

Auroville Today

AUGUST 2019, No.360

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

A roller-coaster ride

On June 12th, Auroville bade farewell to Mohan Verghese Chunkath who had been serving as Secretary of the Auroville Foundation since June 2016. *Auroville Today* asked him about his experience and his views on some of the issues that confront today's Auroville.

Auroville Today: What has it been like to serve as Secretary?

Mohan V. Chunkath: It has been a bit of a roller-coaster ride, for every day there were new things to look after and tackle. It was exciting, but different from what I had expected. I thought that I would be contributing more towards some of the interesting work which is being done in Auroville. I knew Auroville as an incubator, promoter and implementer of sustainable energy solutions, building technologies and farm irrigation systems, and was aware of the significant contributions it has been making to sustainable development, not only within Auroville but also outside with the State Government and the Central Government. But I could contribute less than I had hoped for. I found that there is a lot of plain administrative work, which of course is to be expected, but with Auroville being a non-hierarchical structure, straightforward administration proved to be an interesting challenge. The work here is far more complex than in a normal bureaucratic set-up. I was fortunate that I had a lot of collaboration from the different working groups and from Aurovilians in general.

Could you elaborate on that 'complexity'?

I was exposed to many different visions that exist within the community. It felt at times as if there are several sub-communities living in the same geographical area. Many of Auroville's working groups have gone in different directions which have created a divide. For example, the Green Group is very clear that no trees should be cut; the sustainable architecture group has a view on Auroville roads; there are different views on town planning; and all stances are very rigid. Auroville seems to have splintered into different groups with different ideals, each with their own priorities; and there are many 'free' spirits who do not wish to have rigid rules. What all have in common is that none is ready to subsume their views and compromise to reach a shared larger vision. And the Auroville working groups, which all work very hard, don't have enough time to look at long-term planning and decision-making to take Auroville to the next level. The result is that there is no meeting of minds on what the super-ordinate goals are. So while most Auroville residents seem to have a strong commitment to the ideals of Auroville and its deeper purpose, the manifestation of the ideals needs to be based on a shared vision and plan of action by which the Auroville township can become a reality.

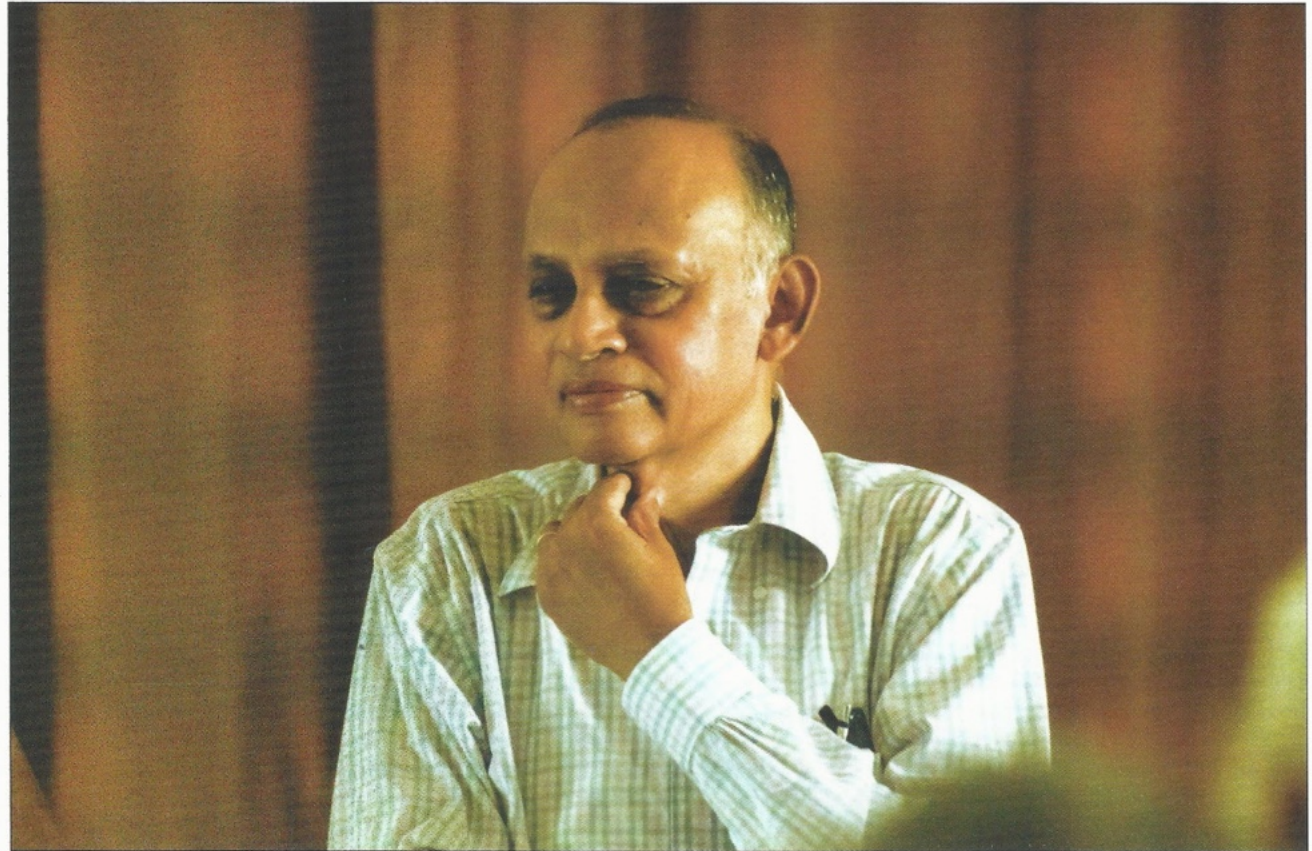
Auroville must go back to its roots, and do a lot of introspection on what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother said. This is very, very necessary, for unless you are able to harmonize different viewpoints, you cannot take decisions. Today, Auroville lacks decision-making ability. It is necessary to look into that: how can issues that have floundered due to lack of decision-making get resolved. In my opinion, you can only do that by looking at the larger overall goals and ideals, use those to resolve these differences, and so find a solution acceptable to all. Auroville is an intentional aspirational community, and that's where you have to move to.

You feel that the spiritual aspect isn't emphasised enough?

I have been wondering if Auroville is failing to expose people to Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's vision. Auroville leaves the inner development to the individual, and rightly so, but many of them never get around to it. I'm not passing any value judgement, but for an intentional spiritual community, I think Auroville is probably not sufficiently progressing along the lines of what is required. I am not saying that people must have read all the books: but there has to be a yearning for the inner life. There should be a search, a continuous interest, rather than getting caught up in the daily humdrum like everywhere else in the world. I was actually expecting that Aurovilians would be distinctly different; but I found that this was not the case. Of course, you can say that my expectations were unrealistic, for people are people, but yet I felt that there should be something more noticeably different. For by joining this unique project, people are supposed to have subscribed to Sri Aurobindo's and the Mother's teaching. But if not enough people subscribe to this in a large way, I think there is a bit of a problem. After all, the Auroville township is meant to be a place where the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother can manifest, a "laboratory of evolution" in the form of a township.

You also mentioned the complexity of your administrative work...

I think people do not realise that the staff at the Auroville Foundation office is far too small for the extensive tasks it is supposed to execute. The Foundation has only a Secretary, an Under Secretary and two staff members. We need more people, more specialised people, a legal cell, a finance cell, people specialised in land matters. Too



Mohan Verghese Chunkath

much depends on too few individuals, and there is little "institutional memory".

Can you give an example of where having insufficient staff affected the work?

I have been quite disturbed by some of the events in Auroville, such as some guesthouse management issue we had to deal with, major issues with a building construction project and various land related issues. It might have been different if we had had a stronger presence at the Foundation office so that we could have been more directly involved rather than leaving it entirely to the Auroville working and project groups concerned.

And in the last months, we have seen an avalanche of land cases, with people suddenly claiming lands Auroville has long had in its possession.

Yes, the neighbouring villagers have become more litigious, more assertive and more knowledgeable and therefore they take steps which earlier they were hesitant to do. The monetary stakes are very high these days, as land prices have skyrocketed. Old land deals are being studied to see if mistakes have been made and if people can claim ownership of the whole or a part. The Auroville Foundation is now involved in many more court cases about land ownership.

The position of the Secretary is a solitary one. How was your experience dealing with working groups who face you with a common stand? For you didn't have the benefit of having your own sounding board.

The Governing Board constituted in its meeting in September last year an Oversight Committee consisting of senior Aurovilians, with as task to do test checks of construction projects in Auroville. I was planning to ask the Board to expand its role to also look into the working of various projects and units and the functioning of various working groups. For this group became a 'think tank' for me to brainstorm difficult issues. My experience with them has been positive, and I would recommend the various working groups to interact with them to formulate their long-term plans, for that is one area where the working groups have little experience.

The Secretary of the Auroville Foundation has been appointed Estate Officer of the Auroville Foundation under the Public Premises (Eviction of Unauthorised Occupants) Act, 1971, which authorizes him to take action against all those who are encroaching on Auroville Foundation owned land, without having to go to court. How has this worked out?

This appointment has not become fully effective. We did a few test cases where Auroville land is encroached, but there were delays in getting the local administration to implement the orders given as Estate Officer. The notification of this appointment in the *Gazette of India* happened in July 2016, and the Act states that it extends to the whole of India. But our legal team has mentioned the need for an additional notification in the *Gazette of Tamil Nadu*. This has to be pursued. For otherwise there will be no other option than going to court, and then the issues may take years to get resolved.

Even before you joined as Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, you had been asked about your views on requesting the Tamil Nadu Government to constitute a New Town Development Authority (NTDA) for the Auroville area. This issue is still being debated in Auroville. What are your views today?

My views have not changed. An NTDA is the only way to get some degree of protection from unwanted development on private lands within the Master Plan area. Right now, there is absolutely no protection. And as Auroville does not have the funds to buy all the lands in the Master Plan area, there is no other option than statutory protection. We can endlessly argue about the merits or demerits, but there is no other alternative. By not doing anything, you are inviting more and more developers, who will do whatever the local body permits. With an NTDA you have a chance to block non-permissible activities. Moreover, the NTDA as being considered by the Government of Tamil Nadu is for a large area around and including Auroville. This would also protect the immediate environs of Auroville, and not only the Auroville Master Plan area.

You have often expressed concern about the town planning aspect of Auroville.

The concern is about the lack of consensus. There is no common vision on future development. Perhaps as a result there has been a watering down of Auroville's Town Development Council (TDC). Within a year, most of its members resigned and today it has not even a full membership. But the TDC has to be a strong mandated body which drives the planning, development and building of the township. The TDC should come up with a 3-year work plan that includes clear deliverables, a budget and a human resources plan. The TDC then needs to specify what it can do itself and where outside consultants need to come in, budget the required funds, and the Governing Board should give its feedback. There must be an open evaluation every year of how far it has progressed towards the goal of developing the Auroville township.

continued on page 2

● **Green cities – a way forward, today and tomorrow**
● **The threats to Auroville's physical integrity**

pages 2–3

● **A transformed eatery: the Aurelec Cafeteria**
● **The Solar Kitchen journey**
● **The Auroville lunch scheme**

pages 4–5

● **Horses in Auroville**
● **Cultivating unknowing**
● **Letter about the International Zone**

pages 6–7

● **Passings: Myriam Isaac, Boris Mabilat, Ursula Loose**
● **What happened to our bonfires?**
● **Chronicling Auroville: for free!**

pages 7–8

continued from page 1

Speaking about budgets: For about one third of its total income, Auroville depends on a yearly grant from the Government of India. This GOI grant has not increased in the last years. What are your views on this?

I think that a community which aims at self-government should not depend too much on a government grant. Auroville should decrease that dependency and take active steps to move towards self-sufficiency. This implies that Auroville should re-prioritize its needs.

So far, the four main beneficiaries of the GOI grant [SAIER, TDC, Bharat Nivas and Administration. eds.] determine where they spend 'their' portion of the grant. This is now changing with the involvement of the GOI Grant Group [a subgroup of the Working Committee and Funds and Assets Management Committee, eds.] which has started discussing proposed allocations. This is necessary. GOI grants have to be allocated in a rational manner, not just because something is desirable for a particular group. For example, the concept of 'shared' or multi-purpose spaces is not sufficiently developed. There could be better utilisation of existing buildings and facilities while GOI grants may be used mainly for capital expenditure on common infrastructure facilities.

The Auroville population consists of about two thirds of foreigners who need a visa to live in and work for Auroville. What has been your experience in this area?

We have fared very well. I would say that we have broken the ice, both at Chennai and Delhi, with the authorities being increasingly cooperative. The Visa Policy for Auroville is stable: the visa situation for Auroville residents, volunteers and tourists is now clear and unambiguous. The Government has even agreed to bring perceived visa violations by an Auroville resident to the notice of the Auroville Foundation Secretary who can provide clarifications, instead of serving the resident a Leave India notice or refusing him or her re-entry when returning to India. This has been a joint endeavour in which the cooperation of the Working Committee and François Gautier has been essential.

During your term of office the issue of discrimination came to the fore. Do you feel the issue has been sufficiently dealt with?

No, the issue is not over and it has to be dealt with sensitively – though perhaps 'discrimination' is too strong a word. It came up in the context of people's participation in working groups. Some people felt they were excluded from governance-related work in Auroville, and that this was not done in a fair and transparent way; others feel they have less voice, despite the fact that their numbers in terms of percentage of the population are larger and that the same opportunities have not always been given. Of course, the question of a person's ability to do the work is also there. I wouldn't go as far as proposing proportional representation, but Auroville has to re-study its selection process. There is room for correction and for the self-governance mechanism to improve. I acknowledge it is a difficult problem which cannot be expected to be resolved easily.

This issue was brought to the attention of the Governing Board which, exceptionally, delegated two of its members to look into the issue. Today we see more of an active involvement of Board members in Auroville issues. What are your views on this?

I welcome a bigger involvement of the Governing Board in Auroville. The Board started that when it kicked off the Retreat, but this has not continued. The Board should have enquired how Auroville has developed in each of the areas discussed in the Retreat, what the plans and impediments are and then entered into a dialogue with the Aurovilians. But this didn't happen.

A regular stronger input from the Board is desirable. Just a sporadic intervention is not enough. There has to be some impetus, some questioning of where Auroville is, and if it is going in the right direction. That questioning can't be completely left to the community, as it has shown that it doesn't have that kind of direction. But the Board should not aim at telling Auroville what it has to do; it should begin a conversation and play a supervisory, progress reviewing and guiding role.

I foresee that the Board will become more assertive. The community needs to do some introspection on how to deal with this. It should not be a reactive kind of thing, but rather how to best work with the Board. For example, the Board may be asked to break deadlocks, such as obtaining the Government's permission for the sale of outlying lands, or to intervene when an Auroville development is blocked.



Mrs. Sheela Chunkath and Mr. Mohan Verghese Chunkath during the farewell event at the Unity Pavilion

And the position of the Secretary in this?

I recommend that the Secretary becomes a Member-Secretary of the Board, while continuing being accountable to the Chairman of the Board as is specified in the Auroville Foundation Act. At present the Secretary is not a board member. I think this is not ideal.

Do you have any regrets for having taken up this post?

No. It was a very interesting and an extraordinary experience. Nothing I've ever done compares with it, it was unique. I depart holding Auroville very dear to my heart.

In conversation with Carel

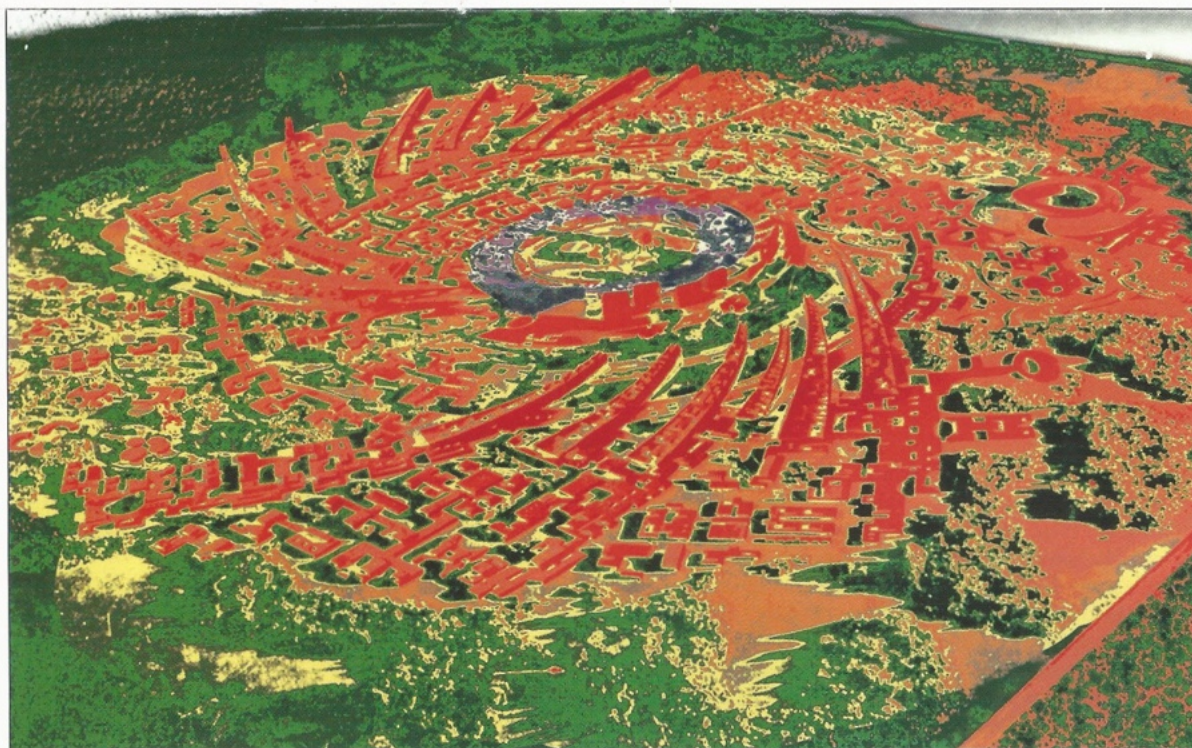
TOWN PLANNING

Green cities – a way forward, today and tomorrow

The communities of architects/ planners/ city-builders and greenbelters must come together in Auroville to manifest the city of the future (emphasis on "come together"). In contemporary urban planning, planners are now realizing since several decades the critical need of integrated green spaces to reduce the 'urban heat island effect' and produce bioclimatically designed, livable cities with reliable potable water resources. (The urban heat island effect is basically a bubble of concentrated heat around cities, formed by the reradiation of shortwave heat from hard surfaces that cannot escape the atmosphere.)

I myself worked nearly 20 years ago in the first movement of green-roofs in New York City... in a time when every rooftop was asphalt-black, and New York was a hot, inhuman and environmentally unconscious city. But cities can and do change, mostly by necessity – as the last 20 years have proven in New York. And so does planning, as a discipline.

The concept – even the idea – of climate change did not exist in the 1960's or 70's when the Galaxy Plan was envisioned by Roger. At this stage of early Modernist city-planning, the urban form played the most important role and there were not the tools in mapping to accurately represent "unbuilt" urban form. There was not yet the concept that city form, its buildings and its green spaces, can be designed for human comfort (not in a Modern city design paradigm, although this knowledge always existed in vernacular architecture). This is in no way a short-coming of Roger or of the Galaxy. It is simply a product of the times. And as the times have changed, we as a human race, in greater and greater globalizing societies, have gained tools for sustainable city design. Just as cities all over the world have begun to critically incorporate such strategies – e.g. by critical placement or construction of urban green infrastructure in places where microclimate can best cool cities, by planning green infrastructure for water security – Auroville and the Galaxy can, too. In fact, it should be said that the Galaxy has the potential



Visualization of the Galaxy Plan's urban heat island effect (Note: this is not a detailed study)

for even greater adaptive design than many other city models, as long as it is seen as plastic and adaptive. What should not be seen is a Galaxy vs. Green polarization, a fight between buildings and forests, planners and greenbelters. This is a super-unproductive "way forward" for Auroville and it is really unfortunate that this instructive (though slightly late notice) planning workshop in the January sessions further polarized this existing debate.

Several months ago, I brought Gerhard Schmitt, a leading computational and artificial intelligence expert in the mapping of urban heat island effect (in Singapore, Switzerland, etc.) to Auroville. Gerhard's work focuses on computational modelling of cities' heat production, and the way in which cities can be designed (or redesigned as more often the case) for selective urban green spaces which passively cool the city. Imagine for a second, that cool corridor of air that you feel often on the motorcycle while driving past Pitchandikulam forest. Now imagine this kind of cooling effect intentionally integrated into the city planning to reduce the dis-

comfort in your houses at this relentlessly hot time of year. This is precisely the kind of work proposed by Eble and Dreizeitl in the January Sessions workshop, not at all in opposition to the Galaxy, but as an adaptive integration of the Galaxy to environmental planning logics.

After visiting l'Avenir and seeing the city at large, Gerhard told me that Auroville has no idea what it already has! Just as cities in the equatorial range around the world are now having to retrofit green spaces for an imminent future of climate change, rising temperatures, drought, water crisis, increased storm and natural disaster risk, Auroville already has this by virtue of the extraordinary work of the early pioneers. Gerhard said that Auroville is like a contemporary urban planner's dream, and that it must do whatever it can to maintain its present qualities. This means an integral approach in planning that adapts the Galaxy to the conditions of the ground – the land, its surface topography, bunding, water bodies and percolation rates, its underground aquifers, geology, its gradient of plateau to sea level, its forests, farms and parks – all

green spaces must play a role in the design of the future city.

Even B.V. Doshi has tried to re-purpose the Galaxy to design for basic bioclimatic design at the urban scale, strategies such as proper orientation for sun, for summer winds, for sustainable water resources, for green spaces. He failed because we as a community have failed to be plastic enough to see the Galaxy as a model in a constant and perpetual state of "becoming", a model which can adapt to new environmental necessities much better than conventional cities. This is why we must try to gain new tools in planning that help us as a community to understand what it means – for society and for the land – to complete all aspects of the Galaxy with critical reflection (e.g. do the Lines of Force create wind or sun shadows, over-heating issues, inhuman scale issues vis-à-vis the neighbouring villages?).

We need to support our planning community to gain and implement these new tools and strategies – including through workshops with professional planners like Eble and Schmitt. We cannot afford to be fanatics – neither for the perfect urban form of the Galaxy, nor for buildings, nor for trees. The severe and very scary present water crisis in Tamil Nadu shows us that. We must learn how to compromise, to build and plan the city together. This includes taking stock of crucial initiatives like Suhasini's Land Use Plan, Gilles' Water Management Plan for water security and David and Achva Stein's Greenbelt Land Use Plan in which there was active collaboration with the Green Group.

It includes taking risks to begin new initiatives. And it means each resident, in his or her own way, working to de-polarize the Galaxy debate, to minimize personal opinion in the face of an enormous field of planning complexities. Those working close to the land have enormous potential inputs to share in how the urban plan can be best adapted to the ground conditions. What will it take for us to choose to work together?

Lara Davis

The threats to Auroville's physical integrity

For many years Paul Vincent has been involved with trying to protect the land of Auroville. Here he gives his views on the present situation in which private developments in the Auroville area are mushrooming, and suggests what can be done about it.

Auroville Today: How many private developments are there in the Master Plan area?

Paul Vincent: There are more than 150. There are three types of developments. One is layouts for private housing projects, some of which are encroaching into the Green Belt or are close to the edge of the city. Those we are tackling with the authorities, without much success until now. Then there are developments like restaurants, hotels and guesthouses built by villagers. We have a lot of these commercial developments along the road from Kuilapalayam to Certitude, which means that many of them are in the designated Green Belt.

Thirdly, there are some private developments by Aurovilians and Friends of Auroville who have purchased land in the Master Plan area for themselves and who are developing either housing or hotels or guesthouses without any permission from Auroville. In addition, Aurovilians are purchasing private property outside the Master Plan area but in the surrounding area. Large parts of the area around Serenity, for example, are owned by Aurovilians. Aurovilians are also purchasing land elsewhere in India, like Kodaikanal. The local people know this so they wonder why, when we say we still need land in the city and Green Belt, Aurovilians are not helping but buying land outside.

Why should we be worried by these private developments, particularly those in the Master Plan area?

It is very simple. Mother established a very basic socio-economic principle for Auroville and that is that there would be no private property in the city.

So having people residing in this area who have no relationship to the ideal will make it harder for us to achieve that ideal?

Of course. I believe that if no miracle takes place, the land situation means that the realisation of the project of Mother will be virtually impossible.

When did land threats begin?

Large scale land speculation began around 1994. In response, we had the first Residents Assembly meeting approving the basis of the Master Plan. Until that time the villagers did not believe we were serious about building a city, so the land had little value. But when we started building schools and large, permanent buildings, we gave a signal that we meant business, that we needed the land, so villagers with land realized they could wait for us to come to them and they could name their price. This was the beginning of the massive inflation of land prices in this area.

However, land threats began much earlier. I have been involved in protecting the land of Auroville since 1975. In those days there was already a problem because a lot of Auroville land was given by the Sri Aurobindo Society to the villagers to use free of cost. They were harvesting our fruits, our trees. I managed to get much of it back in the area between Vérité and Dana.

In fact, we are still fighting cases of people who are claiming Auroville land because the Sri Aurobindo Society, which was in charge of purchasing the land in the early days, was using wrong procedures or not properly documenting the land they had purchased. In fact, regarding the land all we are doing at the moment is fire-fighting.

But we are as much to blame as the Society because we have not occupied and fenced land that had been purchased for Auroville, so allowing others to use and claim it. In other words, when it comes to protecting Auroville land there is a vacuum; there is a lack of attention and care as well as an adequate budget. When you have jewels in your family you keep them safe, and the land is like jewels: the majority of the land around here has a value of more than one crore an acre now.

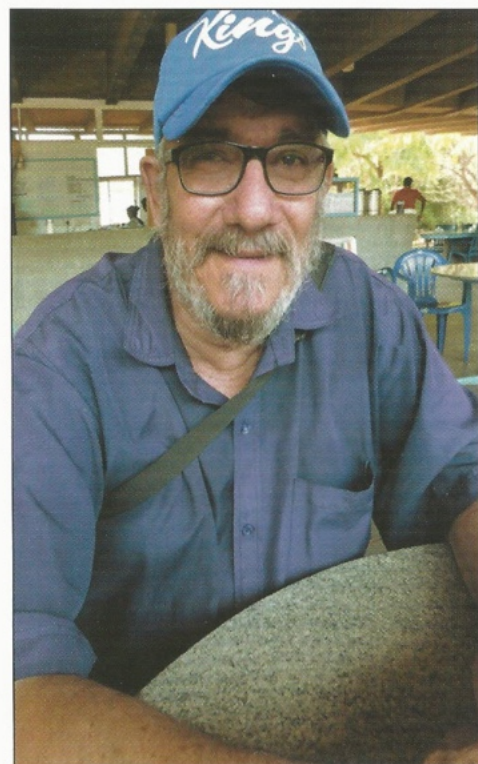
What has been stopping us from being more active in the protection of land?

Our land purchase groups for the last 25

years have not had people with real knowledge and capability. This is evident from the fact that they have not always bought land when and where it was needed. Some years ago, Naicker from Irumbai wanted to sell an important 300 acre plot in one piece to Auroville. He was offering the whole lot for 1.2 lakhs an acre, which was peanuts, but we wanted to bring down the price. We didn't treat him with respect so finally he got fed up and divided it between his children. The last land that we purchased from the remnants of that 300 acres cost us 55 lakhs an acre....

But the land purchase group always say that we have never had enough money to purchase the land that we need. This is why they have to negotiate the best price and be selective in what they purchase.

We could have purchased much more land with the means at our disposal in the early days if we had treated the villagers differently, with respect, rather than sending them away when we thought they were asking too much. Since 1985 we have spent more than 200 crores on buildings in Auroville. If we had waited we could have used that money to purchase critical land, like land alongside roads. If we had made land purchase a priority then, we would have been able to purchase the majority of the land we needed, and prevented what is happening now with all the commercial activities and private developments on the Certitude to Kuilapalayam and Edayanchavady to Kottakarai roads. What we need to prioritise today is not more roads or better connectivity but securing the land for Auroville.



Paul Vincent

As to fund-raising, there are people who do this job professionally. Why don't we employ professional fund-raisers and lobbyists? Some time ago, a well-wisher of Auroville offered to make a significant contribution in the form of procuring land for Auroville but we refused this help.

The problem is our lack of humility; we think we know better than anybody else. In fact, we could have done much better with the help of professionals.

So what do you think should happen now regarding land purchase and land management?

The recommendation I made to the Governing Board is that land purchase should be taken out of the hands of Aurovilians and handled by professional people appointed by the Government. These people would be guided by



Privately owned hotel in the Greenbelt near Dana community, built without the required permissions

the principles of the Master Plan and by advisers within the community. The job of the Auroville Land Board would only be to maintain what we have now, to ensure that what we have purchased is protected. The people appointed for this Land Board should be tested for their capacity to do the job: it should not be based upon 'feelings', upon whether or not we like them as people. These have to be people who really know the land and who understand the rules and regulations about land.

In 1965, Mother told Roger the town would be directed by a Municipal Council, a 'committee of technicians'...

I agree, in regard to the land as elsewhere we need professionals who know their job.

But there have been attempts to control land speculation and unwanted developments in the Master Plan area. For example, the Government Order (GO) of 2003 stated that a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Auroville Foundation was required for all future developments in the Master Plan area.

There are two parts to this GO. The NOC was to be accompanied by land acquisition by the Government of Tamil Nadu. Since there was no such acquisition, the GO became a worthless piece of paper. Even some Aurovilians don't care about this GO as they have built property for private people inside the Master Plan area.

For me the most important strategy now is to have a Master Plan approved by the Tamil Nadu Government. The big mistake we made in 1999 was to go to the Central Government to get approval for our Master Plan when land matters are a State not Central Government subject.

Are you saying that our present Master Plan is not recognised by the Tamil Nadu Government?

Yes, it doesn't recognise it yet, which is why we have to engage with them. At present, we are asking them to accept the Perspective Master Plan we have already prepared. But even if the State Government constitutes a New Town Development Authority and accepts the Master Plan, the real plan has still to be created. This would be a Detailed Development Plan (DDP) which defines what will happen on each plot of land. If the DDP is accepted by the New Town Development Authority it will be imposed and any violation in the future can be stopped. The question remains whether we have the people capable of making such a plan.

So what can be done about the present private developments within the Master Plan area?

Even if a DDP is approved, it will not be retrospective so we will have to negotiate separately with all of these private developments to purchase them.

How do you think we should deal with those Aurovilians who own land within the Master Plan area?

There are two categories. There are ancestral lands which are owned by a family, one member of whom is an Auroville resident. With these you negotiate, you try to exchange or purchase the land. But there are also those Aurovilians who purchase land in the Master Plan area to make private developments. This is clearly against the ideal and people who do this should not be given any executive job in any working group in Auroville.

Some of them would argue that if they don't buy land, particularly in the Green Belt where we don't own 80% of the land, others would buy it who have no relationship to Auroville, so in this way they are helping to protect the community. This also seems to be the thinking behind a proposed clause in the new Exit policy that allows Aurovilians to own private land in the Green Belt with the permission of the Secretary.

I don't agree at all with this clause. And do you think Aurovilians who have purchased land privately are ever going to give that land to Auroville? You are dreaming if you think that. The problem is that people have fear; they don't believe that Mother is here in Auroville, so they buy land to try to ensure their future. But tomorrow if there is a big financial crash, what is the value of this land?

Mother said we should buy the land but the villagers were also encouraged to donate land, presumably because of the feeling that they would be inspired by the ideal of Auroville. Is this still a possibility?

No one is going to give land to Auroville today. The local people know we are not yogis. We live an ordinary life, we are no better than anybody else.

So what is your prognosis? Are you optimistic or pessimistic about the possibility of us solving the present land problems?

I am optimistic, but this is based upon us making a change in the way we manage and purchase land, and upon us coming together to protect it. For me, the biggest danger for Auroville regarding securing the land is not the villagers or outside developers: it's us. We are not able to agree, to present a united front. At the moment, Aurovilians own land or are brokers and developers of land within the Green Belt for outsiders. If we had an agreement on a land policy, if we were a true example of human unity, we would be vibrant and strong and nobody could come into this area.

So while I am optimistic, we need help because we are in a very deep soup.

From an interview by Alan

A transformed eatery – the Aurelec cafeteria

When Aurelec first started back in the early 1980s, it had no catering facility, only a small kerosene stove on which the cleaning lady brewed tea and coffee for the pioneer staff working there. Lunch was taken at Fraternity's community kitchen, which one could easily reach in those days by walking across the completely open fields in the area now occupied by Kulapalayam's satellite village of Lakshmiapuram.

A year or two after completing the first proper building at the southern end of today's complex, a small 'kitchen' was set up in the room now occupied by Mira Computers' CEO, and meals were served under a shady neem tree at the back. It was all very relaxed and idyllic, but as computer sales took off and more staff were employed, there came an inevitable expansion, requiring more buildings and more sophisticated facilities. The Dining Hall was an early priority.

Aurelec's Dining Hall, alias Cafeteria, which has remained essentially unchanged structurally and functionally since its original inception in 1983, at its peak was catering to the needs of around 125 people a day (nearly 40,000 meals plus 80,000 tea-coffee-lemon juice servings a year). Staff had to eat in staggered sittings, with the R&D boffins opting to eat last, probably because of reluctance to tear themselves away from their beloved computer screens.

I say 125 people, but that didn't quite cover the total number of food consumers, because for a while there was also a mouse living in the kitchen. It would emerge sometimes in broad daylight, with everyone working around it, to snatch up items of fallen food and carry them back to its 'home' under the worktop cupboards. I can remember the first time I saw it, as it sallied forth, and exclaiming in shocked tones to the then cook, "Murthy, did you see THAT?", and getting the calm reply, "It's OK Tim, don't worry. Not a rat, just a mouse."

Birds also used to fly in to take a snack, until we screened off the windows. Then there were the geckos, flies and other creatures, plus the squirrels regularly nesting in the roof beams. At one point it was suggested the whole place be re-designated a wildlife park, but – like everywhere else in Auroville – Aurelec has become much more hygiene conscious since then, and it is no longer possible to spot the former range of unwanted life-forms; just the occasional fly.

Previously, the flies used to come inside in large numbers, bringing with them the risk of various diseases, simply because people failed to close the doors. To counter them an electric 'Pest-O-Flash' fly zapper was purchased, with a bluish-green light that supposedly lured them into a high

voltage discharge space, where with an ominous crackling sound they could be shot down in mid air. It had a tray at the bottom to hold the fallen corpses. However, it never proved very effective. The flies just loved it, flying in and out in a game somewhat like 'Russian roulette'. We still have the unit, or rather its successor, but it seems to be more for psychological reassurance of staff and guests than catching flies.

Today none of those old hygiene problems remain, having been long ago dealt with, and the Cafeteria meets all the criteria of Auroville's Health Services.

Talking of electrical equipment, some of the old-timers still recall the day they heard a piercing scream coming from the premises, and rushed over to find one of the kitchen ladies lying unconscious on the floor, having apparently electrocuted herself on a defective lead to the water cooler. "Is she dead?" was the tense enquiry. No-one seemed to know, so it was decided to take her to the Health Centre. At which point the corpse stirred slightly, and hope returned. The in-house journal's gentlemanly co-editor then strode forward and – unaided – lifted her off the floor and deposited her in the company Jeep. An hour later she was back, looking a bit groggy. Someone then jokingly suggested that the experience of being carried in a pair of 17-inch-bicep arms had probably done more to revitalise her than any doctor could have done. Maybe; but she wasn't seen near the water cooler for quite some time.

The staff in those days had to put up with an extraordinary variety of requests – plus occasional complaints – from all directions. Some people wanted tea at their workplace, some coffee, some lemon juice, some other beverages, and each of those variations came in two forms – with or without sugar. The serving staff were somehow expected to know the preference of each individual member of staff working in the compound. Put a cup of sweetened tea down in front of an 'unsweetened' addict, and all hell could break loose. Then to go with their drink some preferred a certain type of biscuit, some wanted savoury items or peanuts, and some clamoured for the occasional slice of cake. On top of this, people regularly failed to inform the kitchen that they would not be there at tea time, so the serving person was left confused as to whether to leave something or not.

In the Dining Hall it was much the same. You had the asbestos-stomached chilli addicts and the



Lunch at Aurelec

ulcer-fearing 'unspiced' brigade; the warm water drinkers and the semi-iced quaffers; the north Indian enthusiasts and the south Indians; the animal protein aficionados and the vegetarians; the onion lovers and the onion haters; etc. You could never please them all, which is why a good caterer has always had to be rather like a yogi, full of equanimity, calm, flexible and patient.

Now Aurelec as a separate computer manufacturing unit, operating independent of Auroville, is no more, and the "Kitchen/Dining Hall" of those days has become known as the "Cafeteria" under the management of Franz. Over the years he has overseen a considerable number of modifications and improvements to its operation, transforming it into a public eating place-cum-restaurant facility with both breakfast and lunch available every day, including Sundays, and has expanded the seating capacity to enable people to sit outside under a shady jackfruit tree, where they can admire an artistic ceramic tile mural featuring birds and jackfruits done specially by Ange for the Cafeteria, or sculptures by Henk, while at the same time enjoying a view of the gardens. He has also introduced art to the Cafeteria's interior, by transforming its walls into display spaces for paintings, drawings, posters, fabrics, etc, making it a gallery as well as an eatery,

and has introduced Wi-Fi for anyone wanting to quietly work there on their computers.

While today's kitchen/Dining Hall operation seems like a shadow of what it was back in the 1980s, the logistics are still quite impressive. In a typical year the 8 kitchen staff (5 men and 3 women) still have to prepare, cook and serve up over 2½ tonnes of rice, ¼ tonne of onions, 1½ tonnes of tomatoes, 5 tonnes of other vegetables, and 60,000 papadums, all cooked with around 1,000 litres of oil. That's a total of over 23,000 meals. Then there is the tea-coffee-lemon juice requirement, involving nearly 5,000 litres of milk, a tonne of sugar, 5,000 lemons, and the actual tea and coffee that makes up the 60,000+ annual servings.

Where does it all go? Well, forgetting the leftovers, let us just say that we don't notice anyone getting slimmer once they start eating there.

The Cafeteria also offers a full catering service beyond its walls, providing and serving specially ordered and cooked meals outside the premises, sometimes including non-vegetarian dishes. The staff also cater for special events in Auroville. As one of Auroville's lesser known eateries, if you are in the area I would say it is well worth a visit.

Tim

Serving those who serve the community: the Auroville lunch scheme

Lunch is an important element in any person's daily schedule and The Mother knew how time and energy consuming it could be to shop and cook a balanced meal for oneself. She wanted common dining facilities to be provided for the residents and this ideal has been translated partly into everyday reality.

The City Services Lunch Scheme began more than 10 years ago as a way of enlarging the in-kind maintenance system. It was developed to help those working in the services to supplement the monthly maintenance which was not enough to cover the basic needs of living and working here. Like the Pour Tous in-kind maintenance today, the lunch scheme can be availed by all Aurovilians and Newcomers who work at a service unit at least half a day daily.

Those in the Lunch Scheme can either eat lunch at one of dining areas in the scheme or take it away in a tiffin. It cannot be redeemed in any other way.

At present, the Solar Kitchen, PTDC, Aurelec, Right Path Cafeteria at Visitors Center, Solitude Farm, Well Café, Neem Tree, and Annan at Bharat Nivas are in the scheme and offer different menus to suit the palette of the multicultural population of Auroville. At the Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) the varied menu includes choices of vegan, dairy or egg dishes from around the world prepared by the team of multicultural chefs in the



The Neem Tree open air cafeteria

PTDC kitchen. The calzone on Saturdays and the sushi on Tuesdays are a given, according to one Aurovillian, who also confided that he would have liked to eat the buffet at Aurelec kitchen sometimes, but found the distance a hassle.

Since the PTDC team is not constant

(a volunteer chef could leave after a limited period of time) some dishes could suddenly vanish off the menu, like the Kimbap Korean platter loved by many, and equally exciting new dishes, like the current zucchini tempura, could arrive and become regulars. The soups are always fresh and tasty and

so is the choice of salads according to Christel, a newcomer who works at Marika's Nursing Home and at Upcycling. "Of course, the food on the lunch menu depends on what comes into the kitchen that morning", she says with a grin.

The popularity of the Solar Kitchen lunch has continued unabated due to its winning combination of taste, variety, and wholesomeness. In February and March this year the Dining Hall catered to approximately 1200 daily lunch consumers, out of which the lunch scheme members numbered 335. In recent years more and more Auroville restaurants have offered a varied menu for the 'lunch schemers'.

The Right Path Café caters mainly to tourists and this is the reason why only up to 40 people can be accommodated on the Lunch Scheme list here. The Lunch Scheme provides a choice of the Healthy Plate, the Mini Meal, and the Vegan Salad which, despite their austere names are sumptuous and delicious options drawn from European and Indian cuisines. Most dishes are prepared with organic vegetables and grains grown on the Auroville farms, which makes the price tag go up a notch.

The need to provide wholesome and tasty meals is, however a challenge at the budget price specified by the Lunch Scheme. Some restaurants specify that lunch schemers can only eat certain

continued on page 5

The Solar Kitchen journey

The Solar Kitchen opened in December 1997 and since then has been operating uninterruptedly under different managers. The first were Jaya and Shyama, who were joined shortly after by Andrea. After a few months, the task of organizing almost the whole kitchen fell upon her and she felt overwhelmed. So she asked Angelika to help her. Angelika started by doing the vegetable coordination, together with Sumathi from the Farm Group.

In 2002, for a variety of reasons, Andrea left the Solar Kitchen and Angelika, Thushitha and Gilles Guigan became executives. The decision to become an executive was not an easy decision for Angelika, who decided to have a conversation about it with Sri Aurobindo.

"I told him I did not come here for that, that I wanted to serve, to help provide Aurovilians with basic needs, but I was afraid that if I became an executive it would bring me into trouble. I received a very dry response: 'Don't take titles so seriously'. So I felt I had to do it..."

Since then, Angelika and Thushitha with the professional assistance of Mrs Vijayakumari, the accountant, have been organizing the entire work. This includes not only managing the large team of 27 employees and 19 Aurovilians but also purchasing and food acquisition, cooking, maintenance of machinery, finances, etc. In addition, the Solar Kitchen team is responsible for the running and maintenance of the entire infrastructure – including overhead and underground tanks, wastewater, waste disposal, etc. – of the Prosperity Compound in which the Solar Kitchen, La Terrace, Foodlink, Nandini, Freestore and PTDC are situated.

Originally, the Solar Kitchen was providing roughly 400 lunches a day between Monday and Saturday. Today it provides 1 100 meals a day, catering to a variety of tastes and supplying the schools, as well as those who come to eat in the Solar Kitchen or take away their meal in tiffins (see data box). The Auroville farms have also increased their production and particularly in January and February, the Kitchen receives plenty of fresh salads and other products from them.

In other words, today the Kitchen is running smoothly and is much appreciated by those who use it. It is fulfilling what Mother said: that large-scale collective kitchens were essential in Auroville because they save the residents time and energy spent in food preparation and cooking so that they can be devoted to other work.

But all this was not achieved without a struggle.

Angelika notes that it has been an ongoing learning process in regard to the general organization and specifically in how the team members relate to each other, to the work itself and to other Aurovilians. "After 18 years of working together a lot of experiences have been gathered, both good and bad, encouraging and frustrating. We know now fairly well what we can expect from each other and what not. Nevertheless, surprises are always possible..."

In the initial years, a lot of different dishes were tried out with often unhappy results. On one occasion, the Solar Kitchen team was very unhappy when a school sent back a delicious North-Indian style dhal. Today, after a long process of trial and error, the Kitchen has arrived at a menu which provides a choice for many different tastes – south Indian, Western, spiced, non-



The food counter at the Solar Kitchen

spiced, vegan, non-vegan, etc. While it is challenging to change people's eating habits, the team is encouraged to see some people experimenting with food they would not normally eat at home.

Angelika and Thushitha had always wanted Auroville to be self-sustaining in food, which is why they prioritised using Auroville farm produce in the kitchen. Another reason is the subtle quality of food grown on Auroville land, which is under the special grace of the Mother. After all Auroville is Her project and laboratory. The present fixed menu helps the farmers decide what they are going to grow, and when.

Yet there have been changes to the menu over the years. These were partly in response to requests but they were also responses to concerns about health. Today, many Aurovilians are diabetic or pre-diabetic, which means that one of the foods they need to avoid is white rice. So the kitchen introduced other varieties, like brown and red rice, as well as grains like varagu. For those who continue to prefer the white rice, they are serving a healthier, parboiled variety.

Health is also an issue for older members of the Kitchen team. They receive regular medical support from Auroville doctors and therapists, including annual check-ups and massage treatments in Quiet and Pitanga, something which is much appreciated by them.

Hygiene procedures have also been constantly upgraded with the help of different professionals, including Dr Ajith. He studied public hygiene and helped them introduce, in 2013/14, the new FSSAI Food Safety guidelines. He also helped create an exhaust system for the kitchen proper, which sucks out the oily cooking-steam and replaces it with fresh air during the cooking process. "Now, at last, you can go into the kitchen and breathe," says Angelika.

Of course, when people think of food being cooked in the solar kitchen, they think of it being cooked by the solar bowl rather than by a diesel boiler. However, the solar bowl only produces steam from 10 a.m. onwards on a sunny day, so while it continues to perform an important role in cooking and cleaning, the diesel boilers are necessary back-ups.

Actually, the famous solar bowl also had its difficulties.

Initially, the solar bowl heated a special liquid which circulated in pipes to cook the food. However, very soon the pipes started leaking and all the team members became sick from the poisonous fumes. So the system had to be changed into one where water is turned into the steam that does the cooking.

A lot of other equipment, like wet grinders, chopping machines, fridges and cool room as well as the steam cabinet and steam pipe system, need to be regularly cleaned and maintained. Every summer, when most of the team goes on their annual tour, the machines that require it are repaired and the kitchen surfaces repainted.

While the kitchen has kept well for 20 years, a full revamp would be good, says Angelika, including tiling everything white and replacing with stainless steel the cutting and preparation tables and the entire dishwashing area. However, this would require not only a lot of money but also a lot of time, and it's difficult to see how the kitchen could be closed for the three months or so that would be necessary.

But perhaps the biggest challenge the Solar Kitchen management has had to face was a financial one. The Solar Kitchen usually suggested an 8–10% increase annually in its budget to be able to meet the unpredictable vagaries of vegetable prices (a very heavy or a poor monsoon will send the prices sky-high for weeks). However, the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) would only allow an increase that was too little to cover such unpredictable expenses. Consequently, the Solar Kitchen account went into minus.

This happened for several years until the BCC agreed to the management's requested yearly increment. "This kind of happening has been a repeated experience with the ruling groups in Auroville," observes Angelika, "who, despite lack of expertise and detailed knowledge, have sometimes had an unhealthy eagerness to interfere in the Solar Kitchen's finances and internal processes".

In spite of all this, the team says they have always felt the constant guiding and supporting hand of The Mother. One material example of this was the spontaneous donation 15 years ago of 20 lakhs by a devotee of the Mother, Mrs Kokilaben, for a much needed, bigger boiler.

"Mother inspires every day my work in the Kitchen," concludes Angelika. "I have a core team with whom I can work well and this is very precious to me. Mother always said it doesn't matter what you do, what's important is the consciousness with which you are doing it. The Solar Kitchen has been a big lesson for me in developing this and I'm very grateful for being able to work here."

Alan

(Based upon a conversation and further inputs from Angelika)



Angelika and Thushitha

The Solar Kitchen

Provides 1,100 meals a day of which roughly 550 are for schools, 300 for the Dining Hall, 200 for tiffins and 50 for the SK staff.

Daily requirements: 50 kg white rice, 15 kg brown rice, 8 kg varagu, 120 kg potatoes, 30 kg tomatoes, 25 kg onions, 30 kg cucumber, 40 kg salad leaves, 40 nos coconut, 35 nos. cauliflower.

Rough monthly purchases from Auroville farms: 2 lakhs vegetables, 2 lakhs milk, half lakh rice/grains
Monthly turnover: 20 lakh rupees.

Serving those who serve the community: the Auroville lunch scheme



Serving lunch at the Pour Tous Distribution Centre

continued from page 4

items on the menu, while those restaurants that cannot absolutely manage within the budget ask the consumers on the lunch scheme to pay a little bit extra.

Another way to keep down costs is to use ingredients according to their seasonal supply. Non-commercial establishments like the Solar Kitchen and PTDC do this. If there is an excess of an item, they incorporate that in their menu for a

limited time. The Friday cottage cheese and vegetable sauce (paneer masala) appreciated by many students and teachers at Future school, for instance, appeared only on a few Fridays in the school year. "It is an expensive dish and we make it for special occasions only. But if we have excess milk we gladly offer the paneer dish," says Angelika, the Solar Kitchen executive. For her, choice and variation within the Solar Kitchen meal system are important; they cannot be sacrificed on the altar of cost.

While PTDC, Right Path Café at Visitors Center, and Solar Kitchen have a wider consumer base, smaller dining facilities such as the Neem Tree are increasing their lunch reach. Located centrally, behind the Auroville Library, the Neem Tree is about 2 years old and is proving popular, especially at breakfast and dinner.

The menu at Neem Tree is varied (mainly south and north Indian) and healthy. It is also affordable within the range of Rs 80 to 100, with customized smoothies and juices to

refresh taste buds. However, "at present we have only 8 people on our lunch scheme list," reports Harsha, the person-in-charge. "This could be because people are unaware of the fact that we offer it." The lack of a proper sun shade may also be a reason why not many people on the scheme eat their lunch there.

Hopefully, more Auroville restaurants and community dining areas will offer the Lunch Scheme as a way of providing support for those who are serving the community, so keeping alive The Mother's vision of providing community eating facilities for all residents, irrespective of their financial resources.

Abha Prakash



A rich food layout at PTDC

Horses in Auroville

From the pioneer days of Auroville's children travelling to school on horseback, Aurovilians have had a long affinity with ponies and horses. Today, there are close to 60, with the majority in Auroville's three communal equine facilities, but several also live in Greenbelt communities.

The conversation about horses in Auroville started even before the inauguration of the city, when Frederick, who was one of Auroville's first residents, wrote to The Mother to express his interest in bringing horses from the Madras Racecourse. The idea took hold and even Roger Anger embraced the concept of horseback and horse-powered transport, proposing to put facilities for the horses in the north-east section of Auroville, in present-day Fertile.

In 1970, the Madras Riding Club donated a retired racehorse named Betershine to Auroville. Francis brought him to Forecomers, where he would ride him along the canyons and down to the beach. "A man came with the first video camera that I ever saw and made a short video of Betershine and me to send to The Mother," Francis recalls. "She was delighted."

Then around 1976, recalls Janna, Frederick's sister, a group of early Aurovilians and children went to Tiruvannamalai during the Deepam Festival in November for the famous annual Horse and Cattle Market. The children selected two ponies and a small horse, which were brought back to Auroville on foot.

Auroville's spirited youth immediately took to these diminutive equines, easily adopting a natural riding style through trial and error with no equipment needed other than a length of rope. And in such a rural landscape, the children could keep their ponies under their keet huts and let them forage for the bulk of their nourishment. A unique connection of trust and familiarity grew

behind him, "And suddenly there was little red-haired Sukrit, going full blast in the middle of the night, letting the horse find its way through the dark."

A shift in structure

But concerns within the community about the welfare of the ponies, which were sometimes tethered outside the schools with limited access to food and water, as well as the departure of their riders as they grew older led to an increasing need to rethink and reorganize the care of these animals. So efforts were made to create communal facilities for the ponies and horses.

In 1988, Achilles began to gather up the "surplus" ponies and created Pony Farm for them in Kottakarai. Though at first he tried to limit the number of ponies he took on, the number swiftly mounted to 30. With school finishing at lunchtime, those children interested could spend the entire afternoon grooming, riding, and feeding the ponies. The option of riding at Pony Farm became a part of the Auroville sports programme, but Achilles firmly maintained that his students had to pursue riding of their own volition, and not just as a required class.

But whereas Pony Farm continued the saddle- and bridle-less approach to riding, others in the community wanted to practice classical styles of riding with the necessary equipment. Red Earth



PHOTO: DOMINIQUE DARR

Cooling down in the sea

A major undertaking

But the development of Auroville and its surroundings has brought new challenges.

The consistent knowledgeable care that horses need can pose an obstacle when more Aurovilians are travelling outside the community. In Red Earth and some of the at-home horse facilities, this has required the employment of hired workers. Horse feed, particularly oats, has increased in price along with everything else and Achilles calculates that for the amount he spent for 30 ponies in the past, he probably wouldn't be able to keep 10 today. However, now he is able to ask for a monthly contribution from all his riders, making the financial situation far less chaotic than it used to be. Ashwagandha takes the approach of dividing horse care responsibilities between its team members. Red Earth has offered free and subsidized lessons for Auroville riders, while charging riders from outside the community.

Safety has also presented a challenge. With many of the horses coming from the racecourse, Frederick notes they may exhibit either psychological or physical damage, and this must be skilfully and sensitively handled. Increasing traffic on the roads of Auroville has also made it more difficult for riders to safely ride around Auroville.

With the looming issue of water scarcity in Auroville, the water consumption of horses – both for drinking and for bathing – must be carefully addressed, particularly in the hot summer months. A widespread move toward pastures equipped with ponds and wastewater recycling for horse showers is needed.

A sustaining joy

But in spite of the mounting challenges associated with keeping horses, their numbers do not seem to be diminishing.

"You need energy for Auroville," explains Janna. "And horse riding gives me strength in the morning. It's very calming with good energy. I am always in a good mood around horses."

And, in the words of Achilles, horses are a means to "inner and outer balance."



Those were the days, galloping past the partially constructed Matrimandir

between the children and their ponies. The sandy soil that had proven so challenging for a bicycle was actually an ideal footing for the ponies. As interest took off, Janna was able to get a pony stallion in Pondicherry and an informal breeding programme started that created a whole line of Auroville-born ponies that still populate Auroville today. Many can trace their lineage back to Vishva, one of those original ponies from Tiruvannamalai.

Several adults also joined in. Janna, who had developed a passion for the equestrian sport with Frederick in post-war Germany, was joined by Tine as well as Karlheinz and Clementine, and they would explore the empty landscape of Auroville on horseback. Thoroughbreds started showing up in larger numbers, often sourced through Dr Karthikeyan, the former chief veterinarian of the Madras Racecourse who has helped foster the equestrian spirit in Auroville throughout the years. Bernard Borg, who started the community of Shamga, went so far as to set up a stud farm for the breeding of thoroughbreds, using his contacts at the Bangalore Racecourse. Equipped with formal stables and a sprinkler system, his green pastures and stately horses were quite a contrast to the surrounding barren red soil.

These early years were heady with romanticism. The children rode their ponies all over Auroville and beyond, unimpeded by fences or congested roads. From the Matrimandir construction site down to the Bay of Bengal, they had free range of the Auroville terrain and could gallop down the canyons fearlessly.

Frederick remembers riding his cycle one night when he heard the sound of hoof beats

Riding School was started by Jacqueline to offer new forms of equestrian sport, with classes in dressage and show jumping taught by Eric, Catalina, and Ann.

Lili, who had a horse in Auroville while growing up and learned at both Pony Farm and Red Earth, recalls, "Every afternoon, we had a safe place which was also a learning space. We were taking responsibility for the horses while still having immense amounts of freedom."

The current landscape

In recent years, the opportunities for riding in Auroville have become concentrated in three equestrian centres, which offer distinct experiences based upon their respective philosophies. (Dehashakti Sportsground also had a small horse programme run by Priam, but this has been closed down.)

Baraka was started in Fertile Windmill ten years ago when Achilles shifted the ponies there from Pony Farm. He has been joined in the endeavour by Mahi, who learned to ride as a child in Pony Farm and now does the bulk of the teaching. Whether riding in the ring or out on the forest trails of Auroville, students continue to ride bareback with halters. Fifteen horses currently live there, enabling 40 students to have weekly classes, though many more apply than can be accepted. On certain days of the week, therapeutic sessions are offered for disabled children. Members from the larger community can witness the close relationship between horses and riders during the annual Baraka Fair, a day-long event filled with horsemanship and riding

demonstrations.

Evergreen was first started in 1998 by Sara and Bettina, and later developed into a natural horsemanship school. The focus has been on the Parelli method of natural horsemanship, which employs a series of games based on equine psychology to establish clear communication between horse and human [See *Auroville Today* Issue No: 322, May 2016]. This year, the natural horsemanship school has shifted to Gaia, where it is closer to the schools and other sports activities. It has been renamed Ashwagandha, meaning 'essence of horse', and has already grown to 4 horses, 4 ponies, and 8 team members. Resolutely not a riding school, it aims to offer classes in natural horsemanship and equine-assisted learning and therapy to children and young adults in Auroville.

Red Earth Riding School greatly expanded after its move from Kottakarai to Brihaspathi Farm in 2002. Continuing to focus on classical riding, it also opened the door to more contacts with the equestrian community in India, particularly through the hosting of annual riding competitions where riders from all over South India participate. Today the riding school has 30 horses and ponies. It welcomes a mix of Auroville students and outside clients who learn from Red Earth's home-grown trainers like Kali and Cameron, with higher level dressage classes taught by Jacqueline.

Several Aurovilians have also continued to keep their horses at home, and each demonstrate their own distinct philosophy on horsemanship and riding. The stud farm in Shamga no longer exists, but Bernard's daughter Mirabelle continues the tradition of horses there. Tine has three horses in Aurogreen and over the years has trained two of the babies born to her mares, relying on classical German horse training manuals for guidance. Janna, now in her 80s, has consistently kept horses since her arrival in Auroville, and has developed a small dressage arena so that she doesn't have to ride out into the increasingly busy roads around Akashwa. And until recently, Edzard kept horses in Discipline, which he would ride bareback around Auroville.



Mahi teaching a class at Baraka

Cultivating unknowing

In 1896, Thomas Mann wrote a short story called *Disillusionment*. It tells of a young man brought up in a clergyman's family in which the 'pulpit rhetoric' makes him expect great things of life. However, he is constantly disappointed by what he encounters. "I went out into that supposedly so wonderful life, craving just one, one single experience which should correspond to my great expectations. God help me, I have never had it."

Disillusionment with life was a popular theme among writers of the late 19th century but often it was more of a pose than something deeply experienced. For the 20th century Existentialists, however, it was genuine and profound, deriving from their sense that we live in an absurd world, a world which has no larger meaning and where nothing has any more value than anything else.

So how do people continue to function when they live in a world that disappoints them, or which doesn't make sense?

The protagonist of Mann's short story resorts to gazing at the starry heavens at night, "that being the best way to turn my eyes away from earth and from life. And perhaps it may be pardoned in me that I still cling to my distant hopes?" For the existentialists, the only way to live 'authentically' in an 'absurd' world is to impose one's meaning upon it and live according to this. Yet another response to a world which constantly disappoints is the fatalistic hedonism of Peggy Lee's "Let's keep dancing":

If that's all there is my friends, then let's keep dancing

Let's break out the booze and have a ball

Sri Aurobindo and Mother agree that existence is not what we conventionally think it is. Mother was unequivocal. "All our old ways of understanding are WORTHLESS. All, all our values are WORTHLESS."

However, Sri Aurobindo and Mother offer a very different vision of reality from the pessimism of the existentialists and the 'disillusionists' because they affirm that there is an overall purpose, order, which involves a process of spiritual evolution. While this can be intellectually understood, it can only be experienced by accessing a higher level of consciousness than the one

in which we usually function.

And so the problem presents itself: until we access that level and contact the psychic, the inner guiding compass, how are we to function? For the awareness that all our old ways of understanding are worthless can be very debilitating. How can one plan or take even the smallest step with this awareness? How to continue to function, work and make decisions, when everything is shadowed by this uncertainty?

Of course, we don't lack signposts. Both Mother and Sri Aurobindo provide plenty of guidance regarding how to open ourselves to levels of consciousness that offer truer guidance than the mind. But many of us are still struggling at the lower levels and we are left wrestling with many pressing issues – like, to take topical examples, whether or not we should pursue a New Town Development Authority for Auroville, or how to choose members for our major working groups or decide upon the design of the remaining Matrimandir gardens – for which no specific guidance from our teachers exists.

What to do, then? One approach is to take everything much more lightly rather than welding ourselves to inflexible perspectives and attitudes: Mother's assertion that conventional understanding is 'worthless' should sound the death knell of any kind of dogma. However, this is easier said than done because the unenlightened mind craves certainty, neatly drawn lines and divisions.

Another way is to try to subvert this tendency by deliberately cultivating 'unknowing', a conscious acknowledgement that we do not understand the world around us. This is not easy when people are knocking at the door wanting immediate answers to a problem, or in a society where confidence is prized above uncertainty (when did you last hear a politician say "I don't know the answer"?). Yet the need for 'immediate' solutions is often overstated, and the embrace of unknowing can be a first step towards emptying ourselves of all the mental detritus we have accumulated, and of calling down the peace within which a new, truer guidance can emerge. (The idea that the ordinary mind is the bar to higher consciousness is a very old one, of course. The 14th century text, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, is a classic work on the topic in which the anonymous author states, "We cannot think our way to God".)

Of course, the precondition for this to happen is a profound faith that a higher guidance than our minds does exist, and a willingness to surrender to that guidance. Mother pointed out that the spiritual consciousness is much more efficient than our minds at dealing even with matter but this, as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, is the hardest thing particularly for Westerners with their Cartesian, deeply materialistic, minds to acknowledge.

Yet faith is not something we lack. The problem is we tend to have faith in the wrong things: in a particularly narrow view of reality, or in our minds as the ultimate explainers and judge of all things.

So how can we 'loosen' ourselves from our present 'knowing'? It could begin with us recognizing how far the continued existence of the Auroville experiment does not depend upon the Aurovilians or government support, important though this is, but upon larger forces far beyond our control and understanding. As Mother pointed out in 1969, *The city will be built by what is invisible to you. The men who have to act as instruments will do so despite themselves. They are only puppets in the hands of larger Forces.*

If we can admit our ignorance in matters like this, we can gradually extend these 'islands of unknowing' to more and more areas of our life. Finally, we may recognize that even the simplest action in this cosmic laboratory may be subject to forces and have consequences far beyond our ken. (Ruud Lohman once wrote that if we understood the true significance of what we are engaged in when we work at the Matrimandir, we "wouldn't dare pick up a nail".)

Once we have reached this degree of unknowing, if we can avoid hitting the panic button or falling into the slough of disillusionment or nihilism, we can try practising the quiet and confident surrender which is the precondition for receiving the 'Something Else' that can help us negotiate a truer path through the thickets and complexities of life here.

Of course, it's hard, very hard, to give up an entire way of thinking and understanding around which many of us have constructed our identity and our relationship to the world. But how much longer do we want to keep circling on the same old mental wheel?

Alan

Dear friends,

I am happy to read the 'Views on the International Zone' in a past issue. May I respond as one who has been part of the International Zone Group in Auroville since the early days... keep this 'window' open and let inputs come from round the globe!

The International Zone Group moved into the Bharat Nivas campus of this Zone some months back, where it now has its base. This enables us to work together and feel the pulse of world forces that are shaping the future.

We have just completed 50 years of the Auroville experience. We have gone through many phases of our searching for the contours of this Zone, in particular. They were necessary stepping stones in our process.

We now stand on a threshold – of which there have been many! – where the world ... in its accelerated pace forward... seems to have overtaken us. There are questions:

– Do we even sense the direction in which this movement of the world-forces is taking place?

– Do we reflect this movement in our work here? Are we in sync?

– Do we stand at a cross-road where a change of directional attitude is needed to be part of this 'flow' in which the world moves?

– There is a 'fluidity' of change which marks our times... can we lend ourselves to this process?

The Mother has said that nations should engage themselves in the 'building' of the International Zone of Auroville.

To remind ourselves of Her words: "I am speaking of the countries in CREATING something.... The point is a combined interest in building something based on the Truth."

Also, a few words from Mother about Auroville, which bear an urgent import on the threshold where we stand...

"It is the best chance men have to avoid a general conflict."

Dear editors, having opened this 'window' through the pages of the journal, may I request you to widen it further so as to make one continuum through which the dynamics of Auroville and world forces meet... to create our common future.

Warmly,

Aster

PASSINGS

Myriam Isaac

On the morning of 28 May, Myriam Françoise Marie Noelle Isaac left her body at the age of 76 due to cancer at her house in Sincerity, surrounded by her children.

Myriam, who was born in France but carried the Swiss nationality, arrived in 1970 at Aspiration at the age of 27 with her little son Pascal, now Gopal. She's one of those olden-days stalwarts of Auroville who has been always here, working in the background, totally dedicated to the Mother, in a quiet, modest and steady way. Starting off in Aspiration, she worked as a nurse with Dr Sen at the Auroville Health Center that was just starting off. She also was active as Auroville's midwife and delivered many of our babies at home to be later joined by Hilde. At the same time she was actively involved in Fraternity's activities with the villagers living there. By 1977 Myriam was living at the Matrimandir workers' camp, where she gave birth to little Prema. Three years later Kartik was born. Throughout the eighties she continued her involvement in various village related activities, participated in the community meetings and decisions of that time, and was one of the first ones to work in the Free Store at Bharat Nivas, where she also was active in the then Auroville Community Kitchen there.

Myriam took over the boutique from Claude while it was still at Bharat Nivas and then, since the very onset of the Visitors' Centre in 1991, she maintained the new Auroville Boutique at the VC from where most of us will remember her. Due to her conscientious and capable management, and deeply concerned care for her staff, she soon became executive, while also functioning as one of the trustees of Artisanat Trust.

Having remained at the viewing room for several days, Myriam's remains were buried at Auroville's burial grounds on the afternoon of Friday 31 May, with many old-timer friends, acquaintances and family members attending the quiet, serene and very Aurovilian moment of farewell.



Boris Mabilat



Boris with his son Silas

Boris Mabilat left his body in Paris on 12th. He was 45 years old.

Boris came to Auroville in 1975 at age of 1 with his parents Samata and Cristo. He founded the community Rêve where he had a mechanic workshop, taught many young people mechanics and in later years started Rêve Guest House. His son Silas was born in Auroville in 2002.

On New Year 2001/2002, a small conflict resulted into a big tragedy. Boris was wrongly accused alongside two young Aurovilians. All three had to leave the country on a Leave India notice in 2005.

Boris found refuge in Paris with his partner Marjorine and his son Silas.

In 2008, the High Court Chennai declared the 3 boys innocent. But Boris was able to return only once, in 2010, on a Tourist Visa. He attempted in later years to return to Auroville to visit his family but his visa was always refused without explanation. It was an irony of fate that when his return to India was finally approved at the highest level, Boris passed away.

Ursula Loose



Ursula Loose Tuschekwitz of Gratitude passed away on July 15th in the Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences PIMS at the age of 69. She had been suffering from a cancer (lymphoma) affecting her spine. After a short stay at PIMS, treatment in Chennai during March of this year could not prevent progression of paralysis of the legs and the cancer in her medical situation was not curable. She returned to PIMS, where additionally she got several minor strokes.

Ursula came from Germany in 2011 and having worked as accountant for a large German car maker, she was readily welcomed to look after financial matters here in Auroville, half time for City Services, half time for Varuna. Though she could be at times somewhat strict, friends and colleagues much appreciated her often quaint German use of the English language, her great sense of humour, goodwill and hard-working stance in life.

Ursula lived very simply in a small, completely open house in Gratitude. Cats were her great love in life: she was an internationally well-respected juror for pedigree cats and would once a year travel abroad to attend international cat shows.

As one of her doctors mentioned, Ursula was a model of a life-oriented and affirming patient in a tragic situation.

Ursula's remains were brought to the Farewell Centre where friends could bid her goodbye. The cremation took place at the Adventure burial and cremation grounds on Tuesday 16 July, where friends and colleagues honoured her with flowers and incense.

What has happened to our bonfires?

One of the most popular images of Auroville in the local press and social media is that of the bonfires in the Amphitheatre that are organized annually to celebrate Auroville's and Sri Aurobindo's birthdays. The iconic image that is beamed around India and abroad is of hundreds of people sitting around the fire in rapt attention, their faces illuminated by the flames while, in the background, a golden Matrimandir bur-nishes the pre-dawn darkness.

Yet many Aurovilians no longer attend these bonfires. Why?

One long-term Aurovilian provided an answer in a recent posting on Auronet. "Auroville's bonfires are becoming almost circus like another among so many Auroville events. The social aspect seems to have become the focal point. We need to change the atmosphere around the bonfires and bring that special energy back."

He was referring to the fact that the birth-day bonfires used to be an opportunity for community members to rededicate themselves individually and collectively to the ideals of Auroville and to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, and to receive their Force. When dawn broke and the bonfire died down, it was also a moment to re-experience a deep fraternity through quietly greeting friends who one may not have seen or talked to for months.

Today, however, many of the attendees are visitors who seem more concerned with having a good time, exchanging travellers' tales and taking photos to post on social media than with absorbing the special energy. As one of the respondents to the Auronet posting put it, "The bonfire is now seen as a kind of fun/party thing to do in the region – not unlike a beach rave in Goa or something. I'm always astonished by the random people I hardly know on Facebook posting about it and how it's the 'happening' place to be. I think we can all agree that's not what we want and we should do something to keep it under control..."

So what can be done?

One radical suggestion is to stop the bonfires altogether. As one Aurovilian put it, "I find the bonfire evokes a primitive feeling and does not enhance a silent and intense concentration the participants need. It is associated with jungle camps and parties in the popular mind and so may be attracting the wrong kind of people." Stopping the bonfires, however, does not receive much support.

Another suggestion is to return the bonfires to their earlier simplicity. In the early days the arrangements were much simpler, more spontaneous, as a few hundred people came together around a simple fire. Yet these were powerful experiences. As one of the early pioneers put it, "It has been confirmed by all who have had the experience that from the beginning of Auroville in those difficult-to-plan moments of gathering together in complete silence, all

falls away until what remains is again only that which is always present, obvious, true and shared."

Today, there's a feeling that the earlier simplicity has been lost. No doubt due to the pressure of numbers there is much more regulation regarding the timing and entry to the bonfires. Also, the bonfires have become more 'showy'. While the basic constituents, like the fire, recordings of Mother's voice, readings from Sri Aurobindo and meditative music remain, the flower arrangements around the urn have become larger and more elaborate and for some years the fire was arranged and burned in a 'designer' bowl.

Of course, the fact that far fewer people attended the early bonfires, and these were mainly Aurovilians, made it easier to sustain a certain atmosphere. One proposal, therefore, is to limit who can attend them now. "There needs to be some discernment regarding who can join such gatherings," wrote an Aurovilian. "There are people who very much tune with our life – those who share our inner aspirations and outer works – and they should be welcomed in special gatherings where we lit our aspirations high. But if day tourists and very casual first time visitors are kept

away, barring perhaps a few exceptions, and only those who are well associated with Auroville in some way or come with Aurovilians are given access, it will keep the purity of intention."

However, there are problems (in addition to the logistical challenges) with limiting attendance. One is that we do not all agree upon who should be allowed to attend. Some think it should only be Aurovilians and Newcomers, others argue that long-term volunteers, guests and Ashramites should also be included. Some would also welcome Auroville workers and people from the bioregion.

Which introduces another consideration. Who are the bonfires for? Just the residents? Or is it an opportunity for others to experience a very special moment which may change them forever? If this is the case, how can we exclude anybody who wishes to attend?

However, as one Aurovilian pointed out, if we change the atmosphere around the bonfires, this might help solve the problem because this would automatically attract the 'serious' people and deter others.

Many people agree that one of the main disturbances in the atmosphere is caused by the incessant flashes in the pre-dawn darkness of cameras and cell phones as people busily record the event. While the organizers have tried to control this by specifying only one location from where photos can be taken, this is routinely ignored.

One of the most popular suggestions, therefore, is to ban all cameras, cell phones and tablets from the bonfires not only to prevent visual distractions but also to make the bonfires less attractive for those who come simply to enjoy the 'theatre', hang out with friends and take selfies.

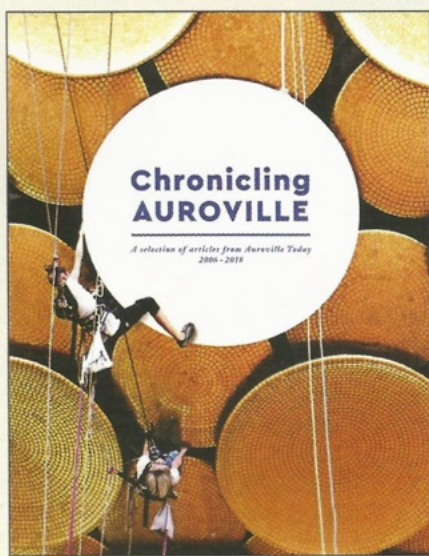
The plan is to try this for the next bonfire, on 15th August. It won't be easy to implement, which is why a small group has come together to discuss the practical details. They conclude that it needs to be widely publicised in the media and surrounding area, large posters need to be put up on the night itself, and provision made for those who turn up with cameras, cell phones and tablets to leave them outside the Amphitheatre. Additional volunteers would also be needed on the path to the Amphitheatre to maintain a concentrated silence and to ensure that the ban is observed.

Will it work? Who knows. But if nothing changes, it is likely that fewer and fewer Aurovilians will attend these occasions which once were so central to the community's spiritual year and its collective aspiration.

Alan



AUROVILLE TODAY



Chronicling Auroville – almost for free

On 15th August, 2018, we released *Chronicling Auroville*, a 290-pages anthology of articles from *Auroville Today* published between 2006 and 2018. This is the third and most comprehensive anthology *Auroville Today* has published. Not only do the articles and illustrations represent a rich chronicle of developments in the economy, arts, planning, education, outreach activities, etc., of Auroville over this period, but some articles written a decade ago remain as relevant today as they were back then. *Chronicling Auroville* gives a taste of the challenges, frustrations and joys of trying to live the future in a community that, in its longevity and diversity, is unique in the world.

On the occasion of Sri Aurobindo's birthday, August 15, 2019, we would like to gift a free copy to each of our subscribers. Those interested are requested to send an email to avtoday@auroville.org.in. We only request a contribution towards the packing and mailing charges, which is in India Rs. 100, and abroad Rs 800 equivalent. Payment can be effected in the same way as the subscription (see below).

Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 issues :

India: Print + digital edition: Rs. 600
Other countries: Print + digital edition: Rs 3,000 equivalent
Other countries digital only edition: Rs 2,100 equivalent.

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

There are three ways to subscribe:

1. Through our website.

Subscriptions can be ordered and paid on-line through www.auroville.org/avtoday and auroville.com. On-line subscriptions have additional unit charges and bank costs.

2. By sending your contribution directly to Auroville Today.

Cheques sent directly to Auroville Today should be made payable to Auroville Unity Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques. Please do not send money orders or cash.

3. By sending your contribution to:

U.K.: Auroville International U.K., c/o John Mulrey, 7 Cubb Field, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP19 7SJ tel. (44) (0)1296 415685 email: john@aviuk.org

Germany: Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49) (0)30-42803150, Fax (49) (0)30-92091376, email: info@auroville.de. GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS, IBAN: DE 1643 0609 6780 1938 9200.

USA: Make checks payable to Auroville International USA, and send to:

AVI USA, P.O. Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818, Tel: (831) 425-5620, email: info@aviusa.org, or to: Pondicherry, 12 Tinker St, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: 845-679-2926, email: info@pondi.biz

The Netherlands and Belgium: Auroville International Nederland, Koninginneweg 129, 1211 AP Hilversum. Email: secretaris@auroville.nu Tel. 0031 (0) 6 4807 8595. Triodos Bank nr 1984.20.927, IBAN NL26TRIO 0198 4209 27, BIC: TRIONL2U

Editorial team:

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

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.