the recent vote resulted in no decision actually brings the conversation to a different level now, and I think that's great. I think this is a very synergetic moment; there is the potential for a lot of interesting things to happen right now.

**Sacha:** Exactly. Everybody today says whatever we have is not working, so we have to look at alternatives.

**Elvira:** After forty-eight years, we are realizing that we need to come up with a different governance system because until now we've had a kind of patchwork made up of what works outside, with a few small differences. And now the fact that we haven't created anything truly different based upon our ideals is blowing up in our faces. We shouldn't miss the writing on the wall. Change is needed on all levels and we urgently need to find ways to practice our high ideals.

*From an interview by Alan*

## Under the eye of eternity

One of the major problems we are facing as a community at the moment relates to power, or the perception of power, and its abuses. In its most overt form it can be seen in the pursuit by some Aurovilians of seats on the Working Committee because of the status they associate with it, or because they have a particular agenda they want to force through. But it can also be seen in some people's perception that we are being 'ruled' by an unaccountable bureaucracy, and in a fear, by others, of 'mob rule' which will threaten their view of how, say, the city should develop.

All these are real issues, based upon real fears, insecurities and concerns. And yet we have never managed to sit down as a community to discuss them. It's not difficult to see why. The topic of power seems so explosive and likely to bring up so many difficult issues, both personal and cultural, that nobody

wants to touch it. So it festers and continues to drive many aspects of our individual and communal behaviour.

Perhaps we can try another approach to difficult topics like this.

Suppose we began by reframing how we see ourselves and how we relate to each other. In an Ashram talk, Mother told the children that they had been together in many lives before because, at some point, they had assented to be part of a great experiment. I assume the same is true of Aurovilians. If this is the case, we could start looking at the Auroville experiment from a much vaster perspective than our limited life-spans. To adopt Spinoza's haunting phrase, we could begin viewing ourselves 'under the eye of eternity'.

Taking a cue from another of Mother's talks, we could also begin seeing ourselves as individual repre-

sentatives of universal problems to be solved, rather than as flawed individuals who, perhaps, don't really 'deserve' to be part of the Auroville experiment.

Such a reframing would imply that we have a work to do together far bigger than any of our individual issues, and that it is a work that may not be completed in one lifetime.

This all sounds rather theoretical. So what could be the practical consequences for us when dealing with issues like power abuse?

Firstly, if we can see ourselves as representatives of universal problems, I think it helps depersonalise any problems or 'character defects' we associate with particular individuals. In other words, from this new perspective 'x' is not simply a flawed, power-hungry individual. Rather, he is an embodiment, perhaps only for this lifetime, of a particular universal challenge regard-

ing the use of power. And as an embodiment he is offering not only himself but all of us an opportunity to understand this particular force and, potentially, to transcend it.

Such a perception, I think, may change people's attitudes towards such an individual; they may begin to feel compassion rather than blame. If we can change the emotional climate in this way, we make it a little bit easier for him, and all of us, to talk more frankly about power issues – why people pursue power, what are its satisfactions, its downsides etc. And this may lead to a discovery that further depersonalises the issue: the realization that all of us, 'perpetrators', 'victims' and even 'silent ones', are implicated in some way in keeping this particular pot on the boil.

Secondly, if we see ourselves as part of one grand experiment stretching

over many lifetimes, and if this lifetime is just one episode of that epic, I think it becomes a little bit easier for us to be absolutely honest with ourselves and others about the issues we are struggling with. For, ultimately, from the perspective of eternity, what have we got to lose?

Of course, such an approach may seem impossibly exalted given the present state of our community consciousness and it is unlikely, at least initially, to unlock the hearts of our 'serial offenders'. But if only a few people start practising it, being utterly honest with themselves and with others about their own problems and insecurities while holding the sense of all Aurovilians as fellow spiritual travellers through time, I think it would have an effect, and perhaps a profound effect, upon our ability to share our difficulties – as well as our joys – with each other. And this, in turn, may unlock many doors...

*Alan*



Taking care of the elderly

The Auroville population has a substantial number of 65-plussers. In November 2011, the count was 206; in November 2013 it had risen to 253, 14.3% of the adult population. These numbers are bound to increase. How will Auroville care for its elderly in future?

An Auroville Pension Fund doesn't exist and there are no plans to create one. Pension funds get their income from premium payments by employees and employers. But the level of the Auroville maintenance is too basic for individuals to pay a pension premium and neither can the community afford to pay pension premiums. The Budget Coordination Committee, facing steep declines in income, is struggling to meet current expenses and has no possibility to set sums aside for a fund for the elderly [see the article *Auroville's economy hits stormy weather* in the previous issue of Auroville Today].

The concept of retirement is, in fact, foreign to Auroville. In Auroville, retirement is only considered when a person can no longer contribute to the community for reasons of ill-health. In such a case, the community continues to pay the normal maintenance to those without other sources of income. The situation is similar to that of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. There, too, a pension fund does not exist. Ashramites who can no longer work are maintained by the Ashram on a basic level.

A number of elderly Aurovilians have an income from savings or from a pension or from state social security in their home country. This allows them to 'retire' at the prescribed age, but in fact few do. Many keep working after the 'retirement age', often in less taxing positions, and so continue being a useful member of the community.

Those who depend on an Auroville maintenance and struggle to meet expenses can benefit from the Golden Fund, a private initiative set up to provide a supplementary income and to meet exceptional needs of the elderly. The Fund is administered by a group of three Aurovilians. It generates revenues from regular monthly contributions and from incidental donations.

"At present, most of Auroville's elderly are financially covered," says Judith, one of the Fund's administrators. "Only a few elderly are badly off." How this may change in the future, as more of the population greys, has not been looked at.

But some of the next generation, those who grew up in Auroville and have never worked or lived elsewhere, will not have a pension or state security to fall back on. They will necessarily depend on the community. By that time Auroville will need to have sufficient income to carry them. Like a state social security system, Auroville will need to have a working population large enough to carry those who can no longer work.

Social and medical care

"The community will help out, not only financially but also otherwise," says Friederike, a geriatric nurse and one of the team members of Auroville Health Services (AVHS). The problem, she adds, is that often nobody knows that there are problems. Quite a few of the elderly are lonely, with few friendships or social contacts. Auroville Health Services has been talking about

meeting all the single elderly in Auroville, at least once every six months, to enquire about their financial and social well-being. But this has not yet taken off.

"Today we only get involved after something has happened," says Alice, an AVHS executive. "When we hear that someone has fallen and broken a leg or that someone seems to be growing feeble minded, we get into action."

Auroville Health Services had its trial run when it took care of a person who was showing signs of dementia. "A few years ago I heard there were plans to send him back to his country of origin. I said this was unacceptable and something had to be done," says Friederike. "That person had been living in Auroville for many years. Auroville can't send back people just because they are in ill-health!" Auroville Health Services got involved, organised 24/7 nursing and provided administrative, financial, medical, social and even spiritual care.

It was learning on the job. When a hired nurse proved too expensive, Auroville Health Services started experimenting with volunteers. "We developed creative ideas," says Alice. For example, a newcomer who was looking for a place to live in Auroville agreed to take care of the person while living in his house, and AVHS provided the necessary training. "We also organised his meals and laundry, found people to bring him to the Matrimandir or to cultural events and read Savitri to him. Someone else would periodically sing for him. Others would take him out for a meal in a restaurant. We organised doctor's vis-

its, the renewal of his passport, necessary house repairs, and we paid his workers. In brief, we organised his life till the day he passed away."

Auroville Health Services has also been looking into the possibilities of training young Aurovilians in providing geriatric care. Students of the Life Education Centre are interested, says Friederike. "But it hasn't worked out as we can't provide them with stable work. At present there is no need for them, and by the time there would be, they would have found other jobs."

In the dementia case, the costs were paid from the pensioner's substantial income. "The community will have to pay if a person does not have any means," says Manfred, another AVHS executive. "There's no other option." He suggests enlarging the Golden Fund and points out that if Auroville units could agree to pay each month a small sum for each Aurovillian they employ, and self-supporting Aurovilians would contribute as well, the Golden Fund could become an effective elderly support fund.

Auroville Health Services are planning to build an assisted living home for older people who can no longer be helped in their homes. The house would have eight or nine rooms with attached bathrooms and kitchenettes, a common room, and rooms for regular caretakers. "The plans are ready, we have got planning approval and we'll soon start a campaign to raise the necessary funds," says Manfred.

Carel

For more information about elderly care or the Golden Fund email [avhs@auroville.org.in](mailto:avhs@auroville.org.in)

Auroville population 2013

It is becoming increasingly difficult to say anything interesting about our population statistics as so little seems to change year on year. While the increase in the total population is almost double what it was last year, we are only talking about an increase in population from 24 to 62, or from about 1% to 2.7%, which is hardly world-shaking. This number includes Newcomers and potential Newcomers.

In terms of numbers, the Indian population has seen the biggest increase – 36 in all – but this only represents a growth rate of 3.7% in this community. The Indians continue to make up about 43% of the total Auroville population. The Italians, attracted, no doubt, by concessional prices at Tanto Pizzeria, continue their surge – there are 19 more this year, representing a growth rate of 16% – and 11 Americans have joined Auroville, which has boosted their community by over 14%, marking its highest representation for 10 years. The German and French numbers continue to erode, but Indians, French and Germans together still make up two thirds of our total population.

Which bring me to the question of whether Auroville is truly 'international'. If we assume that you need at least ten members of a nationality for critical mass – and ten is setting the bar low as some of those may be babes in arms – we can only claim that 17 nationalities are genuinely represented in Auroville today. No less than 12 nations have only one representative at present, not enough to share a cup of tea and chat about the old days back in, say, Ecuador or Ireland.

As to the nationalities we have lost this year, according to the figures we have been given there are no more Estonians, Greeks, or Taiwanese. Where have they gone? And why? The weather? The food? More casualties of the housing crisis?

And what about the new nationals, the Iranians, the Czechs, the Lithuanians and the five Uzbeks? What has drawn them here? The first translations of Sri Aurobindo in their language? The challenge of a city to be built? Or yet another stimulating article in *Auroville Today*?

Out of the total population of 2331, 546 are under the age of 18. That is getting on for 25% of the whole, so when we talk about a 'greying' Auroville we should remember that we are much less 'grey' than Japan or much of Western Europe.

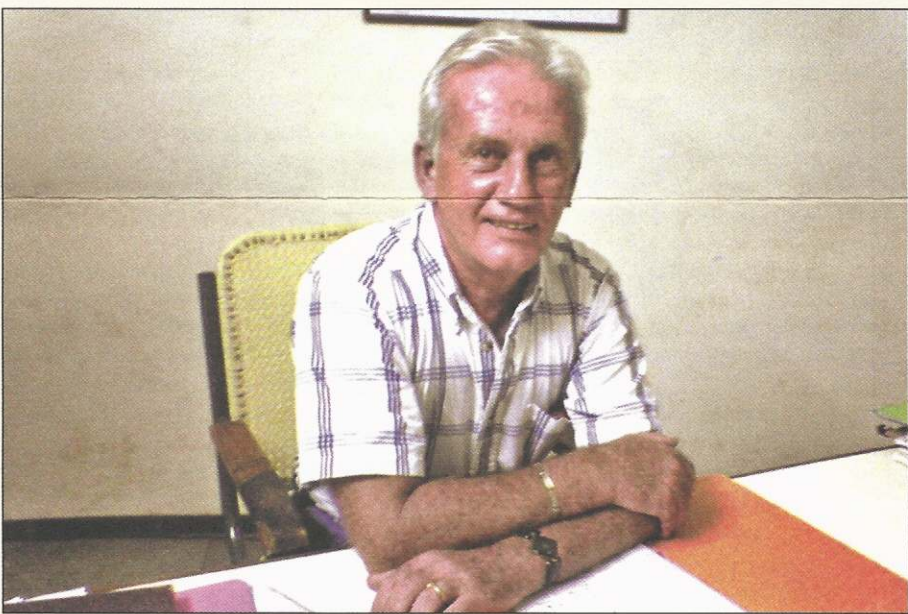
As to the adult sex ratio, in 2013 there are 916 males against 869 females, or about 1.05 men for every Aurovillian woman, which seems a trifle unworkable, but this is almost identical to last year's figures.

And so the long, tense wait for next year's population figures begins...

Alan

Auroville Population by Nationality			
Nationality	Nov. 11	Dec. 12	Dec. 13
Indian	951	961	997
French	332	334	331
German	235	228	219
Italian	116	120	139
American	80	75	86
Dutch	86	84	85
Russian	55	61	65
Spanish	42	44	46
British	41	41	42
Swiss	45	42	41
Korean	38	34	34
Israeli	37	35	31
Belgian	26	28	28
Swedish	20	23	24
Canadian	19	19	22
Australian	13	14	15
Ukrainian	15	15	15
Argentinian	7	8	9
Japanese	7	7	9
Austrian	8	8	8
South African	7	8	8
Chinese	0	7	7
Slovene	6	6	6
Hungarian	5	5	5
Tibetan	5	6	5
Uzbekistan	0	0	5
Brazilian	5	5	4
Danish	1	4	4
Latvian	2	4	4
Mexican	4	4	4
Belorussian	3	3	3
Bulgarian	3	3	3
Iceland	5	5	3
Nepali	3	3	3
Portuguese	3	3	3
Colombian	2	3	2
Moldovian	1	2	2
Sri Lankan	4	4	2
Irish	1	1	1
Kazakh	1	1	1
Lithuanian	0	0	1
Algerian	1	1	1
Egyptian	1	1	1
Ethiopian	2	1	1
Finnish	1	1	1
Philippines	0	1	1
Ecuador	1	1	1
New Zealander	0	1	1
Czech	0	0	1
Iranian	0	0	1
Estonian	2	2	0
Greek	1	1	0
Taiwan	2	1	0
Total	2245	2269	2331

PASSING



Dutch national Albert Zwaan passed away on December 6th in his house in Sri Ma at the age of 67. He had been suffering from the consequences of a road accident since July 2012.

Albert joined Auroville in 1997, after working for 20 years as the head of the outpatient department and operation theatre of a hospital in the Netherlands. In 1999, he started working for the Auroville Health Centre in Aspiration as a nurse-administrator. He also took responsibility for the Health Centre's village programme, as well as for raising funds, and became one of the administrators of the Auroville Health Fund, Auroville's health care system.

Albert was known as a hard but fair taskmaster by the Health Centre staff, impatient with shirkers, but always ready to teach a young nurse the basics. Many will also remember him for the gentleness, compassion and the loving care he gave to all patients, villagers and Aurovilians alike. He was an impressive nurse, cheerfully responsive to calls for help at any time, and always cool in an emergency. In dealing with the departed, he showed extraordinary tact and gentleness, taking care of the body of the deceased and guiding affected families through the logistics of the moment.

Apart from his work in Auroville, Albert was also very active for the poor and the destitute. He helped many of the poorest villagers undergo expensive operations, which he either paid for himself or got friends in

The Netherlands to pay for. This changed the lives of many, including that of three people who were only able to crawl. With Albert's financial help their limb deformities were surgically corrected and now they function normally. He also helped Jwala, a home for the mentally challenged in Pondicherry, to acquire land and collected Rs 21 lakhs for the Rajiv Gandhi Home for the Handicapped in Pondicherry. He helped tsunami victims and had houses built for four of the poorest families who had lost their homes.

In 2006, Albert started his most treasured project. Knowing how little is done for old people who have ended up living in the streets, emaciated, dehydrated, filthy, and forgotten, he started the Mahatma Gandhi old age home in Pondicherry with the help of a Dutch foundation. Sometimes, Albert would personally take an old person in and wash and feed her. He organised doctors from the Auroville Health centre to provide medical support when needed. The home, which now gives 18 old people three meals a day, a bed and a warm shower, will be continued by his adopted son Royal, who has been caring for Albert ever since his accident.

Albert's body, after lying in the temporary Farewell Room in Auroshilpam, was buried at Adventure burial grounds on December 12th.

Those who would like to support Albert's work for the elderly please contact [adankrob@gmail.com](mailto:adankrob@gmail.com) of Stichting Health Care Trust Nederland.



# Strong mind, strong body

Suryagandhi talks about her career in promoting health.

**S**uriyagandhi worked her way up from caring for her mother in her village 30 kilometres north of Pondicherry to become a preventive health care specialist serving the Auroville bioregion. By taking advantage of opportunities, using her native talents, and working hard, she gained the training and experience needed to advance her career step by step. Her healthcare work started in her village, and even after joining Auroville in 1989, work in the nearby villages has remained her focus.

As a teenager, Suriya had to stay at home to care for her mother who had diabetes. She was just 17 when her mother died. She says, "This led me to help other people, because I was not able to save my mother. Also, my father was a literate person and allowed me to make my own choices for my life; this helped me to go further."

A Chennai hospital started a project in the nearby villages, and hired her as a lay first aider. After a one-month training, she started treating minor health problems, doing prenatal checkups, and giving information and referrals for cases of leprosy.

Excelling at her work, she was selected to become a supervisor and went for a six-month training course in Chennai to become a multipurpose health worker. Afterwards, she returned to the same project as a supervisor. As the project was winding down, the director, impressed with her skills, brought her to Chennai to help with the evaluation phase. He then offered her further education in a two-year training course in nursing. After gaining some nursing experience in the villages, she took up a further six-months training programme offered by a project of USAID aimed at eradicating TB and leprosy and worked for a year on that project.

Chennai, however, was not to her liking, so in 1986 Suriya came to Auroville where her brother was working to look for a job. She found a position at the Health Centre working as a nurse midwife and community health worker. "Compared to outside, I found that here there was more freedom to do whatever work I could do. Outside there was more of a rigid hierarchy. Even if you are good they can keep you down. Although I was offered a government job, I did not take it and in 1989, I decided to join Auroville instead."

Janna Imhoff from Germany, Jacques Verré from France, and Dr. Kamala Tewari from India were in charge of the Health Centre then. "Janna was a strict manager, but she still gave me freedom. She also carefully observed my work, and I gained her trust. She encouraged me in whatever I was

doing."

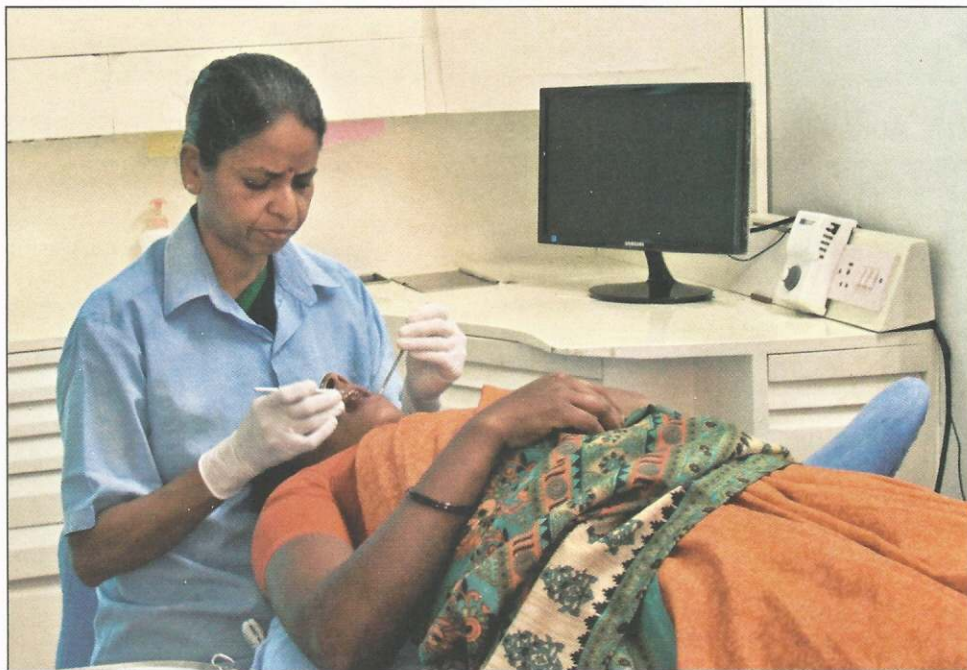
Suriya began seeing patients in two local villages, bringing them to the hospital if needed and sometimes delivering babies at home. Later she got funding from the Tamil Nadu Government to run the Mini Health Centre to treat general health problems in two villages, which eventually expanded to many villages and continued for several years. She and a doctor from the Health Centre would train health workers in the villages to treat the people and do referrals.

Then came a turning point. "One day a woman came to me with labour pains, and after a normal delivery, began having post-partum haemorrhage. I had never seen this before. At that time there was no ambulance, no car, nothing. You had to call a taxi in Pondicherry which would come and take the patient back to a hospital there. Somehow I managed to save her life, but it was a shock and I decided I didn't want to do this work anymore."

In 1992, Suriya married Hari, who had grown up in Auroville. Being a love marriage, her family was against it at first, but she persisted and eventually convinced them. Hari was someone who respected her rights, and like her father gave her the freedom to make her own decisions. In fact, she told him that she did not want to have a baby, and he agreed and always kept to his agreement – "which is an amazing thing" she added. "Usually in Tamil families, girls must get permission from their parents to do something, and when they get married, must get permission from their husbands. But because of the way I grew up, I never ask permission like this, I just give information. I also tell other women that the best way to lead life in a marriage is for each one just to give information, not to ask for permission."

She adds, "In Auroville we talk about equal rights, but still we have not reached that level. Sometimes in certain working groups there are men in charge who do not want to let women come up. Men sometimes think I am a feminist because I am strong and will speak out, but I don't just support the woman's side, we have to give rights to each side equally. Sometimes women will just put down the men; that also is not right."

In 1992 Jacques from the Dental Centre asked Suriya to join him. He wanted to start doing preventive dental health care in the villages, and knew she was perfect for the job. A woman from each village in the Auroville area is trained for three months to do the work. Supervisors go out daily to help them. They treat about 4 000 children from all the private



Suryagandhi at work in the Auroville Dental Clinic

and government schools.

In the Auroville schools, they provide a once-a-year check-up, demonstration, education, and then if needed they can come to the Dental Centre for treatment. If there are monetary problems, they can get treatment at no cost. "Among the children who have participated during the past 20 years and have now grown up, there are fewer dental problems and no need for root canal treatments. Our aim is to have zero problems."

Suriya's work extends beyond dental care. As a member of Auroville's Child Protection Service, she is educating children to become aware of the dangers of child abuse – whether physical, emotional, or mental – and learn how to protect themselves.

She also leads evening classes on gender issues for both boys and girls. "They have to understand each other, then only can they begin to overcome their problems and learn how to give respect to each other, and when they grow up, give rights to the women. The boys have to learn the limits in their relations with girls so as not to give disturbance. I have no shyness in talking about these things with them, I talk directly." For the older children and young adults, she also gives a class on the reproductive system. She also gives classes on these issues with young women at the Life Education Centre, and also does summer camps with large groups from the schools.

About a year ago, Suriya started doing workshops for women on the Aviva Method, a set of exercises that prevents many problems of the repro-

ductive system, such as painful menstruation, irregular cycles, uterine fibroids, unexplained infertility, and menopausal symptoms. "Usually when women get these types of problems they take medicines which give temporarily relief but then the problem recurs. This sometimes goes on throughout their life. I want to help women to manage themselves without medication." She also started teaching breathing exercises that help lower stress and remove toxins from the body.

Preventive health is not limited to check-ups and exercises. Suriya is also one of a team of coordinators providing music classes twice weekly to more than 50 children, half from Auroville and half from the villages. She also conducts a class for children about Auroville and Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. "We do a different type of education; we never teach. The children select a booklet in Tamil to study silently for 45 minutes, it may be just a page or two, and then they select some art materials to express what they studied. Afterwards they explain it to the group. In this way they all learn something from the different books."

Where does she find the energy for all this work? "I believe we are all instruments for Her. Whatever Mother gives us to do, we have to do it. But it is joyful, I am happy to be here. Each time I learn something I feel I have to give it to others; this is my way. If you give something to others and it makes them happy, it makes you happy. What else do you need?"

Larry

## BOOK REVIEW

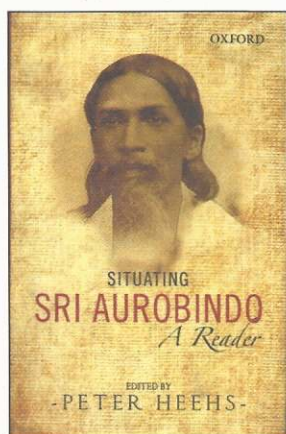
# Situating Sri Aurobindo: A Reader

**P**eter Heehs has edited a collection of critical essays by various scholars on Sri Aurobindo. The book aims to put Sri Aurobindo's thought in perspective – biographically, culturally, and politically; within the corresponding intellectual disciplines; and as a living influence for the present and the future.

I found Heehs' 'Introduction' quite interesting and helpful. He begins by introducing Sri Aurobindo, who, "known to some primarily as a revolutionary and political leader, to others as a yogi and spiritual guru, was also an outstanding poet, literary critic, political and social theorist, philosopher, and spiritual thinker." Heehs then quotes one of the authors in the volume, K.D. Verma, who says that readers of Sri Aurobindo's works "fall into two broad groups: those who are followers of Aurobindo and those who are fascinated by his extraordinary genius and achievements." Heehs notes that while the former have generated an extensive literature, the latter have published pieces on him in a variety of peer-reviewed jour-

nals and edited books. From the latter Heehs has selected fifteen out of the dozens of essays brought out in such publications since the late 1950s. Heehs goes on to nicely summarize the essential approaches and issues discussed by each of the 15 authors, putting them into the broader context of their respective fields and of Sri Aurobindo's life and work.

As might be expected in an edited book of 15 chapters from different authors in four different disciplines (Poetry and Criticism, Political and Social, Philosophical, and Spiritual) there is some unevenness. Indeed, I was ready to put down the book mid way through the first chapter by K.D. Verma, "Sri Aurobindo as a Poet," which was overflowing with scholastic jargon and meandered as through an unmapped jungle. I



suppose it was selected for this first position, however, because it further explores the issues of critical analysis, particularly for someone like Sri Aurobindo, and did raise various intriguing propositions. The chapter that followed was on *Savitri* by Richard Hartz, who I believe is currently one of the best exponents of Sri Aurobindo's thought. Two additional chapters, one on Sri Aurobindo's theory of poetry, and one on 'Poetic influences on the development of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual and nationalistic convictions' rounded out section one.

The second section on political and social thought was interesting because it focuses on a relatively short period in Sri Aurobindo's life during which he radically changed from being a revolutionary to a yogi. The authors in this section explore the biographical and historical

influences which may be at work in this transformation. They also raised interesting speculations about the possible development of Sri Aurobindo's thought.

I felt more satisfied with the third section on philosophy. I particularly liked Steve Odin's chapter comparing Sri Aurobindo's and Hegel's view on involution and evolution, which helped me to better appreciate some aspects of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy while also informing me of similar views that were being advanced in the West. Some of the main points made were further delineated in Nalini Bhushan and Jay Garfield's essay which focussed on *lilavada*, the philosophical view that the universe is a play of the Divine, and more broadly, exists for the delight that the realization of its possibilities bring. Haridas Chaudhuri's chapter nicely laid out three primary issues in Sri Aurobindo's philosophical thought, while Stephen Phillips discussed Sri Aurobindo's views on ethics.

The final section on spiritual thought seemed to me uneven and dis-

appointing. The first essay deals with a somewhat tangential issue of the "parable of the ten avatars" as a metaphor for spiritual evolution in the Indian tradition. While the broader issue of involution and evolution is certainly a central issue in Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, it is dealt with only in summary fashion and not as the focus of the article. The next chapter discusses tantra and saktism in Sri Aurobindo's yoga, which again is interesting and central, but the author focuses on the historical development of these ideas and practices in Sri Aurobindo's life and yoga, rather than on their mature form in his teachings. Helpfully, the author makes it fairly clear that Sri Aurobindo was averse to the controversial practices with which tantrism is sometimes associated. The final chapter by Robert McDermott, a well-known Sri Aurobindo scholar, nicely wraps up the book by emphasizing several key points about Sri Aurobindo's spiritual teaching, and most importantly, that it is based on spiritual experience and is not merely an intellectual or historical construction.

Larry

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