

## Upasana: starting the fourth seven-year cycle

*Auroville Today* reported on the social outreach work of Upasana in January 2009, eight years ago. Today Upasana is 20 years old. What direction is it taking now?

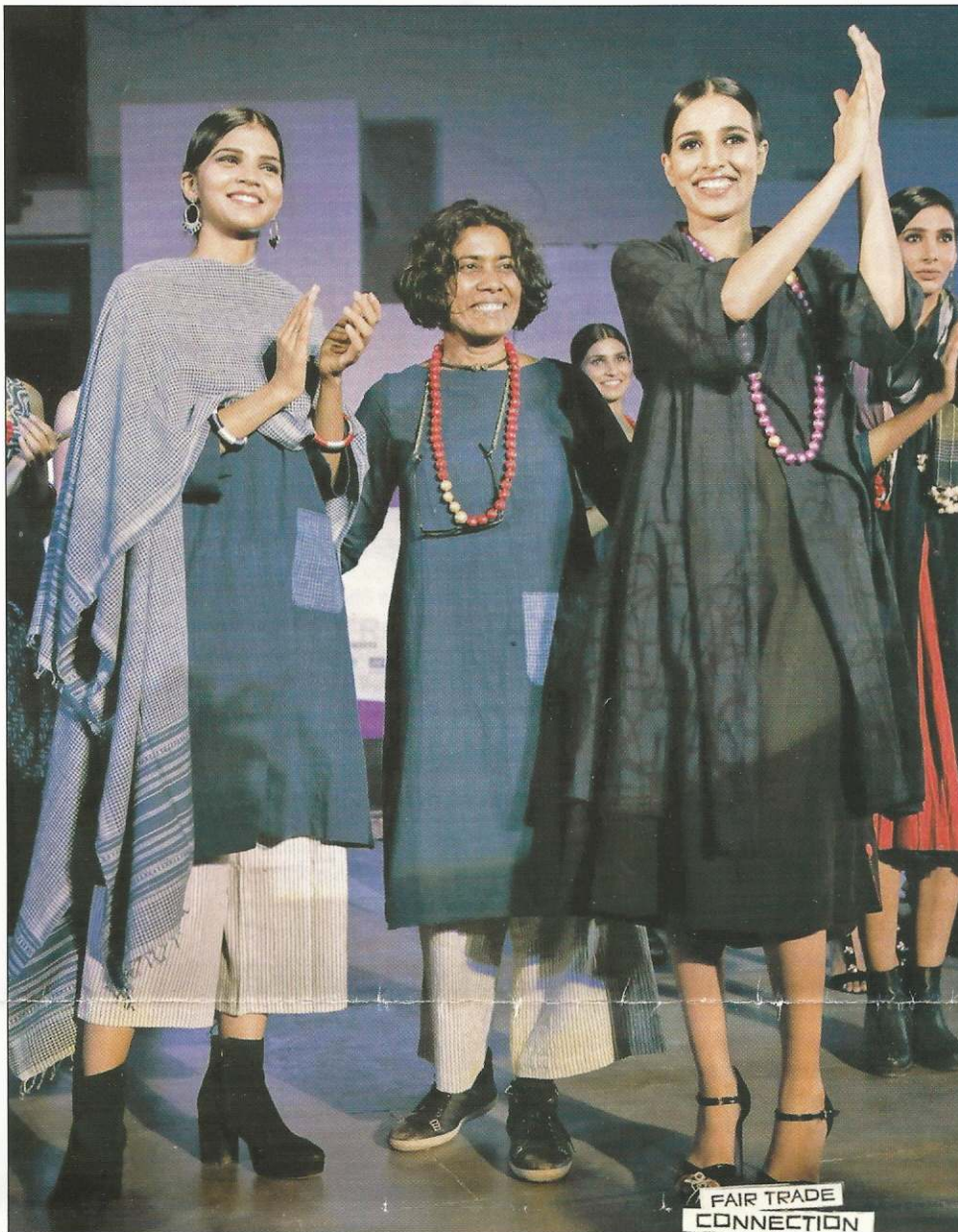
**A**s far as birthdays go, Upasana's 20th, celebrated on December 9th was a quiet affair with excess stock made available against 'suggested contributions' and all income donated to the future Line of Goodwill, a 200+ crore development initiative in which Upasana's executive Uma is particularly interested. "It will bring a sea-change in Auroville," she predicts.

### Seven-year cycles

We are seated in a quiet area of the Upasana compound, contemplating an immense rock in a Japanese sand garden. "Upasana's evolution," says Uma reflectively, "goes in seven-year cycles." During the first, Upasana was quite successfully doing normal business. The second cycle started when the tsunami hit and Upasana got involved in social responsibility work, starting many not-for-profit activities. These were intense years with some projects becoming national icons, such as the Tsunamika doll and 'Small Steps', the foldable cotton bags to replace plastic shopping bags. The projects kicked off the "Gift Economy", in which the products were given away free but the recipients were asked to make a donation in return. Farther afield, Upasana got involved with the Varanasi weavers, initiating the revival of a dying art; and with organic cotton production around Madurai, trying to prevent farmer suicides.

"During the third cycle we saw Varanasi once again hitting the limelight as the decline of Varanasi's weaving technology had been reversed," says Uma. "We are proud to have been amongst those who helped bring this turn-about." The movie on Upasana's work with the Varanasi weavers, made by Basil and Claudine, was shown to the Prime Minister during his visit to Varanasi in September this year. "That was a great honour. Upasana's work was brought to national awareness." Uma herself was made a member of the All India Handloom Board, a national advisory board of the Ministry of Textiles, to help develop a policy for handloom textiles in India.

The work with the cotton farmers led to the introduction of Upasana's organic cotton line. "When I was interacting with the farmers I felt their desperation, and being in the fashion business I had a hard time pushing away a feeling of guilt, of being responsible for the farmers' suicides. Not doing anything was not an option for



Uma (middle) with models at the Fair Trade Forum India fashion show in New Delhi

me. We were not in a position to question the fact that now 97% of all Indian cotton is genetically modified. But Bt cotton was introduced promising better yields and a better income for the farmers. For many small farmers this did not manifest as the costs of Bt seeds, chemical fertilizers and insecticides exceeded the income from sales. The farmers took loans to cover pre-harvesting costs, and when crops failed, committed suicide. Promoting organic cotton was our way to help the small cotton farmers.

### Downslide

Doing so much social experimenting had a negative fallout: Upasana struggled to survive. "To launch Upasana's organic cotton brand, we had scraped together 60 lakhs from all over Upasana – money from credit lines, deferred payments – and it worked. We were listed in the top five social companies of India, we got a lot of positive publicity, but the negative side of it was that for many years we not only had to stop all our contributions to Auroville, but were struggling to survive as a company. Looking back, I say we had been naive, very idealistic and we got quite a few blows – from within Auroville, but also from ourselves. We do not regret what we did outside, but we did feel bad that Auroville got affected because of it – even though we felt that we were guided, carried by a spiritual aspiration which was our justification for this drive."

People had come to see Upasana as an idealistic NGO, not as a company. "Because of the 'Gift Economy' concept we'd introduced, people started believing that all that Upasana made was for free, even clothing. But the Gift Economy hadn't worked as well as we had hoped. We'd given away over 5 million Tsunamika's to 80 different countries, and a lesser number of Small Steps bags, but the 'return giving' was insufficient. 'Return giving' happens when a person feels committed to the cause of the 'gift', or just as an expression of gratitude. That needs a lot of handholding – people are to be reminded of the purpose of the gift – and we couldn't do that," says Uma. To remind people of the Gift Economy ideal, Uma now organizes Gift Economy sessions where Upasana's clothes carry a suggestion concerning what amount people could contribute.

So much of the third seven-year cycle focused on undoing the negative 'NGO' image and recovering financial health. "That took us three years," says Uma. Upasana's focus shifted to becoming a social and sustainable business, but no longer donor-based. "Now we have been able to re-establish Upasana as a premier design company in the Indian and international markets," she says.

### Making fashion accountable

Yet, the social responsibility work did leave its marks. "I dare say that we have played a large part in waking up many organisations to start working with organic, so much so that today organic has become fashionable. And

now we have started another move: we've launched a conscious fashion hub as a national platform to address all the difficult questions that the fashion industry has to answer. We want to make fashion accountable and talk about issues such as pollution caused by fashion – fashion is the second largest pollution industry of the planet – and labour conditions." Uma mentions the 2013 disaster of Rana Plaza in Bangladesh, where a badly constructed building that housed five garment factories supplying global brands collapsed, killing 1,135 people. "This still happens all the time all over Asia," she says.

This year Upasana hosted a two-day workshop in Auroville, attended by 75 people who flew in from all over India. "Policy makers, deans of organisations and founding members of the organic movement came to listen to their peers about 'conscious dealing with fashion'. For them, Auroville is a place where much conscious effort is put into making society a better place, and they wanted to connect." She feels it is also in response to a world-wide shift of consciousness. "Upasana is helping bringing that shift about, but the true credit goes to Auroville and to what stands behind Auroville."

### The fourth cycle: going bonsai?

Upasana today employs around 50 people, a varying number of interns, and a number of people working in different villages on Tsunamika and Small Steps. Business is brisk, yet Uma is not happy.

"I am worried about the future," she says. "Upasana is re-establishing itself as a premier fashion brand, and we are opening up again to international markets – not as a cheap job service provider but as a unit that sells its own brand designs. I am just back from Japan and Singapore, and earlier I was in Europe, as an ambassador of Auroville conscious fashion. Japan, in particular, is sensitive to that approach. In September this year we were at the India Trend Fair in Tokyo, and our stand was among the most visited. I have as a market strategy chosen to only take small orders. For Japan, that works."

But that approach won't help Upasana to grow. "We need a system shift, otherwise Upasana will 'go bonsai' – unable to grow as its roots can't expand. We need investment to grow, and that seems not to be available in Auroville. So we need wellwishers' help to develop. Upasana needs two crore [approximately US \$ 320,000, eds.] as 'angel investment', but without expecting any other return than supporting Auroville through a unit with whose profits Auroville will faster develop."

Upasana is not alone. Auroville's fast growing units together would need something like 20 crores of this type of investment. The problem is largely due to the unique legal structure and the income tax exempt status of the Auroville Foundation which makes investment in the units by outsiders impossible. "I hope that Auroville's Funds and Assets Management Committee will come up with a solution soon," says Uma. "My chartered accountant once asked me why I didn't come out of Auroville and play mainstream ... but is that the future of Auroville business?"

Uma confides that when she starts thinking large, she get butterflies in her belly. "Nevertheless," she says, "I am ready to go ahead, no longer solo, but on a large scale together with the community. For I often feel something or rather somebody is pushing us with a quiet but very intense force. I just have to learn to surrender."

*In conversation with Carel*



An Upasana outfit modelled at the India Trend Fair in Tokyo

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# The Kalpana housing project

Across the road from Humanscapes, a Rs 15 crore (US \$ 2.5 million) housing project is coming up, consisting of 42 different-sized apartments, four offices, a caretaker house, a gymnasium and a covered parking for 70 motorbikes. The process of materialisation has been tough.

“Satyakam and I both worked many years for the Housing Service and we have first-hand experience of the difficulties of people needing housing,” says Devasmita. “It convinced us that we needed to help, that we had to start a housing project with beautiful apartments where people are happy to live.” Kalpana was conceived and the first shovel broke the ground in March 2016. “Actually, the project had started as early as 2012, but that didn’t work out due to various reasons,” says Satyakam. “In 2013, we requested Neel and Supriti from Ovoid Atelier to become the architects of Kalpana. Neel and Supriti have strong links with both the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville. They run an architecture studio in Pondicherry.”

A second delay happened when L’Avenir d’Auroville, (the Auroville Town Development Council) decided to change the allocated site. “The initial location was next to Arati, opposite Sanjana,” says Neel. “It was a large plot, the size of two football fields, and we had planned the apartments in a ring on the outside.” Mr. Doshi, the then Chairman of the Council, did not approve. “This looks like a golf link,” he said and proposed that Kalpana be shifted to a smaller plot along the Crown Road, while housing the same number of people. “It was a bit of a shock as we had to start all over again,” says Neel. “But we also enjoyed the challenge to build a higher density project closer to the city centre.”

The new design took three years to manifest. “We worked in parallel with Auroville’s urban designers who were formulating the guidelines for urban design buildings on the Crown as we went ahead,” says Neel. Kalpana was their test case. The urban designers became sensitized to what it means to have a large construction directly on the Crown and to how it should contribute to Auroville as a city. It led to some deep thinking: on how to create a façade on the Crown, what type of units should be located on the ground floor facing the Crown – the TDC asked for shops and offices – and if a walkway along the Crown could be integrated. “It was a good process,” says Supriti. “Our designs have improved because of that interaction.” “But it took too long,” complains Satyakam.

## Shaping the apartments

The shape of the Kalpana apartment buildings is unusual. Neel explains. “We wanted the design to respond to three important considerations. The first was that the buildings should be more sculptural as this project is closer to the centre of Auroville. So form became a prime criterion. The second was that the experience of living in an apartment should be as close as possible to living in a free-standing house. The third that energy should, as much as possible, be generated on site.”

The energy requirements were the easy part. Each apartment block has its own rooftop solar panels and UPS, and a solar hot water system to eliminate the need for geysers. The other

considerations fused when the architects studied how best to meet the needs of privacy, sound insulation and ventilation.

“We designed each apartment block in a modified star form, where the apartments do not face each other,” says Neel. “That took care of the privacy requirement and the noise pollution from neighbours. Contact noise has been avoided by building ledge walls between the apartments on which the plumbing is running, so the noise from someone’s toilet flushing can’t be heard.” To minimize visual pollution as requested by Mr. Doshi, each apartment has a roofed open utility space where the laundry can dry invisibly from the outside.

“Climate control was a more difficult issue,” says Supriti. “Here we took the advice of Chamanlal and Shipra from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and of Toine and Helmut. We jointly decided against air conditioning for a few reasons. It has been proven that air conditioning is bad for health; it is addictive; it requires too much energy; and even though modern air conditioners now use HCFC, they still contribute to the pollution of the ozone layer. As Auroville wants to show innovative solutions, we wanted to design the apartments in such a way that air conditioning would not be required, not even in mid-summer.”

The solution was to maximize the air inflow, insulate the walls and roofs and provide as much shade as possible. “To promote natural ventilation and benefit from changing wind directions, 90% of the apartments have windows on three sides. For the walls, Aerocon autoclave blocks were used as they have the highest insulation value of all building materials now on the market. [Aerocon blocks are lightweight stabilised cement blocks containing fly ash, cement, lime, gypsum, aluminium powder and water, eds.] The walls are plastered on both sides. Each apartment has a large shaded

verandah or courtyard, covered by a 4.5 meters cantilevered RCC roof, which is insulated with a layer of 8 cms vermiculite and reflective tiles. The walls are juxtaposed, so that there is a lot of shading. Only 15% of the walls will be exposed to the sun. Where there is too much exposure, we will plant creepers and have a system which goes with the ethos of the place,” says Neel.

Will it work? “Kalpana’s model apartment was cool in high summer,” says Devasmita. “We felt comfortable with only the fan running, while it was 40+ degrees Celsius outside. So we are convinced it will work.”

worked over the years. Such a protocol would also show the ecological footprint of each construction – e.g. how much of land has been consumed per resident; how much built-up area each person has; how much steel per person was used; how much wood, how much cement, how much electricity, how much solar, and what the costs per person were taking into account the built-up area, the height of the apartment blocks and the size of the plot. Only then can you make a comparison and judge the eco-friendliness and the successes and failures of a particular project.”

“We have often been asked if our designs weren’t very costly,” says Supriti. “We have made a costs comparison with three of our other housing projects in Pondicherry that have 50, 100 and 350 apartments. We found that the costs of Kalpana are not higher than these, at approximately Rs. 22,000 /m<sup>2</sup> based on super built up area. The higher costs are caused by the extra’s Kalpana provides: solar panels, solar hot water systems, fully equipped kitchens and bathrooms, and super efficient fans in each room to name a few.”

## Objections

Kalpana has the dubious honour of having been one of the most disputed housing projects in Auroville. The project was publicly presented in March 2016, and once again in April that year at a well-attended General Meeting. The immediate reason for the large attendance was the cutting of a number of trees, which was permitted in the building approval but objected to by some Aurovilians. Other objections were to the perceived ‘luxurious’ nature of the project, as compared to the low cost, simple lifestyle of the neighbouring residents of Vikas.



Architectural image of the Kalpana project



Layout of a 3-bedroom apartment

Community interaction is another important design parameter. Each apartment block has an open area on the ground floor with a sitting arrangement. “It is also a passage,” Neel explains. “Residents, including those from other communities, can use the passage to go to the large garden area in the middle of Kalpana, cross the bridge over the swale – a water harvesting device that runs through the centre of the compound – and walk to the Crown Road to visit the nearby Solar Kitchen, the Santé health centre, the Neem Tree restaurant or the library.

## Eco friendly?

Over the years, a small army of concrete mixer trucks have driven into Kalpana to supply the required concrete. “We have been criticised that Kalpana is not eco-friendly,” says Satyakam. “But the fact is that Kalpana is very much eco-friendly, even though we don’t use earth block technologies.”

“The problem is how to compare building technologies,” explains Neel. “Housing projects should be evaluated using a common set of parameters. We suggest that the TDC develop a protocol to share numbers before and after construction, and once again after three years of occupancy: this is what was projected, this is what has been achieved, and this is how the project has

Last but not least, the neighbours feared noise disturbance during construction.

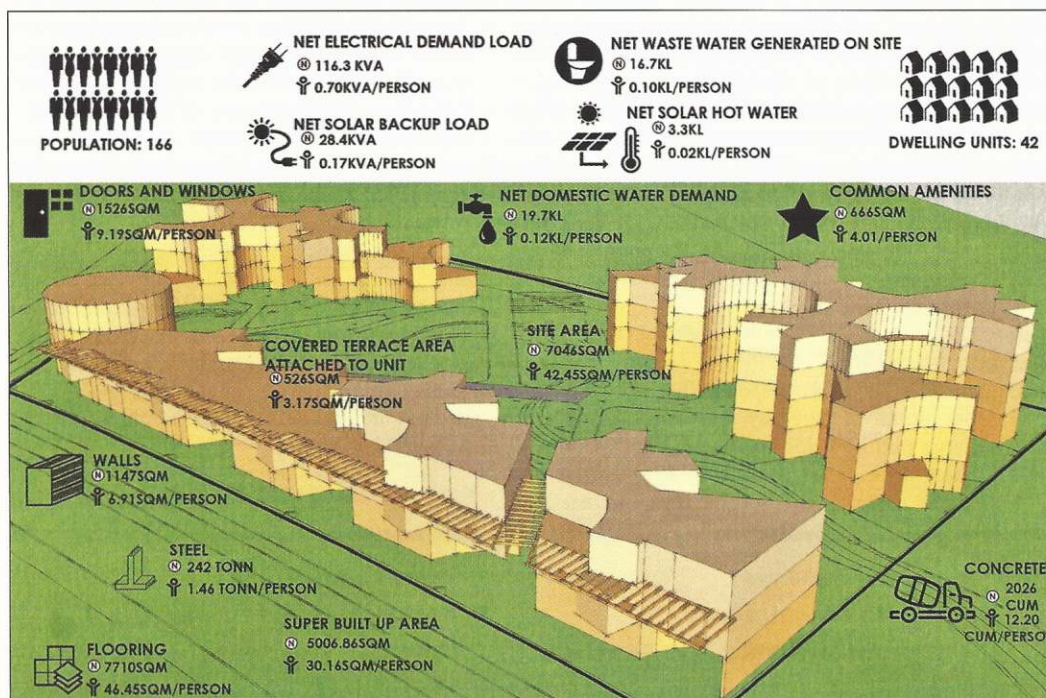
“Much of the animosity has gone, but we still do not always enjoy a warm and friendly neighbourhood relationship,” says Satyakam. “The main complaints are about noise pollution after working hours, which we try to minimize as much as possible. But sometimes a cement mixing truck arrives late. These trucks come from 30 kilometres away and are sometimes held up in traffic congestion. But you can’t wait till the next day, the cement has to be used immediately.” Koodam’s mediation efforts have helped to create more understanding, but some resentment lingers.

## The financing

The Kalpana project will cost about Rs 15 crore (US \$ 2.5 million) and could take-off as Satyakam and Devasmita could arrange the finances to get the project started and ensure its continuation and completion. All the four offices and most apartments have meanwhile been allocated against donations. “As part of our personal contributions, we also make sure that about 10 persons who cannot financially contribute towards the actual cost of the project can live in Kalpana. We also contribute towards the costs of the caretaker apartment, the gym and a small guesthouse,” says Satyakam.

Kalpana will be completed by July 2018. It is no small achievement.

Carel





# Remembering Hu Hsu

In September 2017, the Chinese Ambassador to India Mr. Luo Zhaohui visited Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Addressing a gathering at the 68th anniversary celebrations of the People's Republic of China at New Delhi soon after his visits, Ambassador Zhaohui remembered Hu Hsu.

"Last week, I visited Pondicherry. It is one of my dreaming places. One of my teachers, Professor Xu Fancheng lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram from 1945 to 1978. He was one of the most famous Chinese scholars, translating the Upanishad, Bhagavad Gita, and Shakuntala from Sanskrit to Chinese. He also introduced Sri Aurobindo to China. More than 300 paintings of Professor Xu were kept in Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Looking at his legacies, our eyes were full of tears. He was one of the bridges between our two countries ... In the history of bilateral engagement, there have been thousands of prominent persons like Professor Xu, including Xuanzang, Faxian, Bodhidharma and Tagore. We should never forget their contribution and legacies ... Standing on their shoulders, we should do more today... We should turn the old page and start a new chapter..."

Hu Hsu (pronounced Hu Shu) was born on 26th October, 1909, into a wealthy family in Changsha in the southern province of Hunan. His family was respected thanks to one of his ancestors, General Hsu. The Hsu family was successfully engaged in the business of silk. At elementary school, a young Mao Tse-tung was his history teacher. While he lived in the family house, Hu Hsu never had to handle money. Later, when he was given some money for the first time, he confided to Shanta, a friend in the Ashram, that he felt embarrassed and didn't know how to deal with it.

A thorough classical education in literature and the arts was considered a necessary basis in his family. Lu Hsun, the noted writer and literary reformist, considered to be the founder of modern Chinese literature, became his friend and mentor. Hu Hsu studied History in the noted Sun Yat-sen University in Guangdong and, thanks to Lu Hsun's support, obtained a scholarship to study Fine Art and Philosophy in the prestigious University of Heidelberg in Germany from 1929 to 1932. His first major work was a translation of Nietzsche's *Also sprach Zarathustra*.

During the troubled days of the Sino-Japanese war, we do not know much about his whereabouts in China, but in 1945, just after the war ended, he decided to head towards the West, that is, towards India. He settled in Visva Bharati in Santiniketan to further his study of Sanskrit (he would go on to translate some works of the great classical poet Kalidasa from Sanskrit into Chinese), and teach the History of Chinese Buddhism at 'Cheena Bhavan', the Chinese study centre co-founded in 1937 by Rabindranath Tagore and Tan Yun-shan (who also visited the Ashram, met The Mother, and had the darshan of Sri Aurobindo in 1939). Tan Yun-shan once wrote, "...As in the past China was spiritually conquered by a great Indian, so in the future too she would be conquered by another great Indian, Sri Aurobindo, the Maha-Yogi who is the bringer of that light which will chase away the darkness that envelops the world to-day." It is probably here that Hu Hsu first heard of Sri Aurobindo.

## In Pondicherry

In 1951, Hu Hsu came to Pondicherry. Shortly after his arrival he wrote a poem which sheds some light on his first experiences (translated):

*The Mother bestowed a flower for its blossom  
Other than offering a flower to the Mother, living in  
South India nothing else matters.  
Flower blossom, flower beautiful, flower can be  
divine, the divine itself silent, and the flower itself  
spring.  
Time flies, experience beyond the material is new,  
timeless divine knowledge is ever fresh.  
This flower, this leaf, the essence of the present  
moment, this is the way to realization.*

The Mother saw his potential – not only was he a scholar and master of many languages, but he also had the desire to translate Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's books into Chinese. Eventually he was given the Villa Orphelia to stay in, a large colonial mansion with a large garden in the French town, on Rue Dumas, right next to the Ashram Nursing Home today. He was working tremendously hard, fourteen hours a day. Manuscripts were quickly piling up, as well as brush paintings. Mother had brought back from Japan some calligraphy material

and She gave some to Hu Hsu so he could continue to paint. When, in 1967, he exhibited his paintings in the Exhibition Hall of the Ashram, The Mother wrote a very special introduction: "Here are the paintings of a scholar who is at once an artist and a yogi, exhibited with my blessings."

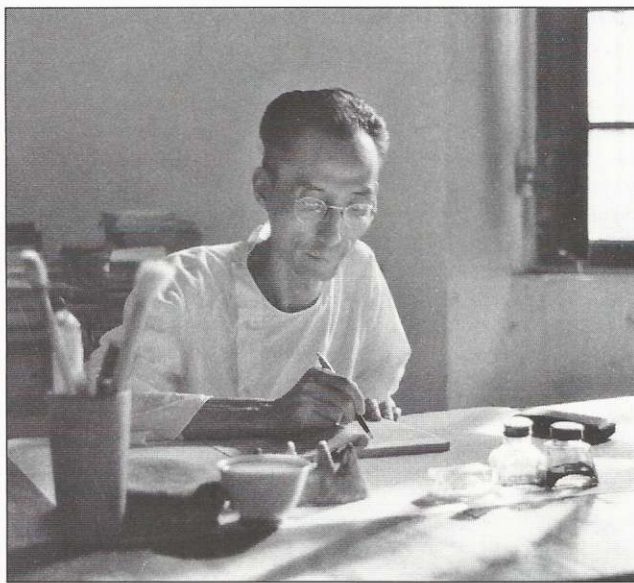
In a conversation dated October 30, 1962, she praised him as being a genius who was in fact coining new Chinese words to better translate Sri Aurobindo. She spoke highly of his translations and referred to one of his letters in which Hu Hsu wrote to a friend, "If you want to experience Taoism, come to live in the Ashram, you will have the REALISATION of Lao-Tseu's philosophy." The Mother added: "This man is a sage."

## Chinese Section at the Ashram School

In 1954, Nandlal Patel had just shifted his business from Pondicherry to Hong Kong. There he worked to start the Sri Aurobindo Philosophical Circle of Hong Kong, for which the Mother gave the message: "Let the eternal Light dawn on the eastern horizon."

While in Hong Kong, Nandlal received a letter from Jayantilal (in-charge of the Ashram Archives) telling him that Mother wanted him to buy a Chinese printing press and have it shipped to Pondicherry. The Mother added that a compositor should also be recruited as Hu Hsu could not do the printing work himself. So an ad was sent to a newspaper looking for a young assistant willing to go to India. 17 applicants replied, and Mother chose a young man from the list named Kau Tam Sing to come and help Hu Hsu. Nandlal Patel recalls:

Hu Hsu had just written to him, "This is the Divine's work", and Kau Tam Sing was ready, not asking the questions any ordinary person would



Hu Hsu at work in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram

painting material. This man who worked tirelessly never seemed to be annoyed by their visits. A few children of the Ashram would also learn the art of Chinese painting under his guidance.

Hu Hsu loved to play the Chinese game of Go (called 'wei chi' in Chinese) and aspiring players like Vijay, Roy Chvat, Gary Miller, Steve Phillips, Ingo and Gerhardt Stettner used to meet in his house every week. Roy still carries on the legacy of Go in Auroville.

Hu Hsu was also a regular walker and cyclist, and every Sunday with Pierre Legrand or Peter, he used to throw divination sticks to determine whether they would go cycling or walking, and for deciding on the direction in which they should proceed. Pondicherry then was a walkers' and

cyclists' paradise! They would visit Auroville, or the canyons near Utility. Once after a long walk, he explained how to restore one's energy levels: "...concentrate the consciousness in the feet, or gaze at the emerald green of a paddy field."

Sybille Hablik in her book *30 Years in India* writes about him:

"He was tall and slender but strongly built. We often saw him, dressed in Indian white pajamas and riding a bicycle, wearing a green eye-shade... Hu Hsu invited us to join him on Chinese New Year's day. We found him in his roomy colonial house sitting at a two-metre long table with a black glass top. We offered him a flat covered basket of fruits and wished him a Happy New Year. He had promised to paint something for me, so before our very eyes bam-

boos were magicked onto a big sheet of paper. I held my breath as I followed the movements of his huge brush: one stroke – the stem; a small diagonal curve – the growth node; another vertical stroke – the bamboo is growing; a thin line and a few points: there are four narrow pointed leaves.

With silent attention we followed the light, sure movements of the ink-brush – we were experiencing perfect skill.

Hu Hsu led us to two cupboards that contained the whole of Chinese history in the form of many individual books. 'This,' he said, 'is an official edition of which only three copies exist. This is one of them, the other two are in my homeland'.

A melancholy shadow fell on the three of us at last, as Hu Hsu played patriotic Chinese marches to us on his gramophone. It was a memorable meeting and for me, it was the beginning of a lasting friendship.

Today, the rare books on Chinese history are still preciously kept in a cupboard in the Ashram Library."

## Auroville

On the day of the foundation ceremony, the Auroville Charter was read out in the four languages of Auroville (French, Tamil, English and Sanskrit), and then in Chinese and Arabic. Hu Hsu translated the Charter, and the son of a Chinese dentist based in Madras read the Chinese text. The earth from both the Republic of China (Taiwan) and from the People's Republic of China (Mainland) were poured into the urn by Ashram youth (Kanu Dey and Vimala Sandalingam for Taiwan, and Bokul Chakravarty and Hema Singh for Mainland China).

In an article in Nan Yang Siang Pau, a newspaper in Singapore, Hu Hsu introduced the project of Auroville to the Chinese-speaking world and spoke about building "... a Pavilion which can represent the culture and arts achievements of the great Chinese civilisation", and invited Chinese scholars and artists to participate.

## 17th November, 1973

Roy recalls an incident on the fateful night The Mother left her body: "[Hu Hsu] was a very special kind of person. He once told me he could look at somebody and tell if he was going to die or not. I said, 'Oh it's interesting!' He said that well, it wasn't interesting, because when the Japanese had invaded China, everywhere he looked he saw people about to die. [...]"

I used to play Go with him. On November 17th, in the middle of the game, he stands up and says, 'Let's stop playing. I looked at the clock: it was 7.25p.m. He says, 'It would be good if She could live up to a hundred'."

## Return to China

In 1978, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, Hu Hsu decided to go back to his homeland. A young man from Hong Kong, Desmond Hsu (Ramana) arranged his ticket and travelled with him. In Delhi, he stopped to get his Chinese passport for he had come to India before the People's Republic of China had been founded in 1949. He stopped for a while at Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch. There Hu Hsu spoke at length with Tara Jauhar and did two paintings for her. She remembers, "He spent a long hour in conversation with my father and both of them, I remember, were very emotional. He left my father's room and I helped him with his luggage to the taxi as he left for the airport and China."

Back in China, he joined the Institute of World Religions, a department in the well-known Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing. Living much the same way as he had lived in the Ashram – quietly by himself – he remained engrossed in his inner quest. He continued his study, writing, and painting work, and shared his vast knowledge and experiences with fellow scholars and students. Soon he became known as one of the foremost Chinese scholars on Indian culture and spirituality.

His colleagues saw a remarkable similarity between him and the legendary Hsüan-tsang, the Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled to India in the 7th century, lived at Nalanda, learnt and translated the original Buddhist sutras, and returned to China with the sacred knowledge of the West (India). The parallel with Hu Hsu's own life is striking. His contribution is seen as particularly significant since he translated and returned to China with new sacred knowledge – the ancient pre-Buddhist spiritual knowledge of the Upanishads and the Gita, as also the contemporary spiritual knowledge contained in Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's writings. After his return, Hu Hsu came to be known as Hsu Fancheng (also written as Xu Fancheng) – the one purified by the realisation of the Brahman consciousness.

On 6th March, 2000, Hu Hsu left his body.

## New Horizons

But his story is not over. While Hu Hsu's translations could not be sold in China of the 1970s, there is a growing interest in his writings today, and through him, in Sri Aurobindo and The Mother's philosophy and vision. His students and colleagues in Beijing brought out his Collected Works in 2006, and the response to them has been very positive with Universities in China starting to read Sri Aurobindo's philosophy, and a few students studying his works, and even the Integral Yoga, as part of their doctoral theses. Discussions are also underway to open the first Centre for the study of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother's writings in China. A small but growing number of Chinese-speaking seekers also visit the Ashram and Auroville inspired by the works of Hu Hsu, a few of them even choosing to settle down.

One can only hope and pray that the Mother's message given 55 years ago is indeed starting to take shape before our eyes, in our own times:

*"Let the eternal Light dawn  
on the eastern horizon."*

Eric Avril and Devdip Ganguli



# Preserving the Green Belt

In December, a group of post-graduate planning students from Queen's University, Canada, visited Auroville under the auspices of the Auroville Integral Sustainability Institute. This was the fourth time students from Queen's have visited the community. This time they chose a topic which is both topical and sensitive – growth management of villages in the Green Belt.

The 2001 Perspective Master Plan designates the Green Belt, the area surrounding the city, as being for forestry, farming and recreation. However, at present Auroville owns only 35% of the Green Belt which includes six villages with a total population six times that of Auroville. As the population of the villages is growing at a much faster rate than that of Auroville, there is concern that they will expand in a disharmonious manner. Meanwhile, the Green Belt area has become increasingly attractive to developers planning private housing projects.

In other words, the Green Belt concept is increasingly under threat. What can be done about this? While the Town Development Council controls the development of Auroville-owned land, presently they do not have planning authority over privately owned land, which includes land within and around the villages. Hence the sensitivity of a topic like village growth management, which can be interpreted as Auroville attempting to tell the villagers how they can develop on their own land.

The Canadian students began by doing extensive research while still in Canada. Among other things, they conducted phone and Skype interviews with Auroville planners, other community members and village resource people. The main findings included:

- 1) In the villages, land ownership and status are closely connected.
- 2) Auroville is perceived by the State governments as being "not important, not cooperative" and Auroville planners are perceived as being "Auroville-centric".
- 3) Increased communication and consultation with the villages is necessary but Auroville lacks the manpower and resources to do this at present.
- 4) The villagers want farming to continue in their area.
- 5) However, many villagers prefer office work to farming.
- 6) Sale of land is seen as a more significant and immediate gain than farming.

## Changing focus in Auroville

The students conducted more interviews after they arrived as well as on-site visits to Alankuppam village, which was taken as the focus study area. "When we got here we were surprised that there were many different points of view," says Anna, one of the students, "because this didn't come across from the interviews we had done from Canada. Even between the villagers, everybody had different perspectives about the direction they wanted the village to take."

"The older villagers remember how it used to be," says Philip, another student. "They have seen how the lifestyle of the villages and the environment around here improved because of Auroville and are happy to let things develop in their own way. But the younger villagers who have not witnessed this just want to get what Auroville has now."

The students also learned that while the local landowners are most concerned about economic security and maintaining a certain cultural heritage, Aurovilians favour a more holistic, environmental development of the Green Belt.

Consequently, the students concluded that the issue of growth in the Green Belt must be addressed from both Auroville's and the villagers' perspectives. "So while one of the main objectives for the project was to preserve the Green Belt, another was to preserve its villages," says Meghan, the student project manager.

She also confirmed that since arriving in Auroville and understanding better the complexities, they had broadened the scope of their project. "Instead of trying to define a specific strategy, we decided to develop a framework for a future growth management strategy. In our view, completing the steps in this framework would allow Auroville to ultimately develop and implement an effective growth management strategy for the Green Belt."

The steps include continuing to strengthen a collaborative relationship with the villages. The latter also represented an important shift. The proposals the students had developed in Canada had tended to emphasise a more top-down approach to controlling activities in the Green Belt. "However, it's one thing to consider something like legislation in the context of Canada," says Philip, "and another thing to come here and talk to people who



The Green Belt of the Auroville Master Plan has six villages which together have a population six times larger than that of Auroville and which have relatively higher growth rate due to wide-ranging work opportunities, primarily created and stimulated by Auroville activities. There is also a good chance, as the image shows, that most of the western Green Belt will turn into a continuous 'development belt' in the near future. It is high time that Auroville works more proactively, to have a roadmap towards a harmonious co-existing model and acts on it.

understand the system. They told us that the political atmosphere and many other considerations do not make legislation the only effective tool. So then we focussed more on bottom-up approaches."

## The framework

The proposed framework was presented to a well-attended meeting of Aurovilians on 15th December. It was intended to achieve the following objectives:

- A) To develop measures to preserve Green Belt lands for the intended uses outlined in the Perspective Master Plan.
- B) To develop measures to manage development within the Green Belt on privately owned lands.
- C) To facilitate a collaborative and mutually beneficial planning relationship between Auroville, the villages and state planning authorities.

The study suggested that future mapping of land in the Green Belt should include data on soil quality and biodiversity and that a weighted mapping system be developed to identify, for example, the location of prime agriculture land.

The study also proposed that Auroville develop an environmental youth education plan for residents of the bioregion to help them understand and support future environmental protection programmes. Meanwhile, a Farmers Forum could be set up where Auroville farmers could discuss with local farmers how to improve land viability. Auroville could also offer more training programmes in sustainable agriculture.

As to the issue of controlling what happens on Green Belt lands, the study concludes that land purchase and land exchanges remain the best solution. However, it also mentions that certain 'market-based' solutions, like the possibility of purchasing development rights on private land or land leasing, could be explored if viable in the future.

## Communication with the neighbours

The need to improve communication between Auroville and the villages was an important topic. For example, the students noted that many villagers do not understand the concept of a 'Green Belt'. In fact, while many Auroville groups are working on outreach in the bioregion, it was observed that there was no consistency in how they communicate about Auroville, and sometimes contradictory messages are sent.

The study suggests that a Collaboration Hub be set up to provide for exchanges of information and resources between Auroville and local villages. Also, that an impact assessment be made of existing village outreach initiatives to help Auroville determine if the activities carried out in the villages are producing the changes they set out to accomplish, and to identify any gaps that may exist.

Alongside this, there should be a community asset assessment to help each of the villages in the area to understand their skills and strengths. This would help empower the villages to take up their own development initiatives.

The main purpose in all this is to build better relationships with the villages so that a transparent planning process for the Green Belt area can be created in a spirit of collaboration. At the same time, developing a regional plan for the Green Belt area requires a good relationship with the two state governments involved – Tamil Nadu and Puducherry. This aspect, the study notes, needs to be worked on further, particularly in respect of our relationship with the Puducherry Government.

## Ratify the Greenbelt development plan

The study noted that Auroville planners warned that a growth management strategy for the Green Belt must be created within the next five to seven years, or by 2025 at the latest. Beyond 2025, management of growth in this area may become much more difficult for Auroville to address due to disproportionate rates of growth within the region.

To aid timely implementation of the strategy, the study suggests certain things need to happen. These include the ratification of the 2011 Green Belt Development Plan by the State governments, the setting up of a Green Belt Collaboration Hub with the villages and the creation of an assessment toolkit to ascertain if the goals of the project are being attained.

The study stressed that all proposed solutions must be evaluated from the perspectives of both Auroville and village residents.

## Reception

The presentation was well received. Cristo, an ex-member of the Town Development Council who has been active in setting up Development Councils in some local villages, was particularly appreciative and felt that the recommendations were very much to the point. Others agreed that better communication and collaboration with the villages were essential if the Green Belt was to remain 'green'.

However, certain questions remain. Clearly, the groundwork for the implementation of a development plan for the Green Belt will require additional resources, both human and financial. At present, not enough Aurovilians are involved in this work – and, perhaps, not interested in this work – while our farmers, for example, are already over-stretched. So it is not clear where the extra resources will come from.

There are also certain doubts about the comprehensiveness of the information the students gleaned from their interviews. All the villagers they

spoke to, it seems, were positive about Auroville and all wanted farming to continue near the villages. We do not always hear this. Perhaps the fact the students were only here for two weeks, that they only visited one village, and that the focus groups were selected for them meant that they did not meet a fully representative sample.

The key question, however, remains whether Auroville's concept of the Green Belt can survive, given factors like Auroville's lack of legislative 'muscle', the absence of interest of many young villagers in farming and the lure of immediate wealth offered by speculators eager to develop land in this area.

"One of the things we heard from the villagers is that before they can care about environmental factors, which is the ultimate goal of the Green Belt, they have to look after their basic needs first," says Philip. "After all, why would you care about the Green Belt if you can't feed your family?"

In fact, the villagers made clear that their top priority is improvements in infrastructure – water, electricity, roads. Education is also a big concern. "A lot of the people we talked to," says Philip, "told us that one of the main reasons that land is being sold, and not necessarily to Auroville, is because they want a better life for the next generation, and this would typically come through education, which can be costly."

So can raising the standard of living in the villages benefit protection of the Green Belt? Philip believes it can. "In the western area there are plans for a water purification system which would service not only Auroville but also some of the villages. This would both help to increase the villagers' quality of life and take away their fear of not having sufficient water. This, hopefully, would lead to more sustainable water practices that would not tax the water table."

"And if farmers benefit from better farming practices while the general quality of life improves in the villages, maybe the villagers would think twice about selling their land to speculators and developers. They may not sell to Auroville either, but if the land is farmed well it would keep the Green Belt concept alive, even if Auroville doesn't have direct control of the land."

Lalit, the Aurovillian coordinator of the project, is very pleased with the students' work. "These people have been catalysts. Their work has brought to our attention things we need to look at urgently because the growth of the surrounding villages is of great relevance to Auroville's own development. The different outreach activities of Auroville, like Village Action, have laid a fantastic groundwork over the years, but now a different approach to the villages is needed because the rules of the game have changed. These are no longer the traditional villages that, out of respect for The Mother, gave away land to Auroville in the early years."

"If we can find a new way to relate to the surrounding villages, we could create a viable model which Auroville not only needs for its own survival, but which is in line with what Mother wanted of Auroville: to respect and to work collaboratively with its neighbours."

"The students have provided a good framework for the next step. If Auroville does not act upon it, we will be facing a very serious situation in the Green Belt in a few years. However, I am hopeful. I think a certain synergy has been lacking in our different outreach development initiatives but today we are beginning to join the dots, and we are better prepared to take these issues head-on rather than shying away because they are too hot."

As to the larger picture, Lalit sees the ongoing collaboration with students from Queen's University as a model which Auroville may increasingly adopt in the future. "I see this as an example of how world energy and expertise can plug into Auroville by researching topics of relevance to us, especially when we do not have the required manpower or expertise to address issues essential to Auroville's holistic growth."

Alan



# Reviewing the "Galaxy" concept 50 years after its conception

In the November issue of *Auroville Today*, a group of Aurovilian architects and town planners discussed the Galaxy plan and concluded that it still had much to offer. Gilles Guigan, who manages the Auroville Archives and has made an extensive study of documents relating to the history of Auroville, disagrees. Here is an edited version of an article (with an additional clarification) which he recently posted on Auronet.

The "Galaxy" concept was conceived in 1967, in France, on a white sheet of paper and without any consideration for the region's culture, climatic, environmental and economic conditions, by Roger and his office team. It was conceived according to his understanding of the planning brief. The following five assumptions were made in this brief:

**1) This city of 50,000 inhabitants will be built within 20 years or less.** As the city was to be built within 20 years, many major decisions needed to be taken at an early stage and a Master Plan for 50,000 inhabitants needed to be produced. Designing it as a city sculpture seemed to be a beautiful idea as the chief sculptor (Roger, then 44 years old) was expected to be able to oversee its construction till its completion.

**2) Money won't be a problem.** Dare to dream! Designing huge "lines of force" (up to 16 storeys high) seemed possible as securing the huge funds required for their construction wasn't seen as a problem.

**3) Securing at the very least all the lands in the future city area (2.5 km dia.) won't be a problem.** Auroville's planners therefore thought they were justified to plan without taking into consideration any of the lands then owned by the Government (*peromboke*), temples and private parties. They believed they could design entirely new road and drainage networks and could plan any kind of other developments anywhere (even on existing canyons) without taking the existing land ownership pattern into account.

**4) The entire city area can be considered as being empty of any development** (by villagers, Aurovilians and other parties) and of any landscape or vegetation worthy of being taken into account. Auroville's planners felt thus free to plan this new town without taking into consideration any of its existing features.

**5) The plans will not be contested** as they will be produced under Mother's guidance and will be approved by her – and she will remain in her body (at least long enough for Auroville's development to be well underway). Auroville's planners therefore felt free to plan the kind of development (such as a city-sculpture) which is usually only possible in places where the planning authority is uncontested.

## The status of the assumptions today

I think that it is understandable that Roger believed in these assumptions in 1967. However, 50 years later, have these five assumptions become reality?

**1) A city of 50,000 within 20 years:** Today, less than 5% of Auroville's planned population is presently living within the city area (not taking into account the villagers who live in that part of Kottakurai/Bharatipuram which has been encroaching into the city area since 1967). Our annual population growth rate has never exceeded 5%.

**2) Money is not a constraint.** In fact, it has always been a constraint. In particular, funding Roger's massive "lines of force" (even

phase by phase) is likely to remain a huge challenge and, even if one would manage to raise enough funds for a few phases, there would be no guarantee of being able to repeat this feat. Would an Auroville with only a few "lines of force" be beautiful and make sense? Should this risk be taken?

**3) We will own all the land.** Early brochures spoke of 17,000 acres "for the main township" (an area which we now call 'the City area'). 50 years later, Auroville owns only 3,000 acres in all, with 17% of the land in the City area and more than 50% of the land in the Green Belt area still to be bought. Considering the very high costs of land at present, the prospects of being able to purchase additional acres by the thousands don't seem to be realistic. We will manage to buy some more land in the city area but we have not found an answer to speculators buying lands and building structures within the City and Green Belt areas which are detrimental to Auroville's ideals.

**4) The city is empty.** Today the city area is full of developments (buildings) which are not in accordance with Auroville's Master Plan and have been built by private land owners. The initial town planners also ignored the presence of '*peromboke*' (government owned) lands and roads. Over the years also many beautiful trees and entire forests have been planted; cutting them to make place for some new development will be very strongly opposed by many Aurovilians.

**5) Auroville's planning authority is uncontested.** Is Auroville's planning authority beyond contestation? On 10.3.1972, Mother told Rijuta: "I can see, I have truly the occasion to see that if I left, I have nobody here, it would be our destruction. Then if the work must be done, if Auroville must be built, not only do I have to remain in my body but the body must become strong." In 1972, Mother signed a notice which was all that was needed to get the residents of "Silence" to relocate elsewhere so that Bharat Nivas' construction could start. Would similar notices issued by today's planners be abided by? Does our Planning Group command the kind of natural authority to implement this kind of Master Plan?

Within Auroville, we have seen that no group has absolute 'authority'; decisions are being reached after a lot of discussion. Outside Auroville, the Planning Group has zero authority. A working group has been studying the pros and cons of having the Auroville area become part of a New Town Development Authority to be set up by the Tamil Nadu government. Such an Authority would determine the land use plan of all lands in the Auroville city and Green Belt areas, hopefully in accordance with the Auroville Master Plan, and would refuse building permissions for any development by non-Auroville land owners and Aurovilians not in accordance with this land use. But it is far from certain if the establishment of such an Authority is in Auroville's interest.

## Does the Galaxy still matter?

Considering all these factors, would building the Galaxy as originally conceived still serve Auroville's purpose? I believe not. Our

community and its planners need to acknowledge the present reality and adapt their plans according to the existing situation. They shouldn't plan more than 20 years ahead (all over the world, planners never plan more than 20-25 years in advance, simply because "life" tends to modify even the very best plans) and speak no more of 50,000 inhabitants (although we should do our best to increase our population quickly and harmoniously).

I am well aware that some of us need some plan/framework as, without it, they feel lost. So, they won't let go of the Galaxy until some other plan, even more visually appealing than the Galaxy, is presented to them. Yet, on 10th July 1957, Mother invited us to join a Great Adventure but warned us that a road would need to be created step by step in the unexplored. Mother repeatedly told Udar "Don't plan". He liked the idea, but commented that it is not so easy...

But we don't need any "preconceived mental plan" (neither a 50-years old one, nor a brand new one) because too many questions about Auroville's future are left unanswered. Life has shown that answers come only when the questions are really there – and not when we speculate about them well in advance. As Mother explained to Satprem in 1964, "Since 1926 when Sri Aurobindo retired and gave me full charge of [the Ashram] (at that time there were only two rented houses and a handful of disciples) all has grown up and developed like the growth of a forest, and each service was created not by any artificial planning but by a living and dynamic need. This is the secret of constant growth and endless progress."

Auroville needs what Ruud Lohman called "a third way" between full organic development and some detailed master plan (new or old). It is a question of keeping always in mind a particular set of values.

Finally, does the fact that Mother signed Roger's "Galaxy" plan mean that it is sure to manifest?

Some of us are absolutely convinced of it, but when one studies Auroville's history and some of Mother's other projects before it, one can only realise that this is not guaranteed at all. She made two previous attempts to build an ideal township and both failed. Regarding the second attempt, she explained to Satprem that it had failed to take off because "*things change. It's not that the project stops, but it's forced to take other paths*".

Moreover, the fact that Mother wrote "Blessings" on the Galaxy plan does not necessarily guarantee that it will be manifested. She explained, "*My blessings are very dangerous. They cannot be for this one or for that one or against this person or against that thing. It is for... or, well, I will put it in a mystic way: It is for the Will of the Lord to be done, with full force and power. So it is not necessary that there should always be a success. There might be a failure also, if such is the Will of the Lord. And the Will is for the progress, I mean the inner progress. So whatever will happen will be for the best.*"

## REFLECTION

# Matter matters

One of the oldest and most influential thought forms makes a distinction between spirit and nature, between the ideal and reality. In the West, this was powerfully exemplified by Plato's *Theory of Forms*. Plato posited that everything in the material world has an ideal form which represents it in its essential purity. The ideal form can never be materialised, although its existence can be grasped through the exercise of reason.

This opposition of ideal and reality was also a tenet of the major religions. Heaven, salvation, always lay beyond. Life was a 'vale of tears', to be endured in devotion to an otherworldly deity if one wished to inherit redemption, which was only available after death.

That matter is dead, purposeless, is also one of central tenets of the materialistic outlook that underlies modern science and so much of modern thought. Rupert Sheldrake defined these tenets as follows: existence is mechanical and unconscious, nature's laws are purposeless and fixed for all time, mind is an epiphenomenon of biology, and spirit is a delusion.

But another reason that this is such an enduring thought form is that it seems to confirm our own experience. What we can dream of, imagine, is often far in excess of reality. When we try to manifest these dreams, we are confronted by the dull stubbornness of matter which seems to resist all attempts to shape it into something closer to our ideal. It's no wonder, then, that some people give up the practical attempt to change things and take refuge in ideal philosophies or escapist fantasies.

But Mother, like Sri Aurobindo, emphasised that matter could be transformed. Indeed, that the transformation of the physical is the indispensable foundation for the supramental change: as she put it, 'Salvation is physical'. But how would that change come about?

Mother used her body as the laboratory and testing-ground for this exploration. And, through her deep researches into the cells, she began to discover that matter is not what it seems.

*But as you descend into that domain, the domain of the cells, even of the very constitution of the cells, how it (matter) seems less heavy! This sort of heaviness of Matter disappears – it begins again to be fluid, vibrant. This would tend to prove that the heaviness, thickness, inertia, immobility, is something added, it is not a quality essential to... it is the false Matter, that which we think and feel, but not Matter itself, as it is. This was clearly felt. (7th October, 1964)*

On the 21st January, 1967, she talks about her discovery of what she called 'true matter'.

*All possible colours are joined together without being mixed up (same gesture of dotting), and joined together by luminous dots. Everything is as if made of that. And this seems to be the true way of being – I am not yet sure, but in any case, it is a way of being much more conscious... And you have a strange (for the body), a strange perception, at once of subtleness, of penetrability, if one may say so, of suppleness of form and positively not of an eradication but a considerable diminution of the rigidity of forms – eradication of rigidity, not eradication of forms: a suppleness in the forms.*

In May, 1969, she enunciates the solution:

*There is only one solution, it is the direct contact of the physical with the Supreme. That is the only thing.*

Finally, in 1971, speaking of the need for matter to be permeated by the new force, she mentions a new possibility:

*I believe something has been done to prepare Matter to receive as it must, in a suitable way – it was as though it received in a wrong way and it has learnt to receive in the right way.*

*It will come. Perhaps, I do not know if it will take months or years for the thing to become clear.*

This is why, in May, 1972, she could assert:

*You understand; it is this which in the human common sense says: "It is impossible, that has never been"; it is this which has come to an end. It is finished, it is foolish. It has become a stupidity. One might say: it is possible because it has never been. It is the new world and it is the new consciousness and it is the new Power, it is possible, and this is and will be more and more manifested because it is the new world, because it has never been. It will be because it has never been.*

This is the great revelation. That matter, which we had always seen as the enemy of the ideal, will become increasingly 'mater', able to receive and manifest the Force that Mother was channelling through her body.

And yet... our daily experience of the fabric of Auroville seems to deny this possibility. For though the forests have bloomed, much of our architecture is ordinary, functional, lifeless, while the beauty in simplicity that Mother wanted is almost nowhere to be seen. We seem, once more, to be confronted by the opposition between ideals and impervious matter.

But is this really so? While it is easy to understand those who object to our 50th anniversary celebrations because we have not achieved what Mother expected of us, perhaps they, we, are overlooking something. And that is that the most external forms of matter will be the last to manifest change.

In 1967, speaking of her work upon the body, The Mother said:

*The work remains to be done. But now a certitude is there. The result remains still far off, very far; much has to be done before the crust, the experience of the most external surface as it is, manifests what is happening within (not*

*"within" in the spiritual depths: within the body). To enable that to manifest what is within... This will come last, and it is good it is so, for if it came before time, one would neglect the work, one would be so satisfied as to forget to finish his work; everything should be done within, should be well and good, should be thoroughly changed, then the outside will speak it out.*

Today, while we are far from 'materialising' our ideals, the inner work may have begun. It can be detected, for example, in Aurovilians' aspiration for beauty in all forms and in their attempts to invest consciousness into art, into their meetings and other activities.

Mother talked of the need for new forms to reflect the new consciousness. These may take some time to emerge: we must be patient with our present material stumblings. The first signs of matter reflecting the new consciousness may be a new refinement, plasticity, even aetherialisation, of materials and forms. New materials and new properties of existing materials may be discovered, as may new capacities of the body; so-called 'miraculous' cures may become more common. New evidence of consciousness influencing matter, and not only at the sub-atomic level, will emerge.

Meanwhile, we have the Matrimandir. Constructed largely of steel and cement, Aurovilians transformed these conventional materials into something much more through their dedication to materialising a vision. Somehow, in spite of disagreements and controversies about aspects of the design, a channel was created for something extraordinary to manifest in matter.

Matrimandir is the forerunner, the promise, that matter is ready and able to express the new force. Only our doubts, our lack of faith, can prevent it happening sooner. As we embark upon the next 50 years, let us make our guiding inspiration, "*It will be because it has never been.*"

Alan



# The Koodam Impact

Koodam, Auroville's conflict resolution referral platform, recently published the "Koodam Impact Analysis Research Report," presenting an overview of Koodam's growth and development since 2013 and assessing the impact of its work. A summary.

Auroville's philosophy states that Auroville should exist without law, courts, police and other traditional justice systems, but many in Auroville still come to the Auroville Council and Koodam demanding justice, seeking an authority to act as a judiciary body. Though accepted across cultures, this approach presents many challenges. It tends to create winners and losers instead of win-win solutions based on mutual agreement. This "winners-losers" perspective in turn carries the potential for renewed or additional conflict. And in the absence of an executive power in Auroville, the implementation of decisions that are not "owned" by the affected parties is sometimes very challenging. This is even more so when there had been a feeling of a power imbalance; even if parties come to an agreement, issues of non-compliance occur.



From left: Mukta, Elvira and Niva

## Origins of the word "Koodam"

The name "Koodam" is taken from the Tamil word *koo-dahm*, meaning "gathering place". The root of this Tamil word is *koo-dah*, meaning "together", which perfectly embodies the goal of Koodam's work in Auroville: to resolve conflict in order to bring people together.

Koodam believes that conflict resolution should be born from self-responsibility and inner awareness instead of a 'right-or-wrong' or 'us-versus-them' approach. Koodam aspires to help people build their own justice, since working through differences to find unity and compromise upholds the ideals and Charter of Auroville. For this purpose, Koodam offers various conflict resolution systems. [see side box]

However, Auroville has not yet found a faultless substitute to traditional justice systems. As with many systems in Auroville, conflict resolution continues to be an ever-changing, ever-explored experiment. In addition, Koodam is exploring a shift from solely conflict resolution to conflict transformation – preventing conflict and dealing with foreseeable issues. To adequately address this, Koodam seeks the cooperation of other Auroville bodies and Working Groups, especially in maintaining a balance between rigid policy adherence and the human experience and also in addressing cultural differences where specific mediation techniques could get lost in translation.

"All your differences are purely mental, and in spite of the great importance you seem to give to them, they are, in fact, of very little importance, and could easily be overcome if each one made a broadening effort and understood that what he or she thinks is only one point of view of the question, and that any attempt for effectivity must admit the other points of view as well and try to make a synthesis of them all."

The Mother, 6 April 1961

## The 'what' and 'how' of Koodam

Koodam addresses a large variety of conflicts in the community such as divorce and parent/child conflicts; broken relationships between couples or friends; school/parent relationships; neighbour matters; conflicts at the workplace; conflicts between units/services/Working Groups and clients/individuals; territory and city planning disputes; differences in the interpretation and implementation of Auroville's vision and ideals; and conflicts within Working Groups. When parties cannot sit in the same room together, as in the cases of broken relationships and extremely volatile disagreements, Koodam offers shuttle mediation in which Koodam acts as the middleman, dealing with each party in separate sessions and "shuttling" the discussion back and forth.

Koodam is set up as a referral service, connecting needs with solutions available in the community. Over the years, its work has evolved from doing 'classic' mediation to a sort of Aurovilian variety, practicing "the essence" of conflict resolution and adjusting to meet the needs of all the parties involved. It seeks to facilitate an agreement born from the parties themselves through deep listening, mutual understanding and inner work. All services and referrals are offered free of charge, allowing individuals and groups to get the support they need without the constraints of payment. Since it opened in late 2013, Koodam has dealt with a total of 113 conflict cases. Koodam's office in Kailash provides a neutral and safe space, two important qualities when dealing with sensitive issues.

## The Impact

Early in 2017, Koodam hired an independent research assistant to conduct research and analysis on the impacts of its services. Sixty-one people participated in an online questionnaire or emailed feedback about their experiences with Koodam. Through this feedback, Koodam was able to see in which ways its services had impacted the community, how the role of Koodam in Auroville has evolved, and how the conflict transformation platform could improve and grow in the future.

The analysis showed that there is an increasing desire to involve Koodam earlier in the conflict resolution process [see figure 1]. In 2013, 40% of the mediation cases had one party who refused to participate, while in 2016, that percentage had dropped to 17%. Also the number of processes increased, from nine cases in 2013 to 53 in 2016 – as have the percentage of people willing to try a conflict resolution process with Koodam. Most individuals who walk through Koodam's door are self-referred, having heard about Koodam via word of mouth instead of through referral by the Auroville Council.

More importantly, Koodam has seen a growing willingness and maturity from the community towards conflict

	2013	2014	2015	2016	Total
Mediation	5	4	20	18	47
Request for mediation, one party refused	2	4	2	3	11
Negotiation	-	2	1	3	6
Venting / Advice	2	-	2	16	20
Meeting facilitation in conflict	-	-	1	5	6
Arbitration	-	2	1	3	6
Process support in conflict	-	5	7	3	15
Referring to restorative circle	-	-	-	2	2
Total cases supported per year	9	17	34	53	113

Fig. 1 - Koodam's conflict cases (meeting facilitation excluded)

transformation. In some cases, two parties in conflict individually came to Koodam without knowing the other had. Cases in which people acknowledge their own issues – "Can you help me shift my thinking, or should we come for mediation?" – show that there is a shift in communal consciousness towards inner work and personal awareness when conflict surfaces. After mediation, some respondents expressed that they felt that the conflict had helped them in making personal progress, in gaining more understanding and clarity of their own position, a release of tension, the ability to distance themselves from the conflict, and understanding what the actual reasons were behind the conflict.

Though not all its efforts have been successful [see figure 2], the feedback on Koodam's work has been overwhelmingly positive. The majority of the survey participants perceive Koodam as having a high impact on the Auroville community at large, with all agreeing that the involvement of Koodam had been helpful and more than 80% that Koodam's processes had been confidential, neutral and impartial towards the conflict and the parties involved. Only one participant felt that Koodam had shown "prejudice from the beginning" and that "throughout the process [there was] unfairness." Most respondents stated that Koodam's services embody and bring forward Auroville's value of human unity and help community members understand each other, especially given the cultural differences in Auroville; raise the bar in interpersonal communication; and help find a solution that all parties can agree upon instead of imposing a verdict-like decision. As many of the respondents felt that Koodam with its three facilitators Elvira, Niva and Mukta was understaffed and overworked, they advised that Koodam expand its human resources and train more people in conflict resolution and facilitation.

For more information contact [koodam@auroville.org.in](mailto:koodam@auroville.org.in)

Cases taken up	18
Cases closed after parties reached a formal agreement	13
Cases closed without agreement, conflict de-escalated after mediation	2
Cases where mediation was stopped without agreement being reached	1
Cases pending	2

## What Koodam offers

### Listening and venting

Listening and support in venting is for people who wish to have somebody listen to their personal feelings, thoughts and experiences in a safe and confidential environment. Advice on how to navigate life within Auroville is given if requested.

### Mediation

Mediation is a structured process for solving disputes, accompanied by one or more mediators who act as a neutral third party. The mediators support the disputing parties by creating a safe space in which to have a constructive conversation and reach an agreement that is acceptable to both parties. Mediation as a process aims at restoring relationships by defining the conflict as a challenge the parties share and enabling them to cooperate on a shared solution. Mediation is voluntary, and at any moment either side can decide to stop the process.

### Negotiation

Negotiation is a tool used between two or more parties to reach an agreement when their interests or goals seem mutually exclusive. Koodam facilitates both direct and indirect negotiation. While the parties in disagreement interact with each other directly in a direct negotiation, indirect negotiation occurs when the parties nominate a representative to come to the table on their behalf; this is advantageous in situations where emotions are high and people prefer not to engage directly at that given point in time, and where finding a mutually acceptable and workable agreement is more important than restoring a relationship.

### Reference to Restorative Circles

Restorative Circles (RCs) are offered through Restorative Auroville. An RC is a process that holds space for conflict and dialogue within the context of community, and it consists of a series of meetings amongst those involved in a conflict, either directly or indirectly. Through dialogue and reflective listening, the process allows those involved to understand each other at a deeper level, to start to take responsibility for their choices, and to look at how, together, they might contribute to forward movement and constructive change, both on the personal and collective levels.

Koodam refers people to Restorative Auroville when they feel that an RC would be the most suitable process for the conflict. However, in most cases people contact Restorative Auroville directly. In the last one and a half years (since January 2016), Restorative Auroville has facilitated 17 live Circles.

### Arbitration

If parties cannot solve their conflict through mediation, negotiation or RCs, then one or both parties can ask the Auroville Council for an arbitration process. In arbitration, one or more third-party arbiters are entrusted with the responsibility to make a binding decision that brings closure to the conflict situation. When an arbitration process starts, the parties in conflict surrender their responsibility to the collective – represented by the arbiters, who remain neutral – in order to find a solution, accepting that the arbiters' decision will be final and binding. Given that the Auroville Council is charged with facilitating the actual arbitration process, Koodam's role in an arbitration is to provide the Auroville Council and arbiters with the support needed to carry out a successful arbitration; this includes setting up meetings and ensuring that proper procedures are followed. Koodam is never involved in arbitration decision-making.

### Meeting Design and Facilitation

Meetings are an essential part of Auroville's governance. Though still unpopular in some quarters of the community as being an unproductive waste of time and energy, more and more Working Groups and teams understand that meetings led by a trained facilitator can lead to purposeful, engaging, face-to-face conversations that produce stable decisions owned by the collective, which are therefore easy to implement. Koodam offers a facilitation service that can range from creating an agenda with an objective that a facilitator helps the meeting follow, to designing and facilitating a road map of meetings and workshops for strategic and organizational change processes.

### Policy and Research Development

In 2015, Koodam drafted a step-by-step conflict resolution policy to guide Aurovilians through conflict situations and establish a commonly agreed upon process to be followed. The draft went through a participatory revision process and was ratified in May 2015. The aim of this policy is to shift the collective attitude away from the concept of a truth-versus-lies judiciary system and towards the ideas of multiple truths, conflict as an opportunity for positive change, and taking personal responsibility to engage with and transform our own challenges.

In addition to policy development, Koodam helps to facilitate various research initiatives. Koodam supported the Auroville Council to draft the "Auroville Appeal Process", which intends to support fair, open and transparent decision-making processes and encourage accountability from our Working Groups. It provides a framework to meaningfully address individual's serious dissatisfaction with decisions of Working Groups, and thus helps to harmonize and improve the relationship between Working Groups and the community.

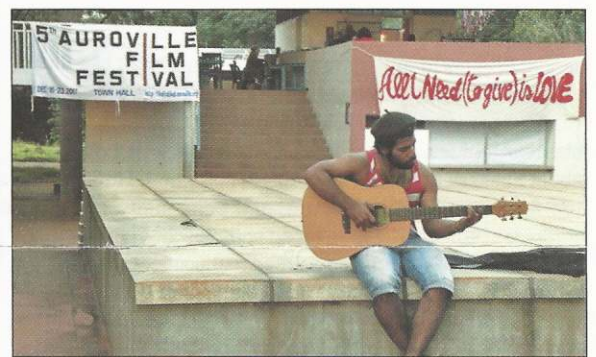
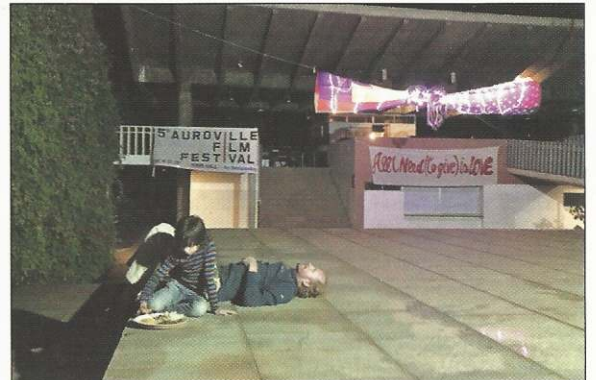
### Non-Conflict-Related Meeting Design and Facilitation/Process Support

Throughout 2016, the demand for meeting design and facilitation has grown exponentially. In 2016, Koodam facilitated a total of 68 meetings that were not related to any actual conflicts, in cooperation with the Working Committee, the Funds and Assets Management Committee, the Entry Service, the Entry Task Group, the interim Town Development Council, the Core Group for the Town Development Council restructuring process, the Land Board, the Pool of Arbiters, the Adult Learning Activities, the Auroville Art Services and The Learning Community.



# The 5th Auroville Film Festival

The 5th Auroville Film Festival was held from December 16-23, 2017. With more than 275 films screened in three venues, this edition of the Film Festival was the largest yet. There were four categories of films: films made by Aurovilians, neighbours or guests; films about Auroville; films made by students of Auroville or of the bioregion; and films that develop the theme of human unity. Some of them were as short as the 12-second Hi Buggy, while some were full length films, such as the two-hour Pawo. The festival had a good mix of internationally acclaimed films, such as Taxi Tehran, and films by budding directors, including many Auroville students. Live music in the evenings and the food festival added to festive atmosphere. There were some grumblings from residents of Sunship and Citadines about the noise, especially from the late-night music. But the energy and goodwill generated by the 5th Auroville Film Festival was perhaps worth the price. Here's the Film Festival seen through the lens of Parisa, a Newcomer.



Top row: Cooking for the food festival; The conversations continued long after the late-night show; Trying to find the right film among hundreds. Second row: A film being screened in the new Archives Building; Hitting the right notes with live music; Too much screen time; Throwback to the sixties.

## Grant for 50th anniversary celebrations

The Government of India has made a special grant to the amount of Rs 10 crores for fixed assets expenditure for Auroville's 50th anniversary celebrations. The spending is allocated and monitored by the 50th Core Team together with the Secretary and Under Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. A request for an additional grant for 'general' expenditure for the 50th celebrations is pending.

## 50th anniversary update

On 29th of December, the 50th anniversary planning team gave an update to the community on planned events.

Among other events, there will be a water ceremony after the early morning meditation on 28th February 2018, in the Amphitheatre. It is proposed that water from different water bodies of the world, including the seven sacred rivers of India, be collected and brought to Auroville. Individuals who would like to participate should contact [worldwater@auroville.org.in](mailto:worldwater@auroville.org.in) for more details. Meanwhile, Auroville Earth Institute plans to build a rammed earth wall composed of earth coming from all over the world. For further info go to [www.earth-auroville.com](http://www.earth-auroville.com) or [communication@earth-auroville.com](mailto:communication@earth-auroville.com)

## Fundraising Website

A new website showcasing "What Auroville does for the world" – what progressive regenerative practices and culture are developed, demonstrated and taught in Auroville – has been created. The website will be a backbone for crowdfunding for land, and will be a central source of relevant information for all fundraising for Auroville. Visit: [funding.auroville.org](http://funding.auroville.org).

## New Entry Board

The Auroville Council and the Working Committee have completed the selection of an Entry Board. Under the new entry policy, the Board will oversee the Newcomer process and participate in deciding regarding whether or not a Newcomer becomes an Aurovillian.

## L'avenir d'Auroville

The new L'Avenir team has announced they will be holding regular interactions with the community. On the first Monday of every month at 3 pm, people are invited to visit their office for exchanges and dialogue on everything to do with city planning.

## Road works

For many years, Aurovilians and guests have suffered from Auroville's dusty roads. This will now change.

## News in brief

The Neyveli Lignite Corporation has made a donation to the value of Rs 1.1 crore from its Corporate Social Responsibility funds for making the access road in front of the Visitors' Centre. The donation includes Neyveli paving the road with paver blocks, as well as the service road to the back entrance of the Visitors' Centre, the pathway from the parking area to the Visitors' Centre and a bus bay. The Auroville Road Service has started paving the road from the Solar Kitchen to the Kindergarten, also with paver blocks.

The dirt road from the Certitude corner to the Solar Kitchen roundabout will be stabilized by the Road Service, using the poured earth concrete technology developed by the Auroville Earth Institute.

All works are scheduled to be ready before the visit of the Prime Minister in February 2018.

## Exploring Prosperity

The exploring prosperity team is investigating how the community can move closer to the system of prosperity as envisaged by The Mother and which operated in the early years of Auroville. Focus groups have formed to study the possibilities of short, medium and long-term solutions in eight different areas, including Auroville services, commercial units, education and self-governance.

## Line of Goodwill

In late December, the team which is planning the Line of Goodwill – a megastructure that will stretch from Matrimandir to close by the Visitors' Centre – made their second presentation to the community. They outlined the work done so far by a team of seventeen architects, and asked for support from the community for a project which they described as a way of 'reinvigorating The Dream'. While certain concerns were raised from the floor, including the relevance of such a project at this stage of Auroville, its impact upon the environment and its 'commercial' orientation, 48 people answered the call to participate in twelve areas that need to be researched for its manifestation.

## Art for Land

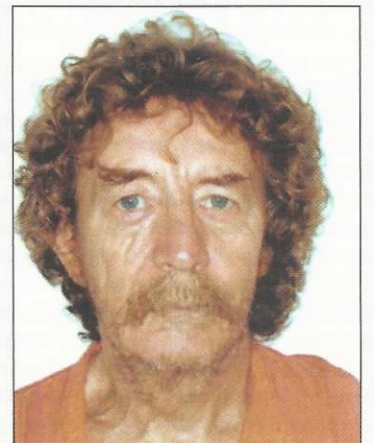
The third edition of 'Art for Land', in which artists donate work to raise money to acquire land for Auroville, was inaugurated on 1st January at the Unity Pavilion. This time, a record number of more than 70 artists participated. The works will be exhibited at the Unity Pavilion until 15th February. Visit: [artforland.auroville.org](http://artforland.auroville.org)

## Golden Sunbeams

A mixed-media outdoor exhibition of works by Auroville artists was held in the boulder garden of the Matrimandir in January.

## Passing Hans Pfunder

In the early morning of Wednesday 6 December 2017, Hans Pfunder left his body in Marika's Senior Home in Samasti. Suffering from a terminal illness, his health had been deteriorating over these last years. He would have been 65.



Hans, who had trained as an electrician in Germany, had been coming to Auroville in earlier years and joined in June 1996. Living till last year a solitary life in Silence adjacent to Vérité, his self-styled 'Innovations Unlimited' supplied Aurovilians with a wide range of handy electronic gadgets that followed the trend of the times.

His yearly sojourns in small Buddhist ashrams in Thailand and Myanmar gave him perspective, peace and deep understanding. Hans' remains were buried at the Adventure grounds on December 9th.



# A doorway into Tamil

A new online English language magazine, *Vaasal*, has just been released. "We would like this magazine to be an entrance into the world of Tamil ideas, art and culture for anyone in Auroville who is a non-native, from another ur (village, country, habitat, that place that belongs to you and you to it)" it announces. The first issue includes Sri Aurobindo's translation of a classic Tamil poem, a simple language 'hack' to get people speaking Tamil, an interview with senior Aurovilian, Mahalingam, and advice about local customs. *Auroville Today* spoke to Meenakshi and Jonathan of the editorial team, to discover more about their intention and their ideas for the future.

*Auroville Today: What inspired you to bring out this magazine?*

**Meenakshi:** Many non-Tamil Aurovilians cannot speak Tamil. This realization has always haunted me and so, in the past, I have taken many steps to try to remedy it. The most successful attempts were when I was teaching Tamil one-on-one to people like Ruud Lohman, Barbara and Christine. They all had to speak Tamil daily with their workers and this need pushed them to learn spoken Tamil.

Other people have also tried over the years to improve people's Tamil. There have been classes by Shankar and others, and Claude of Auro-Traductions began bringing out a simple phrase book in the four languages Mother specified for Auroville. However, this soon stopped. We are all too busy. People come for one or two months for a class but then they have to take up a job to maintain themselves and they drift away.

Actually, I have discovered that even native-born Tamils have no real knowledge of their language. Because of the influence of movies and television, what is spoken locally is an impoverished form: the depth and spirituality of the Tamil language is missing.

For many years I have been bringing out a magazine in Tamil which tries to remedy this deficiency. Then I thought, why don't we do something in English for both the local people and for non-Tamil Aurovilians? So Harini and I started the first magazine in English, which was also called *Vaasal*. We wrote about the ancient history of Auroville, we introduced Tamil poetry and life in the village. However, Harini had no time to continue.

But this gave me the hope that something could be done in English. I was waiting for someone who was well versed in both languages who could help me to take the next steps. And then Jonathan came along.

**Jonathan:** My background is in music and languages. When I came to this area, I was told that Tamil is one of the world's great classical languages. I was shocked because people always talk about Sanskrit as being one of these, not Tamil. However, after living for some time in the Adishakti community among dancers, actors and singers, I experienced some of the richness and beauty of South Indian culture and wanted to discover more.

I had heard about this wonderful Tamil poet, Meenakshi, so one day I went to her house unannounced and told her I thought she was the person I was looking for. Since then, I have learned so much from her. I learned that the first treatise on music and the arts Tamil was in Tamil, and that one of the ancient poems speaks of Tamil as being like 'honey poured into the ears'. This is the true sound of classical Tamil.

The difficult thing for most people to understand is why it is important to learn Tamil. It is not simply to buy petrol in the local village; it is about discovering this vast ocean of literature and song.

*Do you believe that if people understand the richness and beauty of the culture they will be more motivated to want to speak it?*

**Meenakshi:** Very much so. For example, take the word '*vaasal*'. It means 'doorway', but this has many depths of meaning. It is from the root '*vay*', mouth, the doorway of the face. It can also mean the entrance to Heaven and it is also about crossing thresholds, from the exterior to interior or from one stage of life to another.

The entrance of a house in Tamil Nadu is called '*nillay vaasal*', the 'standing knowledge': it is the first thing to be constructed after the foundation. The *nillay vaasal* tells you about the situation of the house. If there are neem leaves above this door, it means there is pox infection and you should not come inside. If there are mango leaves, it is an auspicious day. If there are banana leaves and fruit, it is a festivity and everybody is welcome.

In Tamil, many words have both a literal and an occult meaning. For example, '*udkar*' means 'sit'. But it is from '*ud kar yar*', which means 'Who are you inside?' '*Veedu*' is house. But it comes from the root meaning 'freedom'. So your house is the place that gives you freedom, that releases you from bondage. '*Manavi*' is wife, but also 'foundation'. '*Kanavan*' is husband, but also the 'third eye' of the family.



Meenakshi and Jonathan

*Are these deeper meanings still understood by the local people?*

Not by most of them. Certainly the younger generation do not know this, so the magazine will also be an eye-opener for them as well.

*One of the reasons why some people are not so motivated to learn Tamil seems to be that the local culture and the way the language is spoken around here does not seem very elevated.*

**Meenakshi:** It is true that classical Tamil is not spoken around here. This is a region of folk culture: people do not write classical poetry but sing while they are working; it is music of daily life. The only place where I found some classical songs was at the Irumbai temple where the priest was reciting 7th century hymns. Otherwise, for classical culture you have to go further south, to places like Tanjore and Madurai.

But that culture is very rich. It's worth remembering that Sri Aurobindo was an ardent student of Tamil. He wrote on the great Tamil poets and philosophers, and he even said that studying the roots of the Tamil language allowed him to understand the Veda better.

*One of the most common reasons people give for not learning Tamil is it is too difficult, along with the fact that many of the local people have acquired some proficiency in understanding English.*

**Jonathan:** Auroville is full of tremendous linguists, people who can speak three or four languages effortlessly, so the idea that Tamil is too difficult does not make sense. What is the block?

I think there are two things. The first thing is that when you are a good linguist you are used to finding languages easy. So I think that if you do not pick up Tamil immediately, you tend to be embarrassed and you would rather say you choose not to learn it than address the challenge.

Secondly, I think that sounds exist in Tamil that we cannot hear at first because we don't have the ear for them. But if you understand that Tamil can be an adventure in discovering new sounds and music and rhythms, I think you find a new doorway into it. I found a wonderful partner in this endeavour in Krishna of Solitude Farm who just loves to celebrate Tamil for its sound.

For me, the main reason to try and say something appropriate in Tamil to a Tamil speaker is to make them smile: I want to make a heart moment out of it. Language has this magical power to turn an everyday situation into something joyous with just a single word.

But, above all, learning Tamil should be enjoyable.

**Meenakshi:** I experimented long ago with Tamil classes at Transition School. The classroom sessions didn't work, so I realised that I had to access their five senses to help the students absorb the language. For the next class I asked them to come to my house and I told them we were going to make *bhaji* and chutney. As we

prepared the food, I give them the words for the ingredients. Then we made it and ate it together. It was a success.

**Jonathan:** To help learn language, I believe in daily practice. We can call it 'Tamil yoga'!

**Meenakshi:** Actually, the different sounds of the Tamil consonants and letters emanate from different parts and chakras of the body. So even chanting the sounds is like a mantra as well as a breathing exercise.

*What I learned from this issue of Vaasal is how little I know of Tamil customs and culture. For example, I didn't realise that one should not ask direct questions in certain circumstances.*

**Meenakshi:** You should not ask someone directly where they are going because it is believed it can cast a pall over a proposed journey. Also, you should not ask a direct question before going to bed that cannot be fulfilled. For example, if you ask your mother if there is more food, and there isn't any, and then you die that night, for the rest of her life your mother will feel responsible. Again, if you are a Tamil man who sees a girl for the first time in preparation for a possible marriage, you will not say she is either ugly or beautiful. Everything has to be in moderation. That is why, in our culture, we don't get excited about the greatness of great people or the smallness of small people.

As an Aurovilian, if a worker comes and gives you a marriage invitation you should not say you cannot come: they will not like this. You have to thank them and say you are happy to receive it.

*Given the fact that there are more than 50 nationalities in Auroville, isn't there an argument for evolving some kind international language and code of conduct so we don't have to navigate all these different cultural customs?*

**Meenakshi:** It is happening, in Auroville a new language is emerging. But I think you should first understand a culture in its heritage and its depth before assimilating it into a new language. Just brushing it aside without bothering to know about it is not good.

**Jonathan:** This is a very important point. If a new language evolves, it should happen on an egalitarian basis so that one component, something drawn from one language, is not superior to another.

*A concern about the loss of languages in the world today is that each language seems to tap into a slightly different perception and experience of the world, so that learning new languages is actually a way of expanding one's experience. For example, I believe that Tamil has many words for the different stages of an unfurling of a flower whereas English only has one...*

**Meenakshi:** True. And while there is no Tamil word for 'ugliness', we have many words for 'beauty'.

*Do you have plans for future issues of Vaasal?*

**Jonathan:** We would like to come out every two months. For the next issue, Lourdes wants to speak to the lady who is the 'funeral crier' in Kilapalayam. I've heard her sing. It's extraordinary what a huge sound comes out of her when she sings.

**Meenakshi:** We also decided to interview more senior Tamil Aurovilians. In this issue, we were very happy to learn more about Mahalingam, who is one of the very few people alive today who met Sri Aurobindo. In future, we will also interview senior workers who have been at the inauguration of Auroville to find out how they see Auroville and its progress. And we won't neglect the local folk elements. In this issue, for example, there is a story about a man who could not let his deceased wife go and how he finally managed to release her.

*You could also invite people to write in with their questions about the Tamil culture and language.*

**Jonathan:** That's a great idea. We will do a page of questions and answers each issue. We will also try to make a simple website.

*From an interview by Alan*

## Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 issues :

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