

Auroville Today

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The Africa Connection



The African Drumming Session at the site for the Africa pavilion

With 55 countries, about 3,000 ethnic groups and about 2,000 languages, Africa is a continent of massive diversity. It is said that the genetic difference between two Africans is often more than the genetic difference between a Chinese and a Czech. Therefore, representing Africa and its diversity is critical to the project of human unity that is Auroville. *Auroville Today* caught up with Tahir Kedir, one of the project holders, to understand the past, present and likely future of the Africa Pavilion.

Tell us a little bit about yourself, where you grew up, your family. How did you come to Auroville?

I was born in Shashamane, a town about 250 kms from Addis Ababa, the capital of Ethiopia. I was raised within a very large family and my father, mother, brothers and sisters were a major influence on me. My father was engaged with many aspects of life in our town – religion, farming and business – which taught me a lot about the various elements of the society.

The community I was raised in was religiously diverse and harmonious. Islam, Christianity, Judaism and others were all present but I found that I couldn't identify with one exclusively. Instead I learned about all of them and found respect for the assortment of religions and belief systems surrounding me. I believe this is what led me to develop myself spiritually. I recognised all religions as one and took as my focus a type of Divine force, which could take several shapes and forms. For example, it could take the form of nature. At this point, I began to imagine a place like Auroville, filled with diverse peoples living in peace and unity with one another, even though I had not heard of the place yet.

At a Red Cross conference in Ethiopia in 2011, I learned about Auroville for the first time. I felt that my values and spiritual intention were aligned with the Auroville dream and I was very keen to participate in the development of the town. I first came here in 2012. Initially I visited for a six-month period, then came back for six more months, and on my third visit I stayed for a full year. After that I returned to Ethiopia, and attempted to take the Auroville life and values with me and embed them into my lifestyle there, but it didn't work. I was back in Auroville within one and a half months of leaving. That was in 2013 and I have been here ever since.

In Ethiopia, I had studied ecological architecture and sustainable building practices, which have remained my passion. In Auroville, I started out working at the Bamboo Centre and then at Sacred Groves

as a coordinator and part of the Core Group. Currently Eric Clapton and I are the Project Holders at the Africa Pavilion, which has been a big responsibility and a dream.

How and when did the idea of the Africa Pavilion start? What are some of the key events that led to it?

In Sri Aurobindo's writings, especially in his poem entitled 'Hail to the Fallen' dedicated to Haile Selassie, he expressed great admiration and sympathy for Africa. The Mother was of Egyptian-African origin too, so these are the subtle beginnings of Africa in Auroville.

More concretely, the relationship began early on in Auroville's history, in 1966, when the Indian Government presented the plan for the town at a UNESCO conference and generated interest from Africa. Then came the Auroville Inauguration Ceremony in 1968 where significant support came from Africa – almost a third of the countries participating were from the continent.

Tekeste Kidan from Ethiopia was a of critical importance when it came to connecting Auroville and Africa. He was a diplomat serving in the Department of Foreign Affairs in India and it was there that he heard of Auroville. Eventually he visited the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, and established a written correspondence with the Mother. After his first visit to Pondicherry, he reported back to Africa's world-level statesman, Imperial Majesty Haile Selassie of Ethiopia and to Archbishop Dioskoros of Ethiopia, a highly regarded spiritual leader, about the plans for Auroville. In turn, both these leaders wrote to the Mother. These were the first Africans to express in writing to the Mother their support for the ideals of Auroville. The Mother was deeply pleased by their support and blessed Africa and the African people very much.

It was proposed in 2002 that there should be a space for Africa in the International Zone for increasing the awareness of all African nations and for the participation of Africans in Auroville. It was also hoped that the pavilion would symbolise the spiritual realisation of the unity of Africa. The plans were sent to UNESCO and to African leaders. Tekeste formed many relationships with leaders across the continent as well as in the USA and introduced to them the concept

of Auroville. You can refer to Tekeste's book, *"Towards Tomorrow – Auroville & Africa, A Journey Towards the Future"*, to read his letters to Haile Selassie and to leaders such as Kofi Annan and Nelson Mandela as well as to learn about the development of Africa-Auroville relations.

After Tekeste's retirement in 1999, he came and settled in Auroville. He was a driving force of the work of the Africa Pavilion and was very active in trying to integrate his continent into Auroville.

Africa is a very large and diverse continent. How are you thinking about representing this diversity?

Africa is indeed extremely diverse but there are commonalities and themes across the continent and we can work with these to share with our community the spirit and experience of African life. Every Monday we have an African dinner with African tribal music. In Africa, food is a central part of the life, in families and communities, who sit in a circle and eat together from the same plate. We lovingly prepare food for everyone – but only one meal as it is not supposed to be like a restaurant but a community or family event.

Music and drumming also are highly significant across Africa, so every Thursday evening we host the African Drumming Session, a bonfire and an African dinner. I consider this as one of the really special offerings of Africa Pavilion in terms of sharing the culture of the continent. In Africa, the drum is important, not only to the body and the brain, but also to the soul. The vibrations are cleansing and liberating, connecting us to the earth through our own heartbeats and the wider atmosphere. We generate peace in our surroundings with the drumming sounds, it

isn't just music. We use the drumming session to let go of the week behind us, to release tensions within and around us, and to come back to a place of positivity and peace. We begin and end the session in a circle and every week we are a group from all over the world. It's a beautiful, joyful, shared experience and I would encourage everyone to come, join in, dance, listen quietly, however they feel they wish to participate. It begins at 7pm every Thursday and runs until about 9.30pm.

continued on page 3



Tahir Kedir

• On seizing the spiritual in poetry

• The work of the Auroville Residents' Assembly

pages 2-3

• Auroville's raison d'être and how to achieve it

• Creating public canvases – painting street art in Auroville

pages 4-6

• In memoriam Michael Redbeard

• Passings: Tekeste Zerhanes, Yolande Lemoine, Damien Hedley, Luciano Gemo

page 7

• News in brief

• From St. Stephen's to Future School

• Book review: Under the Banyan

pages 7-8

All the birds of Oxfordshire

On seizing the spiritual in poetry

There is nothing which gives you a joy equal to that of gratitude. One hears a bird sing, sees a lovely flower, looks at a little child, observes an act of generosity, reads a beautiful sentence, looks at the setting sun, no matter what, suddenly this comes upon you, this kind of emotion – indeed so deep, so intense – that the world manifests the Divine, that there is something behind the world which is the Divine.

The Mother

There is a whole spectrum of poetry that is the outpouring of spiritual experience, from simple lines that hint at something spiritually experienced to poems from some plane above the mind, that have simply used the poet as an instrument.

My good friend and mentor Sonia Dyne has pointed out that so-called ‘spiritual poetry’ does not have to deal specifically with ‘spiritual’ themes: it can be a celebration of nature, an expression of religious belief, or simply a deeply felt outpouring of emotional response without any intellectual quality as in purely devotional poetry. The essential thing is recognition, overt or implied, of a hidden oneness uniting all human life with the life around us in Nature and the poet’s response of wonder and awe or delight or gratitude.

There seems to be a type of spiritual poetry where the spiritual is understated, restrained, almost covert. Consider Edward Thomas’s poem ‘Adlestrop’

*Yes, I remember Adlestrop –
The name, because one afternoon
Of heat the express-train drew up there
Unwontedly. It was late June.*

*The steam hissed. Someone cleared his throat.
No one left and no one came
On the bare platform. What I saw
Was Adlestrop – only the name*

*And willows, willow-herb, and grass,
And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry,
No whit less still and lonely fair
Than the high cloudlets in the sky.*

*And for that minute a blackbird sang
Close by, and round him, mistier,
Farther and farther, all the birds
Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.*

A matter-of-fact description of the station scene observed from the train that has stopped there is followed by Thomas tuning into the sound of birdsong, starting nearby with a blackbird, but then hearing the chorus of ‘all the birds of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire’, a physical impossibility but in the wider state of consciousness he has entered, a different and more sublime sense of reality unbounded by the specific and literal. Ó million d’oiseaux! This is the touch of the spiritual that can invade us in a silent moment of true experience of nature and is perhaps felt by many without even realising it or considering that it has been in any way a spiritual experience.

Or even more understated, consider ‘Early One Morning’ by the Auroville poet Navoditte (Norman Thomas):

*The sun got up; so did I,
slow and cosy, half in sleep.
Stumbling out, I sat upon the step:
receiving nothing from the night
I expected nothing from the day.
There was a tree in flower,
A scratching dog,
the sun was shining on the sea.
But then, at half-past by the clock,
the world turned over....flip!...
and changed all that.
And when it all had settled down,
resplendently I saw:
a tree in flower,
a scratching dog,
and the sun O shining on the sea.*

Navoditte describes, in a simple, matter-of-fact way, the experience of waking up, still sleepy, observing what he sees. But then quite suddenly he has an experience at some undescribed other level that totally and resplendently transforms the same scene. He does not describe what he has experienced, only its after-effects.

Henry Reed’s ‘The Naming of Parts’ presents an experience in which we are amusingly confronted with the banality of our normal, adult world whilst yet we find ourselves simultaneously being aware of a truer, more beautiful world around us.

*Today we have naming of parts. Yesterday,
We had daily cleaning. And tomorrow morning,
We shall have what to do after firing. But today,
Today we have naming of parts. Japonica
Glistens like coral in all the neighboring gardens,
And today we have naming of parts.*

*This is the lower sling swivel. And this
Is the upper sling swivel, whose use you will see,
When you are given your slings. And this is the
piling swivel,
Which in your case you have not got. The branches
Hold in the gardens their silent, eloquent gestures,
Which in our case we have not got.*

*This is the safety-catch, which is always released
With an easy flick of the thumb. And please do not
let me
See anyone using his finger. You can do it quite
easy
If you have any strength in your thumb. The blossoms
Are fragile and motionless, never letting anyone
see
Any of them using their finger.*

*And this you can see is the bolt. The purpose of
this
Is to open the breech, as you see. We can slide it
Rapidly backwards and forwards: we call this
Easing the spring. And rapidly backwards and
forwards
The early bees are assaulting and fumbling the
flowers:
They call it easing the Spring.*

Consider now Dylan Thomas’ well-known poem ‘Fern Hill’

*Now as I was young and easy under the apple
boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass
was green,
The night above the dingle starry,
Time let me hail and climb
Golden in the heydays of his eyes,
And honoured among waggon I was prince of the
apple towns
And once below a time I lordly had the trees and
leaves
Trail with daisies and barley
Down the rivers of the windfall light.
And as I was green and carefree, famous among
the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was
home,
In the sun that is young once only,
Time let me play and be
Golden in the mercy of his means,
And green and golden I was huntsman and herds-
man, the calves
Sang to my horn, the foxes on the hills barked
clear and cold,
And the sabbath rang slowly
In the pebbles of the holy streams.
All the sun long it was running, it was lovely, the
hay
Fields high as the house, the tunes from the chim-
neys, it was air
And playing, lovely and watery
And fire green as grass.
And nightly under the simple stars
As I rode to sleep the owls were bearing the farm
away,
All the moon long I heard, blessed among stables,
the nightjars
Flying with the ricks, and the horses
Flashing into the dark.
And then to awake, and the farm, like a wanderer
white
With the dew, come back, the cock on his shoul-
der: it was all
Shining, it was Adam and maiden,
The sky gathered again
And the sun grew round that very day.
So it must have been after the birth of the simple
light
In the first, spinning place, the spellbound horses
walking warm
Out of the whymying green stable*

*On to the fields of praise.
And honoured among foxes and pheasants by the
gay house
Under the new made clouds and happy as the
heart was long,
In the sun born over and over,
I ran my heedless ways,
My wishes raced through the house high hay
And nothing I cared, at my sky blue trades, that
time allows
In all his tuneful turning so few and such morning
songs
Before the children green and golden
Follow him out of grace,
Nothing I cared, in the lamb white days, that time
would take me
Up to the swallow thronged loft by the shadow of
my hand,
In the moon that is always rising,
Nor that riding to sleep
I should hear him fly with the high fields
And wake to the farm forever fled from the child-
less land.
Oh as I was young and easy in the mercy of his
means,
Time held me green and dying
Though I sang in my chains like the sea.*

Would you have thought of this as a spiritual poem? Yet it is a psychic cry for the lost glory and innocence of childhood and a statement of defiance against what seems like the imprisonment of the adult world.

But what is the difference between the psychic and the spiritual overhead planes? Sri Aurobindo from *Letters on Poetry and Art*: “The tone of the psychic is different from that of the overhead planes – it has less of greatness, power, wideness, more of a smaller sweetness, delicate beauty; there is an intense beauty of emotion, a fine subtlety of true perception, an intimate language. The expression “sweetness and light” can very well be applied to the psychic as the kernel of its nature. The spiritual plane, when it takes up these things, gives them a wider utterance, a greater splendour of light, a stronger sweetness, a breath of powerful authority, strength and space.”

Amal Kiran was a poet at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram whose significant talents were lovingly nurtured by Sri Aurobindo himself. In his poem ‘This Errant Life’, Amal yearns for ‘sky-lucent bliss’, the pure high spiritual experiences which are at the summits of the overhead spiritual planes and yet still pleads, with an intensity of psychic emotion, for the Divine to express the love Amal yearns for in actual human experience.

*This errant life is dear although it dies;
And human lips are sweet though they but sing
Of stars estranged from us; and youth’s emprise
Is wondrous yet, although an unsure thing.*

*Sky-lucent Bliss untouched by earthiness!
I fear to soar lest tender bonds decrease.
If Thou desirest my weak self to outgrow
Its mortal longings, lean down from above,
Temper the unborn light no thought can trace,
Suffuse my mood with a familiar glow.
For ‘tis with mouth of clay I supplicate:
Speak to me heart to heart words intimate,
And all Thy formless glory turn to love
And mould Thy love into a human face.*

Perhaps the most sublime, the perfect perfection of spiritual poetry is *Savitri*, which Sri Aurobindo wrote over a period of forty years, regularly revising the poem as his own consciousness rose to ever higher levels. This poetry is “The lines that tear the veil from Deity’s face”

In *Savitri* we have the detailed record of Sri Aurobindo’s inner journey, of his experiences in all the subtle and occult worlds. It is an account of the events and process of the transformation of human consciousness. But *Savitri* is also a poem that relishes in the joy of language whilst still depicting events and observations of life and nature seen both from the here and now and yet simultaneously seen from ‘some eternal eye’, rising to poetic magnificence with lines like:

*I caught for some eternal eye
The sudden kingfisher flashing to a darkling pool*

Now consider these lines from Book Three, Canto Four of *Savitri*, which seem to describe in symbolic terms the current chaos of the world and

might be considered to be prophetic of the events that they are in process of leading to:

*I know that thy creation cannot fail:
For even through the mists of mortal thought
Infallible are thy mysterious steps,
And, though Necessity dons the garb of Chance,
Hidden in the blind shifts of Fate she keeps
The slow calm logic of Infinity’s pace
And the inviolate sequence of its will.
All life is fixed in an ascending scale
And adamantine is the evolving Law;
In the beginning is prepared the close.
This strange irrational product of the mire,
This compromise between the beast and god,
Is not the crown of thy miraculous world.
I know there shall inform the inconscient cells,
At one with Nature and at height with heaven,
A spirit vast as the containing sky
And swept with ecstasy from invisible founts,
A god come down and greater by the fall.
A Power arose out of my slumber’s cell.
Abandoning the tardy limp of the hours
And the inconstant blink of mortal sight,
There where the Thinker sleeps in too much light
And intolerant flames the lone all-witnessing Eye
Hearing the word of Fate from Silence’ heart
In the endless moment of Eternity,
It saw from timelessness the works of Time.
Overpassed were the leaden formulas of the
Mind,
Overpowered the obstacle of mortal Space:
The unfolding Image showed the things to come.
A giant dance of Shiva tore the past;
There was a thunder as of worlds that fall;
Earth was o’errun with fire and the roar of Death
Clamouring to slay a world his hunger had made;
There was a clangour of Destruction’s wings:
The Titan’s battle-cry was in my ears,
Alarm and rumour shook the armoured Night.
I saw the Omnipotent’s flaming pioneers
Over the heavenly verge which turns towards life
Come crowding down the amber stairs of birth;
Forerunners of a divine multitude,
Out of the paths of the morning star they came
Into the little room of mortal life.
I saw them cross the twilight of an age,
The sun-eyed children of a marvellous dawn,
The great creators with wide brows of calm,
The massive barrier-breakers of the world
And wrestlers with destiny in her lists of will,
The labourers in the quarries of the gods,
The messengers of the Incommunicable,
The architects of immortality.
Into the fallen human sphere they came,
Faces that wore the Immortal’s glory still,
Voices that communed still with the thoughts of
God,
Bodies made beautiful by the spirit’s light,
Carrying the magic word, the mystic fire,
Carrying the Dionysian cup of joy,
Approaching eyes of a diviner man,
Lips chanting an unknown anthem of the soul,
Feet echoing in the corridors of Time.
High priests of wisdom, sweetness, might and
bliss,
Discoverers of beauty’s sunlit ways
And swimmers of Love’s laughing fiery floods
And dancers within rapture’s golden doors,
Their tread one day shall change the suffering
earth
And justify the light on Nature’s face.*

For most poets of the spiritual, their inspiration arises from a momentary visitation of light from above the lid of mind, or from some passionate outburst from deep within or a calm, quiet expression of the psychic being, the soul. In *Savitri* we constantly get lines written from such a permanently vast and luminous station of consciousness above the mind that it was said of Sri Aurobindo that he had a mind of light:

It saw from timelessness the works of time.

This is the summit of consciousness from which the past and the future are seen as a single panorama, from which prophesy is manifested and the truth and fullness of things is effortlessly seized.

Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri* traces the journey of the soul through its life experience and traces the exploration of the subtle worlds that are encountered by seekers, ending in the debate of Love and Death in which Love conquers Death. It is in a way our own story. Our lives are the debate of love and death.

Vikas (Alan Vickers)

Knitting the community together

The work of the Auroville's Residents' Assembly Service (RAS).

“WE NEED YOU TO NOMINATE NEW MEMBERS,” thunders the email message from the RAS, Auroville's Residents' Assembly Service. “IT'S WORKING GROUP NOMINATIONS TIME”. The community is urged to nominate new members for the Town Development Council [see the June-July issue of *Auroville Today* # 335-336] and replacements for outgoing members of the Working Committee (3), the Auroville Council (3) and the Funds and Assets Management Committee (2). Each resident is invited to click a button and propose names.

This email is but one of the many personalised messages each Aurovilian receives from the RAS every week. For some, it's an overkill. But not for the RAS which takes its motto “If you want to go fast – go alone, if you want to go far – go together” seriously. It showers the community with emails such as the newsletter ‘Vibe’, containing the most interesting news items of the week; reports of working groups; requests for views on proposals, policies and mandates; requests to nominate new members of working groups; invitations to meetings and CAT (*Create Auroville Together*) sessions; reminders that people have to respond to earlier emails; and most recently, a request “to immediately act to reduce water consumption in response to Tamil Nadu's current exceptional drought”.

The evolution of the RAS

These messages show the evolution of the RAS. It started as an electoral commission with a very limited mandate, that of overseeing the decision-making in the Residents' Assembly and counting the votes. It evolved to become Auroville's major communication body.

“This is in accordance with the decision-making policy of the Residents' Assembly,” explains Jesse, who together with Isha, Slava and Tatiana runs the RAS. “The policy says that Auroville wishes to arrive at decisions by consensus, but if that fails, we go for voting. But the policy has neither a definition of consensus nor an indication how that consensus has to be achieved. It's therefore skewed in favour of voting. We had to figure out how that elusive consensus could be reached.”

Auroville favours collaborative decision-making. Top-down decision-making is hardly existent; if it happens, it usually meets with resistance. “The RAS have learned that you can't separate the community from decision-making and that decision-making is a collaborative process,” says Jesse. “We wondered why there was such a difficulty in reaching consensus as we all share the same collective values – the Charter, the Dream, the City the Earth needs etc. We found that differences of opinion, most of the time, are due to poor communication. So we set out to improve it.”

The communication drive led to a change of attitude. Working closely with the working groups and the *News and Notes* team, the RAS started taking charge of the publication of each proposal that required collective approval in English, Tamil and French. They invite feedback, then incorporate the feedback as much as possible, publish the revised proposal, and continue doing that as long as is required. “We seek to maintain a high standard and quality of communication,” says Jesse. “If a proposal is well-configured, the working group has a better chance of achieving its objective.



The members of the Residents' Assembly Service. From left: Tatiana, Isha, Slava and Jesse.

Badly-worded documents can destroy the work of the group and even insult people. Carefully worded documents can be valuable steps towards harmony.” He observes that usually, at the end of the feedback process, the proposal has so dramatically improved that it is likely to be accepted without problem. “The process is intended to diminish the emphasis and importance of voting within our decision-making systems.”

Communication is also a must for the filling of vacancies in working groups. In accordance with the community approved “Participatory Working Groups system”, the RAS first invites all residents to nominate potential working group members and others who wish to participate in the selection process but who do not themselves want to join a working group. The names of those nominated are then published for feedback and the feedback received is checked by a separate group which announces who are eligible. Those qualified then mandatorily attend a three-day selection process, where the decision is taken about who will become the new members of the working groups. The process is flexible: each participant in the three-day selection process can at any point step forward to become nominated as a working group member – even those who had initially stated they did not want to join a working group.

Increasing Aurovilians' participation

Contrary to an autocratic system where participation is not encouraged and people are just expected to do as the boss tells them, in Auroville people are expected to participate. “Aurovilians have a responsibility to be aware of what's going on and the consequences a decision will have for Auroville and for themselves,” says Jesse. He acknowledges that this is a tall demand. People are sometimes asked to read through pages of legalistic texts, such as in the case of approving new mandates and policies, and often give up after the first page.

The RAS tries to meet the difficulty by feeding the Aurovilians with bite-sized and easily digestible chunks. Long policies are broken up into sections and people are invited to comment after each part. ‘Legal’ sections, sometimes termed ‘the boring bits’, can

be skipped. The comments on the more interesting sections are then collated by the RAS and sent to the author of the document to gauge the mood of the community and make appropriate changes.

Yet, and notwithstanding all these efforts, community participation in collective decision-making remains limited. Voting attracts a maximum of 400 people out of 1800 registered residents. The Open Forum of the Auroville, Auroville's Intranet portal which aims at facilitating the exchange of information among Aurovilians and friends of Auroville, is only actively used by a small group of people. The attempt to create an Active Residents' Assembly [see *AVToday* # 326, September 2016] seems to have become dormant. Does all this show that only a small group of people is truly interested in general Auroville affairs and that the majority has a *Not In My Back Yard* attitude and does not care?

Jesse reflects. “Of course, some people are only interested if a topic touches their private lives. A certain number of people are always present in general meetings, but there is a shifting participation of people who only attend when a topic interests them. For example, if the issue is about land you get a different participation than if the issue is about entry or planning or food. So the general interest is not limited to a 300 people; rather you should say that on any given topic, about 300 people will be interested. And that level of participation is quite normal.”

The RAS can most certainly get more people to participate, says Jesse. But then funds will need to be released for improving the online tools for community engagement, for translating important issues in other languages, and to purchase equipment for providing simultaneous interpretation services during meetings. “Obviously, anyone not fluent in English will have difficulty participating in meetings conducted in English. It's fair to assume that at present, Auroville is missing a great deal of what these people could contribute to the community.”

Community change

“A few years ago I used to hear much criticism and bad language about the working groups and its members,” says Jesse. “They were seen as ‘outsiders’, living in an ivory tower, not as fellow Aurovilians who try to do a particular job. But I don't hear that so much anymore. There's a level of harmony and interconnectedness of all working groups that wasn't there five years ago. Also, the atmosphere in meetings has changed. Years ago, I would dread going to meetings where people would shout, accuse others and start a blame game. Today, these meetings are well-structured; they have a dedication at the beginning and at the end, are well-guided and people are respectful towards one another, even if their views differ. The experience of today is calm and positive and the atmosphere in the room is constructive and forward-moving without the sense of accusation. That's a huge improvement. An increased harmony and working together is finally manifesting.”

Doubtless, a lot of the credit goes to the RAS.

Carel

The Africa connection

continued from page 1

Africa is home to some of the world's most beautiful natural spaces and we would also like to share that appreciation for nature and the environment at the site of Africa Pavilion. We are in the process of building a campsite – Africa Safari – for long-term volunteers and students of Auroville on the site of the Africa Pavilion. We have been busy clearing spaces for the tents and building showers and toilets for the campers. In the spirit of *ubuntu*, a group of us have been meeting on the site every Friday and we all are participating in manual labour for the development of the site.

Yoga classes, meditation sessions, building workshops and a variety of dance classes also take place regularly. The vision at the moment is to try and create a platform for introducing African culture to Auroville in a sustainable way.

I hope that as more African people come to Auroville they will be able to bring traditions and cultures through Africa Pavilion, which can then be shared with the wider community. The more African people we have in Auroville, the more diversity we can celebrate.

If there is one unifying idea in Africa, perhaps it's the idea of “ubuntu”. Can you tell us how it is related to your vision and your work?

The concept of *ubuntu* is central to the ongoing development of Africa Safari and, more broadly, all our work at the Africa Pavilion. What is *ubuntu*? It's a term meaning humanity but used in a philosophical sense it means the belief in a universal bond of sharing which connects all humanity. It is often described as, “I am because you are”. When we work together at the Africa Pavilion, for example when we were clearing spaces for Africa

Safari, we weren't doing it for individual gain, or each other, nor for a particular person or entity but for the purpose of human unity. We see our work as being of benefit to a wider spirit of connectivity with each other in the world and for future generations of the world. We are sharing ideas, culture, and learning with each other – singing, chanting and playing together.

What are you planning to do as the next steps?

Our next steps are to continue the development of the Africa Pavilion according to the original vision and plans for the space. We are about to start building the caretaker's house on the site of the Africa Pavilion so that it will be inhabited at all times. We want to invite more people to come here so that together we can create a channel between Africa and Auroville. We want to create opportunities for African students to learn about Auroville's sustainable development practices, which could address development issues in some parts of Africa, and be transformative for communities there.

Another aim is to provide accommodation where volunteers can stay at a rate that is affordable to them, close to the heart of Auroville. We would also like Africans students to come to Auroville for studies and internships. Africa House will provide a space for African people to come and stay and contribute toward the Auroville project.

Tell us about the design of Africa House and how it came to be.

In order to create awareness of the ideals of Auroville among the new generation of young Africans, it was proposed that an Africa House should be built in the International Zone in the area allotted to the African continent. The Africa House could accommodate African students and guests and allow them to directly experience Auroville. At the same time, the House will present Africa to the international audience of Aurovilians and visitors to Auroville's International Zone.

The approach is to create a complex of buildings that will house activities and presentations related to all the countries and cultures of the African continent. A proposal for the layout of the Africa House was made in 2005 by Brook Teklehaimanot, Chair of the Architecture Department of Addis Ababa University, Ethiopia. The African Pavilion group is connected with AVI Ethiopia and with the Auroville project in Burkina Faso.

What are the challenges you are facing? How can Auroville help?

We have a couple of challenges. One is the financial issue. To advance the Africa Pavilion work we need quite a lot of manpower, especially for the building work. We don't have financial resources for that, so we undertake the labour work ourselves. We don't receive a maintenance for working at the Africa Pavilion, it doesn't fall under City Services, so we have to split our time between the other roles we are committed to.

Another issue is the lack of help from Africa. At present, the lines of communication with Africa are not as strong as they were previously. Tekeste had built many valuable lines of connection with leaders in Africa, but recently he was quite unwell and unable to work so much. He left his body in June, 2017. We have started the research that is required to regain these contacts and connections. We would like to use the 50th Anniversary as a vehicle to engage African leaders with Auroville.

Auroville could help us through AVI and through using the outreach media to communicate what is happening at Africa Pavilion. Also, Auroville could be more present in the life of the Pavilion. I would like to share with the residents of Auroville that Africa Pavilion is deeply a part of the Auroville project and they should consider Africa Pavilion in the same vein as other pavilions, and of the same value. Our space is for everyone.

From an interview with Manas

Auroville's raison d'être and how to achieve it

Gilles Guigan settled in Auroville in 1980 because his soul wanted to be part of this great adventure as it was convinced of its eventual success. Since then he has been studying Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's words to try and help his mind agree with his soul. Here he shares his conclusions.

Fifty years after Auroville's inception, what is known of its raison d'être and of how it is to succeed? What is the reason behind our community's past and future achievements? How can a progress in consciousness in Auroville benefit India and 'the earth'? And how can we hasten the realisation of our ideals?

On the reason behind our community's past and future achievements

In February 1968, a ninety-year old French lady, who had remained in Pondicherry for the past forty-eight years, invited the youth of the world to come to a then barren plateau nearby and be part of a 'great adventure'. The challenge before them was the most difficult one can imagine: building a township of 50,000 whose aim is human unity, the ideal society and city. Initially there was nothing there: money had to be raised, land secured, political support obtained... Though it looked totally impossible, some did believe in this dream. They settled and started working at making it a reality.

Five and half years later, in November 1973, this 'old lady' passed away and a serious dispute erupted between those who claimed to be in charge of Auroville. It soon became a bitter battle between Auroville's legal 'owners' and the bulk of its residents. Very ugly scenes took place. Naturally, some people felt vindicated: 'We told you not to believe in this impossible dream.'

Yet, thanks to the intervention of India's Government, Parliament and Supreme Court, Auroville escaped destruction and, not only survived this ordeal, but keeps blossoming. WHY?

Well, this 'old lady' was known as 'The Mother' because She was a very high incarnation of the Divine Mother about whom Sri Aurobindo wrote: 'The Divine Mother is the Consciousness and Force of the Divine – which is the Mother of all things.'

In turn Mother wrote: 'What Sri Aurobindo represents in the world's history is not a teaching, not even a revelation; it is a decisive action direct from the Supreme.'

Speaking of him, she also said: 'Without him, I exist not; without me, he is unmanifest'.

Sri Aurobindo and Mother were avatars (divine incarnations) who spent their entire lives manifesting a new and higher consciousness in their own bodies, and thus in the terrestrial atmosphere. Their joint labour resulted in a first descent of the 'supramental' consciousness on 29.2.56, in a first descent of the 'superman' consciousness on 1.1.69 and in Mother telling Satprem several times on 10.2.70: 'The work is done'.

It is this 'decisive action direct from the Supreme' and it alone that makes possible what used to be impossible. It is by tuning to this new and higher consciousness which has descended that the Aurovilians were able to be Mother's instruments – and will continue to be her willing servitors.

One can say that by tuning to this higher consciousness – that is, by relying on Mother's Force – one establishes a 'field of resonance' (a term used by some modern scientists) which then channels this consciousness (which can also be considered as information or vibration).

On how progress in Auroville benefits India, 'the earth' and the universe

Mother spoke repeatedly of an invisible 'link' between the disciples, India, 'the earth' and the universe.

On 2.8.61, She told Satprem that Théon, who taught her occultism in 1906-07, 'was the first one to give me the idea that the earth is symbolic, representative – symbolic of concentrated universal action allowing divine forces to incarnate and work concretely. I learned all this from him.'

She also explained: 'In the whole creation the earth has a place of distinction, because unlike any other planet it is evolutionary with a psychic entity at its centre. In it, India, in particular, is a divinely chosen country.'

Speaking of the Ashramites, she told her class on 25.8.54 that 'from an occult standpoint, it is a selection [of diverse human types]' and, on 20.9.60, she explained to Satprem: 'The idea is that the earth as a whole must be prepared in all its forms, including even those least ready for the transformation. There must be a symbolic representation of all the elements on earth upon which we can work to establish the link. The earth is a symbolic representation of the universe, and the group is a symbolic representation of the earth.' Because of its size and diversity, the Auroville community has also become an interesting symbolic representation of the earth.

On 1.2.68, She wrote a message for a press conference called in Delhi in preparation of Auroville's upcoming Inauguration Ceremony:

India has become the symbol representing all the difficulties of modern humanity.

India will be the land of its resurrection, the resurrection to a higher and truer life.

Two days later, she commented on this message to Satprem: 'the same thing which in the history of the universe made the earth the

India has become the symbol representing all the difficulties of modern humanity.

India will be the land of its resurrection, the resurrection to a higher and truer life

symbolic representation of the universe so as to concentrate the work on one point, the same phenomenon is now taking place: India is the representation of all human difficulties on earth, and it is in India that the ... cure will be found. And then, that is why – THAT IS WHY I was made to start Auroville.'

What Mother seems to mean here is that the Auroville community, and that of the Ashram, are two 'chosen groups' (probably because 'He who chooses the Divine is chosen by the Divine') two 'symbolic representations of the earth' (just as India is the chosen country and the earth the chosen planet) and that our solving of Auroville's problems, which are similar to those of India and of 'the earth', will help solve the problems of India and of 'the earth'.

Hence, it seems that the field of resonance which links Sri Aurobindo and Mother to their disciples is also interlinking Auroville, India, the earth and the universe and that a progress in our community will positively impact – is impacting – India, the earth and the universe.

Means to stimulate Auroville's progress

On 7th May 1912, two years prior to Her first meeting with Sri Aurobindo, Mother stated clearly the purpose and programme which 53 years later would become those of Auroville:

'The general aim to be attained is the advent of a progressing universal harmony.'

'The means for attaining this aim, in regard to the earth, is the realisation of human unity through the awakening in all and the manifestation by all of the inner Divinity which is One.[...]

'The terrestrial transformation and harmonisation can be brought about by two processes which, though opposite in appearance, must combine must act upon each other and complete each other.'

– Individual transformation, an inner development leading to the union with the Divine Presence.

– Social transformation, the establishment of an environment favourable to the flowering and growth of the individual.

'Since the environment reacts upon the individual and, on the other hand, the value of the environment depends upon the value of the individual, the two works should proceed side by side.'

Forty years later, in April 1952, Mother expressed again the same need, in an article published in the Bulletin, titled, 'An International University Centre':

'In this effort to improve human conditions, there have always been two tendencies, which seem to be contrary but which ought to complement each other so that progress may be achieved. The first advocates a collective reorganisation, something which could lead to the effective unity of mankind. The other declares that all progress is made first by the individual and insists that the individual should be given the conditions in which he can progress freely. Both are equally true and necessary, and our effort should be directed along both these lines at once. For collective progress and individual progress are interdependent. Before the individual can take a leap forward, at least a little of the preceding progress must have been realised in the collectivity. A way must therefore be found so that these two types of progress may proceed side by side.'

For Auroville to become 'a living embodiment of an actual Human Unity', we all need to unite progressively with the Divine within ourselves. Only then will we be ONE in the Divine. For that, every Aurovillian has to do his individual yoga (to transform himself) and has to take part in Auroville's collective yoga (to transform our society so that it stimulates our individual transformation).

Auroville's success depends on how seriously we do these two yogas and on our individual and collective ability to seriously look for a way for these two types of progress to proceed side by side – one stimulating the other. Should we fail in this regard, Auroville would be a failure – even if we were to succeed in increasing steadily its population, its annual turnover and the total value of its assets, while implementing scrupulously its original master plan.

Our community's main programs of social transformation are described below, together with some explanation of what their step-by-step implementation will require in term of progress on our side. We all need to be aware that, circumstances are bound to evolve in such a way that pressure will keep mounting for all of us to keep progressing individually and collectively.

Aims and objectives of Auroville's programmes of social transformation

The aim of Auroville's programmes of social transformation (our collective yoga) is to create 'an environment favourable to the flowering and growth of the individual' – that is, of an environment that stimulates the development of a new and higher individual and collective consciousness.

As is the case in all other spiritual endeavours, ours requires mastering one's ego, desires and sense of possession. Therefore our community's programmes of social transformation will have to apply an increasing pressure on all of us to keep progressing in this regard.

Every progress in our community's social transformation will result in sincere *sadhaks* feeling increasingly motivated to join it or to support it in some ways. It will also result in some people not wanting to join it, and in some of us feeling out of place in our community and leaving it.

The progressive implementation of these programmes will also result in this new and higher consciousness being expressed and embodied in our society and in Auroville's outer face (its city and green belt). As is always the case, progress will flow naturally from within to without.

Auroville's main programmes of social transformation:

1) Hastening the advent of a more luminous future by bringing in all fields and at absolutely every level ever more truth, beauty, harmony and knowledge as well as collaboration, unity and peace. (The last two being Auroville's aims.)

This implies that we all practice these values.

2) Making an integral and unending education available to all Aurovilians' spiritual education being one of its key components. On 1.2.69, Mother told Roger Anger: 'The permanent university will be the key to Auroville's raison d'être. It must be a leap forward; so that it can hasten the advent of the future, of a world of harmony, beauty and union.'

This implies: a) that all should be keen on learning ever more (the key to a 'youth that never ages'), b) that our top collective priority is to provide to our children the kind of education Mother wanted for them, c) that the teachers are well trained to this effect and, more importantly, are shining examples of the values they teach, and, d) that parents realise that Mother didn't want them to produce so many children (and thus overload Auroville's schools with pupils) and doing what some of them too often do: wrongly influence their children (e.g. by insisting on them obtaining a degree instead of learning for the joy of learning).

3) Improving Auroville's simplified way of life so that our 'higher qualities have more time to develop'.

This implies that we become all keen on spending more time on developing our 'higher qualities', on supporting measures aiming at this simplification (i.e. improving and extending the scope of the existing range of 'Prosperity' services), and on using them.

Let us be aware that Mother's experience with the Ashram as well as with Auroville was that many residents used their freedom from daily chores not to progress, but to indulge in laziness or in activities which neither develop their higher qualities, nor benefit the community.

4) Turning Auroville into a self-supporting township by producing at least as much wealth as it consumes – not to satisfy our desires, but to meet our respective true and simple needs and enjoy a way of life which is both simplified, beautiful and rich in opportunities for each one to become his beautiful self. We need to keep in mind that: 'Auroville is created to realise the ideal of Sri Aurobindo who taught us the Karma yoga. Auroville is for those who want to do the Yoga of work. To live in Auroville, means to do the Yoga of work. So all Aurovilians must take up a work and do it as Yoga.' and that 'Working for oneself is not working for the community. Each member of the community should have an activity that corresponds to the needs of Auroville.'

To be self-supporting implies that those amongst us who could contribute more work or money do so and that we all increase our efficiency in producing wealth and in utilising it.

It also implies using consciously all precious resources (land, water, energy, money, etc.). Mother wanted to provide an example of 'true life' – of the conscious use of money and said that its present utilisation by financiers is turning the earth into a 'dead moon'. More importantly, it implies not wasting the grace/consciousness that is constantly showered upon us.

5) Improving our internal economy by turning it into 'a kind of adaptation of the Communist system, but not in a spirit of levelling: according to everyone's capacity, his position (not a psychological or intellectual one), his INNER position.'

It is therefore to be based on the concept of 'no private property and no circulation of private money within Auroville'.

'At Auroville nothing belongs to anyone in particular. All is collective property. To be utilised with my blessings for the welfare of all.'

continued on page 5

continued from page 4

Mother wanted us to offer generously our work and money to Auroville and have our true and simple needs (not our desires) provided by the township – and not by private means.

'No private property' is a means to try and ensure that we all master our desires and sense of possession, which, as said already, is a must in any kind of spiritual endeavour.

'No private money' is a means to try and ensure that money is handed to 'those who have an integral, comprehensive, TRUE and universal vision' and that money ceases being 'the Supreme Lord', which it will remain as long as those having access to private money will remain able to enjoy higher living standards than that enjoyed by sincere and hard-working but poor Aurovilians, and as long as Aurovilians and friends who have access to big money will remain able to use it to impose their own pet projects on their fellow Aurovilians.

There are two main reasons why so many amongst us are unwilling to allow money or other assets in their control to be allocated by others than themselves:

1) As yet, they haven't mastered their desires and/or sense of possession.

2) They claim, rightly or wrongly, that they know better how best to allocate this money and/or assets than the relevant community-appointed committee. To invalidate this reason, our community needs to seriously improve the way it appoints those who allocate collective resources.

The economy should also be based on 'from everyone according to his possibilities to everyone according to his needs'. But this is not an equalitarian system. Though we have many needs in common, many of us have some very real needs which others don't have. How are they to be met?

For this system to be truly ideal, each one's real possibilities and needs need to be properly assessed: *'The difficulty is the appraisal of the value of things. You know, you have to have a very broad vision for that. The easy thing about money was that it became mechanical.... But this other system can't become quite like that, and so....'*

For Auroville's version of communism not to fail (as communism did elsewhere), we need to master our ego, desires and sense of possession and be able to offer our work to the Divine instead of trading it against higher living standards. On its side, our community needs to organise itself in such a way that it is able to provide for each one's true needs – including one's 'sphere of action' – that is, a work opportunity where 'to express oneself and develop one's capacities and possibilities while being of service to the community as a whole'.

'It is not for comfort and satisfaction of desires that one comes to Auroville; it is for the growth of consciousness and consecration to the Truth that has to be realised.'

Unselfishness is the first need to participate in the creation of Auroville.

6) Improving constantly Auroville's membership policy so that the quality and quantity of its members keep increasing simultaneously, instead of one increasing at the expense of the other.

In this respect, one needs to keep in mind the following points:

– As seen above, ideally, Auroville's population should be 'a symbolic representation of all the elements on earth upon which we can work to establish the link' – 'including even those least ready for the transformation' – Yet, they should be keen to progress: On 4.4.72, Mother was asked by Roger Anger whether people considered as 'undesirable' by many Aurovilians should nevertheless be accepted 'as being useful in providing Auroville with a certain type of difficulty' to be overcome, Mother answered: *'No! Certainly not! No, no, I don't favour deliberately adding difficulties! I know they come for... But they shouldn't be invited – on the contrary. They shouldn't. Things should be made as easy as possible. Only, we shouldn't be ruffled by difficulty, that's the point. I am not at all saying that difficulties should be accepted – don't invite them at all, at all, at all; life is difficult enough as it is! But when a difficulty comes, you must take heart and face it courageously.'*

– Mother's criteria for qualifying as an Aurovillian evolved through the years. Though, on 10.11.69, while comparing the Ashram and Auroville, She said: *'the simple goodwill to make a collective experiment for the progress of humanity is sufficient to gain admittance [to Auroville]'*, on 4.4.72, She felt the need to tell Satprem: *'coming to Auroville does not mean coming to an easy life – it means coming to a gigantic effort for progress.'*

Therefore, while welcoming new members in our community, we need to ask ourselves whether they understand the need for these two simultaneous transformations and are genuinely keen on making these two progress – or do they simply want to enjoy 'an easy life'.

As this individual and social transformation is what matters most, trying to increase dramatically our population's yearly growth rate would most probably be counter-productive – at least as long as there is no substantial progress in our programmes of social transformation.

7) Adapting constantly Auroville's land purchase and exchange policies. In my view it should have the following aims:

– To consolidate and enlarge all existing large pockets of land – especially those in the area earmarked for the city and immediate greenbelt.

– To purchase all those sensitive areas which need to be protected for ecological reasons.

– To purchase more agricultural land to be able to produce more of our future needs. These lands will also provide some very interesting work to many *sadhaks*.

– To exchange outlying and isolated plots of land (whose atmosphere and ecology will become increasingly difficult to protect) against plots which consolidate large pockets of Auroville land (especially in the 'city area') in order to protect the atmosphere and ecology of these large pockets.

8) Continuing to develop city and greenbelt so that they are able to accommodate more *sadhaks* and provide for some of their needs (such as food and wood) as well as to stimulate and reflect a new and higher consciousness and thus embody beauty, 'an harmonious simplicity,' dynamism and effectiveness as well as provide an innovative and replicable model of the conscious use of money (and of other resources) and sustainable development which will benefit humanity wherever it will be replicated. Such are the conditions for Auroville to become 'the city the earth needs' and 'the town of the future'.

There is also the need to take into account the fact that our present Master Plan was conceived 50 years ago according to four main assumptions which didn't become reality and do not seem to be on the way to becoming reality – at least not in the foreseeable future:

– Inspired and thus undisputed leadership was NOT expected to be a problem. Mother was expected to remain in Her body and to be able to guide Auroville's construction and its early life.

– Raising loads of money was NOT expected to be a problem. It was hoped that the main World Powers would finance massively Auroville's construction and that hence a township of 50,000 would be fully built within 20 years or even less. (In which case, many of the town's main features needed to be decided upon at a very early stage.)

– Massive and effective political support was therefore NOT expected to be a problem. Therefore, securing a huge acreage of land in one or several very large pockets was NOT expected to be a problem either.

– The future city area was considered by Auroville's planners as being empty of population and of vegetation. Therefore, they didn't feel the need to take into consideration any of its existing features such as existing villages and their need of space to develop, existing canyons, existing land-ownership pattern, existing network of paths

ways (on *poromboke* lands) and existing vegetation. They felt totally free to modify its contours and to develop the area without having to take any of these constraints into consideration.

Considering today's reality, it would seem that our development plans need to be reviewed very seriously:

- It seems very unlikely that Auroville will own its entire 'city area';
- the yearly growth-rate of our population is unlikely to exceed 5% in the foreseeable future; and
- all over the world, planners plan more than 20 years in advance ONLY in exceptional circumstances (because 'life' tends to modify even the very best plans).

9) Informing people about Auroville without advertising it – that is, stating its message at its true level without lowering it in an attempt to make it more understandable. In particular, we should speak more on the true nature of the challenge our community has to take up (finding ways to operate simultaneously our individual and social transformations) and less of

building a city of 50,000, which, for several reasons, is very unlikely to reach this population in the near future. Those who believe that we should continue to state that our main practical aim is to build a city of 50,000 need to explain to fellow Aurovilians, friends and visitors why Auroville shouldn't be considered a failure as, 50 years after its inception, its population is only 5% of that for which it was planned for and as, for various reasons, it will take another 50 years, at the very least, for this 50,000 target to be reached – if at all.

10) Improving Auroville's internal organisation. This programme is mentioned here last not because it is the least important, but because there was a need to explain first what is to be 'organised'.

On 10.3.70, during Her first meeting with residents of 'Aspiration' Mother told them: *'To be practical, you must first have a very clear vision of your goal, of where you are going.'* Before appointing any of its main committees, our community should first come to an agreement on the formulation of a 'vision of our goal' in the relevant field.

On 25.3.70, Mother explained to Satprem what is required from good organisers and what She thought of democracy and other basis of human organisations:

'The conditions for organising – for being an organiser (it's not 'governing', it's ORGANISING) the conditions for being an organiser should be as follows: no more desires, no more preferences, no more attractions, no more repulsions – a perfect equality for all. Sincere, naturally, but that goes without saying: wherever insincerity creeps in, it acts like a poison. And then, only those who are themselves in that condition are capable of discerning whether someone else is or is not. And now, all human organisations are based on: visible fact (which is a falsehood), public opinion (which is another falsehood); and the moral sense, which is yet another falsehood! [Mother laughs] So....'

On 11.10.67, Mother explained to Satprem the need for a simple organisational framework within which each one would find naturally his place:

'I said, 'Yes, everything is always in a hierarchy, especially all conscious individuals, but not out of any arbitrary will: it's people themselves who spontaneously take their place without knowing it, the place they must have.' It's not, I told her, 'it's not a decision, we don't want categories: this category, that category, and so this person will go here, that person will go there – all that,' I said, 'is mental constructions, it's worthless!' The true thing is that NATURALLY, according to his own receptivity, his own capacity, his inner mission, everyone takes up the post which in the hierarchy he truly and spontaneously occupies, without any decision.'

'What can be done to make the organisation easier is a sort of plan or general map, so that everyone need not build his position but will find it ready for him – that's all.'

Mother also repeatedly stressed the need of not having any 'pre-conceived mental plan', of remaining always very flexible. She showed the example by being always very clear about her aims but by adapting the way to achieve them according to newly perceived needs, possibilities and constraints.

On 30.12.67, Mother explained to Satprem: *'At bottom, the problem almost boils down to this: to replace the mental government of intelligence by the government of a spiritualised consciousness.'*

On 10.4.68, Mother explained to Satprem what all Aurovilians should accept: *'The first thing that should be accepted and recognised by everyone is that the invisible and higher power (that is, the power which belongs to a plane of consciousness which is veiled for the most part but which can be attained, a consciousness which can be called by any name, it doesn't matter, but which is integral and pure in the sense that it is not false: in the Truth), that this power is capable of ordering material things in a MUCH TRUER, happier and better way for everyone than any material power. That's the first point. Once people agree on that....'*

'And the second thing is the power of conviction. That is, the highest consciousness brought into contact with Matter has... (what shall I say?... it's not an 'influence' because there is no question of trying to influence... perhaps we could say it this way:) spontaneously it has a greater power of conviction than all the intermediate planes. By mere contact, its power of conviction, that is, its power of transformation, is greater than that of all the intermediate planes. That's a fact. These two facts make it impossible for any pretension to last long. (I'm seeing it from the standpoint of a collective organisation.)'

'As soon as you come down from this supreme Height, there is all the play of the various influences [gesture of mixture and conflict], that in itself is a sure sign: even a very slight descent, even into the domain of higher mind, higher intelligence, and the whole clash of influences starts. Only what is really at the top, with a perfect purity, has this power of spontaneous conviction. Consequently, whatever one tries to do to replace that is an approximation, and is not much better than democracy, – that is, the system which wants to govern by majority and minority (I mean social democracy, the latest trend).'

'But all those who participate in the experiment would have to be absolutely convinced that the highest consciousness is the best judge of THE MOST MATERIAL things. You know, what has ruined India is this idea that the higher consciousness is only concerned with 'higher' things and lower things don't interest it at all and it doesn't understand anything about them! That's what has ruined India. Well, that error must be completely eradicated. It is the highest consciousness which sees most clearly – most clearly and truly – what the needs of the most material thing should be.'

Conclusions

Sri Aurobindo said that two things are essential in this Yoga, an intense aspiration and reliance on the Mother. We should all keep in mind that we need to always ask her what she wants us to do and seek her support in doing it as we are nothing more than her instruments. Kireetbhai saw in her the 'servant of the servants' – always guiding/supporting those who sincerely aspire to do her work.

There are some amazing evidences of the link between some events in Auroville and others in India and the world. We need to always keep Auroville's importance in mind and realise that our progress, and the lack of it, has an impact on Auroville, India, the earth and the universe. There is tremendous suffering in the world and we can do something about it by making some substantial progress here.

More than ever, I feel that 'the earth needs' the kind of Auroville Mother spoke about. Considering all that has already been achieved and despite some negative aspects, I am convinced that there is no better place in the world to realise our ideals. Yet, we can and should do better.

I will never forget the first real conversation Suhasini and I had with Kireetbhai, more than thirty years ago, at his house in Delhi. He spoke to us of Auroville's three main failings (though he is likely to have used some other word): Education, Economy and Democracy. I tried to explain to him that we were doing our best in very difficult circumstances but he kept insisting 'You are finding excuses, you are finding excuses, you are finding excuses...' Though he didn't convince me that evening, I soon realised that he was absolutely right. This is what made me build, together with Suhasini, the Solar Kitchen and a building for a more ideal 'Pour Tous' – and made me write this article (and others). His 'You are finding excuses...' have never ceased resonating in me. For me, Kireetbhai had 'the soul of a hero'. I hope that many of us will develop such a soul.

My hope is that this article will help our community members and working groups to better understand the challenge we have volunteered to take up and that we will organise ourselves to try and progress in their implementation.

I remember reading (but haven't found where, yet) that Mother explained that the two things which will change last in the world are finance and governance – though this is what most people want to see change first. Therefore, we should not expect to be able to make some substantial progress in these two fields soon, but we should nevertheless and definitely try and make some progress. We are likely to be more successful with other programmes.

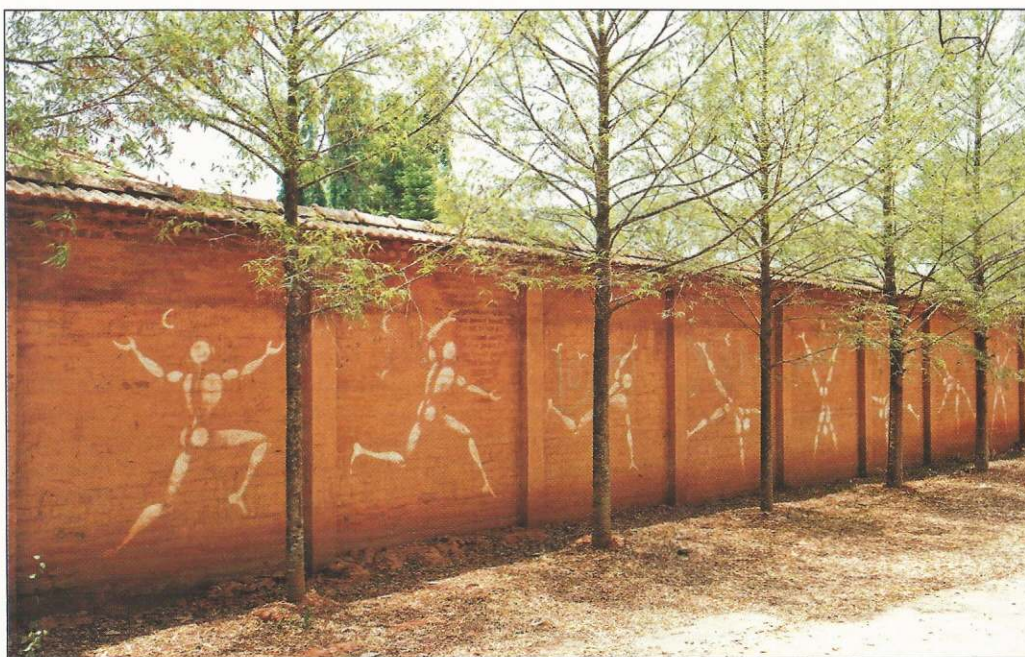
Gilles Guigan

Creating public canvases

Auroville displays an increasing amount of art in public spaces. Two of the recent murals are telephone-themed and are located on telephone boxes on the Auroville main road near Kindergarten and the Eukies field. Auroville Today spoke to artists about their experiences of painting street art in Auroville.

Unlike traditional art, street art is distinguished by the fact that it has a community aspect and is painted in the open rather than in a studio. Street artists don't hold ownership of a mural or graffiti they work on, rather, public art is perceived as a collective project. Despite its growing popularity around the world, street art is often portrayed as vandalism. In this context, the images of graffiti art on the Berlin wall, and on the Paris underground metro come to mind. Yet, artists who paint street art can have powerful social and political messages behind them, one that they seek to communicate to the public at large. Street art has also been termed 'the voice of the oppressed'. For example, secretive German artist known as 'Alias' who passed by Auroville in January 2016 says that he began spray-painting at the age of 14 in his parents' village in Germany as a means to protest a proposed dumping ground for nuclear waste. 'Alias' is known for his significant impact on the cityscapes of Berlin but his work can also be seen in Paris, Rome, Bristol, Istanbul and, recently, India and Auroville.

India is experiencing a boom in street art promoted by events such as the Street Art Festival in New Delhi, which has become the capital of street art in India. Places like Mumbai, Varanasi, and Pune are not far behind. Pondicherry also has more and more sightings



Wall decoration by French artist Jérôme Mesnager near Prarthna

Probably for this reason, street artists who pass through do not hesitate to leave behind some ink for thought. These are sometimes of a more thought-provoking nature than some of the work referred to above. For example, Alias' signature work often depicts forlorn children and men often in unpredictable places, and he presents his subjects by focusing on one individual at a time, he presents his audience with tragic stories that are accentuated by his choice of location, which effectively acts as an extension of the concept. One of the works portrayed in Auroville shows a teenage school-boy in a fearful state, hiding his face with his hand and caught in an intense body language. The onlooker can immediately relate to similar scenes from everyday life. This makes for poignant effectiveness. All of us are naturally wired to react to injustice. With each work of art, 'Alias' alters individuals' state of mind. This particular stencil is called 'shame' and Alias says, 'One of the most important aspects of my work is the placement of the image in the urban context. This particular one was created in an intimate emotional context, and in this case it worked perfectly with the destroyed building as background.'

Although his trip to Auroville was mainly about travelling and taking photos, he did leave us a few of his

works of art behind, albeit with glue rather than paint, which means they have a limited lifespan.

Another street artist who has left her mark in Auroville is Oregon-born artist Marichelle, who has been interning with Sankalpa for the last few months. When Krupa was invited by Sandeep to do a mural on two BSNL telephone boxes, she

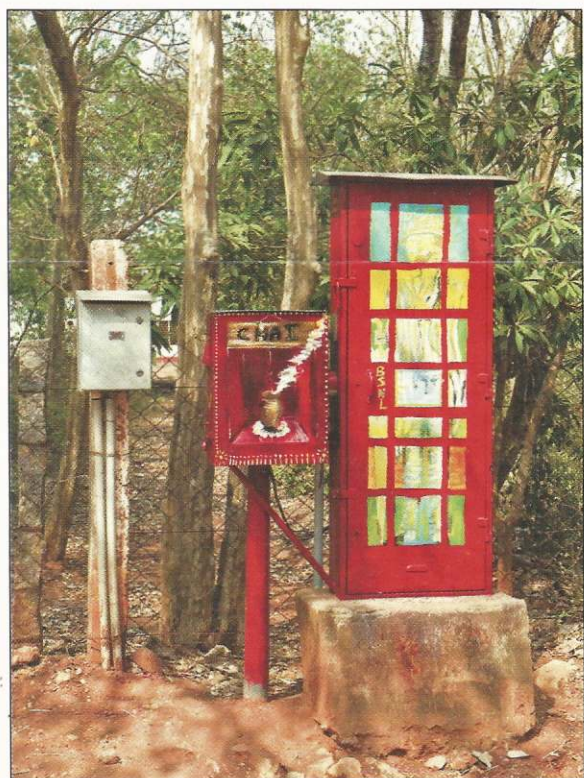
approached Marichelle with the idea. In contrast to 'Alias' who had a very direct message, Marichelle's intentions were more subtle but no less meaningful. One of the murals she helped paint was designed by Aurovilian Olga and depicts a vintage telephone box. 'For this mural, I aimed to incorporate the idea of peace,' says Marichelle, 'as this particular area's development seems to be controversial in Auroville, and I intended it to act as a bridge between two parties in conflict.' She adds, 'for the London telephone box mural near the Kindergarten, my colleagues and I chose to paint a depiction of Gandhi making a telephone call in a red telephone box. We perceive him as the icon of peace and 'the father of India'. Furthermore, I was told that he is believed to be the first to have made a telephone call in India. I also envisaged the London telephone box as a reflection on the Britain-India relations, and then settled on painting a 'chai' stand beside it, to stay true to the local culture of tea drinking.'

Although street art in Auroville generally blends into the surrounding over time, a week after the London telephone box mural was finished, Marichelle was asked by Sandeep to paint over the mural depicting Gandhi. 'The community wasn't happy with the depiction of Gandhi,' she explains. 'Probably it was thought to be a political symbol. This stimulated an open discussion about things like censorship in India.' Some of the other artists from Auroville, New Delhi

ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE MARCO SAROLDI

and Mumbai, with whom Marichelle collaborated to paint the London telephone box, explained to her that censorship is common and that each had experienced it in their own careers as artists. 'This helped me to cope with some of the frustration that I initially felt. One of the girls told me that I can't get upset over every person who tells me what to paint and what not to paint.' Perhaps this is the reason why 'Alias' always paints at night and with a cloth over his face and then leaves the scene. In the context of Marichelle's work, the metaphor for the layers of the mural's paint is the layers of collaboration that were necessary in order to finalise this project. Now, the depicted character bears a close resemblance to Sherlock Holmes. 'At the end of the day, despite what I learned, I still feel like my artistic voice was taken away. But my intention was to bring people together and that's what this project did for me.' Reflecting on the experience, Krupa shares: 'It became a deeper story, the experience was a practical level example of what it takes to manifest real human unity.'

Other examples of street art can be found at the Skatepark, called Concrete Jungle, near



Telephone box near the Kindergarten. Artists: Marichelle and co.

of street art. Although collective art projects take place in Auroville in schools and in the Youth Centre from time to time, there is no lack of public art in Auroville. Whether it is an original information board in Pitchandikulam forest, a drive along the Surrender stretch where you see colourful sign posts, a visit to the water service and the sight of the beautiful blue mural, or a stop at the upside down car near Future School that gets a fresh lick of paint every few years, Auroville is an incubator for its own kind of public art.

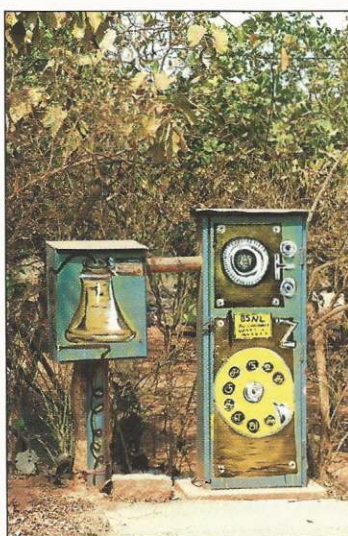


The upturned car near Transformation

Dana, where the sides of the ramps are covered in graffiti. 'The paintings change every few years as different artists come and cover up the old paintings. Each artist also knows that his or her work is not going to be displayed forever, so they aim for maximum impact,' says Dylan, one of the regular skaters who has seen the art change many times over the last decade. Tanguy was one of the few artist passers-by who painted the skate park ramp, his best work being a large blue face. Another highlight of the ephemeral nature of street art is the favourite and must-capture picture of the upside-down car. It gets a new look every few years. From permanent residents to short term guests, the car gets re-vamped without any question of who owns it or decorates it.

Although Auroville may not be described as street art utopia for the lack of suitable surfaces, today's graffiti gurus travel the world creating canvases and it's only a matter of time before more of them end up in our little corner of the world.

Inge van Alphen



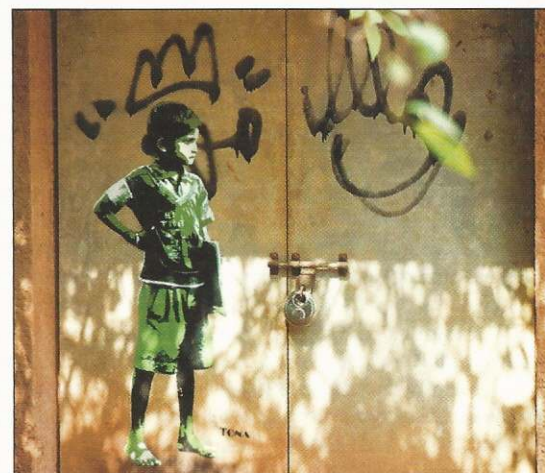
Telephone box near Eukies. Artists: Marichelle and co.



Graffiti in Auzolan, artist Izadi



Blue face at the Skate Park, artist Tanguy



Outside Sukhavati, artist unknown

A prime deliverer of an indelible education

Michael Neville, a long-term Ashramite, passed away on 22nd January. Michael, known as 'Michael Redbeard', ran the early Auroville transport service and taught in the first Auroville school. He was an inspirational teacher, much-loved by his young students. Here some of his former students remember those times.

"He always dressed in Khaki shorts and a light blue shirt. That was his dress code. He told us it was simpler that way because he didn't have spend time choosing what to wear every day," Tashi writes. "His classes were so much fun and we learnt about different topics like air pollution, evolution, the Bermuda triangle... endless topics."

In a 1991 essay, another of his former students, Miriam wrote, "He taught a mixture of history, geography, science and natural history which he called 'General Knowledge'. His class generally started with a complex diagram on the blackboard and concluded with a small group discussion about anything we happened to be interested in."

Michael was born in London in 1931, of a Russian mother and a British father, and spent his early childhood in Riga, Latvia. In 1938, he and his brother were taken to England. During the war, he was a boarder at Dartington Hall, a progressive school.

Shanta, Michael's future wife, had moved from Germany to Paris to improve her French, and this is where she and Michael met. Later the family moved to the Austrian Alps near the Swiss border where they build a small house. But the parents were reluctant to place Amra, their daughter, in the village school which only had one class. Having heard of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, they decided to visit the Ashram before confronting that problem. So they locked up their home, left the keys with a neighbour and set off as a family on an overland journey East, never to return. They arrived at the Ashram in December, 1965.



For many years, Michael ran the Auroville transport service, together with Rajan and a few boys from Morratandi and Edeyanchavadi whom they trained. Auro-garage was located on a plot (near JIPMER) that was in between Pondicherry and Auroville. The workshop maintained a variety of the vehicles that arrived with overland adventurers to Auroville. Since everything in those days, from people to goods, had to be transported from Pondicherry and within the community, Auro-garage was the lifeblood of the scattered activities taking place.

Michael was the hub that kept these and other vehicles running, including those of the Sisters of Cluny. He managed to do so by swapping parts between these vehicles and re-building them, being a trained mechanical engineer. However, his skills and interests were vast; he had been a rally driver, he dabbled in carpentry, machining and making musical instruments, and he spent a lot of time studying Viktor

Schauberger's theories on water and on building vortices in his tiny room.

He was also a cartoonist and had curiosity, enthusiasm and a good sense of humour (never taking himself very seriously). All these qualities made him an excellent teacher,

one whose classes and personality are well remembered and still very much appreciated by his former students.

Tashi remembers, "He would tell us fantastic stories while we walked to the beach. He used to say that stories are floating in space and we just have to learn to catch them. After the school closed due to the big problem with Sri Aurobindo Society, Kathrin and I had bird watching classes with him. He used to take us on his bike. He loved the nature here and through him we learned a lot about the birds and small animals in our area. We also hunted down the open wells around Auroville: they were our swimming pools."

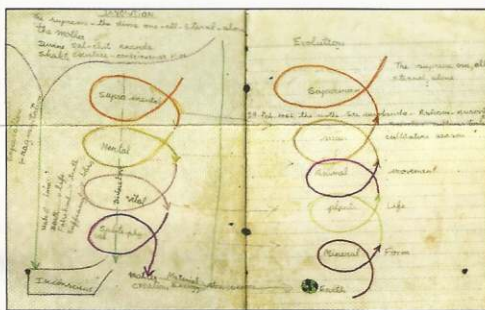
"Those were our 'good old days' with Michael. While I feel sad that he never came to Auroville later on in his life, we are always grateful to him for what he taught us and for all he inspired in us."

"It was a revelation to see Tashi's notebooks, the recognition of the lessons, exploding, intact, in this pocket of my memory," says Renu. "Perhaps it was our age (11-13) that left the information seared so passionately into our beings, but his interest, enthusiasm and talent as a cartoonist made him and his lessons a favourite. He drew deftly on the large blackboard, talking all the while, and we laboriously copied these elaborate drawings into our notebooks."

"The closing of the school in late 1976 was part of the enormous upheavals that would redefine our destinies and after that our lives drifted apart. Though a mere 12 kilometres separates Auroville from Pondicherry, an invisible chasm formed, engulfing many of our early teachers."

"In the year 2000 we organized a gathering of former Auroville students. One of the events involved us working together with our former Ashram teacher in the Matrimandir Gardens. The work consisted of moving earth by hand. I was shovelling the earth into a chetty when Michael Red-Beard mischievously muttered, 'You know I am pretty sure we are moving back the same pile of earth we had moved here 30 years ago!'"

Renu



A page from Tashi's notebook

Tekeste Zerhanes

On June 6th, Tekeste B.G. Kidan Zerhanes left his body in his apartment in Courage. He was 79.

Tekeste, who in the late sixties came from Ethiopia to Ashram and Auroville and to whom Mother gave the *adesh* to "spread the light to Africa", always kept the Mother's words and love as the guiding principle of his life. Tekeste wrote to both to the Emperor Haile Selassie and to Father Dioskoros, Archbishop in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, about The Mother and the creation of Auroville. As a result of this, Emperor Haile Selassie and Bishop Dioskoros were, after India, the first Head of State and religious leader to express in writing their respects to the Mother and support for Auroville and the ideals it stands for.

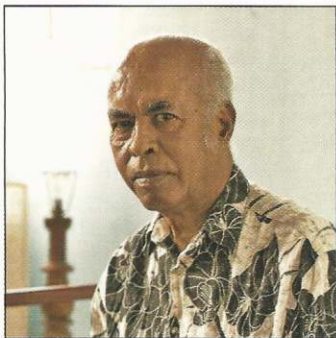
Backed by firm spiritual connections with the Ashram and Ethiopia, he strongly endeavoured to create an Africa centre and, after joining Auroville in 2001, connected with the Unity Pavilion and Auroville International with the same intent. One of the results was a week-long conference on developing an integral approach to collaboration between Auroville and African countries in Addis Ababa in October 2011. He also helped bring professors and students of architecture from Addis Ababa University to Auroville to work on the Africa House project.

Tekeste's burial at the Adventure Burial and Cremation grounds on June 9th was followed a day later with a bonfire in his honour by the young people of the Africa House.

Yolande Lemoine

One June 24th, Yolande Lemoine, one of Auroville's strong supporters in the early days, left her body in Paris.

Yolande had been a close friend and aide of Satprem and Sujata, and liaised the important contacts between J.R.D. Tata, Satprem and Auroville.



It was thanks to the effort of J.R.D. Tata and Yolande that Satprem's manuscripts and audio cassettes of *L'Agenda de Mère* (*Mother's Agenda*) made it to France to be published there. In 2014, she published her correspondence with Satprem in the book "*Satprem: Lettres à Yolande*".

Damien Hedley

On July 8th, Damien L. Hedley left his body at the age of 67 in Canberra, Australia, after a struggle with cancer. His funeral was held on July 13th at the Australian National Botanic Gardens.

Damien joined Auroville in 2009 and was a resident of Creativity. He was a popular teacher. He taught at Future School, Last School and, most recently, The Learning Centre, where he taught a sex education series along with his Aurovilian partner, Paula Murphy.

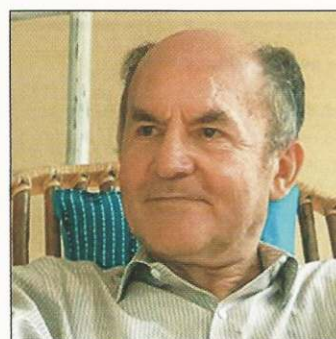
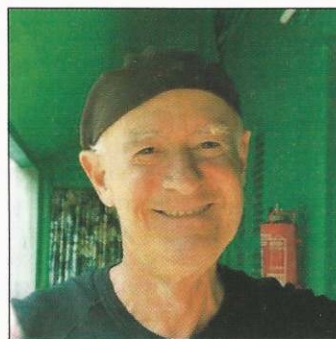
Damien had studied the I Ching, the Enneagram and first read Sri Aurobindo in 1971. He gave this advice, "Tell the Truth to yourself. Be true to yourself. Then you might have a chance to be truthful with others."

Luciano Gemo

On July 16th, Luciano Gemo left his body in Italy at the age of 71 after a prolonged struggle with cancer and other complications.

In the mid-nineties, Luciano joined the team in Annapurna and took care of the farm's daily deliveries of milk and cheese, transporting Tomas's daughter, Usha, to and from school in Auroville, and passionately studying Tamil in Auroville's library in between. When he moved in 2011 to Realization, Usha could join him in his flat for her further studies.

Due to his illness, Luciano went back to Italy in 2014 where he was hospitalised and passed away.



In brief

New Governing Board members

In addition to Dr. Karan Singh, who was reappointed as Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation on 23-11-2016, the Government of India has appointed four persons as members of the Governing Board: Dr. Prema Nandkumar, Sri Aurobindo scholar; Prof. Sachindanand Mohanty, Vice Chancellor, Central University, Orissa; Dr. Anirban Ganguly, Director, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation; and Dr. Nirima Oza, dentist, Pondicherry. The ex-officio members are Mr. Rakesh Ranjan IAS (Joint Secretary, HRD Ministry) and Ms. Darshana Dabral IAS (Financial Advisor, HRD Ministry). The term of office of all members is 4 years. The appointment of two more persons is awaited.

Open letter from former International Advisory Council members

The outgoing members of the International Advisory Council wrote an open letter to the community in which they expressed they had greatly valued the honesty of the dialogue they had had with Aurovilians during their term of office.

In that spirit, they listed some of the areas which they felt required greater attention from the community. These included the further growth of the City; a more rigorous effort to welcome and induct new Aurovilians; a systematic development of eco-architecture and green infrastructure as a signature Auroville model; a more effective outward communication within and outside India, particularly with potential Aurovilians; continuing the development of the youth and their active participation in the affairs of Auroville; and evolving new models of voluntary simplicity, sustainable farming and integrative medicine as a model for India and the world.

New members needed

Nominations have been invited from the community for three new members of the Working Committee, three for the Council and two for the Funds and Assets Management Committee. The selection of new members will take place during a three day process between October 20-22nd. This year, the community will also select an entirely new Town Development Council (also known as l'Avenir d'Auroville).

Farmers' Workshop

In collaboration with the Sustainable Livelihood Institute (SLI), Auroville Consulting recently organized a farmers' workshop to learn and understand the challenges faced by farmers in Tamil Nadu.

The table discussions explored opportunities for improving current farming practices, raising awareness of renewable energy options, making farm irrigation more efficient, addressing soil erosion, making the land fertile and the advantages of growing local crops. The outcomes from the workshop will be used in implementing water conservation measures and increasing the nutrient content of food harvested in Auroville.

In the next phase of the project, they will integrate smart control systems with sustainable farming practices. This is part of the ongoing SCORRES Project (Smart Control of Rural Renewable Energy & Storage), funded by Innovate UK, that aims to develop a viable, location-specific irrigation system for the Indian agricultural sector.

FAMC annual work plan

The Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) has issued its annual work plan. Its objectives include a) increasing financial transparency and accountability by simplifying and strengthening basic regulations and policies b) growing Auroville's income-generating activities to increase work opportunities for Aurovilians to provide more community wealth c) exploring the restructuring of the maintenance system to ensure that it provides sufficiently for all in need (e.g. food, child maintenance, 'life-long maintenance', etc.) d) exploring innovative solutions to provide affordable housing opportunities for Newcomers and Aurovilians and e) facilitating the development of a food strategy towards greater food security.

From St. Stephen's to Future School

Abha reflects on her journey

I like to brag sometimes that I have retired from the best academic institution in India. St. Stephen's (SSC) was the premier college for undergraduate studies in India half a century ago, and it was number one when I quit my position there in 2002. It continues to hold its top position today. But whoever retires in their early thirties? And why?

My mind was made up. I was going to resign from university teaching in May and relocate to Auroville, a small international community near Pondicherry.

"Only someone with an unsound mind would do what you plan to do." My mother, a diligent academic and a botanist by profession, was upset. After enjoying the prestige that came with her daughter's appointment as a lecturer in English at St. Stephen's, she suddenly faced the prospect of losing her younger daughter to an obscure township in Tamil Nadu and having to answer unsettling questions that would erupt from the extended family, most of which was settled in palatial bungalows in Civil Lines. Why give up a promising career in a college that had harboured the rising stars of the Garg family for generations? My maternal uncles, even my brother, were graduates of SSC. And here was I, armed with a doctorate from Canada, several published articles and reviews, as well as a significant 7-year teaching record, throwing it all away – for what?

My mother's older sister, a formidable professor at Indraprastha College for Women, phoned in. "Abha, what are you doing, beti? Such appointments don't come easy." I protested, "But it is only a temporary lecturership, mausi. It's not like I'm throwing away a permanent job!" My aunt persisted – "Teaching two years in a row at any college means an appointment as a permanent lecturer soon."

And that was the problem. There was truth in what she said. The posts were going to be advertised soon for permanent vacancy. I had to leave before that happened. The prospect of becoming permanent anywhere, even the most satisfying work place, was irksome for me. My whole being resisted this idea of a continuum, where the element of just being in the present, of floating in transience, would be gone forever. I would be labeled, categorized, stuck in the same slot for years to come.

In Auroville, on the other hand, developing oneself in more directions than one was possible. To work in Auroville meant contributing to the needs of the community in some form or the other, not necessarily in the one profession you were destined for or qualified to be in. However much I liked the teaching profession, I didn't want to end up as a professor with a truckload of seminar presentations and useless theoretical viewpoints to my credit. In Auroville I could venture into territories that were closed to me in the mainstream world. I could be a writer, a town planner, an editor, a teacher, a farmer or just a dreamer. The possibilities were endless. I would get no salary but my basic needs would be taken care of.

Because I knew I wouldn't be part of the rat race for the upcoming permanent post, my final term at SSC was relaxed and enjoyable. I taught my classes, attended the departmental meetings, carried out my role of advisor to the college Lit. Soc. (Literary Society). It was an exhilarating experience to be part of a vibrant community of dedicated teachers and talented youngsters. One of my students at the time is the now well-known actor Konkana Sen Sharma who was already going on short shooting stints at the time. Whenever she would be late in handing in her tutorials she would smile charmingly and say "Ma'am, next time for sure I'll give my essay on time!"

Many students were aware of my plans to join Auroville and knew that I had already lived there and in neighbouring Pondicherry in the late nineties when I was teaching at Pondicherry University. Some students were eager to know more and even visited me here later. What was this place on earth where educational certificates and degrees, titles and one's family background didn't count for much? How could inner growth and evolving to a state of nothingness be more important than holding on to success and material assets?

I couldn't explain everything and in a way my decision to join the Auroville experiment became my first act of total surrender not knowing if I would make it or not but having a deep conviction



Abha Prakash

Aurofuture, the town planning office now known as TDC, and helped write informative pamphlets and brochures. Like most enthusiastic newcomers, the heat didn't bother me as I cycled up and down from Certitude to Bharat Nivas. The Asia Urbs project was happening in Italy that summer and fundraising needed to be done. Later, fuelled by my need to continue writing about Auroville – the work being done and the people who were doing it – I joined the team at *AV Today* and became a reporter, writer, editor for about a year.

Finally in July 2003, in response to an urgent call for Advanced English teachers, I found myself facing a class again. My first group of A-level students in FS was not big but it consisted of highly motivated individuals. Philip, Peter, Jivatma and Killol were part of this first batch, set to graduate from high school in 2004. Jackie from UK, the then teacher whose children Ben and Sam were also in the graduating class, had just staged the enormously successful drama, "The Importance of Being Earnest", at the Visitors Centre. She was, however, keen on leaving to join another activity in Auroville.

I grimly noted the tasks ahead of me: to rapidly familiarize myself with the specific Cambridge curriculum and prepare these students in discerning speech features in spoken language scripts and their adaptations in drama dialogues. In addition I had to train them in analyzing prose fiction and in the ability to write meaningful 500-600 word essays within the space of an hour by the end of the academic year when three A-level Language and Literature unit exams awaited them.

The students were up for it, the energy was wonderful. We studied James Joyce's *Dubliners*, Somerset Maugham's short stories and Oscar Wilde's drama. Every week we had class discussions, and in addition the students had to write two assignments – one for speech analysis and the other for literary analysis. Over subsequent years, as batch after batch rolled in and out, I couldn't help comparing the enthusiasm and dedication of that first group of students who saw me through not only my first year of teaching in Auroville but also my first pregnancy. When I could no longer commute to school after the seventh month, they came all the way to Utility for classes. My first child was born on June 8th 2004, two weeks after we stopped classes.

Overall, my time at Future School has been a positive one. High school teaching is demanding and requires out-of-class study time, energy, and commitment from both the teacher and the student. When students are of varying abilities and backgrounds it is the teacher's task to set the standard at a level where all students benefit from the challenge. When I ask myself how I lasted so long at teaching here, it is simply because I get energised by classroom interaction and find it enjoyable. Furthermore the GCE syllabus does not remain constant year after year. On the contrary it makes space for new components (such as creative/research oriented coursework in place of an exam unit), newer contemporary authors as well as the chance of revisiting classic ones.

However, I also admit that during the roughly 15 years I have taught GCE English at Future School, I have had moments when I wanted to take a break or try out something else. Some of those moments extended into taking up part-time work (co-editing the *News and Notes* from 2006-2012, for instance and doing communication and publication work at SAIER) while continuing with reduced teaching responsibilities at the high school. It is only in a

place like Auroville where individuals can switch work places with ease.

The reasons for wanting to quit included dealing with sixteen year olds' moods and attitudinal problems, grading essays with the same recurring mistakes, preparing for classes at night while my kid(s) missed out on the bedtime story, feeling fatigued with exam preparation, correction, etc.

However, being able to be part of making higher education options available for at least some children in Auroville makes me happy to continue the work. The occasional optimistic emails that come from ex-students sharing their academic progress at university make the effort worthwhile. Three recent FS students who enhanced the classroom experience for me with their high levels of commitment to the course were Sonja Helena, a guest from Germany, Aruna from Arya, and Chandra from Samridhi. Whether these students got A-stars in their English Cambridge exams or not is beside the point. The important thing was that they brought A-star enthusiasm and diligence into my class through the year.

The final irony of my work life in Auroville does not escape me. I am still a teacher, a profession I wanted to break away from in Delhi but which strangely enough has grown on me here.

And although I still have a restless spirit at times, I can't think of living anywhere else in the world.

Abha Prakash

NEW BOOKS

Under the Banyan

Under the Banyan is a sketchbook designed to introduce readers to essential principles of sustainable architecture in tropical climates, using examples drawn from Auroville. It does not go into details – there are no architectural drawings, for example – and it emphasises that it does not offer any universal recipes for sustainable construction. "Each structure is different and should be analysed individually, depending on climate, landscape, people's needs, social environment, cultural history and available materials." The format is an architect's graphic diary of a week exploring sustainable experiments in Auroville. Each day it focuses on a different theme – biodiversity, water management, ventilation, solar protection, waste management – and draws out the most important learnings from Auroville's response to these challenges.

The principles are clearly and entertainingly presented: the witty and informative sketches reminded me of those early Auroville cyclostyled newsletters. Much of it may be a matter of commonsense but I have never seen the principles of how to enhance natural ventilation both inside and outside buildings, for example, so clearly and so simply described. I have a few reservations. Speaking as a layperson, I'm not convinced that "preserving the natural ground level" should be taken as a basic principle of sustainable architecture, as I can conceive of many cases where sensitively reshaping a given landscape may lead to enhanced water catchment possibilities. I think respecting the "natural flow" of water may also be problematic in certain cases for the same reason. No doubt, this is where the warning against seeing these as "universal recipes" comes in.

I also wonder if urban architects will find enough guidance here for materialising these principles in environments very different from that of Auroville, but I understand this is not the purpose of this publication.

Lastly, I regret that the text has not received the attention of a first-rate English-speaking editor. While it is perfectly readable, Mother did not conceive of Auroville, for example, as a place for the "evolution of conscience"! But all these are no more than niggles. This is a handsomely presented and beautifully illustrated handbook, useful for both the layperson and professional in that it clarifies important principles of sustainable design. The authors should be congratulated for this entertaining and informative introduction, as should Auroville Consulting for its valuable assistance in design and publication.

Alan

Under the Banyan: Principles for Sustainable Habitats in the Tropics. Published by HarperCollins India, 2017. Available in India from Amazon.in Price: Rs 449

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