

# Auroville Today

AUGUST 2009, No.246

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

## Introducing Sri Aurobindo

A year ago we published an interview with Peter Heehs and a book review of his newly-published biography, *The Lives of Sri Aurobindo*. Since then the book has generated enormous controversy within the Aurobindonian community. Some people regard it as ground-breaking; others believe that it demeans Sri Aurobindo. The controversy has become so heated that civil and criminal cases have been lodged against the author.

One of the important issues thrown up by the controversy concerns how to introduce Sri Aurobindo to those with no background in the yoga or spirituality. Some people suggest that the attempt should not be made, arguing that if an individual is ready he or she will discover Sri Aurobindo for themselves. Others believe it is valid to create some kind of bridge to Sri Aurobindo's work for those who might otherwise not come upon it or not want to read it.

But what would that bridge look like? Would it be devotional, uncritical, allowing nothing which disturbs the impression of a smooth, inevitable, unfolding of avatarhood? Or is there a place for a biography which places Sri Aurobindo in the mundane world, which is willing to document his struggles and failures along with his enormous achievements? Which might not take for granted everything that his devotees take as articles of faith?

Where does the line run between over-simplification and providing greater accessibility to Sri Aurobindo and his work? Is it legitimate, for example, to downplay the occult dimension of his work if the biography is intended to introduce those sceptical of such matters to the richness of his thought? Can he be presented as a man rather than an Avatar? Can he be questioned?

We asked a number of people to reflect upon these questions. They come from different cultural backgrounds but all have a deep knowledge of Sri Aurobindo's works and all have been involved, at some time or another, in writing books or editing magazines which introduce him to a wider world.

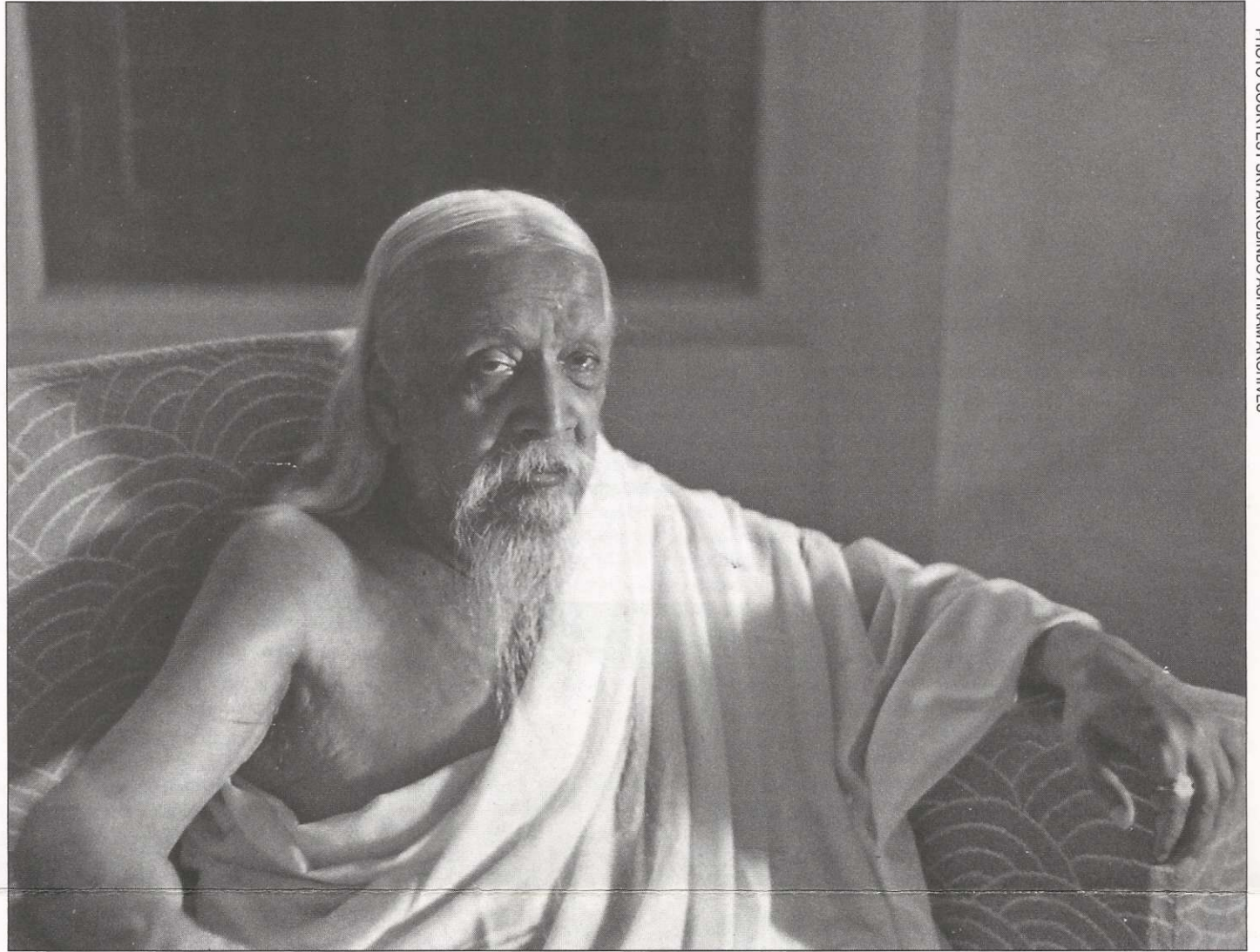


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### Writing as a student: Georges van Vrekhem

How does one write about Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*? "It's a complex issue," says Georges Van Vrekhem, author of six books on Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*. "The first question an author has to ask himself is if he has anything original or worthwhile to write about. There is so much rehash of themes one can find better in the works of Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother* themselves.

"Another question is: from what perspective does one write? Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother* are my life, and more than my life. If I am here, it is because I have been brought here by Them. So I write as a student of Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*. My study is an endless journey of exploration, going from discovery to discovery. It is a constant dialogue with Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*'s words, and with the interesting and knowledgeable people who are the authors of the other books I read. Particularly reading Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*, I can never know something definitively, for the next page or book may open a quite new, unexpected view, even when I have read the passage many times before. What I write is what I believe I see and know at the moment of writing. Everybody is welcome to have a different opinion and to correct me if I have been wrong.

"A third question is: what kind of public does one want to address? The public one has in mind will determine the choice and arrangement of the subject matter, and the tone one adopts. Most of my books are written for people interested in Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother*, for Aurobindians, although I am amazed that *Beyond Man* and other books of mine have spread far outside that circle.

"Actually it has taken many years before some people, who knew me from the time of my

arrival in the Ashram and later in Auroville, accepted that a fellow like me might have something worth writing. I have been hurt by the fanatical attitude of a group of Aurovilians who treated me like a leper because they disagreed with a few phrases or sentences in *Beyond Man*. Likewise, I was hurt because *Overman* is not for sale in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram as there seem to be objections against the term 'overman'. I cannot understand how somebody who prides himself or herself on being a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and *The Mother* can become a fanatic and insult or hurt others who see things differently. An Aurobindian should have the largest encompassing mind in the world, while being in his yoga one-pointed and totally surrendered."

Georges reflects a moment. "It has been said and written that I am not a historian. It has never been my intention to be a historian in the sense of a person who studies past events and personalities from a materialistic, positivist, academic standpoint. Anything connected even from afar with the paranormal, with spirituality or mysticism – or other matters many academics have never tasted – is automatically blackballed by them. Then how can a historian of this kind have any understanding of what thousands of years of Eastern tradition, research and experience represent? How can he approach great historical beings like the *Rishis*, Krishna, Vyasa, the Buddha, Meister Eckhart, or the countless anonymous realized beings who have concentrated their lifelong effort on reaching and exploring a higher, greater life?

How can his mind be open to the evolutionary vision of Sri Aurobindo? "Can a positivist academic convince another positivist academic of things spiritual? I would say 'yes' in the exceptional circumstance that such a positivist academic

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### The path of moderation: Sachidananda Mohanty

How shall we introduce Sri Aurobindo to a wider audience? There is a dividing line between persuasion and proselytization. I take it that it is the former we have in mind when we think of building bridges with the 'outside' world. I would say that our approach to the question would depend on our mental, emotional and spiritual make up, our upbringing and our *Samskara*, and finally, our location in a given community or communities.

For nearly three decades, I have functioned in the academic world. In the Indian University system where I work, I find myself constantly assailed by the 'secular' position. Some call it 'secular fundamentalism'. It finds allusions to the 'spiritual' anathema. The alternative that informs our mainstream social life is religiosity. Could there be an approach to Sri Aurobindo that would convince the 'secular' camp on its own terms?

In my book *Sri Aurobindo: A Contemporary Reader*, I have explored such a 'secular' possibility. The conceptual frame work, the selection of the texts of Sri Aurobindo, my own introduction to the book as well as the prologues to the various sections, consciously eschewed references to the occult or the mystical while speaking of the contemporary relevance of Sri Aurobindo.

I may have had a measure of success. I do not know. But was I aware of my blind spots and the limitation? It was only when I saw the reviews of my book including the one in *Auroville Today* that I realized that my 'secular' reading of Sri Aurobindo was weaker by not having a section dealing with the occult and mystical writings of Sri Aurobindo.

Each writer brings to bear on his/her work a set of contextual factors and 'baggage'. I had brought mine. I was educated in the (Sri

Aurobindo) Ashram school for over nine years. I have enjoyed the trust of the Ashram authorities and the elders. For my book I was given copyright permission in 2007. It was trust, plain and simple!

How would I respond to such a trust? The generosity truly humbled me. Consequently, I chose and weighed each of my words, each expression that I used in my book with care. I meditated over all that Sri Aurobindo had said of His life and that of *The Mother*. I knew I could not be a biographer of Sri Aurobindo in the conventional sense of the term. I realized that the enigma of Avatarhood and the mystery of the divine Grace were frankly beyond me. I had found no 'intellectual' framework to judge the 'mystical' or 'spiritual' experience that Sri Aurobindo spoke of, no anchor to fathom these depths. I must approach such concepts, I thought, with care and caution when I attempt to explicate them in intellectual terms. Where I do not understand, I must remain silent, hoping to learn in future.

I do not think my critical approach to Sri Aurobindo is incompatible with reverence for the Master. In fact, the two go hand in hand. I believe the best of 'intellectual' approaches are born out of a deep meditative state. I believe such an approach ought to be based on a basic modesty, and the realization that intellectual formulations are limited, by definition.

Are there limits, a *Laxman Rekha* that I should not cross in my expositions? I believe there are! Such self-imposed restrictions arise on account of my understanding of the Indian spiritual tradition which reveres the realized Being and does not discuss the intimate aspects of His/Her life in the public domain. Is this an 'Indian' approach? I do not know. Despite the advent of 'modernity' in India, we

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## Georges van Vrekhem

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has a living soul, perhaps without being aware of it. This is why one should always be cautious about condemning things with which one does not agree, for the Force may use them in ways our mind cannot foresee. But on the whole I think trying to convince academics in an academic way is a vain exercise, because their 'mental formations' are fixed. Changing their mind would mean changing their career and their whole life.

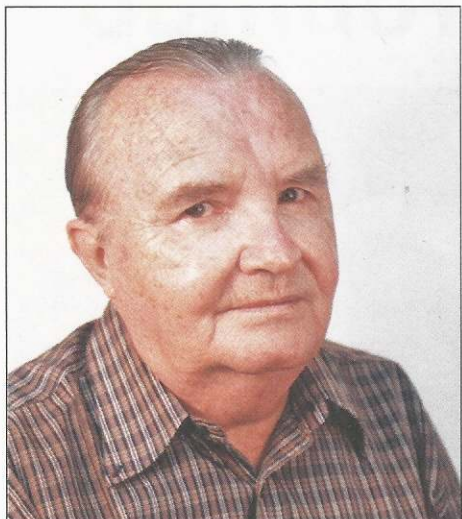


PHOTO COURTESY GEORGES VAN VREKHEM

Georges van Vrekhem

"To me a fact is a fact. And I am grateful for the biographical information which has been gathered about the lives of Sri Aurobindo and The

Mother. Now Sri Aurobindo would no longer have to write a book to contradict the false rumours about him. But scientists and philosophers also tell you that facts are only understandable in a context. How could I write about the external, physical lives of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, and leave the reality inside and behind out of the question? Does writing about that 'real reality' make me a 'hagiographer'? There is a line between mindless adulation and a search for the truth, taking reality into account on its various levels.

"Sri Aurobindo called his own method 'spiritual realism'. Matter, the vital and the mind, as well as the spiritual levels and the supermind, are realities. If there are people who prefer to remain stuck in the one-dimensionality of matter – Wilber's 'flatland' – that is their choice. I try to write for intelligent people as an intelligent, dedicated student. My subject is the vision and realization of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. I have experienced certain aspects proving the existence of the spiritual worlds, and I find in Sri Aurobindo and The Mother a coherent philosophy which explains it all to me, and a guidance which allows me to put it into practice to the extent of my limited capacities. People on the same frequency, knowingly or instinctively, may read my writings if they have the time and the inclination. If not, they should read or do something else, in agreement with the need of their soul."

*In conversation with Carel*

(Georges van Vrekhem is the author of many books on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. He was awarded the Sri Aurobindo Puraskar 2006 for his writings on Sri Aurobindo and The Mother by the Government of West Bengal.)

On the question of how a spiritual person relates to others, it is meaningless to ask whether bridges should be built. We exchange ideas, feelings, and our very substance with people every hour. What matters is whether those bridges are made of the tensile steel of inner truth, or the tissue paper of superficial platitudes. Most conversations don't use trademarked yoga terminology, nor do they need to involve esoteric occult references; but if we have a connection to spiritual reality, our networks with others are suffused with yoga.

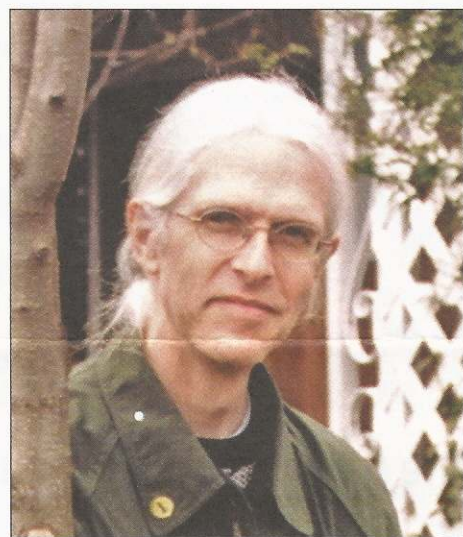
No two people are identical in their grasp of language, capacity for thought, or degree of inner realization. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother knew this, and their works varied depending on the audience. (For example, *The Record* is overflowing with obscure Sanskrit, but his major works are entirely in English.) The meaning of yoga is discussed in different terms with a three year old, a professor of philosophy, or a Tibetan Buddhist monk. Language is a tool; as with any art or profession, one uses the right tool in the right situation. Writing is a matter of voice. There is a voice for children's tales, one for poetry, one for devotion, and yet another for historical biography.

Limiting discussion of yoga to insiders means that we don't have the courage of our convictions, or flexibility in expression. Speaking of yoga is not the same as proselytizing; one can refer to Sri Aurobindo or Integral Yoga without naming either one. Discussing a topic in common terms requires real understanding. It is easy to fall asleep while intoning the familiar terms such as *supramental* or *cellular* or *gnosis*. If you want a truly difficult task, try explaining yoga to a five-year-old!

When we interact with people, we are forced to come out of theological strongholds, into the fresh open air, and then must apply yoga to the details of our beautifully diverse world. We won't understand yoga unless we grapple with it in practice. How does a true yogin act in relation to flame wars, political maneuvering, authoritarianism? Until we apply yoga to the actual situations we encounter, we will settle for comfortable truisms, the hypocrisy of the pulpit, with its inert and impotent abstractions.

If you don't examine your own inclinations, your views will remain unconscious, inherited from culture and childhood. Then yoga becomes a matter of unexamined clichés. Questioning is not skepticism, as Sri Aurobindo himself knew; it is a matter of looking deeply, discriminating, and coming to one's own conclusions. Know yourself first; then you can know others.

A person engaged in a serious endeavor asks a hundred questions a day. Wrestling with Sri Aurobindo gives him the greatest respect, by taking his life, yoga, and ideas seriously. We respect him because he questioned accepted wisdom and found deeper meaning, not because



Dave

he could quote the *Vedas* or the *Gita*. If one must blindly accept what Sri Aurobindo wrote, then Integral Yoga has become a religion, with the inevitable fixed doctrines. *Shraddha*, faith, is an active power that illuminates and transforms, not a passive acceptance of scripture. If you accept easy, obvious notions, nod your head with a solemn "Because he said so..." then you treat Integral Yoga as less important than knowing how to boil an egg.

Every person is a complex reality, and Sri Aurobindo represents an immeasurably greater and more multifaceted whole. Is he a teacher, husband, revolutionary, friend, yogi, Indian, Englishman, Avatar, writer, healer, principal, university professor, occultist, guru, polyglot, dramatist, philosopher, poet? Yes.

Understanding a life requires knowledge of details, as well as a grasp of the essence. Did Sri Aurobindo eat meat? How did he approach marriage? What kind of lecturer was he? Arjuna's question is as relevant as it was two thousand years ago: How do we recognize the enlightened person? What does that life look like? Understanding how Sri Aurobindo lived gives depth and meaning to his writings, and vice versa. *Bande Mataram*, *Essays on the Gita*, and even *Savitri* make more sense in context. Knowing his life helps to understand how his yoga changed, evolved, and grew over time.

Deep reverence for a transformative figure like Sri Aurobindo is fully compatible with knowing details of his life, just as deep love for a child is compatible with knowing that she likes oatmeal for breakfast. It is natural to want to know where Sri Aurobindo spent his childhood, when he learned languages, how he meditated. Did he make mistakes? What bothered him? Who were his friends and enemies? If the life of the Avatar is to have any meaning, it means the coming forth of the divine through an actual person, in all its messy complexity. The divine is emerging in each

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India, seem to remain firm in our attitude towards our parents, for instance. I do not know if this is an East-West divide. I should imagine this is how things are seen in our country. Every writer, while being original, shows sensitivity to a culture and its life values, especially those that have sustained him/her.

I am aware that a dominant trend in the publishing industry today is to debunk received wisdom for market considerations. For every view point, there has to be a counter view to make the issue look 'balanced' and 'complicated'. There may be nothing objectionable in this methodology.

I too have adhered to the academic format. But only up to a point! And I have had no regrets! This is a subjective decision every exponent of Sri Aurobindo has to make. I have made mine. I am clear, however, that I shall not push myself beyond a point in order to find acceptance to a certain forum or audience.

I realized that although not an Ashramite, I was still an 'insider' and therefore had greater responsibilities as an author. Before publication, I welcomed feedback from readers and critics and incorporated all the changes carefully.

I had earlier edited three books dealing with the vision of Sri Aurobindo. These volumes were structured around the lives and works of three Sadhaks: Kishor Gandhi, Madhusudhan Reddy and Amal Kiran. In a sense, these books were less challenging. The volumes were primarily meant for devotees. The present volume

is for an academic, 'secular' audience in the outside world.

I think I have moved on. I do not know how far I have succeeded in my efforts. But I am happy I chose a middle path, the path of moderation.



PHOTO COURTESY SACHIDANANDA MOHANTY

Sachidananda Mohanty

(Sachidananda Mohanty is Professor and Head, Department of English, University of Hyderabad. Winner of several awards, national and international, he has published widely in English and in Oriya. His latest publication is: *Sri Aurobindo: A Contemporary Reader*, New Delhi: Routledge India, 2008; reprint.2009)

of us, not just the Avatar. If we worship the myth, we have Krishna in Brindavan, not Sri Aurobindo in Pondicherry.

We also need to grapple with specific events in the unfolding of Integral Yoga – such as the current censorship of Sri Aurobindo's biography. None of this takes place in a vacuum: individuals, communities, and institutions have deep and often hidden roots. The sources of this discord include Indian nationalism, past efforts towards literalism in relation to editions of *Savitri*, and proposals for censorship on an email list. To imagine that a part is separate from the whole is the basic error in life.

It is quite possible for a sectarian faction of Integral Yoga to develop. If that happens, the rest of religion will soon follow, with mandatory household icons, fixed scriptures, and cultural rules. Astonishingly, we have already heard a call for burning books in the name of Sri Aurobindo. But in truth Sri Aurobindo embodies the wide-

ness of consciousness, not the narrowness of religion. Doorways to Sri Aurobindo – the man and the Avatar – can be found in unexpected and non-traditional places, including a scholarly biography. The force of his yoga is at work everywhere, and can't be defined by petition, lawsuit, or decree.

David Hutchinson

(D. Hutchinson lives in Sacramento, California. He has hosted two AUM conferences (1998, 2008), moderated numerous online discussions, published articles on and summaries of Sri Aurobindo's major works, given talks, and edited the journal *Collaboration*. He has served as president of the Sri Aurobindo Association. For the last ten years he has administered thirty separate *Aurobindo.org* listserv discussions, working directly with Integral Yoga organizations in the US, abroad, and in Auroville. He has moderated weekly yoga discussion groups almost continuously since 1982. He is an organizer of the September 2009 San Francisco conference, titled "Fundamentalism and the Future".)

## The Mother Selected photos

**When The Mother left her physical body in 1973, she left behind a number of treasures: Her teachings, the concept of Auroville, the Matrimandir are some of the visible ones. There are others, invisible, but no less significant.**

**One of those treasures is the collection of 12,000 photos of Her. Depending on how open we are, these may enable us to catch some of the vibrations which She carried and expressed. They may open for us a window into a world different from the world projected by our present state of mind.**

**The book *The Mother – Selected Photos* presents 250 black and white photos of Her in a rather unusual manner; there is no chronology in the selection of the pictures, nor is there a selection according to themes or any other system. The mind is left open in its contemplation of the vibration that is radiated by The Mother's physical appearance.**

**The editors had the courage to refrain from touching up the pictures of repairing them, as they found that with every correction the forceful expression of the pictures was diminishing, and the pictures were losing their strength and depth. The book therefore presents wherever possible original, untouched photos, whatever the defects they might have. Even some pictures with low resolution or which are on the dark side have found their way into this book, for they offer an originality that carries a strong vibration.**

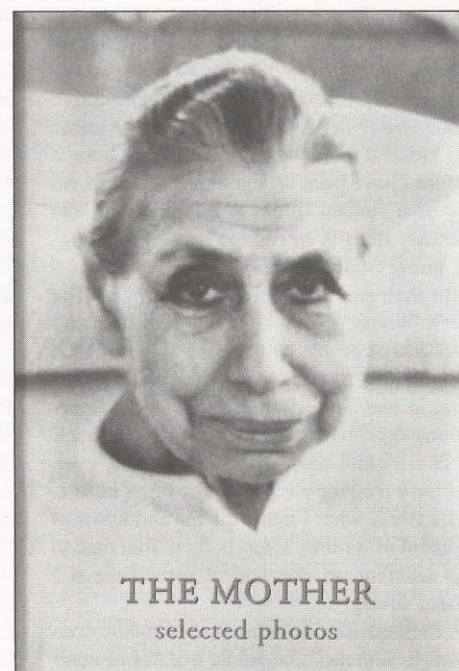
**Herman Hesse once said, "It is not important what a book contains. It is important what the reader can extract from it." This holds true for this book more than for any other. All depends on one's capacity to find that special dimension which is behind the pictures.**

***The Mother – Selected Photos***

**Compiled by Tara Jauhar; Published by Sri Aurobindo Ashram Delhi Branch**

**266 pages; Price Rs 1,600**

**Available from SABDA <mail@sabda.in> and Online at [www.auroville.com](http://www.auroville.com)**





# "We cannot help writing about His life": Manoj Das

How to introduce Sri Aurobindo to those with no background in Yoga or spirituality? Alas, billions in the world have no interest in Yoga and spirituality. They are absorbed in seeking happiness in their own ways, probably in the wrong ways for the most part, as we may feel. But I know that I cannot do anything about it, first because the quest for something sublime had not been awakened in them and second because I do not have the *adhikara* or the psychic right to correct their ways.

Yet we may feel that there are many among them who are truly seeking the way – the true way that would make them satisfied in life – the way to truth, if I may so put it, and out of our goodwill for them we may feel the urge to share with them the truth we have been fortunate to find. Well, what is it that I will feel inspired to tell them, that would inspire them in turn? It is Sri Aurobindo's vision of the future of man, his assurance that despite the complex crisis through which humanity is passing today, there is the certainty of a different tomorrow, a transformed humanity in terms of evolution.

I will invite such conscious or unconscious seekers to the essence of the Life Divine as envisioned by Sri Aurobindo, to participate in the process through a synthesis of various principles of Yoga as presented by him and, to minds that are intellectually-oriented, to the knowledge of human development through the ages so convincingly explained by Sri Aurobindo in his socio-psychological works, such as *The Human Cycle* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*.

For me, this alone could be the motivating force behind any urge to introduce Sri Aurobindo to others. Once introduced, the seeker's inner resources would guide him or her, depending on his or her sincerity and psychological need, to continue in the mighty adventure of consciousness that the endeavours of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother represent. He or she may even reach the stage of tasting the nectar that is *Savitri*.

How relevant is the life of Sri Aurobindo to His vision?

Mankind being what it is, once introduced to the vision of Sri Aurobindo, some people may become curious about his physical and historical life. Traditional education has taught us to follow the examples of the great, in which case the examples imply their concrete and palpable achievements. These may include conquest of a mountain or country; victory in a battle, or a great discovery or invention. There is a basic difference between such heroes and those who work in the realms of consciousness. Any

noteworthy changes in individual or collective consciousness are not brought about by conquerors and discoverers of the former category, though their achievements could have helped humanity in different ways. The explorers of the invisible realms of consciousness – we call them the mystics – alone are responsible for the rapid enlightenment of individuals who follow their clue, or the slow growth of the collectivity that has come a long way from the primeval chaos to forming a United Nations or participating in an experiment like Auroville.

When we are curious about the physical life of mystics – something they consider superficial – we may play havoc with our little knowledge. Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa used to compare those who tried to gauge the profundity of spiritual truth through their puny intellect with a doll made of salt entering the ocean to measure its depth. The irony is that, in spite of that warning,



Manoj Das

people have done exactly that to the Paramahansa himself! The salt-dolls may, of course, be under the sweet illusion that they had survived the ocean.

We all know that Sri Aurobindo's life was rich with events and involvements, voluntary or otherwise, that would fill up volumes of interesting biographies. But it is also known to all of us what he told one of his earliest would-be biographers – that there was nothing on the surface of his life which could justify writing a biography. Obviously what he thought to be the real purpose, works and achievements of his life were matters that remained beneath the surface.

But I realise that we cannot help writing about his life. I have not been able to restrain myself from doing it in a small way. But a would-be biographer must ask himself, will a narration of bare physical facts necessarily lead to our spreading or explaining his vision? The answer is bound to be No. Nothing will help spread or explain his vision except what he himself had said about it or what The Mother has said on the subject.

Even then, if we must delve into the factual aspects of his life, we have to answer one unavoidable question: Do I believe that there are extraordinary beings who from age to age become inexplicably available to the average humanity? If I believe this to be so, then there can be some justification for an author scanning the external events of such an extraordinary life – I mean extraordinary spiritually and not in any social sense. Then the author will see that the external facts are spontaneously falling into the right slots, leading to the realization that he was extraordinary even in his outward life. However, if the external facts are recorded without this belief, without the *shraddha* this belief is bound to cultivate, if recorded with a mixed motive on the part of the author – a motive, say, to be acknowledged as an academic, a sensible rationalist, the facts will lend themselves to serve his purpose but that purpose will be a far cry from introducing the vision of Sri Aurobindo to the world.

Once incarnated as human the Avatar, too, plays, sleeps and snores, suffers from flu and fever. These are facts that can titillate us or console us by showing the Avatar's proximity to us. But that does not serve the expected purpose; rather it creates a mist between the seeker or the aspirant on the one hand and the vision of the Avatar on the other, just as it has always happened on the lesser planes. For example, in Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, Cassius succeeds in confusing Brutus with his casually thrown-out suggestion that since Caesar once failed to swim across the river Tiber and cried like a baby girl when suffering from fever in his youth, he could not be fit to rule Rome!

Manoj Das

(Manoj Das was born in Orissa and joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1963, where he teaches English literature and the works of Sri Aurobindo. He is probably the foremost bi-lingual writer in the country, with about forty books in English and an equal number of books in his mother tongue. He has received numerous awards including India's national award for creative writing – the Sahitya Akademi Award. In 2001 the President conferred upon him the Padma Shri.)

## ORGANIZATION

The process started last year when the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) – a group of four people appointed to oversee the process of decision making of the RA – invited all those with an interest in the topic to sit together to discuss possible ways to form the next WC and AVC (the term of office of the serving WC and AVC members was to expire on 1st April).

This process led to extensive job descriptions for each team. It was also accepted that at least a few of the future WC and AVC members should serve full-time, instead, as at present, only part-time. But agreement on the selection process could not be reached. Some favoured a continuation of the present WC; others proposed that the next teams would be selected by former members of the WC and AVC from a list of people nominated by the Auroville residents; a third group proposed a different selection and nomination process.

The three proposals were put before the Residents' Assembly in February. The proposal that the next teams would be selected by former members of the WC and AVC received most votes, the proposal that the present teams would continue for another 2 years came second, but none of the proposals obtained the required majority of 50% of the votes cast to stand approved.

After some discussion, it was agreed to initiate the process which received the most votes. Members of former WCs and AVCs were requested to select one member from their group to serve as members of the Selection Committee (SC). Meanwhile the community was invited to nominate people for the next WC and AVC, taking into account their availability as full- or

## A challenging process

On June 22nd a new Working Committee (WC) and Auroville Council (AVC) took office, after a sometimes controversial process which lasted more than 6 months.

part-time members and their suitability for the job corresponding to the job descriptions.

The Selection Committee chosen had twice as many men as women and was diverse in terms of age, nationality, background and point of view. It originally had 13 members, but as some left or went out of station, the final decision was made by 9 members.

The community response was overwhelming: the lists of nominees for the AVC and WC contained more than 400 names. They included the qualities of character and job skills that each person was nominated for. The list intentionally did not include the number of times person had been nominated, in order to avoid problems associated with a system of voting.

The SC reported regularly about the progress of its work in the News and Notes, and produced an extensive final report. It mentioned that initially it split up into three groups to independently prepare lists. "When the three groups met, they discovered to their surprise that there was not one name that was chosen by all three groups for either the AVC or WC. This was quite a profound experience because many of us have the idea that some people are just so obviously cut out for this work that everybody would choose them. It was then that the SC realized how well they represented the diversity of Auroville, and that if they could eventually agree on 16 names, they would probably come as close as it's possible to getting the membership that many sections of the community would feel

comfortable with, even though they might not be anyone's ideal group."

A long list of candidates for the WC was agreed by everybody and they were each contacted. Most of them refused to serve. The SC then decided to try to choose the Auroville Council. This went very smoothly and soon nine people, five women and four men, agreed to serve. It was less easy to agree on names for the WC but the SC found people that they agreed had the qualities and skills for the work.

"Besides the qualities and skills required, other possible parameters were also discussed: gender balance, nationality balance, age balance, continuity with the previous groups, number of years residing in Auroville. Although there was a lot of support for the idea of selecting a majority of women for both groups, it was finally decided not to use any parameter other than the capacities and qualities of character of the candidates, and their demonstrated dedication to the ideals that Auroville aspires to manifest."

The SC concluded, "The process, although complex, has been harmonious and the final decision has been made by consensus. The Selection Committee considers that all the Aurovilians who have been selected for the AVC and WC meet the high criteria needed in order to serve in these two working groups. All are competent and dedicated Aurovilians, and we are confident that they will do the work with integrity and skill."

After publishing the names on the AVNet and in the News and Notes, there

was a 2-week feedback period. Sixty one people gave feedback. Only 11 were negative about the process followed and 12 asked for continuity of members from the previous WC. After considering the feedback carefully, the Selection Committee announced that the people selected by it would serve as the next WC and AVC for a 2-year period.

The objections, though rejected by the SC, deserve to be studied. One objection dealt with the SC's decision to make its decisions by consensus, as this process allows one person to block the rest. The SC was aware of the problem but defended its decision as being "closer to the spirit of Auroville than voting."

Another objection was that the SC had not specified which qualities a person had for being appointed as a member of the AVC and WC, even though each community member had been asked to specify such qualities for each nominee. The SC explained that "adding a skill label to each proposed member would be somewhat artificial," and that the skills of communication, organisation, knowledge and vision were available within each team.

Another issue was the question of continuity: 125 votes had been cast in favour of continuity in February, yet the SC did not reappoint even one member of the former WC and AVC. The SC explained that at first they disagreed among themselves. "Later this issue lost its sharpness and everyone was ready to nominate Aurovilians who were on the previous WC and AVC if an agreement was found on the names. However the SC failed to reach such an agreement."

The objections raised give food for thought. While many people feel that the Selection Committee did a good job, the question remains: can we evolve a better system?

Carel

## In brief

### Maintaining the Matrimandir

The Matrimandir executives issued an appeal to all Aurovilians to consider in which way each can contribute towards the maintenance of the Matrimandir. This can take the form of service, of financial or in kind contributions of any size, according to each one's means and capacity. The Matrimandir will continue to require financial support and manpower in order to maintain its structure, gardens and environment.

### Passing

John Lucksted of Auroville's Farm Group was found dead on the morning of the 4th July in his house in Udumbu. It seems that a chronic severe lung problem caused internal bleeding leading to his demise. He was 64 years old. John was cremated in Auroville and his ashes will be taken to his family in the U.K. John, a British national, came to Auroville in 2001. From the beginning he was involved in gardening and farming. Recently he was instrumental in the setting up of Foodlink, a well-functioning link between the farms and Auroville consumers. We shall miss his quiet, unobtrusive and always friendly presence, and remember him with deep respect.

### Living Routes

The spring semester programme of the 21 students from 'Living Routes' USA has ended. The programme incorporated sustainable practice, community building, voluntary work, and body, mind, spirit exploration. The programme also challenged the participants to expand out of 'structured and patterned trains of thought', and stretch personal limits in order to grow and evolve. The organizers evaluated the students' experience as 'life changing'.

### Unskilled Aurovilians

*Connections*, the Auroville service that helps Aurovilians who are out of work to find a suitable job, has drawn attention to the problem of employing unskilled Aurovilians with little formal education who now find themselves in competition with paid workers. *Connections* asks all services and units to contact it when looking for unqualified workers, stating that "we cannot keep Aurovilians unemployed as this is not in harmony with the ideals of Auroville and the spirit of brotherhood".

### Unsteward lands

The Land and Resource Management team proposes to safeguard many unsteward lands in Auroville from encroachment. Those lands need to be fenced-off and have land steward as temporary caretaker. "To let the grass grow there invites encroachment," states LRM. "Stewardship would constitute the best way of safeguarding Auroville's unused land until a permanent stewardship or use has been established".

### Farm walk

Buddha Garden, the 12-acre sustainable organic farm and education centre, plans to create a Farm Walk with marked paths and updatable information boards at strategic places to provide visitors with information about what is happening on the farm. In the process they would learn about approaches to sustainable food growing and why these techniques are so important. The paths will be accessible for wheelchairs.



## Keeping it rolling...

The contrast could not have been greater. On one side of the dirt track which leads from Certitude to Matrimandir, an industrial road-building operation was underway: earth-movers and rollers were manoeuvring tons of granite chips into rigidly-controlled curves. On the other side of the track, outside the Solar Kitchen, small groups of young enthusiasts were constructing playful shapes out of low-cost materials.

It seemed like two different Aurovilles – the big-scale, bureaucratic, controlled one versus the human-scale, intuitive, somewhat anarchic one.

But, in fact, the enthusiasts working outside the Solar Kitchen were not Aurovilians at all. They were young people from all over India who had joined a four week workshop designed to make Auroville a more cycle-friendly place.

The workshop was the latest in a series of initiatives and events which suggest that cycling in Auroville is at last emerging from being perceived as a fringe, slightly lunatic activity to becoming a genuine transportation alternative. The new wave began gathering pace a few years ago when high-quality western mountain bikes became available in Pondicherry and Chandresh began converting conven-



*The path, the bicycle and the cyclist all are one...*

ILLUSTRATION BY ORIAN

tional cycles to electric cycles (the 'QTs'). This was followed by the publication, on AVnet, of a well-received study by Karl-Heinz Posch, an Austrian traffic-planner, who wrote that cycling should be promoted as the most important transportation form if Auroville is not to be devastated by the internal combustion engine. Among his suggestions was that the cycle path network should be extended as quickly as possible. This actually became possible in March this year when six lakhs of government money was unexpectedly made available for such a project.

The 'Bicycle-friendly Area Design Workshop' which was held in Auroville from 18th May – 17th June brought together 16 young professionals and graduates in architecture and graphic and product design. There were two main objectives. One was to explore a collaborative, multi-disciplinary, user-centred design process. The other was to demonstrate some low-cost, practical ideas for creating a more cycle-friendly environment.

During the first week the participants gathered information. They interviewed cyclists and observed cycle usage. Above all, they cycled themselves – everywhere – in the hottest month of the year.

The second week was spent identifying the obstacles to making cycling more pleasurable and coming up with possible solutions. This was done collaboratively: Auroville mentors took turns to run sessions on different aspects and participants worked together to gen-

erate ideas. These ideas were then narrowed down in the light of existing constraints – a limited budget, limited time and the skills available. Eight different projects were finally identified, and the participants split up into teams to begin the work of materialising them.

At the end of the second week, each team presented their project to the whole community. The resulting feedback was incorporated in the detailing of the designs. After one more community feedback session, in the final week the participants materialised the designs in a true hands-on experience. The final products included innovative cycle parking structures, a barrier to prevent motorised transport using cycle paths, a cycle path lighting scheme, a rest area, a design for junctions where motorised roads and cycle paths meet, cycle accessories and a cycling map of Auroville.

All of these were demonstrated outside the Solar Kitchen on the final day of the course and most remain in place to be used by cyclists using the Solar Kitchen.

The feedback from Aurovilians was very positive. Although some of the projects still need refining – the barrier in its present form effectively bars not only motorcycles but also some cycles from using the cycle path! – many of them have been adopted by Auroville units to take to the next stage of production.

Above all, it was the collaborative spirit of the workshop which enthused both participants and Aurovilians. "I'd never worked like this before, I wouldn't have thought it possible we could create so much in so short a time," said a participant. "It's woken up Auroville to a whole new way of working," said an Aurovilian. "It shows what can happen when people drop their personal agendas and work for a common goal."

"Now we have to take this forward," said another. "It's up to us to keep this rolling."

Alan

## "The collaboration was remarkable"

**Raghu and Chandresh coordinated the workshop. What was their intention and does it open up new possibilities for Auroville's development?**

*How did this workshop come about?*

**Chandresh:** Two years back a group of us, including Raghu, began meeting together to talk about what Auroville urgently needs to do to take the next step in its community and infrastructural development. One idea was to use expertise from outside to help solve Auroville problems.

**Raghu:** In terms of Auroville's development, the key issue at present is the shortage of people with the required skill sets. That's why we have to look outside. So the idea was to get people from outside to work with Auroville experts and to channelise all these energies into something tangible, useful. We decided to begin with a workshop on improving the cycling environment as this seemed doable in the short-term.

As we wanted to try out a collaborative model of problem-solving and we didn't want to work with too many unknown factors, we restricted participation to people from India. We also decided to draw our participants from postgraduate students and young working professionals.

At our first introductory session I explained the basic principles of the workshop. Firstly, nobody would own any of the ideas: everything would be collective, Open Source, available for anybody to use. Secondly, the workshop would run on a goodwill basis. There would be no workshop fee and no corporate sponsors. Instead, everybody would offer what they could in a spirit of goodwill.

*Why should such a workshop be attractive to professionals from outside?*

**Raghu:** I worked in the Research and Design industry for 25 years and when you work in industry your scope is limited to what your company is interested in: all the time you are thinking within a particular box. So professionals are always looking for opportunities to think in different ways; to be in environments where new ideas are generated that they can take back and implement them in their own field.

Innovation happens when you connect the 'wrong' people at the right time. A lawyer or a doctor in a design team sparks off innovation. Put ten designers together and nothing new comes out. This is why we put together participants from different disciplines and why we allowed, for example, architects to work on non-architectural projects. This way they discover new fields, new approaches.

Secondly, Auroville itself is very interesting to these people because it's very much hands-on. In one month they got a tremendous learning experience which they would never have got in a university or a company because not only were they generating ideas but they also had to construct them on the ground. This meant managing their own budget, learning how to use the materials, supervising workers etc. It was the whole cycle, an integral experience.

*The first week of the workshop was spent collecting information about cycling in Auroville. What were the most interesting findings?*

**Raghu:** It emerged that most of the cyclists on our roads are local people commuting to work. The next biggest group is guests. The smallest segment is Aurovilians who cycle for pleasure, lifestyle or health reasons.



Raghu (left) and Chandresh

**Chandresh:** We noticed that the villagers always carry something on their cycles – tiffin bags, wood etc. – and that some of the loads are large and unwieldy. They don't complain, they are used to it, but we wanted to see if we could do something for them as well as for the Aurovilians who cycle. Some of the Aurovilian cyclists complained of being treated like second-class citizens: they feel everything here is designed for motorcycles and cars. For example, at the Town Hall there is no dedicated parking for cyclists.

**Raghu:** In the focus group interview, the Aurovilian cyclists said they wanted the cycle paths to have a certain character. They didn't want them paved or fantastically lit but to be made of natural materials and unobtrusive. They also wanted them to run through nature, away from the noise and dust of motorised traffic. There were also concerns about places where cycle paths cross motorised roads, as accidents happen here.

*Did the workshop receive much support from Auroville?*

**Raghu:** The support was tremendous. Firstly, of course, we had the Auroville mentors who gave freely of their time and expertise. Then various Aurovilians or groups sponsored different things.

Ulli sponsored our use of the Multi Media Centre, SAIIR sponsored the participants' lodging and lunches, L'Avenir covered the cost of prototypes, Living Routes offered their cycles, the Road Service sent across their mechanical digger to speed up some digging work. In fact, I've never seen this level of collaboration anywhere before. Nobody said 'no' to us.

And then, of course, there were the open sessions with the community. Here Aurovilians gave feedback on the participants' ideas – this was crucial as the whole process was user-centred – but they also

said it was great to see so many people working together with such a young and inspiring dynamic. I think this meant more to the participants than anything else.

*What about the collaboration between the participants?*

**Raghu:** That was also remarkable. None of the participants knew each other before arriving here, but by the end of the second week everybody had a very good working relationship and they could work together in any combination. Then again, it was truly collective thinking: it was impossible to say which idea came from which person. Later, when they split into groups to materialise different projects, they continued to move from project to project, helping each other. Nobody felt possessive about a particular project.

*In terms of moving Auroville towards being a cycle city, none of these projects is likely to be a key lever. What do you think that lever could be?*

**Chandresh:** I've been thinking about this for many years. I believe that if you can provide a cycle which is maintained centrally then people will switch from motorised transport. Today it's a hassle to maintain a cycle. If you could pick up a cycle,

go to the next place and drop it off and not have to worry about maintaining it, I think many more people would choose to cycle. If you mix in some electric cycles that would also be good, but the cost is too high at present.

**Raghu:** We need action at three levels to make Auroville more of a bicycle city. Firstly, there is the community systems level which Chandresh is talking about. Secondly, there is the need to improve the physical environment for cyclists, which is something we addressed a little bit in the workshop. Thirdly, there is the need to change attitudes and values. At some point it has to become 'cool' to cycle so that if you're on a motorised vehicle people you'll feel uncomfortable. It's much tougher to change attitudes. It can happen but it will take time.

Again, if in the city planning process priority is given to non-motorised vehicles that will definitely make a huge difference.

*What is the significance of this workshop for Auroville's future development?*

**Chandresh:** The collaborative aspect is very important: not just the participants but many of the Aurovilian mentors were working together for the first time. If they can keep working together and draw in more and more Aurovilians to work on different projects, we can develop much faster.

**Raghu:** So far development in Auroville has happened in 'islands', lots of individuals doing their own thing. We are nowhere near critical mass yet so this working in isolation is normal and natural. But as Auroville grows we have to work on the next phase, which is 'clustering'. Here you can still have your own responsibility or 'brand', but now you work together with others so you can handle much larger and more complex projects. This is the only way we are going to be able to build Auroville and I think this workshop has provided a model of how we can take that next step.

In terms of enhancing the cycling environment, quite a few of the products can go into the next stage of development. The cycle map definitely will go into production and some of the accessories are very interesting. It's worth mentioning that we began and ended the workshop with a zero budget and that we made all the prototypes for less than one lakh rupees.

*If this workshop is a pilot project for community infrastructure projects, what might be the next area to focus upon?*

**Chandresh:** 90% of the city still has to be built, there's so much to do. But I think the next important area we could explore in this way is low-cost housing.

**Raghu:** Actually, the opportunities are endless. The main thing is we should be prepared to welcome people from outside to work with us in solving our problems. At present I think it's the only way to go. When we have 10,000 people living here, when we have some kind of critical mass, it will be a very different situation.

(From an interview by Alan)



## In their own words...

### REST AREA

"Using recycled waste materials like broken *jallies* and cement rings, we created a rest area under a tree where cyclists can sit, meet friends and even enjoy the sounds of a wind-chime." - Deepti

### BARRIER

"We came up with a barrier to prevent motorised transport using cycle paths. Gillian had already done a few designs, including a horizontal beam with a notch in it allowing only cycle tyres to pass through. But motorcyclists could easily ride over this and some cyclists found the gap too narrow. So we raised the height of the barrier and made it

more of a feature, and we provided a funnel approach which allows cyclists to align their wheels." - Silky

### ACCESSORIES

"We wanted to design accessories to help both Aurovilians and villagers. We designed pannier bags

which can carry 5-6 kilos in each bag and which, when they are folded, act as a cushion for a passenger. We wanted something which would give employment to the villagers and could be mass-manufactured by them." - Vidya

### JUNCTIONS

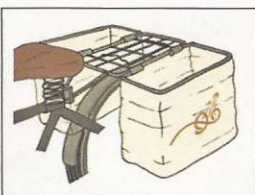
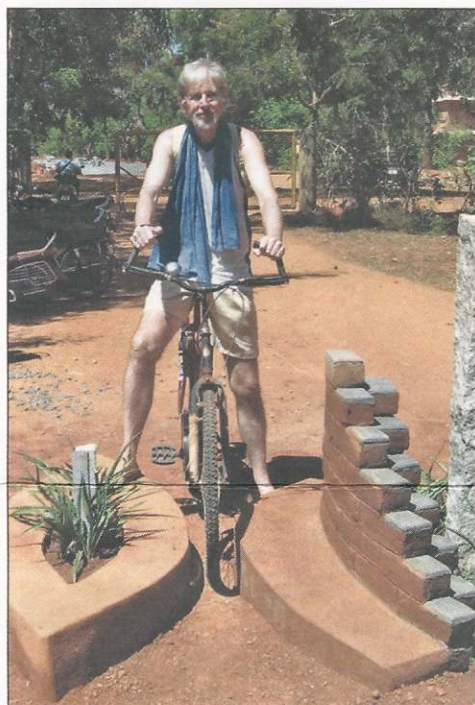
"We used rammed earth mixed with sand and cement for the cycle path surface. Where the path crosses a motorised road, we raised the path so that it acts as a speed-breaker on the road. At junctions we also incorporated granite pieces in the surface to give a different texture and warn people they are approaching a junction." - Mukta

### LIGHTING

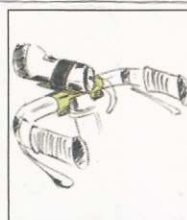
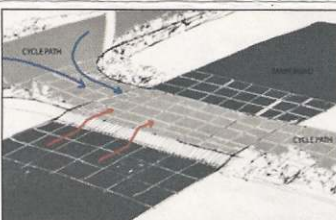
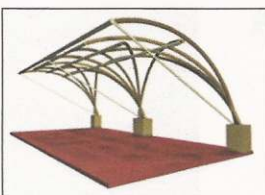
"We devised a system where a sensor switches on path-directed LED lights when a cyclist passes by. The power will come from the solar panels and batteries which power street lights." - Akshay



The *Slinky*: "We didn't want to tell anybody how you should park - we didn't want to do the linear thing - but to make it something playful." - Kums.



Clockwise from above: Pannier bags; concept for cycle shed in bamboo; carrying hook; universal torch-holder; junction of rammed earth and granite; barrier against motorcycles.



Workshop participants with their Auroville mentors

**Priyanka:** We'll never forget this place. It has a different aura to it.

**Akshay:** I've never before worked on a project where we mixed and matched the teams and where we had to materialise the designs ourselves. It was a great experience.

**Anshu:** I think when cyclists see us doing this for them, it makes them feel a little special: they are not used to this treatment in Auroville.

**Supratim:** Once you let go of your ego barriers everybody becomes much more creative. It's been a great learning and we've all grown a lot as individuals.

**Kums:** Normally when you work on a design you become possessive of it, you don't want to change it. Here, because it was nobody's idea, everybody felt free to change and improve it so that, at the end, we got something we couldn't have got working on our own.



Section of cycle map: "The standard Auroville map is too complex. So we made a simplified map for cyclists, listing only things guests would need to know about and using a circular grid. We named the major cycle paths after trees and the junctions after flowers." - Nash

## "It must be the year of the cycle paths"

Gillian was one of those who pioneered the construction of cycle paths in Auroville and she continues to be the coordinator for their maintenance and development. How does she assess the present situation? Is there more support and facilities for cyclists in Auroville today? And what could make Auroville more of a cycle city?

**Auroville Today: When did you first get involved with cycle paths?**

Around twenty years ago, when the motorised traffic was becoming too much for people who cycled, a group of us got together and started the first cycle paths. Then the others dropped out so for many years I worked alone, with people lending a hand now and then, usually when there was a path they really wanted to see happen.

For many years we didn't get any official funding - it was all private donations. Our first big donation was from the Gateway project: we got Rs 50,000 [approximately 1,000 US dollars]. Later we received a regular budget from Auroville for maintaining the existing cycle paths, but as it was only Rs 1,000 a month it was very difficult to do much.

Then, in March this year, L'Avenir asked me if I could build six lakhs [12,500 US dollars] worth of cycle paths in two weeks! It was government money for development and, after exploring other options, they had suddenly thought of cycle paths. To me it felt like the time spirit was opening the door. So I said, "Of course", and I used the money to develop and fence over three kilometres of new paths.

When we started making cycle paths twenty years back, we didn't want them to be beside motorised roads because of the noise and dust, but there was no alternative then. However, the new generation of cycle paths we've made are all deep in the forest and provide a very different experience of cycling through nature, something we've been aiming at for years.

I'm hopeful we can keep up the momentum. It must be the year of the cycle paths as there has been so much focus on them. L'Avenir has indicated there is more funding for their development and maintenance to enlarge and consolidate the network.

**Why has it taken so long to get community support for cycle paths? Are we talking about a clash of different cultures here, different approaches to developing Auroville?**

Yes. We've always had these two things going on in Auroville - the linear approach which uses big money, big machines and would like to ignore existing developments, and the other approach which runs on goodwill and voluntary cooperation and usually very little funding. The two approaches have clashed at times over the years but now I think there's a coming together. People are beginning to realise that we can collaborate.

**What was the importance of the recent workshop for you?**

Those young people - Young India - brought in so much that would never have been generated by us. We provided the infrastructure, the knowledge and the support, like a chalice into which they could pour their enthusiasm, imagination and skill. They were fabulous. I really feel this will be one of the ways that Auroville will be built because Aurovilians need this kind of stimulus.

**What about the products the participants came up with? Do you see yourself using any of them on the cycle path network?**

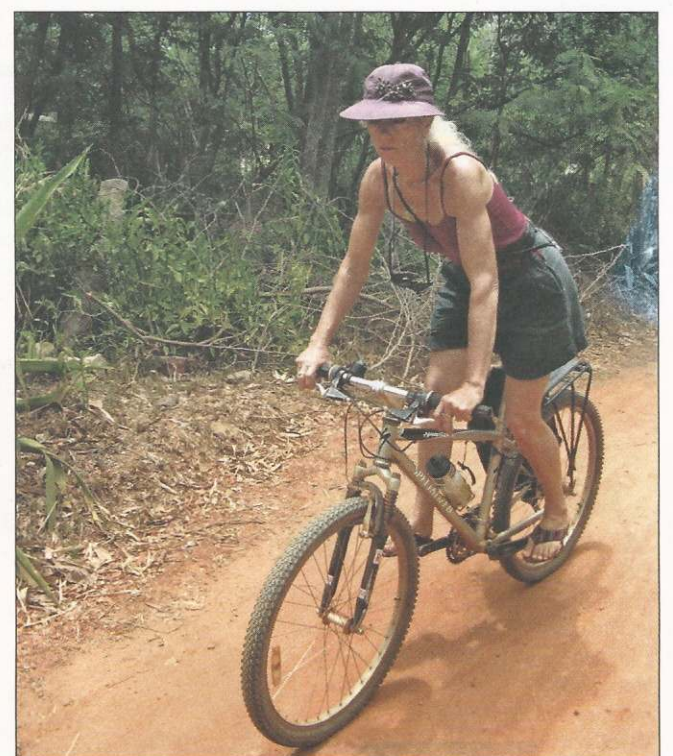
The raised road crossing idea is great. Now road crossings are not marked which makes them potentially dangerous for visitors. For their benefit these safety zones need to be developed. When they are built there will be a sign on the road either side of the crossing to alert motorists they are approaching a crossing and must slow down.

The 'Slinky', the bike parking sculpture, is another great and functional design which I would love to see in other places around Auroville.

**What do you see as the key lever that will get people off their motorcycles and on to cycles in Auroville?**

I think beautiful, shaded, off-road and well-connected cycle paths would do it. If they are not only sweeter but faster why wouldn't more people use them? It would also be good to have an outpost of Kaniappan's repair workshop at the Solar Kitchen to fix simple things like punctures. We could also collect information about which bikes to buy and publish it on AVNet.

However, people seem ready for change only when conditions force them to change. Maybe when petrol is too costly and harder to get? This has happened already all over the world where more and more people are cycling on vast networks of cycle paths developed over the past few years.



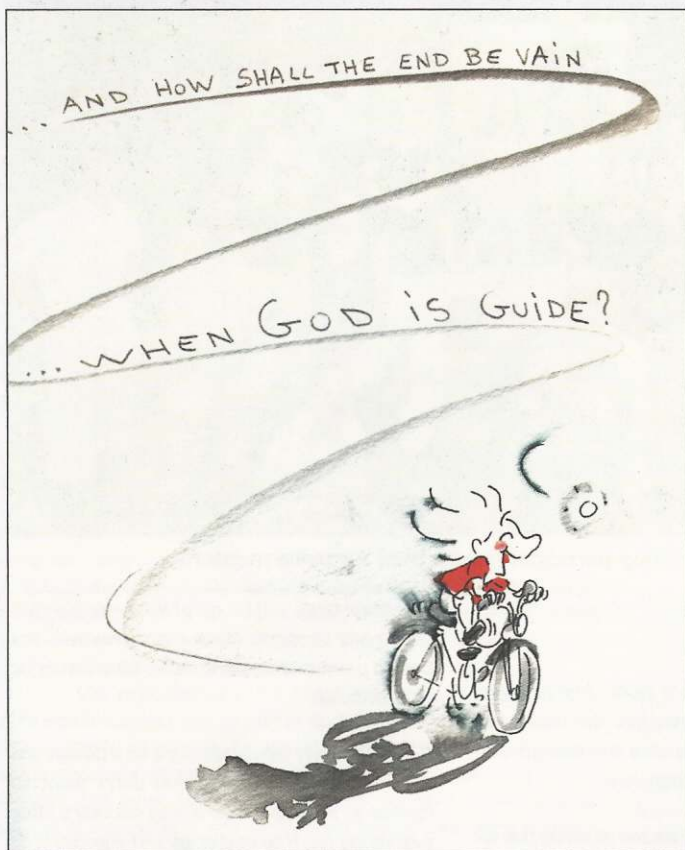
Gillian

Not everyone is going to cycle and I don't think everybody needs to. What is more important is that people are showing more awareness. This is demonstrated by the enthusiastic response in Auroville to electric cycles and electric motorcycles.

Finally, it's all about goodwill. There's always a lot of goodwill among cyclists - they have to adjust to overhanging branches, tree roots and other cyclists on less than perfect paths. Auroville is all about goodwill, about making things work. That's why I'm optimistic about our cycling future.

(From an interview by Alan)





CARTOON BY LEE

## Cycle Path Psychopath

So? Just because I scrambled off my bicycle and screamed at a lorry-asura as it rumbled down the main Auroville road, monopolizing the middle, spewing a fog of black waste, blasting its shrill triumphant victory song, and scattering us small animals in its wake. The driver and his flock of friends were perched high up in the cabin, barely noticing my howl of outrage.

So. I wound up in the white room with the pillars and a voice whispering, "Yoga. You're here to do yoga: that means equanimity not road rage, *shanti* not animosity. You're at the bottom of the transportation food chain. This is about your survival."

So. Then I began my personal journey, my Yoga of Cycling. I began to stay away from the main road speedway and take the forest road, past the women's college and on into the green belt where peace generally prevailed (though dust fouled my chain), and I had the space to deal with the dark thoughts that possessed my brain.

Yes, dark. Mostly dark about motorbikes. Too much like mine. Two wheels, handlebars, spokes, but much much faster than me. I knew that I had piston-envy and I tried to fight it. When they crackled up behind me in the forest, my yogic calm was oh so severely tested. "It's the cool season," I would think, "biking is easy. It's a plateau of flat roads, short distances... it's... it's..." Just breathe, count my breaths.

But sometimes I'd have to take the speedway and face the buzzing herd of motorbikes, the impassive faces flashing by, intent on the next stop. A friend's motorbike might go by just as the driver recognized me, but when I slowed and looked around he was already down the road, going too fast to stop.

But on the back road one could think a little. Like about the motorcycle gangs. OK, maybe not gangs, but all the local guys who had bikes. You could see them parked together, sitting on the bikes, stroking their chrome, caressing their cell phones. Ah, just like the 50's in the USA, only better. Teenagers liberated to cruise the country, independent, free. Once I saw a small group of them off the greenbelt road under a tree, their bikes parked protectively around them, passing around a bottle.

Or this: A famous tale about the Buddha has him asking a grief-stricken woman with a dead child to search through all the houses in the city and find one where death had not been. So it seems to be with motorbike accidents-find a house where no one has the accident scars and stories.

So? The old rage boils up when I glide soundlessly into somewhere with a sea of motorbikes gleaming in the sun. "Sell them all," I scream soundlessly, "and buy vans."

Enough. I know I have made progress with this *Yoga Chakram*, this bicycle *bhava*. Gliding almost soundlessly through the green jungle, swerving around an occasional puddle, I can hear the birds calling to me from the work trees, or I turn a corner on an unsuspecting mongoose, or maybe even smile when I meet another cycle yogi and know I'm not alone.

B.C. Clet (a.k.a. Gordon Korstange)

## WASTE MANAGEMENT

### Sort n' Segregate – Eco Service's mantra

"Auroville does not have little elves and fairies who clean up after us, but a few groups who are dedicated to keeping Auroville and its surrounding areas free of litter." – AV Cleanup.

Once a week, fortnight, or month, almost every Auroville community gets a welcome visitor – a little yellow-white van with its crew of two that pulls up by the garbage bins and sets about emptying them. The van belongs to *Eco Service*, Auroville's trash-picking, garbage-sorting, and land-filling service that attempts to help the township deal responsibly with its waste.

"It is not a job many Aurovilians want to do," says Gillian who for over two decades has been peripherally involved with managing trash in Kuyilapalayam village. "I joined Jayamoorthy in July 2008. *Eco Service* at this time was running in a superficial way in that the waste collectors didn't really care whether the garbage was collected or not from the communities. They were more driven by money, and would only go to places where they knew there was recyclables to be found. They had no overheads as it was a family-run business. The waste was only partially segregated, and that created a large volume to be disposed of at the landfill. The time had come for all this to change. We had become involved with SOMA [Solid Waste Management in Auroville] and working together with them gave us the impetus to take the plunge.

"We decided it was time to 'let-go' of our collectors. This resulted in threats of violence against us, and our sorting sheds were forcibly locked-up. Waste collection got disrupted and the community suffered. The situation dragged on for months until

the Working Committee became involved and the issue got resolved.

"Now all that is behind us, and we are putting a more efficient and conscious system in place," says Gillian. "Besides the three Aurovilians involved, the new *Eco Service* team is made up of a young graduate from Pondicherry University with a background in solid waste management who supervises the workers, a team of six women who sort the waste, and a driver who operates our van."

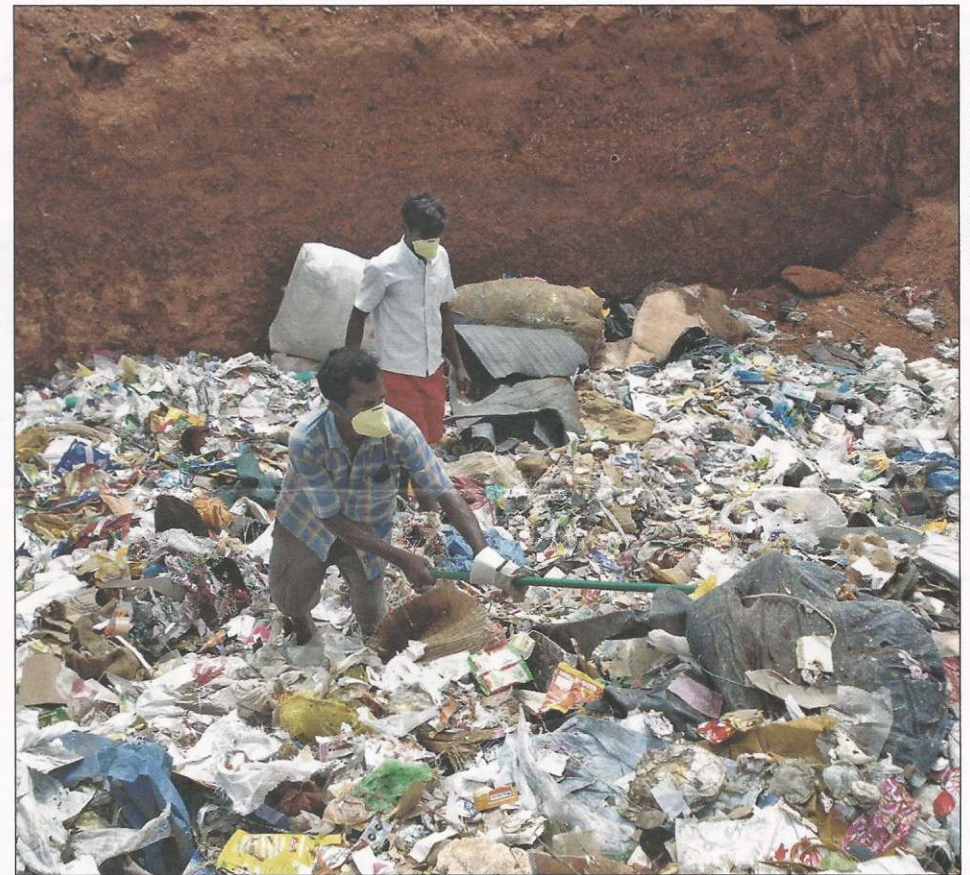
*Eco Service* was started in the mid-eighties by Stephano who tried to tackle the problem of waste being indiscriminately dumped into the canyons or being burnt.

"From the beginning," says Gillian, "the intention of *Eco Service* was to segregate the recyclable waste which had a market value from the non-recyclables and hazardous materials, and in this way reduce the residual waste reaching the landfill site. The communities would sell their recyclable waste – paper, plastic, glass and metal – to *Eco Service* and pay for the disposal of the non-recyclables. *Eco Service's* role was to ensure that things ran smoothly, offer a space for sorting the waste, and store hazardous material such as used batteries."

"But things began to break down because the amount of waste being generated became enormous," says Gillian. "The community was growing and Auroville began receiving more guests and visitors. The contractors could not keep up. Waste from Auroville was ending up in the village dumpsites, and sometimes in the canyons. It was again being burnt to make it quickly disappear. Finally, it was noticed that only about 10% of the waste was getting recycled instead of the projected 70%; the rest was all heading for the landfill."

Not many people know that Auroville has its own landfill – a 6-acre plot behind Auroannam off the Mailam Road. "The area is designated as 'remote' waste land and has a low water table," explains Gillian. "There we've excavated about twenty holes of 250 cubic metres each for burying the waste. With the previous collectors, we would landfill once a month but now it is more infrequent."

"Actually, our wish is that we avoid landfill as much as possible so the waste is sorted very carefully. With our



PHOTOS COURTESY SOMA

Mounting piles of garbage at Auroville's landfill site.

new team we are finding new dealers who recycle many more of the items we find in the garbage. Ultimately our aim is to go beyond the landfill method and find systems that will process waste in a safe and dynamic way; like harvesting energy from the waste. There are many new discoveries being made now and we should apply them in Auroville."

*Eco Service* deals with freeing Auroville from both visible and invisible pollution, but not all residents of Auroville participate. "Some, even some of our larger businesses, do not want to pay the fees," says Gillian. "They prefer to sell-off the disposable waste and burn the non-disposable which is extremely polluting. Burning waste is a serious problem and we have to find a solution. One way to tackle this might be to build a community incinerator to international standards..."

Gillian believes that there is also a need to educate Aurovilians about waste disposal. "For example, we still find disposable diapers or organic food waste mixed with the regular garbage," she says. "In my own community of Aurodam, there was once a family of cobras which had made their nest in the recycling area. This happened because someone had dumped pizza boxes with leftover food which attracted rats, which in turn attracted the cobras... It was the classic food chain!"

Apart from *Eco Service*, other groups are also active in the waste management scene in Auroville. SOMA which is less than six months old, not only organizes clean-ups, but conducts community-wide surveys, and disseminates information to the community on the do's and don'ts of waste disposal. "One can say they are

the activism and educational wing," says Gillian, "and they work in tandem with us. What I am most delighted with is that Auroville's second generation is taking up this work!"

Another second-generation group is *AV cleanup*, a growing band of youth volunteers who for years have been gathering on Sunday mornings to rid the sides of the Auroville's roads and neighbourhoods of plastic bags and trash. Following their successful campaign, *LIFE* or 'Litter Free' day, the group posted a pithy message on the News and Notes: 'Auroville does not have little elves and fairies who clean up after us, but a few groups who are dedicated to keeping Auroville and its surrounding areas free of litter.'

And then there are the many Auroville units that work in environmentally-responsible ways, finding creative solutions to keep the environment clean – like Foodlink that packages its dry goods in biodegradable plastic; Upasana Design Studio with its Small Steps campaign, offering foldable cloth bags to replace throwaway plastic ones; *Wellpaper* that recycles newspapers into jewellery and functional objects; or more recently, an informal 'cottage unit' operating out of Udavi School that puts to use all the styrofoam waste of the community [see box].

Finally there are the Aurovilians; artists who work only with recycled objects; the anonymous residents who on their walks through Auroville's forests and centre, picking up the litter left behind by picnickers; or those ocean lovers who clean the beach of flotsam and trash.

Aurovilians, it seems are beginning to take their civic responsibility more seriously, willing to go the extra mile to make their community and environment clean.

Priya Sundaravalli

### Recycling styrofoam

All of the styrofoam waste that arrives in Auroville as packaging material gets recycled – thanks to Dorothee, an architect who believes in and practices ecological building techniques. "Styrofoam, which is extruded polystyrene foam, is non-biodegradable," she says. It is believed that even after 1000 years, styrofoam does not break down.

But Dorothee has found an ingenious way to put the waste polymer to work, by creating lightweight panels of 'styrofoam-embedded cement' which have good heat insulation properties.

The panels measuring 60 cms by 60cms by 2.5cms are made on-site at the Udavi School campus by a team of three workers. "Right now we are producing them for our own consumption," says Dorothee referring to the construction and infrastructure expansion at the school. "We already have them functioning in three large spaces all located on the first floor: the future dormitory, and the new library and computer room." She explains that the panels are placed directly beneath the pitched tile roof to prevent the heat from being conducted or radiated.

The smiling faces of the 8th graders returning from lunch on that hot afternoon and settling into their new 'cool' classroom attests to this fact.

Priya Sundaravalli



Dorothee with a panel.



# The Unniyarcha from Joan of Arc country

Kalyani's story

“I like this photo because it shows the aspect of strength,” says Kalyani of the photo where she appears in a warrior’s crouched stance balancing her *Kalaripayattu* partner on her thighs. “In Savitri, the triple soul forces are wisdom, love and strength; without one, you cannot do anything.”

*Kalaripayattu* is the martial art of Kerala and in the quiet hush of the Laboratory of Evolution Kalyani is showing me her collection of *Kalaripayattu* photos. “Typically it is men who practice it,” she explains, “so when I began to learn it in Kerala in my Guru’s *gurukulam*, a local magazine ran a story calling me the new *Unniyarcha* from Joan of Arc country.” *Unniyarcha*, explains Kalyani, was a legendary warrior queen from Kerala. “For me that statement had a special meaning because Mother was Joan of Arc, and it made me feel so inspired!”

Kalyani is French and has been living in Auroville since the late seventies. She was brought up as a Catholic. “But I had a lot of doubts and I wanted some deeper understanding that I could not get in my religion. I began looking towards India. When I was sixteen, Swami Chidananda from Rishikesh came to my town in the South of France and I went to a lecture given by him. At one point he jumped on the table and started to do *yogasanas*, and then I had my first spiritual experience. Because when I saw the *asanas* everything disappeared – there was only a light and nothing else, not even myself. So when I came back, I understood this is what I should do. That is how it all started for me – with *Hatha Yoga*!”

Kalyani heard about Auroville in 1969. “The first caravan was leaving for Auroville and I wanted to join but I was told to first read Mother and Sri Aurobindo’s books.”

Kalyani decided to wait. For four years she worked as a stewardess, “but the longing for something deeper persisted.” She met someone who gave her a copy of Sri Aurobindo’s letters. “I had read many Indian Gurus – Ramakrishna, Vivekananda, Sivananda. But when I read Sri Aurobindo, I had that feeling that he was answering all my questions, and I wanted to come to Auroville very quickly.”

She travelled to India in 1974. When she arrived in Auroville she got a huge shock. “I had read in a review that there would be a university of peace in Auroville and another university of metaphysics. But when I arrived I found people showering outside in the fields, and nothing else!”

Kalyani decided to stay in the Ashram and visit Auroville. But she was feeling weak. Finally she decided to return to France. There she met

two Aurovilians and they started to live a collective life on a farm. When Kalyani returned to Auroville in 1978, she was ready. “Nothing bothered me or shocked me, and I settled in.” For the next 18 years, she made her home in the Aspiration community.

“At that time there were more than 100 people in Aspiration, and there was such a beautiful energy. All kinds of people were mixed together: the collective life at that time was very rich. We believed everything was possible. The *Agenda* had just been published and we were listening to the cassettes. The fire in our hearts was very strong at that time; everything was focussed on Mother and Sri Aurobindo.”

Kalyani still makes constant references to the vision of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. “Well, I came for that. I think everybody comes for that. Even if people are not aware of it, it is the soul which answers the call. For me, human unity is a consequence of finding of the soul; it is only in the soul we are one. But it is not easy to find the soul immediately, so we have also to build human unity in the outer way.”

“When I came, Auroville was presented as the cradle of the new species. Everybody was clinging to that ideal, that we must find a ‘new’ way of being human. But it takes years and years to discover what that means deeply inside.”

“‘Kalyani’ is a strong name. My original name was Christiane; it was very Christian. At one point I wanted a new name so I went to see Champaklal. It was the 15th August, 1990. Champaklal explained that ‘Kalyani’ means the best wishes one can formulate for all beings in all the universes. It really satisfied me because I always wanted something as large as possible. Of course, it takes a lifetime to ‘become’ your name. But the more the years pass, the more I understand what it means to be called Kalyani.”

Today Kalyani divides her time between taking care of the Laboratory of Evolution, offering workshops in Pranayama and Ayurvedic massage, and practising *Kalaripayattu*. *Kalaripayattu*, she explains, is all about “the energy of the Shakti; it is not your own energy. It really helps me in my integral yoga because it opens the body to the universal energy and you no more feel attached to the ‘personal’”. Also speed is very important. When you practice with weapons, you have no time to think about yourself or the other or the weapon.

“But it’s hard work: I had to endure the pain, the toughness of the exercises. Mother said that if you want to undergo this integral yoga, you must develop endurance and perseverance. You must overcome pain. Sri Aurobindo says in *The Life Divine* that pain is only a greater intensity of sensation. Now I apply this all the time. When I have

pain I think, ‘No, it is not pain, it is greater intensity’, and then everything changes. I believe this is the work we have to do – to change the way we view every detail of our daily lives.”

Kalyani has been working at the Laboratory of Evolution (LOE) since 1992. “Kireet Joshi made it very clear that this is the place where we should present the vision of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo regarding evolution. Some people wonder about the term ‘laboratory’ because it implies test-tubes and chemistry. But as Sri Aurobindo writes in the first chapter of *The Life Divine*, Man is the living laboratory of evolution where God wants to manifest Himself. So the experimentation is upon ourselves.”

“That’s why we collect not only the works of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo but also other books which show what humanity has been, what it is and what it will be in the future: in fact, everything relating to human evolution. So we gather from ancient cultures like the Chinese, Japanese, Tibetan, and Amerindians. We have books on the new physics, the new biology. We even have comics because, once you understand Sri Aurobindo’s vision, you realise nothing is superficial.”

“The LOE is the best place I could be because it is a constant reminder of The Mother’s and Sri Aurobindo’s vision and aim. And that, for me, is my main reason for being in Auroville – to accomplish what they have written and experienced.”

“For many years I was very unhappy and suffered a lot because life is so imperfect. But then *The Life Divine* helped me understand there is nothing but the Divine and that this manifested universe is the Becoming of God. Slowly the whole Manifestation is climbing back to the Divine state and that is why it includes all this imperfection.”

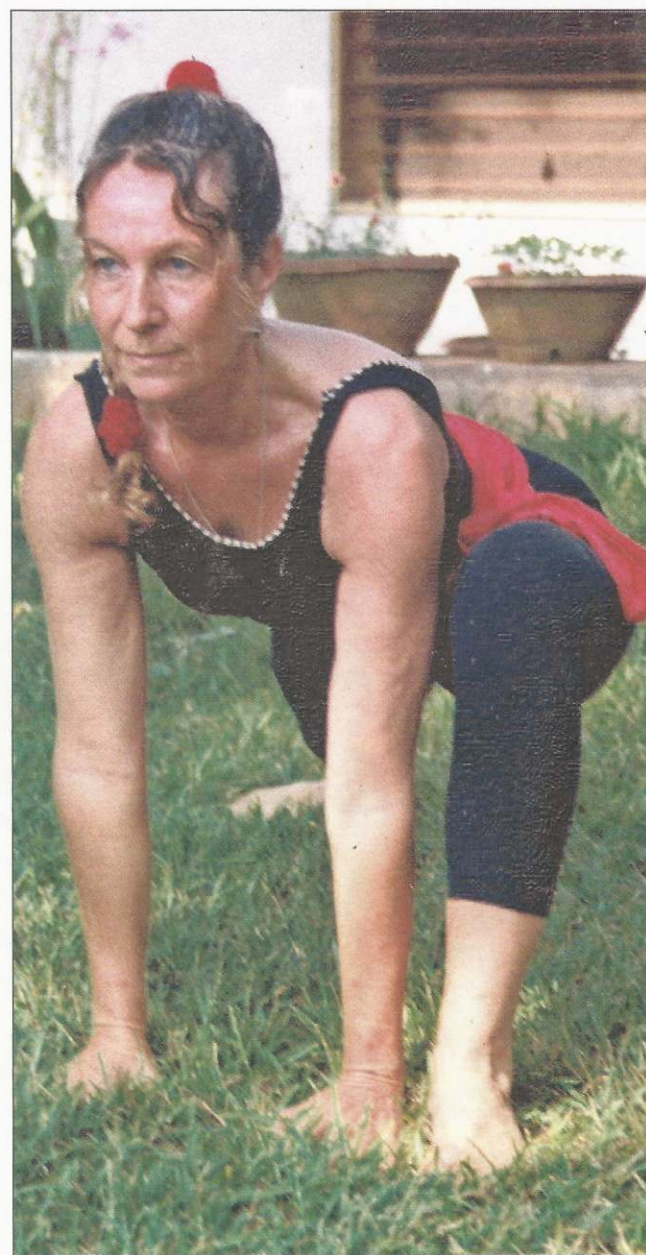


PHOTO COURTESY KALYANI

Kalyani at the Aspiration *Kalari*.

“Once you understand the essential divinity of your body, you really want to do something with it. That is what makes me overcome all the pain, the suffering, fatigue and laziness.”

“As for Auroville, in the early days it was a different way of life; we were satisfied with little. Now Auroville has changed, but I look at the changes as something that have to be. Sri Aurobindo says there is sometimes a need to go back and take up things that were not worked on in order that they be transformed. I believe Auroville is going through that process.”

Priya Sundaravalli

## E-COMMERCE

### Click for Auroville products

One of the hallmarks of Auroville are its products, known for their high quality, fine aesthetics and a reputation for being manufactured ethically. For the last 6 months, individuals and retailers living outside Auroville have been able to order these products on-line. Visit *Auroville.com* to see a wide range of Auroville-made products – incense, candles, spirulina, musical instruments, garments, jewellery, lamps, books and magazines – that are now available at the click of a mouse to be sent any place in the world.

And this is not all. In keeping with Auroville’s reforestation success, a percentage of every order received is used by *Auroville.com* to plant a tree sapling. Customers are also invited to add a small donation to their order to do the same. “The suggestion is taken up by about 60% of our clients,” says Martin, who is part of the *Auroville.com* team. “We took the idea from Auroville’s Travel Shop, which encourages its customers to make a donation as a percentage of their ticket price for planting trees in Auroville to offset the carbon emission of the airplanes they’ll be using. We’ve noticed that those who use *Auroville.com* service are also eco-conscious! So far we raised funds to plant 376 trees and our customers have added another 263. Now we are looking for a specific location, so that we can tell the customer, ‘this is where your tree has

been planted.’ Our dream is to take up a piece of wasteland and create a forest, all from donations to *Auroville.com*.”



PHOTO COURTESY MARTIN

The *Auroville.com* team (From left) Martin, Ulli and Suzanne

The presentation of Auroville projects is yet another aspect of the *Auroville.com* outreach. “We started out as an internet shop, but soon realised that it could also serve as a donation gateway to help projects in Auroville,” says Ulli, another of the team members. “It can be a great way for people outside to be actively involved with Auroville’s development.” As of today, projects of New Creation Boarding School, Arulvazhi

School, the Forest Group and the Matrimandir have been posted on *Auroville.com* and well-wishers can make donations through Paypal. “We expect that other Auroville projects will follow,” says Ulli.

Newcomer, Martin Gluckman, with expertise on on-line business, made a presentation and the students approved an amount of Rs 1.5 lakhs (approximately US \$ 3,500) to start the project.” A website was developed, the technical and financial problems tackled, and Auroville units were invited to join. “Amusingly, we got our first order in July 2008, when we were still testing our Beta site,” says Ulli. “Someone placed an order for one of *Svaram*’s musical instruments. But we weren’t ready and so passed the order to *Svaram* to execute directly. But that gave us a lot of encouragement. It showed there was a potential for *Auroville.com*.”

On December 1st, 2008, *Auroville.com* went live. “That too has a strange story,” says Suzanne, the third executive. “We had met that day and decided to start on December 6th, but events precipitated the opening. For that same evening we received two orders, one for the Matrimandir calendar and the other for Spirulina!” More orders soon followed. As of today, *Auroville.com* has received orders from 26 different countries and five continents.

With *Auroville.com* just taking off, not all Auroville units have yet signed on. “We would like all Auroville products be available on-line,” says Martin. “But a few units are not joining because they have little interest in expanding their business, or only want to do one-of-a-kind products. Others are waiting to see how we’ll develop.” A glaring example is the absence of Auroville potters who are yet to be convinced that

the site can be a venue for their products. “We are not worried,” says Martin. “We’re sure this is only a question of time.”

Of the others who have joined, there have been surprising sales. Suzanne explains: “When we added the products of *Wellpaper*, [WELL stands for Women’s Empowerment through Local Livelihood – which is a social enterprise and empowerment centre for women from Auroville’s surrounding villages] we didn’t expect anything unusual. They make products using recycled materials, mainly newspapers. Just overnight, we got a flood of orders for their ornamental bangles and our distribution system was severely tested. We later learnt that an article on *Wellpaper* had appeared in an US magazine!”

The team is now contemplating including products made by units of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Says Martin, “Many people think about Auroville and the Ashram as being members of the same family. I feel it would be a beautiful gesture if we could show in our product catalogue that we are based on the same ideals. The team is open to the idea.”

*Auroville.com* has incredible potential, and like Auroville, it is still in the infancy of this potential. “We are waiting to reach the critical point after which we can become financially-sustainable,” says Martin. “For the energy of Auroville is now known globally and interest in its products can only increase.”

Priya Sundaravalli



# Harnessing the wind for Auroville

Varuna Energy and Water Pvt. Ltd., a company created to serve the future energy and water requirements of Auroville, has bought its first windmill for Auroville.



The wind energy park at Dharapuram, Tamil Nadu.

The landscape around the city of Dharapuram near Coimbatore is dotted with wind energy converters, more commonly known as windmills. "Probably close to a 1,000 windmills have been installed on this site alone," says Mr. Venkateshwaran who shows us around. "These lands were unsuitable for agriculture and the villagers were earning a meagre existence from cattle grazing. But in the 1960s the potential of this area for wind generation was discovered. Due to the tunnelling effect of the Palghat Pass in the Western Ghats mountain range, high velocity winds sweep the area from May to September. In the next decades the Dharapuram wind park, an area of almost 29 sq. kms, was developed."

Venkateshwaran is Deputy Manager Projects of Enercon India, one of the major windmill manufacturers in India. His company alone has erected more than 150 windmills on this site and hundreds more in other wind parks elsewhere in India. He shows the location for the first Auroville windmill. A massive concrete foundation is ready to receive the concrete elements of the tower that are lying nearby. "The tower will be 74 meter high, made of 18 concrete and 2 steel circular elements," explains Venkateshwaran, stating that the windmill for Auroville will have a capacity of 800 Units/hour under ideal conditions. With an average loading of 28%, and a 6-months high wind season, the machine is expected to produce up to 2 million units a year." Looking around, he mentions that the Dharapuram wind park is now almost filled to capacity. "The Auroville machine is one of the last to be erected. Other windmills will be erected in other wind parks elsewhere in Tamil Nadu."

The Tamil Government is well-known for its policy of promoting wind parks, as there is a shortage of energy and many areas in the state experience high speed winds. The second largest wind farm in the world is in the Muppandal region in Tamil Nadu. Wind energy provides 15 to 20 % of the state's power demand during May-October, and 10% on average throughout the year. The Government also invites private parties to erect their own windmills and offers tax benefits and facilities such as 'wheeling' of energy (for self-use the same amount of energy generated by a windmill in location A can be taken from the grid at location B, at 5% commission), 'banking' (energy not used immediately can be drawn within a one-year period) and attractive schemes to sell electricity to

the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board (TNEB). In India, Tamil Nadu accounts for about 40% of the wind energy capacity in the country. Of Tamil Nadu's total estimated wind power potential of 4,500 MW from 41 sites, 4,136 MW is at present being produced by around 12,000 windmills.

Not only big industries, such as textile mills, cement factories and motorbike manufacturers, but also civic bodies and educational institutions are reducing costs by setting up their own windmills. One shining example is the Odanthurai *panchayat* in Coimbatore, consisting of 11 villages with a total population of 5,000. Ten years ago, 60 per cent of its budget was used to pay electricity charges, leaving just 40 per cent to be spent on the area's own development. The resourceful *panchayat* decided to become energy self-sufficient by installing solar

township that aspires to base its energy requirements on renewable energy, this solution is unsustainable – particularly as lignite has a large polluting potential.

For Michael Bonke, a long-term friend and financial contributor of Auroville who for many years has been involved in the building of the Matrimandir, the situation was untenable. He decided to set-up a private company, Varuna Energy and Water Pvt. Ltd. with himself and a few Aurovilians as directors to serve the future energy and water requirements of Auroville.

"I believe that the present and future electricity needs of the township must be met through wind generators," says Michael. "They should first supply electricity to cover the demands of the township; in a second phase, they should meet the energy demands of the desalination plant which we want to build to help secure Auroville's future water supply; and in the third phase, they should make the Auroville wind park self-supporting." He explains: "Two windmills of 0.8 MW would be sufficient to cover the city's present requirements; another windmill will be necessary for a future desalination plant, scheduled to produce 1000 cubic metre of drinking water per day which would serve the needs of

3,300 Aurovilians at a water usage of 300 litres per person per day. Two further windmills will sell energy to the TNEB; from this income more windmills will be bought, so that the Auroville wind park can continue to expand with the expansion of the city. With five windmills, Auroville will have – at least theoretically – an ever-young and ever-growing energy-source, cost-free."

Varuna has meanwhile bought its first windmill, which became operational on July 1st. The company and the Auroville Foundation are now in the process of obtaining the required permission from the Government of Tamil Nadu for the wheeling of the energy from Varuna's windmill to Auroville.

Purists may argue that, technically speaking, Auroville will still get its energy from the Lignite Corporation in Neyveli. But there is a difference: Auroville's own windmill will have started to produce carbon-emission-free energy. This will justify Auroville being declared an eco-friendly and ecologically sustainable society that produces its own energy.

Carel

## Windmill data

Type of wind generator	E – 53
Rated power	800 kW
Rotor diameter	52.9 metres
Hub height	75 metres
Blade material	fibreglass epoxy resin
Rotational speed	12-29 rpm
Cost	Rs. 4.25 crores (approx. US \$ 1 million)
Potential yearly income (all energy sold)	Rs 65 lakhs (approx. US \$ 150,000)

streetlights, and set-up biomass gasifiers to generate power from the waste of Odanthurai's saw mills. In 2006, making use of a government facility called 'the Remunerative Enterprises Scheme', the *panchayat* purchased its first windmill to generate energy. Today, in a situation where other parts of the state are experiencing power outages, Odanthurai not only enjoys uninterrupted power supply but sells its surplus power to the TNEB and uses the income for further development of the *panchayat*. The *panchayat* now has 'pucca' roads, potable water, three primary schools and a high school.

For Auroville, this example has long been a distant dream. The costs of a windmill, at present Rs 425 lakhs (approximately US \$ 1 million) were prohibitive and there was no possibility it could make use of a government scheme. Auroville had no choice but to meet its electricity requirements, at present around 4 million kWh per year, from the TNEB. The power is generated by one of its power stations, the Neyveli Lignite Corporation at Neyveli, a hundred kilometres south of Pondicherry. But for a



Auroville's very own windmill will look like this.

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Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

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