

Auroville Today

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Growing timber and firewood for Auroville

India faces a drastic shortage of timber and firewood, and Auroville is no exception, its forests notwithstanding. Over the years, Auroville foresters have introduced the drought-resistant 'Work' tree from Australia and have focused on re-growing the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forests (TDEF) that once were indigenous to the Coromandel Coast, collecting seeds from small remaining TDEF groves and setting up TDEF nurseries. These nurseries have since provided most of the TDEF shrubs and trees that now thrive in Auroville and which have also been sent to other places such as the Tholkappia Poonga (also known as Adyar Poonga), the 58-acre ecological park in the Adyar estuary area of Chennai.

But the Auroville planners and foresters have given no or only little thought to the timber and firewood needs of the growing township. In a recent report published in Auroville's internal weekly *News and Notes*, the Forest Group reported that timber stocks from cyclone Thane are slowly decreasing, and that there is not enough firewood available for Auroville's bakeries and pizzerias. Also the Auroville potters, who depend on *casuarina* wood to fuel their kilns, are facing higher prices and supply problems. No timber or firewood is grown commercially in Auroville, and the few timber-quality trees that the foresters harvest are often sold outside because of price differences.

In this issue we report on the work of five Auroville wood working units. The timber they use comes from trees that went down in cyclone Thane, or is old wood salvaged from crumbling houses elsewhere in Tamil Nadu.

This is a comparatively recent development. Ten years ago, timber such as *kalimardu*, *pillarmardu* and *kong* could more easily be purchased. Today, these woods have vanished from the markets or are only available at astronomical prices. They have been replaced by other woods such as *merbau* (*intsia* sp.) and *African padauk* (*Pterocarpus soyauxii*), but these too are now endangered.

It is to the credit of the Auroville wood workers that they categorically refuse to work with imported tropical hardwoods as they are aware that rampant logging in poor South Asian countries leads to environmental disaster. But wood from cyclone Thane is diminishing. From where will the future township get its timber? Even if aluminum is used for window frames (and the mining of bauxite too is facing environmental concerns), still wood will be required for doors and furniture. Even using old wood has its limits, if it implies the demolishing of India's heritage houses such as those with *Madras roofs*.

The solution, evidently, is to grow our timber and firewood ourselves. Timber trees which we can grow in Auroville include 'Integral Wisdom' tree (*Albizia lebbek*), 'Wisdom' tree (*Samanea saman*), 'Work' tree (*Acacia auriculiformis*), 'Transformation' tree (*Millingtonia hortensis*), *khaya* and a few others. For firewood, *casuarina* can easily be grown, as is demonstrated in the many *casuarina* plantations around Auroville.

Running a tree plantation, however, is very different from planting a TDEF forest and the required knowledge of cultivation techniques may not be available.

One possible approach is that the new Land Board, in consultation with the Town Development Council, would identify which of Auroville's extensive landholdings will not be required for the city for the next 20-30 years and allocate them for tree plantations. To the extent that know-how is not available in Auroville, professionals could be hired, and funds be made available to run these plantations and do research on what trees can best be planted.

A more immediate step could be to ban all sales of Auroville timber and firewood outside Auroville. As price is an issue, the foresters should be compensated according to the outside market prices, and the wood be stocked till such time that an Auroville unit buys it. Those who use wood could be asked to donate some of their profits to a fund for growing tree plantations.

Wood is becoming scarce. The Mother spoke about Auroville being a self-supporting township. Should this not include our needs for both timber and firewood?

Carel



Dining table

Kenji's Woodwork

The undisputed master of Auroville woodworking is Japanese Aurovilian Kenji Matsumoto. But it was by chance, he says, that woodworking became his profession. For his first love was the sea and his wooden yacht, and for many years he sailed around the world. Then a hurricane struck and wrecked his boat. "I had no money to pay a professional shipbuilder, and so I was forced to do all repairs myself," he says. It took him a year. But the job not only taught him the love of wood but also showed him his path: to become a professional woodworker.

Back in Japan Kenji took up a carpentry apprenticeship. Japan has a rich tradition of woodworking, stemming from a deep love of and respect for wood as a living organism. Several master craftsmen taught him how to choose and read the wood; how to measure, plan, sketch and execute designs; how to do precision work within an 1/1000th error margin; and, most importantly, how to reveal the hidden beauty of wood and enhance its unique individuality.

In 2001, Kenji moved to Auroville where he established his own workshop - 'Kenji's Woodwork'. "I was certainly not a master craftsman, but I decided to take a chance," he recalls. He ordered several professional wood working machines from Japan and started.

"In the beginning I was doing all the work I could get: window frames and doors, but increasingly also furniture. Then I participated in an exhibition exhibiting the *ikebana* of my wife Valeria and the ceramics of Michél, and that was a breakthrough. My work was appreciated, and an increasing number of people placed orders."

Today, many of his clientele come from the big cities of India, mostly the upper middle class. For them, he creates his 'Japanese style' furniture, both traditional and contemporary. Some of the designs are linear and straight; others follow the form of the tree. "I try to manifest what is hidden in the wood. Unusual shapes are turned to the best possible use." A strangely formed piece of jackfruit tree (*Artocarpus heterophyllus*) became a decorative table top; a piece of Noona maram (*Morinda citrifolia*), a wood normally used for bullock car yokes, was turned into a salon table.

"I love making furniture that has a warm and mysterious feel to it, furniture that has a 'personality' of its own," he explains. "I sometimes accept assignments which I would rather not, such as making a straight



A Japanese 'andon'

square table. But I prefer my more creative and freestyle work."

Cyclone Thane, he says, provided the possibility. "Many 'Work' trees were uprooted. Many of them had large trunks and interesting shapes. 'Work' tree wood is of an excellent quality and nice to work with. The grains often show beautiful patterns, and after polishing it has a velvety finish which you do not get with any of the other woods."

He likes experimenting with inlays - polished stones or even gold foil. "In cases where the wood has knots or interesting gaps and openings in its body, I have incorporated granite or semi-precious stone (malachite,

agate, etc.) into these spaces. Where the wood has natural depressions or local concavities I sometimes use gold foil to highlight them," he says.

Kenji's 'Woodwork' is a small unit. He works with one helper and one apprentice, mostly in complete silence as the work demands full concentration. "It's very much a karma yoga," he says. "When I am working I am fully concentrated on what's manifesting under my hands. I often forget my environment and the time. I don't want to use big words, but there is definitely a sense of doing this as an offering, a dedication."

What would a Japanese master woodworker have to say about his work? He smiles. "He might find fault with some of my techniques; but I think not with the spirit the pieces express." That spirit, he explains, is harmony and beauty. "Each piece must say something to those who use it - it must convey a sense of well-being, comfort, happiness and beauty. If I notice that my clients experience that spirit, I am deeply content."

In conversation with Carel



Low dining table with chairs

For more info visit
www.japanesearthfurniture.com

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New Dawn Carpentry

The doors are four meters high, each smoothly rotating on two ball bearings. The scene is the new Centre for Indian Culture at Bharat Nivas, the construction of which is in the finishing phases. The carpenter is Auroville's New Dawn Carpentry, run by Aurovilians Ricardo Cosarinsky from Argentina and Danasu, from Tamil Nadu.

"The doors are impressive," confirms Ricardo. "But they were the devil in making. We used wood from the *khaya* trees that came down in cyclone Thane, as that was the only wood available that was large enough. But the wood is very unpleasant to work with. Though it had been seasoned for 28 days and the humidity content had come down to the normal 8-14%, the wood kept warping and twisting. I also wasn't happy with the finishing touch, as *khaya* doesn't allow for such a smooth feel as does 'Work' tree."

For the layman, however, the doors feel good, as do the other doors and windows that New Dawn Carpentry has been making for the new Centre. "It has been keeping us very busy and we have had to postpone orders," says Danasu. Ricardo laughs. "My standard reply has been 'Please come back in two months' whenever I was asked to take up



The four-metre high doors of the new Centre of Indian Culture



Window frames at the new Centre of Indian Culture

new work." The reason for New Dawn's popularity, he says, is the high quality of its work and the transparency of its accounting. "We specialize in wooden flooring, doors, window frames, louvers, cupboards, beds, kitchen cupboards, and furniture. And as there are constantly new buildings coming up in Auroville, our work is in high demand."

Not only in Auroville, though. New Dawn's carpenters have also been working in Hyderabad and Chennai, creating home theatres and sound studios, a specialized work. "I don't like to go out, but this type of work gives the unit a financial boost," says Ricardo.

"The carpenters love it as it means a good extra income for them."

Ricardo joined Auroville in 1997, after a career as an airline pilot in Argentina. "I wasn't happy with the political situation in my country, and I tried my luck in Europe. But because of my nationality, I was not accepted and had to return to Argentina. I then stopped aviation, went to the countryside and started living a different type of life, which included learning about carpentry."

Soon after he joined Auroville, he was asked to oversee the crew of carpenters working at the Surrender collective housing project. "It was quite a challenge," he recalls. "I was used to working alone, and here suddenly I was boss of a team of people who came from a completely different culture." It took time for them to get used to each other. But when the project was finished, they asked him to continue and start a workshop. "I got together

with the best carpenters, amongst whom was Danasu, and opened my own unit." New Dawn Carpentry was born, operating from a little rented house in Kottakarai village.

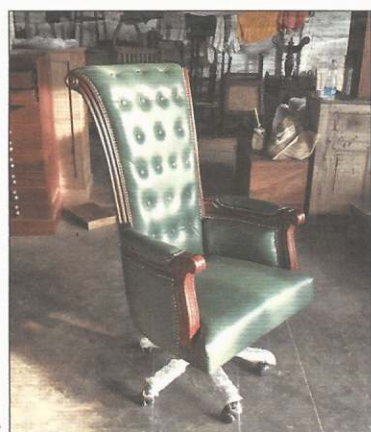
"When I joined Auroville I had no money. I wanted to serve Auroville in the best way I could and since my skills are in the field of carpentry I felt I should do something in that direction. I also thought that this would be the best and easiest way to get my economic independence, and not come to depend on the maintenance system." It worked out nicely. Today, New Dawn Carpentry has a large building in Kottakarai community, operates modern woodworking machinery and employs 10-15 carpenters.

"They taught me quite a lot," admits Ricardo. "In the beginning I thought that I had a lot of carpentry knowledge to teach, and in some ways I was correct. But I'd never suspected how much they could teach me! Our workshop has become a real human school for all of us."

Cyclone Thane gave Auroville a lot of wood, mainly 'Work' tree. It was a wind-fall, agrees Ricardo, who refuses using rainforest wood, such as imported timber from Myanmar. But he prefers to work with recycled wood from demolished buildings. Pointing at a stack of Kalimadu beams he just acquired, he says that the stability of second hand wood is much better than that of recent wood. "That lot is for the furniture for the new Centre. I hope it is sufficient, for it is increasingly difficult to get old wood. Those beams come from as far away as Madurai. But I am afraid that in 1½-2 years second hand wood will no longer be available."

A new entrant in the unit is Auroville born Chaitanya, recently returned from learning carpentry and roof making in France as an apprentice of the Compagnons du Devoir. "He is now training to become a woodworker," says Danasu. "He may take over when I retire," grins Ricardo. "If that ever happens in Auroville..."

In conversation with Carel



Leather upholstered office chair

In 1995, Aurorachana (meaning 'Auro Creation') started giving a second lease of life to old and broken furniture – colonial English, Pondicherry-French and some of Chettinad style – mostly made of teak or rosewood. "This business still continues," says Clemens. "But increasingly, we are making new furniture, some of it designed by us, other pieces designed according to the client's request. For example, they want chairs and come with a few photos. They like the armrest of this one, the backrest of that one, the seats should be upholstered with cloth or leather, and could the legs be bent instead of straight? Then we do the designing, show it to them, and when approved, start making the chairs."

With a staff of thirty carpenters and upholsterers, Aurorachana is the largest carpentry unit of

Aurorachana



Set of chairs

Auroville. Wooden chairs, beds, tables, cupboards, sofas, office chairs, deck chairs, room dividers and doors leave the Aurorachana premises with great regularity. "We also make steel furniture such as massage benches," adds Clemens. "Basically, we make everything." A great project, he says, was doing an entire house: doors, window frames and all the furniture. It took two years.

The wood used is preferably old teak. Large beams are lying in the yard. "We recycle wood. We don't want the rainforests of other countries to be denuded for our benefit," says Clemens. "The wood comes from old village houses that start crumbling

after a lifetime of 80-100 years. The only thing of value that remains is the wood. In those days, everyone used teak, and the richer families used rosewood. Teak has a lot of natural oils, which remain in the wood and are the reason for its continuing flexibility, even in old age. Rosewood doesn't have that; it very often cracks when you try to reuse it," he explains. "Old teak wood is perfect for carpentry. Its quality is better than that of new teak, as it has a higher density. New teak comes from



Bar stool



Dining table and chairs

teak plantations, where the trees are grown using lots of water and fertilizers. This leads to a lesser density." Is old teak still available? Yes, he says, but prices are increasing steeply – they have already doubled in the last three years.

Aurorachana also uses Auroville wood that came down in the cyclone, but to a far lesser extent. "Work tree is about 1/3 the price of teak." Clemens recently did a Kindergarten project for the European School in Chennai, using Work tree and some plywood to make chairs, tables and cupboards for the children. It fitted their budget. "Also most Auroville clients prefer Work tree, because of cost considerations." But Aurorachana's main clients are Indian hotel chains, interior designers, architects and expatriates living in Chennai. "The Australian consulate has put us on their list of preferred vendors," says Clemens proudly. "Our order portfolio is full till March."

In conversation with Carel



Reclining chair



Drawing cabinet

For more information visit
www.aurorachana.com

Prakrit

The large hall on the ground floor of the Centre for Scientific Research, earlier used for researching ferro-cement technology, now houses one of the work spaces of Prakrit, the wood working unit created by Danish Aurovilian Torkil Dantzer a few years ago. The place is filled with finished table tops, legs and stands. Outside, you'll find the wood planing machines and large stacks of sawn logs. "My showroom is in the Janaki shop in Pondicherry," says Torkil. "But it has limited space, so sometimes my clients come here."



Two doors with a 'Tree of Life' engraving

Stacked against a wall are two large separation panels with a carving of the Tree of Life. "They are for my upcoming house," explains Torkil. Another panel showing an intricate tile-pattern carving. "I was always fascinated by the complex geometric patterns you see on Muslim tiles. I am a mathematician by education and I wondered if it is possible to create a pattern which never repeats itself. An American mathe-



Trunk with the 'Om' sign on three sides

matician had found a solution in 1966, using 20,426 different tiles. Other mathematicians tried to reduce that number. The solution was found in 1974 by English mathematician Roger Penrose, who proved that you only need two different tiles to create a pattern which never repeats itself. Using his formula I created a pattern on the computer, printed it out in the size required, and then a few carpenters cut out the pattern." He laughs. "Keep looking at it. You won't find any tile pattern which is identical to another one."

Torkil got involved in woodworking after cyclone Thane hit Auroville in December 2011. As he said in an interview, "The cyclone brought a big change in my life. I've always loved wood and worked a lot with it, but I never imagined that it would become my focus in Auroville. However, after the cyclone, the Land and Resource Management team were suffocated by the work. They only had the energy to collect the wood, there didn't seem to be anybody taking responsibility for storing it and processing it." A new unit called 'Woodlink' and Torkil's new unit 'Prakrit' took the best logs and sent them for cutting in an outside sawmill. All this wood was stored at CSR. Most wood was then left to air-dry, some of it was dried in a kiln. The wood from Woodlink was made available to Aurovilians to buy.

"At that time I had no idea to make furniture; but being in the saw mill and cutting the logs and seeing the natural forms somehow changed me," says Torkil. "Back in Denmark I used to work with wood which was brought in by containers, sawn in straight beams and planks to make optimal use of the container space. But with straight planks, you get no inspiration from the tree itself. So my designs there were purely Scandinavian, with the focus on simple forms and functionality. But now I suddenly had the possibility to follow the form of the log, creating a very organic design which is decidedly not Scandinavian."

In order not to overdo the organic design, Torkil designed legs that bend outwards to support his tables. "They are also needed for stability," he says. "Tables with straight legs are less sturdy. Moreover, our furniture is often used in air-conditioned rooms. That means a very dry climate, where the wood shrinks. For that rea-

son we do not use traditional joinery but leave a space between the slabs that form the table top, to allow for expansion and shrinkage. The out-bending legs can follow such a movement more easily."

The 'feel' of his tables is somewhat Japanese. Torkil laughs. "There are many similarities between Scandinavian and Japanese design. I recently read a book about the development of Danish furniture and there was a mention of Japanese inspiration. Both focus on simple forms. In fact, the largest market for Scandinavian designed furniture is Japan."

Prakrit's tables have followed IKEA's ideas of furniture that can be disassembled for easy transport and re-assembled on site. But contrary to the Swedish furniture giant, Prakrit has no interest in going for mass production. "It would mean a completely different factory set-up, buying modern machinery, producing hundreds of pieces a day and having a nightmare in marketing it. India is not yet ready for that, I think. And then we would have to compete with Chinese imports, in the hundreds of thousands. Prakrit will continue to concentrate on the high end user and provide designer furniture on demand."

Torkil also loves to see what can be done with wood that others reject, such as trunks. A 'Burned Tree of Life' and a trunk with the sing



Burned 'Tree of Life'

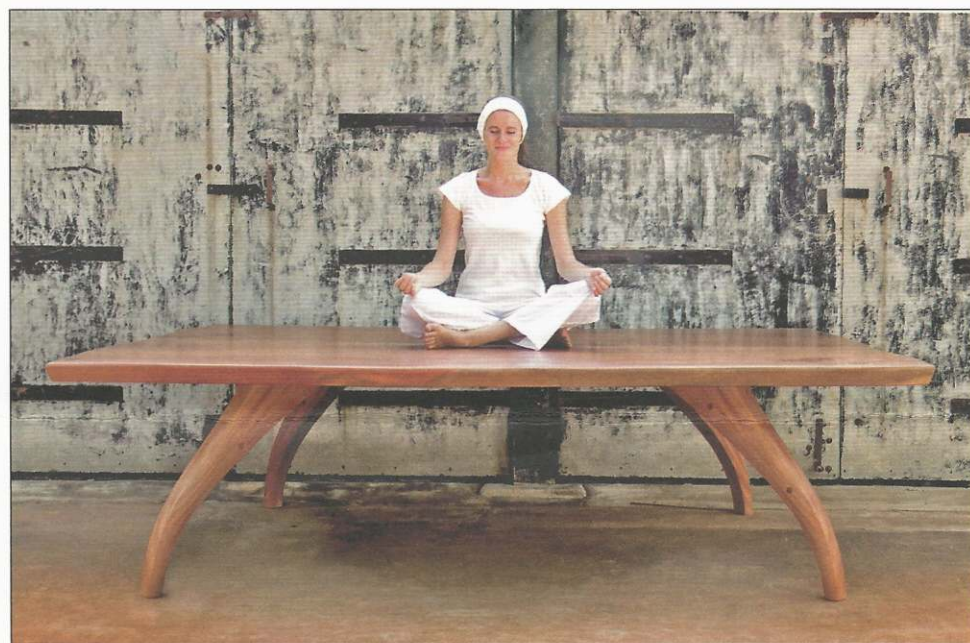


Wooden panel with the Penrose pattern – no tile pattern is identical

of 'Om' carved on three sides show that they can be put to decorative use.

Carel

For more information visit prakrit.org.in



A Prakrit dining table with legs that bend outwards

In November, the Citadines Art Gallery hosted an exhibition of the woodcraft of Auroville architect Tejaswini, made in Auroville over the past year. "Furniture making has become extension of my architecture work," she wrote in her invitation. The exhibition showcased unique pieces: tables, tabourets, stools and art works under her trade name 'Woodscapes'.

"As an architect, I was always interested in furniture," she says. "Architecture is about creating spaces, furniture is about filling them." The inspiration, she says, was provided by Kenji.



Low tables with metal legs

"When I was working with Suhasini some years ago, on Saturdays I would normally work a half day. I spent the other half watching Kenji working his craft." The 'apprenticeship' lasted six months. "It is not that I learned carpentry from him, but just watching him, how he would get immersed in his work, made a deep impact."

Tejaswini experiments with wood, most of it in organic form, and uses various materials for legs, such as



Magazine holder

stainless steel. But she is a designer, not an artisan. "Few furniture designers make the objects themselves. My pieces are made by two master carpenters who helped me understand the possibilities and limits of the materials and their crafts. The shared knowledge of different materials and the shared ambition to perform at the limit of our capacities is the unspoken

Low salon table



Low table with metal legs

bond between designers and makers," she says. Woodscapes' furniture is for sale in two designer boutiques in Bangalore and at her workshop in Auroshilpam, Auroville.

Tejaswini divides her work between architecture and woodwork, as for her, they complement each other. She started her own studio 'Inscapes' in 2010, after having worked with INTACH in Pondicherry and Suhasini in Auroville. "This work earns me my living," she says. "But in Woodscapes, business is not a major consideration. This is all about connecting with wood, its form and shapes, and getting in touch with soul-searching ideas that translate into designs". Her inspiration is decidedly Japanese. "I love the Peace Table and have plans to go to the USA and see George Nakashima's workshop, and also to go to Japan."

Carel

For more information visit www.auroville-inscapes.in

Woodscapes



Low salon table

We have a Working Committee

After a delay of more than a year, the Auroville community has finally managed to select the members of a new Working Committee.

The history

It started in January 2014, when the residents were asked to vote on a so-called *Participatory Selection Process* for the new members of the Working Committee and Auroville Council. However, the vote failed as the required quorum of 10% of the number of residents was not reached. As a consequence, the term of office of the existing group members was extended.

March

The issue was again brought to the Residents' Assembly at the end of March. This time the residents were asked to vote for one out of four possible selection processes. This time the Participatory Process was accepted which implied that many tasks previously performed by the Working Committee and the Auroville Council, would now be taken up by them together with people from the larger community in order "to foster transparency, communication and participation, while being efficient and humane". The Coordinators (e.g. full Working Committee or Council members) could, if they chose, be assisted by Facilitators (non-Working Committee or Council members who help facilitate subgroups created to deal with specific topics) and Resource Persons (non-Working Committee or Council members called upon by the Coordinator to research a particular topic and advise). The Process also has a place for Silent Listeners, residents who want to witness the functioning of a group.

April – May

Residents interested in being considered for the Working Committee or Council were then invited to nominate themselves for any of the four functions. The names of the self-nominees were subsequently published, feedback was invited and the participants went through a three-day process to determine who would serve in what capacity. During these three days, the feedback received was discussed in the group among all the participants. The result of this process was announced in a General Meeting on May 28th.

However, in this meeting strong reservations were expressed about the process. The ethics of self-nominated people dealing themselves with the negative feedback against them was questioned. Another major criticism was the perceived lack of competence of the proposed members of the Working Committee. Also a fault in the selection process was acknowledged: only self-nominated people could be considered for the jobs. It was pointed out that experienced people would normally not nominate themselves but have to be asked and convinced to take up the job in the interest of the community. The process followed meant that they had been excluded. This meeting did not come to any result, and neither did a subsequent meeting.

June – July

At the end of June, the Auroville community was invited to vote on the outcome. Over 280 Aurovilians participated and 65% approved the members of the new Council, which included 2 members of the old Council who would stay on for a few months. However, 63% disapproved of the outcome for selecting the new Working Committee.

More general meetings followed. But after three general meetings with diminishing participation, it was clear that there was no agreement. The last general meeting therefore decided to let the new Council, which had taken up the selection of a new Working Committee as its first priority and which had already started working on the issue with the Organization Study Group, explore the matter further and make its recommendations to the larger community.

August – September – October

The Council and Study Group then revised the *Participatory Working Group* proposal. This revised proposal was accepted by the Residents' Assembly on October 27th. Now, a resident could not only self-nominate him or herself but also nominate any other resident.

Secondly, a Temporary Feedback Review Committee would make an appraisal of the feedback received. Lastly, a staggered system to replace members of the Working Committee and Auroville Council was accepted, whereby at the end of each year two or three members resign and are replaced by others.

November – December

The Auroville Council subsequently called for nominations for the seven members of the Working Committee and the two Auroville Council replacement members. This resulted in 250 Aurovilians nominating 391 Aurovilians. Of these, 49 Aurovilians accepted to become a member and 45 offered to support the Selection Process.

Aurovilians were then invited to send positive or negative feedback on the names proposed "with sincerity and deep introspection". This feedback was studied by the Temporary Feedback Review Committee set up by the Council. It decided to disqualify 13 persons from participation in the three-day selection process on the basis of 'non-negotiable' feedback received. [see article next page]

Working with Auroville's natural values: the 12 powers of The Mother

The three-day selection process was held from 5-7 December, 2014 in the Unity Pavilion. The basis of the process was the twelve powers of The Mother, also called qualities, which are represented in the meditation rooms in the twelve petals surrounding the Matrimandir. They are *Sincerity, Humility, Gratitude, Perseverance, Aspiration, Receptivity, Progress, Courage, Goodness, Generosity, Equality and Peace*. According to the Organization Study Group, which had made them an integral part of the Participatory System, these qualities are Auroville's building blocks, its natural values and the spiritual base of Auroville's organization. Aurovilians, in particular those who work in Auroville's working groups, should attempt to understand and integrate these qualities in their working life instead of doing "just business as usual in the Town Hall and reserving the spiritual ideals for the Matrimandir and their personal inner work."

During the first two days, the participants participated in many different exercises in order to familiarise themselves with each of the twelve qualities. One such exercise was to concentrate on a quality in connection to a given topic, such as 'collaboration', and to describe the relation between the two. The individual findings were discussed in small groups of 4-5 people, and each group would formulate in one or two sentences the essence of what had emerged, and then repeat the exercise with another quality. The results were then read out by each group in a session attended by all participants and posted on the wall. For example, regarding the quality of 'humility' one posting was: 'you are a servant of the community, not its manager.'

Other exercises dealt with trying to find one's greatest strength and biggest fear, and sharing that with the others. This exercise was considered useful as knowing the strengths and fears in oneself would open oneself to understanding the fears of others. But the exercise was not universally appreciated, as some people felt it transgressed the limits of their privacy.

Yet another exercise was meant to make people conscious of how they listen to others, and how to eliminate the mind's 'background conversations', such as thinking of other topics while someone is talking to you, or preparing one's responses while the other person is still speaking. Exercises in 'deep listening' followed, described as empathic listening with an empty or quiet mind so as to better understand what someone says.

In this context, the issue of complaints came up. How does one deal with complaints? Is complaining necessarily negative? Can the person against whom the complaint is made understand from where the complaint comes and appreciate the complainer? This was meant to encourage a different attitude towards complaints, very necessary for all those who work in these working groups.

The homework for the first evening was to choose four out of the twelve qualities and write down how one feels each relates to oneself as well as to the work of the Working Committee.

The 'negotiable' feedback

During the second day the participants were given the anonymous 'negotiable' feedback which the Feedback Review Committee had received but which, it decided, was not sufficiently heavy to lead to disqualification from participation in the selection process. This feedback mainly dealt with perceived character defects of the participant. In teams of two, one person practicing 'deep listening' and the other person reading out the feedback and reflecting on it, helped by sympathetic questions from the listener, the comments were processed. The people were asked to consider the feedback seriously, not to respond defensively or aggressively, but to see to what extent the feedback was appropriate and could be a help for inner growth. Afterwards, those who wanted to shared their experience with all participants.

It appeared that this exercise had brought a lot of reflection, but not all of it was positive. Some feedback was considered inappropriate, some of it not to the point and some as simply made with the intention to hurt.

Also, during the second day, a presentation was made on the work of the Working Committee – what the Auroville Foundation Act has to say about it and what its responsibilities are. A possible task list was given which showed many participants for the first time what the work could entail. It was an omission in the programme that this topic was not followed up by a question and answer session.

Selecting the members

The third day was dedicated to the selection of the Working Committee and the replacement Council members. "It is about agreeing on and choosing the best for the work to be done, looking at both the individual qualities and the functioning of the group," explained the Organization Study Group. A list with the names of the 48 people present in the room was distributed – including those who till then had not accepted to serve as Working Committee or Council member – and the participants were asked to tick names of the persons they felt should be appointed: seven for the Working Committee and two for the Council. The results were tallied and projected on a screen for all to see.

The next exercise was in groups. The participants were asked to jointly select the two Council replacement members and the new Working Committee team; and, afterwards, to give 'weight' to each selected person by putting a number of chickpeas (for the selected Council members) and kidney beans (for the selected Working Committee members) in a paper bag. The chickpeas and beans were then deposited in glass bottles, each carrying the name of a selected person. The levels showed clearly who the two new Council members were to be and almost as clearly who should be in the new Working Committee.

Almost. For the question of whether a member of the existing Working Committee could be selected for the new Working Committee had not been answered, and one member of the existing Working Committee was amongst the first four selected persons. Opposing views were expressed: the approved selection process clearly mentioned that an existing member could not join the new Working Committee; but it also explicitly mentioned the need for continuity. After some discussion, it was agreed that the person would serve for one year and then resign.

The new Working Committee started functioning on December 15, 2014. If during its first year a member resigns, he or she will be replaced by one of the replacement members who have been selected as well. Also a replacement member for the Council was selected.

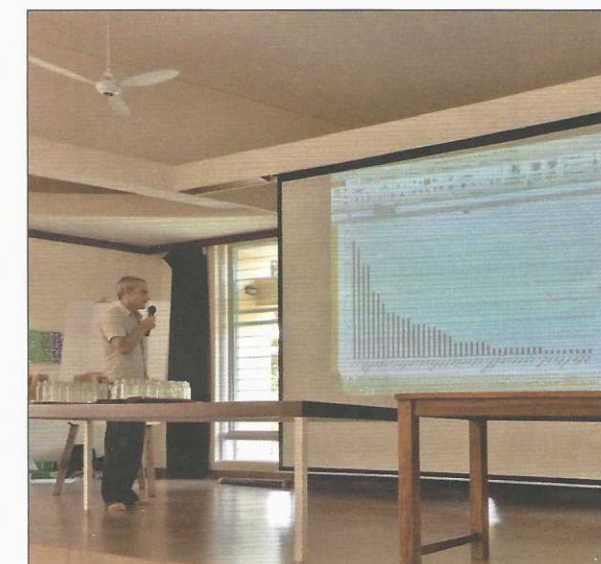
The term of office of the Working Committee and Council members is three years. In order to ensure continuity, a system of staggered replacements will take place. After the first year, one member will resign and be replaced by the choice of the Residents' Assembly. After the second year, two or three members will resign and be replaced by new members, and this process will continue, so that the recurring ordeal of choosing a new Working Committee and Council every two years will finally come to an end.

Carel

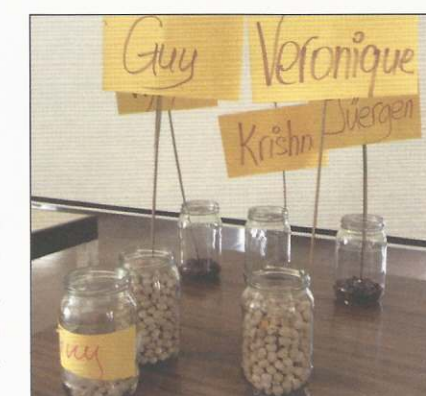
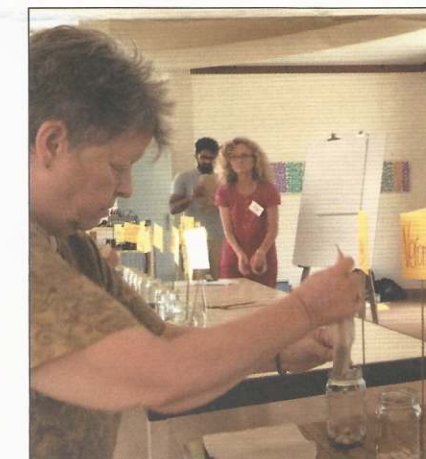
Auroville Today published extensively about this topic in its June-July and August issues.



During day three of the three-day



The tally of the Working Committee candi



Left: putting



The new Working Committee: (from left) Eric, Angela, Carel, Mandakini and

Reflections on a feedback process

The seven members of the Temporary Feedback Committee were chosen by the Council based on names submitted by the community. The brief they were given was to review all the feedback regarding those who had proposed themselves, or been proposed, for the three-day selection process, to decide which feedback issues were 'non-negotiable' and then disqualify those who had such issues. 'Negotiable' feedback would be handled in the three-day process itself.

After considerable discussion, the Committee agreed upon a list of non-negotiables, any one of which would suffice to make an individual ineligible. These non-negotiables, which were based, among other things, upon Mother's messages to Auroville and her *Material Conditions for Living in Auroville* were:

- 1) Being a member of another major work group;
- 2) Psychological unfitness;
- 3) Violence;
- 4) Involving the police rather than sorting out problems in the community;
- 5) Financial impropriety;
- 6) A major unresolved issue with an Auroville working group;
- 7) Drug use;
- 8) Unauthorised land holding or development in the Master Plan area;
- 9) Major breach of trust with the community.

The rationale for drawing up these non-negotiables was that the Committee felt there should be no doubt about the integrity or the motivation of the people involved; and that anybody offering themselves for service in the Working Committee or Council should have no unresolved issues with the community.

The Temporary Feedback Committee also imposed a code of ethics upon itself. It decided that none of the members would give feedback themselves; that they would not participate in the three-day process; that if feedback was received about a relative or close friend, that member would leave the room and not take part in any discussion or decision-making regarding that person; and that it would not divulge the names of those people who had asked for confidentiality when giving feedback.

The Temporary Feedback Committee had neither the time nor the mandate to carry out deep investigations. When it received negative feedback about an individual, it informed that individual of the nature of the feedback and invited a response. It also contacted any work groups involved to ascertain the present status of the issue. If a matter was unresolved and had not received closure, the Committee unanimously agreed that the nominee could not proceed to the three-day selection process on this particular occasion.

The individuals whom the Committee decided could not participate were informed individually of the reason for it. The Committee subsequently invited them to a meeting where they were free to express themselves. Finally, the Committee submitted a report to the community so that everybody could understand how it had been working.

Reflections

The two week process was an extremely intense one for members of the Feedback Committee. The task was daunting. The Committee received 641 separate feedbacks regarding 80 nominees. While a majority of these were positive, 224 raised issues. Some of these were profoundly depressing because they related to the darkest areas of our community life.

At the same time, the Committee was very aware that to exclude someone from the three-day process would be very difficult to deal with for some of the individuals concerned. This is why the Committee examined each of these cases very carefully and had to separate out substantial feedback from mere rumour-mongering or that generated by personal antipathy. In the end, 13 people out of a total of 80 who had received feedback were excluded on the basis of feedback that was considered non-negotiable.

The fact that a group was working intensely upon certain issues had its effect. It prompted some of the individuals concerned to try to resolve matters, while work groups were reminded of matters that they might have relegated to the back burner. For members of the Committee it also threw into stark relief some of the major issues confronting our community today – issues relating, among other things, to different codes of behaviour concerning money, land and power. The Committee felt that certain things had been allowed to drift for many years and that now a certain standard, a line in the sand, needed to be established.

It is not easy to say who is responsible for this drift. Clearly, certain individuals must take responsibility for behaviour that cannot be reconciled with the ideals of Auroville. At the same time, the Feedback Committee became aware that some Working Groups were not taking up their responsibility to stand for certain principles or to bring closure to some issues. Whatever the reasons for this, one consequence was that some of the issues the Feedback Committee had to deal with dated back many years, and this is not healthy either for the individuals concerned or for the community as a whole.

In fact, at times the Committee felt they were in an impossible position. On the one hand they needed to exclude people with serious unresolved issues from the three-day process; on the other hand, they did not know how to advise these individuals to resolve their situation if the Working Groups concerned were proving uncooperative. In fact, sometimes they felt they were doing the dirty work that the Working Groups did not want to deal with.

The work of the Feedback Committee was much appreciated in the community. However, some people expressed concern about the confidentiality issue. They felt that the Committee's decision to allow confidential as well as non-confidential feedback would allow false objections to be raised against an individual under the cloak of confidentiality. It also ran counter to the wish for absolute transparency. The Committee acknowledged this but argued that, in the present climate of Auroville, some people would be afraid to give important feedback because of a fear of repercussions and that these people should be guaranteed some protection. However, while the names of the people who gave confidential feedback were not released, the Committee insisted that all feedback received by them should be signed so that they could carry out a proper review.

Some of those who had been excluded from the three-day process also accused the Committee of discriminating against a section of the local population as, out of the thirteen people excluded, ten had been born in the neighbourhood. But the Committee pointed out that no section of the community had been targeted; that 24 people from the local area, who constituted 30% of the nominees, were free to participate in the three-day process; and that all feedback related only to individuals and had been dealt with by the Committee on an individual basis. In this context, it is worth noting that of the seven members of the Committee, two were born locally and another two come from Tamil Nadu, and that all decisions taken by the Committee were unanimous ones.

Recommendations

In its final report to the community, the Committee made some recommendations. It felt that, if the same selection process were to be followed in the future, the next Temporary Feedback Committee needed to be given more time to do its work. Two weeks is far too short a time to adequately process this volume of feedback, particularly as some of the Working Groups were very slow and disorganized in answering queries.

There was also a sense that some of the people putting themselves forward for inclusion in the Working Committee had not understood the functions of this Committee and the requirements of the work. This information was only given during the three-day process. If it had been given much earlier, probably fewer unsuitable people would have put themselves forward and the workload of the Feedback Committee would have been lightened.

The Committee was also concerned that some of the individuals who were excluded from the selection process this time might run into a similar problem in the future if there was no closure to their issues. This would be unfair. Consequently, Working Groups dealing with an issue affecting an individual Aurovilian should take up the matter and try to reach a conclusion swiftly. When a problem has been resolved, the Group involved should inform the community immediately.

The whole selection process has been a wake-up call for the community. It has highlighted weaknesses in our organizational structure – like major work groups contradicting each other's decisions – as well as certain frustrations and issues that are seriously disrupting our collective life. The Committee recommends that the new Working Committee, Council and the community as a whole make it a priority to resolve issues that are dividing us; and that a forum be put in place where the community can come together to examine these issues with the intention of reaching collective clarity and harmony.

Alan



Feedback process



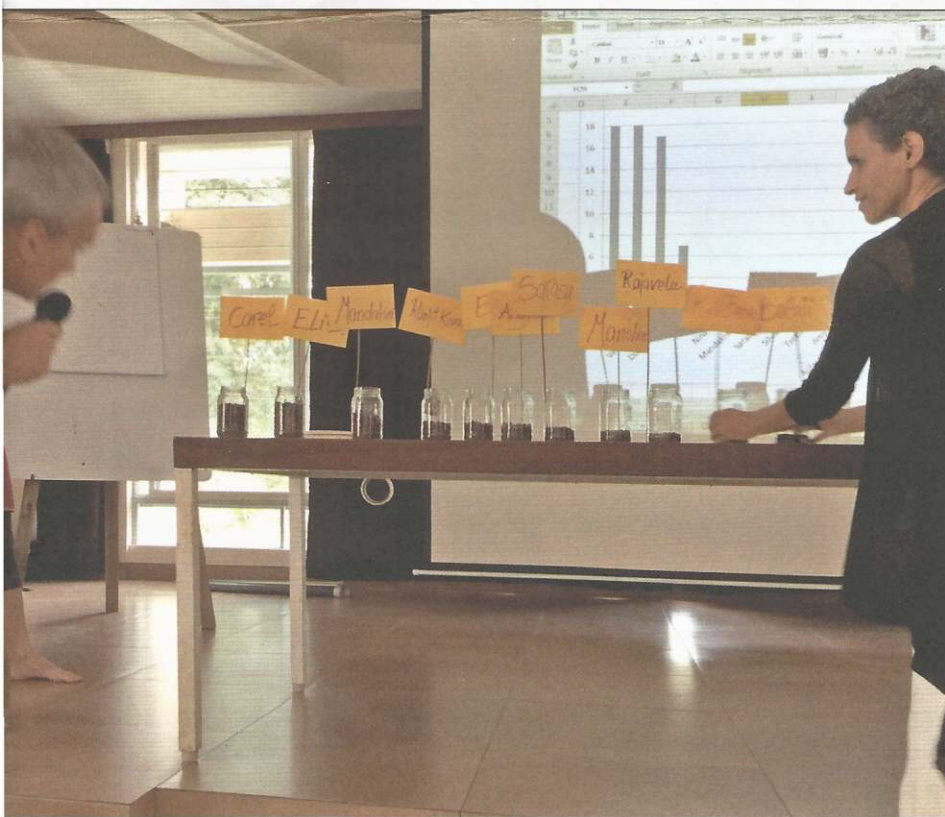
Studying the list of candidates



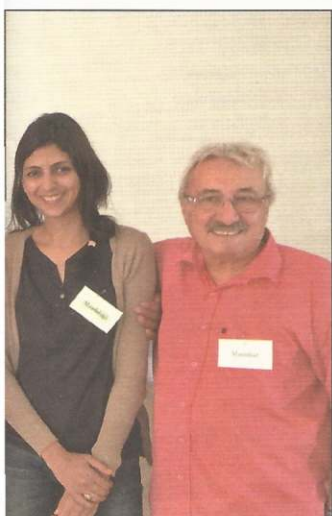
Contemplating the group composition



Contemplating the group composition



Chickpeas in the glass bottles for the two new Council members. Top: comparing the levels of kidney beans for the new Working Committee members



Ranjith Kumar, Ellsa, Manohar



Members of the Council. From left: Guy (new member), Rita, Veronique (new member), Auroanand, Renuka and Sindhuja. Not in picture: Selvam, Matriprasad, Daniel

The Auroville Statistics Initiative

When Prof. Dr. Henk Thomas from The Netherlands and Chartered Accountant Manuel Thomas from Chennai joined forces in 1997 to study the Auroville economy, they embarked on a work which, at that time, nobody in Auroville considered to be of prime importance. But their persistent dedication over a 15-year period paid off. It not only resulted in an impressive economic database of the first 40 years of Auroville's existence but also in the book *Economics for People and Earth. The Auroville Case 1968-2008*, launched in October last year. This book not only gives an overview of Auroville's development, but also gauges Auroville's economic system in the light of its ideals and, most importantly, assesses Auroville's sustainability as a model for a durable socio-economic development.

The initiative for the study had come to some extent from Auroville – there was a formal invitation from the then Economy Task Group and the Funds and Assets Management Committee – but to a much larger extent from Henk himself, with enthusiastic support from the board members of the Dutch Foundation De Zaaier, which Henk at the time chaired. It was thanks to their continuous financial help and strong moral support over the entire 15-year period that this work could be concluded.

Lack of interest in statistics

Auroville, however, has been slow to appreciate the need for statistics. Only a few months after the book was launched, the Budget Coordination Committee refused to give a grant of Rs 3 lakhs (US \$ 5,000) to update the work for the years 2009-2014. [The money was ultimately provided by Stichting Aurolfonds, a private foundation, eds.]

This was not the first time that Auroville showed lack of interest in following up on statistical research. In 2008, the community failed to raise the required co-funding of € 8,800 to do the Second Socio-Economic Survey of Auroville Employees. This survey would show Auroville's impact upon the lives and livelihoods of Auroville's employees, their families and their communities and also the health, education and recreation of women, youth and children. The first Survey had taken place in 2000 in collaboration with the University of Pondicherry, with full financial support from De

Zaaier, and it was the intention that these surveys would take place every seven years. For the Second Survey, De Zaaier had made a contribution of € 10,000, but as the necessary co-funding did not manifest, the money was kept aside. It was ultimately used to print *Economics for People and Earth*. But the Second Survey never happened.

The Auroville statistics initiative

Today, the question of whether Auroville needs a statistical office is extensively being studied. The initiative – again – has not come from any of the Auroville working groups, but – again – from De Zaaier, this time from its new board members who visited Auroville in October 2013. "How can you plan in Auroville without statistics?" was their simple but penetrating question to the town and financial planners, while indicating that De Zaaier might be interested to help fund a statistical office.

It took some time, but in May this year the Budget Coordination Committee and the Town Development Council submitted a joint project proposal to De Zaaier towards the creation of an Auroville Statistical Office (ASO). The project has four phases: phase 1: research; phase 2: setting up the ASO; phase 3: starting operations for Auroville; and phase 4: becoming partially self-supporting, such as by doing custom designed field surveys and data analysis. Funding was sought for phase 1 and for acquiring the appropriate software. The Town Development Council and the Budget Coordination Committee will carry the costs of office infrastructure and running expenses. De Zaaier agreed to sponsor both requests.

The findings of phase 1

On December 10th, Harini, Vikram, Devi and Nidhin presented the result of their research. 23 stakeholders had been interviewed; 44 units and working groups surveyed; and 18 groups had shared data headers.

Most groups acknowledged the need for an ASO. "Currently we have an opinion-driven decision making process. We as a community have to shift to a data-driven decision making process." "Statistics will combat corruption in Auroville by making data transparent and accessible." said those in favour of an ASO. But there were differing views as well: "Statistics fit only to a certain mindset. Numbers are not that important when the thrust is spiritual."

The group also identified the problems of present data collection and preservation: duplication of data; lack of standards; errors in data entry; missing data; no guard against data loss. Even Asyncto, the joint database of the Residents' Service, the Financial Service and the Auroville Electrical Service, suffers from these defects.

The group also observed that some working groups sit on large amounts of often un-analysed data because of poor knowledge and lack of expertise. There is also a possessive attitude towards data and an unwillingness to share.

The researchers are now identifying the appropriate data base technology and software. Finding qualified Aurovilians to run the ASO will be a next step. Amongst its first tasks, the ASO will have to develop a uniform data and information management system, a central data warehouse, and design guidelines for data sharing. The Working Groups will need to be convinced to accept the system. For only then can the ASO start providing statistical support for policy decisions as an independent public community service.

Carel

VILLAGES

Villages clean-up



Students from Kuilapalayam cleaning trash near the temple pond

Kuilapalayam and Edyanchavadi, two of Auroville's neighbouring villages, are in the process of being cleaned up. Over the years, many local schools have created strong eco-clubs which are building environmental awareness by doing environmental programs. One of these is the New Era Secondary School's 'trash-clean up walk' initiated by the students themselves, which has been taking place for the last 10 years.

The clean-up effort has recently started to include many interested adults. In Kuilapalayam, a committee of nine is now directing the Clean Kuilapalayam effort. The team includes a few Aurovilians. On November 23rd, it organized a big event involving students of the Kuilapalayam Trust School, the New Era Secondary School, the Kuilapalayam Cultural Center, the Hygiene Team, and the Yatra Multimedia Center walking the streets picking-up trash and spreading awareness. They began the work early in the morning, joined by a few Aurovilians. Apart from picking-up trash by hand, JCB's and trucks were rolled in to clean major trash areas.

The work will continue in 2015. The team

plans a variety of activities such as installing more waste bins, creating segregation mechanisms, and spreading awareness by screening short films on the subject and encouraging street plays and creative expression. In close cooperation with the village leaders, the effort is to involve as many people as possible to transform their local environment.

Similar to the Clean Kuilapalayam effort, Edyanchavadi now too has a youth group called the Edyanchavadi Green Campaign. It all started when the volleyball team took a dip in the village temple pond. Ramanan, one of the group members, explained how uneasy they all felt "swimming in the junk". They started to clean the pond. "We were around 6-10 people. Later that evening we discussed how we could sustain this activity. That's how our cleaning campaign got started. We decided to clean every Sunday morning."

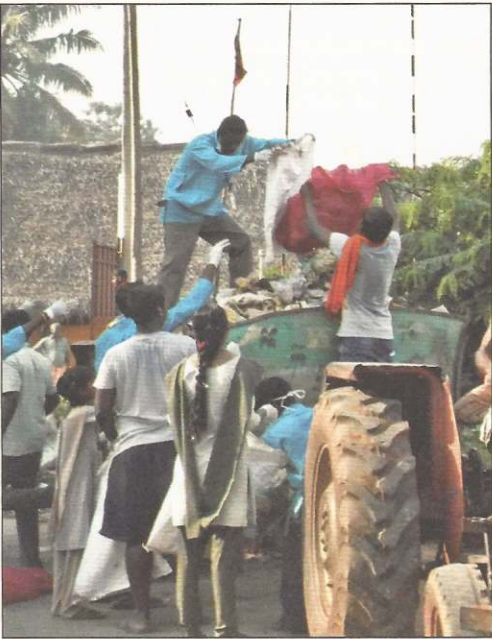
The numbers of participants fluctuate, but usually there are in the range of 12-20, from different age groups. Their current work is to clean public spaces to show their serious commitment to a clean environment. Their long term plan is, as the boys put it, "to do much more work to convince and get support from the community."

They want to create a segregation unit, work on tree planting, encourage household herbal gardens and improve the public toilet facilities. At present they don't receive any support. "We are managing ourselves and do our own funding. So everything will happen slowly. To start the segregation unit, we have started a trash survey. Also, we have to get rid of the sources of plastic. We are finding it difficult to collect enough tools to clean the waste. We hope we can extend our efforts to other villages in the future, but first we have to set an example here."

There are many ideas, but as with any positive movement, this cause calls for the participation and support of many, many more. Both teams look forward to working together one day in the effort not only to clean their immediate areas, but to extend their movement further into their neighbouring bio-region.

Kavitha

For more information contact: edayanchavadygreencampaign@gmail.com



Loading trash on a cart

Population statistics 2014

Question: what's new about our 2014 population statistics? Answer: virtually nothing. The Indian population has increased by less than 3%, the German nationals number a few more, the French a few less, but these three nations still make up two thirds of our so-called 'international' community. The Spanish, Belgians, Israelis, South Africans and Chinese increased their representation, but not by vast amounts, three Portuguese and the lone New Zealander disappeared off the radar, while the Americans, Dutch and many other nationalities continue to be stuck in the population doldrums. The one new entry is two people from Rwanda. Perhaps this is the beginning of a surge from the African continent.

The total population increased by 69, as against an increase of 62 last year. This gives a population growth rate of around 3%. At this rate, it will take a yuga or two to reach the target of 50,000, so perhaps we should put on hold those plans for 6 lane highways in the city.

As for the male-female ratio, males (1231) continue to outnumber the females (1169) of the species, but not by a significant amount.

Why does our population continue to stagnate? Is it due to the lack of or cost of housing? The high cost of living in Auroville? Is it our contracting economy or dysfunctional governance system? Do young, idealistic people no longer find us cutting edge and so look elsewhere for interesting experiments in human unity or ecological restoration or alternative life styles?

Or are we simply not living up to the ideals that Mother has placed before us? Have we lost faith in the Dream, or our ability to realize it, and so are on the way to becoming very 'ordinary'?

Food for thought...

Alan

Auroville Population by Nationality				
Nationality	Nov. 11	Dec. 12	Dec. 13	Dec. 14
Indian	951	961	997	1025
French	332	334	331	340
German	235	228	219	221
Italian	116	120	139	142
Dutch	86	84	85	87
American	80	75	86	86
Russian	55	61	65	63
Spanish	42	44	46	50
British	41	41	42	45
Swiss	45	42	41	41
Israeli	37	35	31	39
Belgian	26	28	28	35
Korean	38	34	34	32
Swedish	20	23	24	23
Canadian	19	19	22	23
Ukrainian	15	15	15	17
Australian	13	14	15	17
South African	7	8	8	12
Chinese	0	7	7	11
Argentinian	7	8	9	9
Japanese	7	7	9	9
Austrian	8	8	8	8
Hungarian	5	5	5	6
Slovene	6	6	6	5
Uzbekistan	0	0	5	5
Brazilian	5	5	4	4
Danish	1	4	4	4
Latvian	2	4	4	4
Mexican	4	4	4	4
Belorussian	3	3	3	4
Tibetan	5	6	5	3
Nepali	3	3	3	3
Sri Lankan	4	4	2	2
Bulgarian	3	3	3	2
Colombian	2	3	2	2
Moldovian	1	2	2	2
Ethiopian	2	1	1	2
Rwandese	0	0	0	2
Iceland	5	5	3	1
Algerian	1	1	1	1
Ecuador	1	1	1	1
Egyptian	1	1	1	1
Finnish	1	1	1	1
Irish	1	1	1	1
Kazakh	1	1	1	1
Philippines	0	1	1	1
Czech	0	0	1	1
Iranian	0	0	1	1
Lithuanian	0	0	1	1
Portuguese	3	3	3	0
Estonian	2	2	0	0
Greek	1	1	0	0
New Zealander	0	1	1	0
Taiwan	2	1	0	0
Total	2245	2269	2331	2400

Kindling the Viewless Fire

We suddenly find ourselves living in an age where it looks as if a colossal cupboard has opened containing previously hidden problems and all are falling out at an accelerated tempo. To name a few: environmental degradation of water and soil, overpopulation, poverty, food shortages, gender inequality, drug trafficking, corruption, terrorism. The threat of terrorism has become the dominant global issue.

"For Nature is slow and patient in her methods. She takes up ideas and half carries them out, then drops them by the wayside to resume them in some future era with a better combination. She tempts humanity, her thinking instrument, and tests how far it is ready for the harmony she has imagined; she allows and incites man to attempt and fail, so that he may learn and succeed better another time."

In an increased tempo, because the time and the moment have arrived, the Yoga of Nature is now initiating the stage for major changes and external readjustments. And what is the change that is being asked of us?

"The solution lies not in the reason but in the soul of man, in its spiritual tendencies."

Humanity as whole is being offered the opportunity to evolve from being a 'thinking instrument' towards becoming an intuitive instrument, and this is no small change.

As an individual at the age of 18, I encountered the writings of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. I received that amazing Grace of having Mother's darshan at 21. Despite "the anguish of the soul's long strife" experienced during my 65 years, I ardently practice kindling the viewless Fire.

We all receive a portion of the Highest, a tiny flame lodged within; this tiny eternal flame is hidden and veiled. A major part of our effort and early travels is connected with re-discovering and kindling this essential messenger and go-between, the viewless Fire, which provides the bridge between the Highest and mankind. Likewise, we are all given certain hurdles to solve during our life span. Those are weaknesses or darker facets in our character. Discovering those flaws, and consequently trying to transform them, is an individual task, long and hard, but essential for making a contribution towards establishing more Light and Truth within our-

selves during our stay upon earth.

"Heaven we always possessed, but not the earth, and the aim of my yoga is to make, in the words of the Veda, heaven and earth equal and one."

It's a discipline in the beginning to repeat a simple Mantra. Gradually it becomes easier; and eventually a time arrives when the words repeat themselves during moments of silence or when there is an open space in the daily routine of the nonstop action of the mind. It's like the equipment used to drive piles into the ground at construction sites. It bangs a pillar deeper and deeper into the soil in order to provide a safe foundation for a building. Repeating a mantra helps one to go deeper and deeper within oneself, cleaning the dark spaces while helping to establish clarity, truthfulness and the perception of the full circle instead of only a segment. This repeated action always goes together with noise, smoke and setbacks, just like what happens on a construction site.

It is useful to invoke and invite Mother and Sri Aurobindo to enter your inner space and ask for protection and help. The more sincere and

intense the request is made, the more effective the help and protection becomes.

To overcome persistent difficulties, weaknesses, shortcomings, Mother and Sri Aurobindo mentioned again and again a simple remedy: offer your difficulty to the Light, with honesty and sincerity. Don't try to wrestle with it on the mental level because the weakness will beat you hands down.

Offering one's difficulties to the Light means that Agni takes up within us the task of bringing its Light not only into the 'higher regions' of our being but also into the 'lower regions', since it works in a hidden way in both regions simultaneously. Most of our difficulties are embedded in the sink of our evolutionary past, the Vast without Light, the period connected with the creation of the world, which still makes up part of our being. We can request Agni to work in that region to break up the rock, the hurdles, and bring Light and Truth into that part of us that is still connected with the Vast Darkness.

In this 'chaordic' period it is imperative to kindle the viewless Fire within oneself, so that "At last the struggling Energy can emerge".

Tency

PASSING

Prema

On 17th December, Prema (Adelina Intanno) passed away. She was 68 years old and had been fighting a terminal ailment for two years.

Prema, who was born in Argentina, came to Auroville in 1979. She had been flying from Mexico City to Paris when a lady approached her. "What are you doing in life?" she asked. "I'm searching," Prema replied. "And what are you searching for?" "I don't know, but I will know it if I find it." Then the lady said, "I know what you are searching for, you are searching for your place. And your place is Auroville." This lady gave her the address of AVI France. There Prema found the book, *The Mother* by Sri Aurobindo. As soon as she read the first sentence

"There are two powers that alone can effect in their conjunction the great and difficult thing which is the aim of our endeavour; a fixed and unfailing aspiration that calls from below and a supreme grace from above that answers."



in Prema's words "my world turned completely round. I continued reading and all the answers to the questions that I couldn't even formulate before were there in this small book. Finally I understood what I had been searching for".

Her first work was helping Narad in the Matrimandir Nursery, later she worked on the Matrimandir construction. Prema had been trained in fashion design and in the early 1980s she decided to open a garment unit. "It was a deep need to express myself on a material plane."

Auromode, which specialised in hand-painted silk garments, became one of Auroville's most successful commercial units, employing over 100 people and becoming one of the most important contributors to Auroville's economy. "I have come to consider money as a manifestation of Beauty on the material plane," she explained, "of welfare and progress in matter itself".

In recent years, due to the global recession, Auromode struggled to

remain profitable. But she wouldn't consider laying off her workers. "They are wonderful – for 30 years they have taken care of me and I take care of them."

She was not blind to the present deficiencies in the community and she was clear about what has to change. "For me, it's very simple. Once and for all we have to transcend the very ordinary consciousness in which we are drowning. It is the only solution both for us and for the planet. Huge forces are acting to prevent the Dream being realized. In spite of all this, I remain optimistic about the future of Auroville and of the world. After all, Mother said Auroville is already there..."

We will remember her for her indomitable spirit of idealism and for the beauty she brought into our lives.

On 21st a meditation for Prema was held at the Banyan Tree. She was buried in Adventure on Monday, 22nd December.

Alan

Veenapani Chawla

Theatre artist Veenapani Chawla, one of Auroville's most dynamic neighbours, passed away on November 30 after suffering a heart attack following a pulmonary embolism. She was only 67 years old.

Veenapani was the founder, artistic director and managing trustee of the Adishakti Laboratory for Theatre Arts & Research (ALTAR), a trust that owns and runs the Adishakti campus opposite Auro-Orchard. It has artists' residences, a guest house and a small theatre, which is well-known to many Aurovilians.

Veenapani created Adishakti in 1981 as a theatre company in Mumbai. Its main activity then was to create performances that were already scripted. But that did not satisfy her. In 1983, she started including research as a part of Adishakti's activities, out of a need to create a new language for contemporary performance. It became the driving force. "We are not interested in performing in the traditional ways. Instead, we attempt to learn from India's rich theatre tradition and, with different effect, create our own contemporary language," she said. It came to include other disciplines, such as cinema, martial arts, dance and music, and even extended to the study of sciences such as the new physics to better understand traditional Indian figures such as Siva's Ardhanarisvara half man and half woman form. The objective was to create an integrated piece of art where the boundaries of theatre are fading into some-

thing else. Veenapani called this 'the synaesthesia of art forms', leading to what she believed to be the most definitive art. Her artists, all of whom had followed a traditional career, enthusiastically embraced this new phase of their development in plays such as *Impressions of Bhima* (1994), *Brhannala* (1998), *The Hanuman Ramayana* (2011), and, recently, *The Tenth Head* (2013). Veenapani directed most of them. Many of her works also toured India and were performed in Europe and the USA.

In 1993, Adishakti shifted base to a plot of land near Auroville. With the help of many grants, slowly a campus took shape, with a small theatre as centre piece. Adishakti became a research centre for performance arts, hosting residency programmes, retreats and workshops for artists from all over the world.

A close interaction with Auroville followed, with all of Adishakti's productions premiered at Bharat Nivas. "Auroville," she once said, "is Adishakti's 'testing ground'. 'The Auroville audience, critical as it is, is an essential first test for anything new I have to offer. And I benefit from all the experiments going on in Auroville.'" But Adishakti was also open to many other art forms and



Aurovilians would regularly be invited to unique performances of highly qualified dancers, musicians and theatre artists, all free of charge. For though administratively separate, Veenapani always felt inwardly to be part

of Auroville. She had met The Mother in 1969, a meeting which she described as "falling in love forever". The reason for not joining Auroville, she said, was that she did not want to be part of an institution and give up her freedom.

"Veenapani's demise won't affect the functioning of Adishakti," says Vinay Kumar, one of the resident artists and trustees of ALTAR, "for she had organized the second and third tier management some time ago in case something would happen to her. Adishakti will continue giving workshops and retreats and the tradition of premiering new productions at Bharat Nivas will be maintained. For, like Veenapani, all resident artists of Adishakti feel inwardly they belong to Auroville."

Veenapani received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Puruskar for Theatre Director in 2011. Her work has been

documented in the book *India: The Theatre of Veenapani Chawla – Theory, Practice and Performance*, edited by Shanta Gokhale and published by Oxford University Press this year.

Carel

Combatting alcoholism

Shankar, who was born in a local village, has been a member of the Auroville community for many years. Among his present responsibilities is looking after a dairy herd. But perhaps his most important work today is his attempt to combat alcoholism in the local villages through his work with Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Here he tells his story.

Alcohol in the villages

Alcoholism is really a major problem in the local villages, and it is getting worse. Twenty years ago only older people were drinking, and they would drink only in the evening. But today people drink at any time, on any occasion, and boys as young as 13 or 14 are drinking. They don't feel guilty about doing this; they want to show they are mature. All this is happening because we are no longer following our cultural standards. There used to be great respect for age but this is no longer so. Children do not respect their mothers and fathers and there is no discipline.

Today there are robberies and harassment in the village and on the roads around; before this was very rare. The widespread drinking has definitely made this worse. I have spoken to criminals. Most of the time when they are involved with crimes they are drunk because it gives them courage.

Alcohol is cheaper in Pondicherry State than anywhere else in India. In this area we have liquor shops in many of the local villages which are in Pondicherry State, so it is very easy to obtain alcohol. When people start to drink, they normally begin with beer, but then they progress to brandy and other liquor. The final stage is drinking arrack, which is very cheap and very destructive.

The alcoholic's downward path

I know all this because I am a recovering alcoholic, although I have been sober for seven years. I know the pain, the feelings of what they are doing when they are drinking alcohol. You don't want to go to work because you smell of alcohol, and anyway you are not eating well so you cannot work. However, you need money to buy alcohol. So you start borrowing from friends on some pretence, then you cannot repay them, so you spoil all your relationships. This makes it worse. When I couldn't



Shankar

face a problem I needed the alcohol just to forget.

Drinking causes big problems in the family. If my wife gave me money to buy ten kilos of rice, I would buy only eight and spend the rest on alcohol. If I didn't have money and my wife didn't give me money for drink, I would fight with her.

I can very clearly remember how it started. My father was drinking heavily and there were always fights between him and my mother. We children were very scared of my father because when he came fully drunk he didn't know what he was doing. It is very damaging to the family, and I told myself that I would never become like that; that I would never drink.

But it is like a family disease, it is in my blood. I started drinking with friends, just for fun. Once a month we would buy a bottle of beer, and five of us would share it. Then gradually I drank more, and soon it was never enough. I started drinking brandy, and then I went on to arrack. In the end, I couldn't even drink anymore. Physically I was in very bad shape, I could not eat anything and I was shaking and very nervous.

My brother took me to the Health Centre and to PIMS hospital, but they could not do anything for me. I was in the last stages.

Hospital treatment

Luckily, Auroville teachers saw that my children were coming late to school or not at all, and they found out what was happening. They wanted to help me so they sent people from this group called 'What we can do for Auroville' to ask me to go for treatment. But at first I wouldn't listen to

them. I thought I could manage my life.

Then Arun my brother found out there was a hospital in Chennai, TTK, which specializes in treatment for alcoholism and drugs. At first, there was no place. I had to wait for 40 days and I was really on the edge of madness. I could hear sounds, I could hear people calling me, but there was nobody there. One time I thought somebody was planning to kill me, so I ran to the Pondicherry Police Station and asked them to put me in jail because there I thought I would be safe.

Finally, I got admission to TTK hospital with the help of my brother and the Auroville Council. Some Higher Power had given them an indication that this guy is suffering and needs help.

I had to stay 26 days in the hospital. The first three days they do detox. They also gave me tablets which made me vomit if I tried to drink alcohol. We were not allowed to go outside the hospital grounds, but we could buy any amount of food, only no cigarettes, beedies or alcohol. They wake you up at 5 o'clock, you do some yoga exercises, after breakfast there is counselling. Everybody has a counselor. They don't confront you, they help you to confront yourself. What happens is that all 60 people of the people under treatment sit together and share stories about their alcohol addiction. It was amazing. Every story was about something that had happened to me. So we all realized we were not the only one with these problems, and we began to accept our condition rather than denying it: before then we had been hiding it behind a screen. Suddenly the pain, the suffering, was shared. This really gave me strength.

At the end of each week, some recovering alcoholics would come in and get a medal from the authorities. They would speak about how they were now and how they had been before. What the changes were and how they were respected now in their communities and in their families. This really gave us hope, because we saw it was possible for us to change.

The Alcoholics Anonymous programme

After 26 days we had to leave the hospital. I wanted to stay there because I feared that if I met my old friends the whole thing would start again. But the counselors gave us good advice. Among other things, they said avoid your old friends, don't go to marriages at night, which is when the drinking happens, but only in the morning and with your wife. I took their advice and never started drinking again.

These counselors also told us about the Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) programme and advised us to join it. The contact they gave me was in Cuddalore but then I was told there was an AA person in Auroville. When I contacted this person and said I needed help, there was immediately a big 'yes'. That was really my spark. I began going to

regular meetings in Auroville and an AA member also took me every Sunday to the Pondicherry AA meeting, even though, as a foreigner, he couldn't understand a word of what was being said. He just wanted to help.

The AA meetings really gave me strength and hope. I like the meetings because when I go there they do not ask anything; they really welcome me from the heart and make me feel I am in a safe place. People share their own experiences but we do not talk about them outside.

Awareness of the problem is definitely growing. When we started meeting in Auroville there were only four or five regulars, now there are six or seven and a lot of other people attend some meetings. Alcoholism is a problem in Auroville as well. The Pondicherry AA meeting, which began with only two or three of us, now has 15-20 people coming every Sunday. Meanwhile new groups have formed. I and another member have started a second Pondicherry meeting and two other people have started one in Muthialpet. There is also a treatment centre in Mudaliachavady called Concern.

The message goes out

The idea is that every AA member should give a message to others in need: there is a 12 step programme (see box). The organizers let people know their phone number so that people can call them, and in some places they also put up posters.

The Auroville AA group is entirely open so villagers are welcome. Some Auroville units have referred workers with an alcohol problem to the meeting. Also, people can join who do not have an alcohol problem but have a relation who is alcoholic. There is also a meeting in Pondicherry exclusively for people who are not alcoholics but who have an alcoholic in the family (the Alanom group). This is a programme to help the family help the alcoholic because without them no alcoholic can succeed: the family is the foundation.

In Kulpalayam about seven people have become sober as a result of having come to our meeting; in my village, Edyanachavady, three people have recovered. These are not big numbers, but when others see how these people have changed, they may also come forward. This is the key. I am very much an example in my village because the people remember how bad I was and they see how I am now. I have recovered my respect and the respect of my wife and family. Every day somebody from the village phones me, every second or third day people are coming to my house to ask how they can stop drinking. I tell them they need to get the treatment or to go to an AA meeting.

I'm very happy that I'm in Auroville. If I had not been here, I would be dead as I would not have got this help. I really want to thank the founders of AA in Auroville; they are doing a great work.

I am happy that God has given me this new life. I am like a child who has been reborn.

From an interview by Alan

THEATRE

The odd couple

In mid December Aurovilians enjoyed a production of *The Odd Couple* by Neil Simon. Oscar, (played by Otto), a sloppy sportswriter, and the neurotically-fastidious Felix, (Krishna) strain their friendship to the limit when they become roommates. Oscar finally throws Felix out, only to discover that Felix is moving in with the desirable Pigeon sisters upstairs.

Directed by Francesca, this was a strong production. Otto embodied the slovenly Oscar well – although he cannot compete with the lugubrious humour of Walter Matthau in the film version – while Krishna was an able if somewhat less convincing Felix. The poker buddies (Lyle, Charu,



PHOTO:IRENO

A scene from 'The odd Couple': Felix (played by Krishna) and Oscar (played by Otto) in disagreement

Richard and Hamish) and the Pigeon sisters (Kripa and Elke) give less scope for characterization but were also well played.

Given the ridiculously rich

comic potential of Auroville, perhaps one day we will be applauding a first-rate comedy about Aurovilians...

Alan

The twelve steps of Alcoholics Anonymous

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory, and when we were wrong, promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

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