

The Women's Solidarity Festival

A volunteer at Village Action (AVAG) shares her experience of this year's Women's Solidarity Festival

India is a land of many festivals, each celebrating our rich cultural tradition, each representing a certain important date in the history of one or the other religion. These timings often correspond to events in the natural cycles of land and water, such as the coming of rain or the harvest season.

The Women's Solidarity Festival at AVAG stands out in some ways from these traditional festivals. For one, the date of the festivities is flexible and this year there were four pre-events leading up to the Finale. The theme of the festival is simply the Spirit of Woman. It overcomes every cultural, caste, class, race, colour and even gender divide since men, too, are welcome to celebrate the Spirit of Woman. There is no religion-based tradition or fear of upsetting a God that drives the festivities. The women come voluntarily, in large numbers, and each one of them contributes financially to the festival. It is this participation that makes the event extremely special.

The aim of the festival is not to educate, raise awareness, honour a dead person or even promote any kind of product or idea. The festival exists because of and entirely for the women.

And so the question arises, why do the women of the bioregion, coming from a rural background that puts them not just at an economic disadvantage but also subject to a severely prevalent gender bias at every level of society, contribute a portion of their savings to host a Women's Festival for themselves?

To find the answer to this question we must dig a little deeper to know the lives of these women.

It is important to understand the value of the Udhayam Women's Federation, Auroville Village Action Group and most importantly, the value of the network these bodies represent in their lives. The Federation is a sisterhood of which every member is proud to be a part. Auroville Village Action Group gives a safe space for them to express, learn, share and grow as a strong community.

It is a family, and the Women's Solidarity Festival is a family function. This is a sentiment echoed by several women on the morning of the festival as they stood at the entrance of the campus, clad in their brightest, happiest sarees to welcome the women's groups. They were full of excitement and pure joy even though many had stayed awake through most of the



Women from AVAG's Women's Self-Help Groups perform in front of an audience of more than 5,000 women

previous night at the AVAG office to complete the preparations for the event. If their bodies were tired, their soaring spirits were hiding it well.

It had been a long night. All the AVAG staff, including the directors Anbu and Moris, had stayed till the wee hours of the morning, personally supervising the cooking and food packaging. Several Federation members too had volunteered for this work. They were assisted by some Men's Clubs and Paalam members (an AVAG initiative to bridge the gap between the youth in the bioregion and the resources available in Auroville).

And then there were the cooking teams who had been diligently working over four days to prepare snacks for all the 5,000 expected women and on the last night were cooking tamarind rice for lunch. The cooking was done in vessels large enough for some of the smaller women to curl up in. The food packaging and distribution system too had been designed in detail. Each development

worker was in-charge of distributing to the groups from villages under his/her care.

In addition to this the entrance to the campus had been decorated with a kolam and stalls arranged for the social enterprises of AVAG.

Through the week we had thunderstorms every night and the water from the flooded ground had to be pumped out and then the swamps filled with dry sand for the event. Fortunately, the day of the festival was clear and sunny.

When Anbu Akka apologised to them for how uncomfortably warm the weather was, the women said that the heat did not bother them because they had been praying for it to not rain on this day lest their festival be cancelled.

We stood with Anbu at the entrance to greet the women as they arrived in groups. The first groups entered dancing to the sound of drumbeats and were accompanied by the AVAG staff to the ground. Each group carried a placard with the name of their group and different drawings and designs. Many groups came in uniform sarees, adding to the visual of unity and solidarity.

The programme was inaugurated by the Federation members who collectively took a pledge to work for not just their own development but for other women too. They declare that they are an instrument for change and will not discriminate on the basis of caste, class or creed. They also vow to not deliberately end their lives, no matter how distressed their situation may be. The resolution is a powerful message to and from the women that signifies the bond they share.

We were then addressed by some senior Aurovilians and Mr. Chunkath, the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation.

All the speakers shared their dream of an inclusive future that would be peaceful and beneficial for all. They marveled at the energy of the women, radiating from their very presence and congratulated them on the social oppression they had overcome to be here.

And so began the cultural performances. The women had been preparing for these for over a month with regular practices and training. AVAG had organised dance, theatre and debating professionals to train women in ancient traditional folk dance forms of Tamil Nadu which are on the brink of being lost. The skits were made on themes of social change, shedding light on issues of gender bias, treatment of the elderly, eve-teasing and deforestation. The songs called for a shift in social mentality and emphasised the role women can play in this shift.

AVAG used this opportunity to introduce to the women the work of other social welfare organisations in the bioregion. We heard from Dr. Vidya Ramkumar who works in the field of Child Welfare about sensitive issues like child sexual abuse, especially within homes and extended family, how to identify it, teach their children to recognise it and how to get help.

Ms. Sheethal Nayak presented the case of the transgender community and boldly spoke of the discrimination these people face in society. She urged the crowd to consider the Gods they worship who have been depicted as transgender and appealed to their sense of empathy, calling for social justice and equality. Even though this topic is commonly considered taboo, and there prevail several biases against people of transgender, the women were not only receptive to Ms. Nayak but also sent her good wishes as she exited the stage.

Several audience members spontaneously stood up and joined in dance, unafraid and unashamed of their spirited expression. They held each other's hands and spun in circles, their bodies moving to an ancient beat of folk music, their collective spirit connecting in a wave of female strength.

Ain Contractor

Ain is an architect from Mumbai and currently volunteers with AVAG. She has an interest in socially and environmentally-conscious design and has a firm faith in the values of equality, compassion and human unity.



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Revisioning Auroville's economy

Recently, a group of Aurovillians concerned about the direction of our economy discussed alternatives. Anandi is part of the management team of Pour Tous Distribution Centre, Jocelyn is on the Santé team, Nicole is a member of the BCC and management of the Visitors Center, Isha coordinates the Auroville Board of Services, and Manohar is the webmaster of the Auroville website. Here is a glimpse into their concerns and their proposals for a revised Auroville economy.

The ideal vision of the Auroville economy is partly based upon Mother's *The Dream* where she mentions, among other things, that in an ideal society, "Money would no longer be the sovereign lord". Further, "Work would not be there as the means of gaining one's livelihood, it would be the means whereby to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, while doing at the same time service to the whole group, which on its side would provide for each one's subsistence and for the field of his work."

However, many Aurovillians are concerned that our economy is moving away from this ideal towards a more money-based system. In a recent AuroNet survey, 64% agreed that the role of money is becoming too dominant in today's Auroville and felt that steps need to be taken to reverse this trend. Another 26% felt this perception was somewhat true.

What is this based upon? One obvious example is that while Mother did not want cash exchange within Auroville, cash exchanges happen frequently for goods or services rendered, either through the physical exchange of money, or through transfers between individual accounts held at Auroville's Financial Service, which operate practically as personal savings accounts.

As one of the participants in the discussion put it, we have evolved from a society where most essential services were free, to one where the majority have to be paid for; from one where there was a great deal of collective sharing to one where many people feel they have to look after themselves. From one of informal exchange and barter, to one where many things have a price tag and where it is difficult to live without fairly generous financial resources.

In fact, as another participant noted, our present economic system breeds a feeling of want and a preoccupation with money. "Not that it wouldn't have happened anyway, because this is happening in the rest of India, but we have made choices which have clearly accelerated it."

How did this happen?

Jocelyn remembers the early days. "In those days we never sold a single thing. Everything



Inside the Santé Multi-Purpose Health Clinic, which provides much more than material support

was exchanged or given away and there was a strong spirit of togetherness, community. Whatever we earned in the commercial units we gave to the community because it was Auroville's money."

She remembers that a major shift happened when the community ran short of money and there wasn't enough for everyone. "This was the beginning of people having individual accounts at Pour Tous (later called Financial Service). It developed into a movement where people started saying, 'She is not working half as much as I am, so I should get more'. Then what people received, which we term 'maintenance', became attached to a specific work, and we started getting what feels more like a salary."

Around the same time, remembers another participant, there was a strong push from the Economy Group to make the community services financially self-sufficient through charging

Aurovillians for any work done.

"It was a big blow to the services when the Economy Group said providing services free of cost does not work. However, this mentality, which keeps chipping away at the ideal, had actually been there for a very long time."

One of the participants notes that Auroville has become a kind of 'California in Tamil Nadu', with its upmarket boutiques and expensive eateries. "Many of those who have lived here for years cannot afford to purchase these goods or even to eat in our restaurants," she notes. "This is a recipe for social tensions and encourages a preoccupation with money."

These tensions and inequalities are exacerbated, says another, by the present system where commercial unit managers are able to pay themselves far more than people in the services receive. "Their argument is, you see how hard we are working, we are making a lot of money for Auroville, so we deserve more remuneration than those who are just working in services. Somehow, the people who are making money seem to feel this is something more 'real', more valuable, to the community than 'merely' providing a service."

"There is much less sense of connection, of collective responsibility today," notes another. "We all have our individual accounts which are treated as private property to use as we like. If we have financial means and pay a fixed monthly contribution – which doesn't at all reflect the true cost of providing the services and benefits of living here – we can live very comfortably and not be involved in any work for the community."

However, Isha sees what is happening as an aspect of human nature. "I see that in each individual, and all of us, there are cross-currents and different motivations. One will always be to take care of one's personal needs; another is to participate in the collective, and to give to strengthen the collective. These things coexist but the balance between the two is always shifting. In Auroville, the trend seems to me that more and more the focus is on the individual, rather than the collective or the larger view."

Experiments have been made, and are being made, to reverse this trend, but often they have to overcome considerable opposition. Anandi, one of the managers of the Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC), remembers how difficult it was to get it off the ground. "When we wanted to start PTDC and requested some financial support from the community, one of the people in the Economy Group told me 'I don't want this responsibility. What if somebody starts taking things and you go into minus?' We are constantly frightened by anything new, unconventional. We were frightened by the PTDC experiment, by the Varuna free electricity experiment, in the early days we were frightened by the Free Store, because we always assume that people will take advantage."

"There will always be a few cases but that doesn't mean we mustn't try experiments. Why should we lower our ideals because not everyone agrees or is interested?"

Revisioning

So what do they think can be done to align the Auroville economy more closely with the original vision?

This was already discussed during the Auroville Retreat in the group focussing upon the economy. One result was the formation of a subgroup to look into how to increase the in-kind aspect of our economy – provisions and services without a cash component – as one step in the 'de-monetizing' of Auroville. One proposal was to begin by looking at those older people who have lived longest in Auroville and see if some kind of universal maintenance or 'prosperity' package, taking care of basic needs without cash exchange, could be provided for them.

The intention behind this is not simply to provide services rather than money but also to build trust among Aurovillians that the community will support them. "This is very much missing at present and one of the reasons why many people feel they have to look after themselves."

This proposal could be a first step towards a more radical solution – the provision of a comprehensive prosperity package to all those who have fully committed themselves to serving the community. The package would not be the same for everyone, there would be an element of individual choice reflecting the different needs of different individuals, but ideally the basics – food, health-care, transport, shelter, education – would be provided according to need.

This would mean that what Auroville would give us in return for work or another form of involvement would be provided by centrally-supported services.

Well-functioning services are a crucial element in the revisioning of our economy. The services can bring a different quality into our lives. "If you go into Santé Multi-Purpose Health Clinic," says one of the participants, "you immediately feel you are somewhere special; somewhere beautiful where you will be cared for in a spirit of service. In this way, our services can provide much more than the material aspect. They can provide an environment in which we can grow, develop, as was intended. And as more and more of them succeed in doing this, they will be like stepping-stones in the community that will allow us to move from one to another while remaining within the same very special atmosphere."

At the same time, points out someone, we need to acknowledge that more can be done. There is a lack of a self and peer-assessment system in the services, and this needs to be put in place if we want a better community culture and atmosphere.

Another idea to put our economy on a new basis is to eliminate physical cash exchanges in the central city area. "There is a lot of opposition to this," observes one of the participants, "as some people would love to have a supermarket and shops in the centre of the city where they can go and pay for things. But the planning office and the FAMC have restated support to protect a unique Auroville (no-cash) atmosphere in this area."

This is seen as a fundamental stand that needs to be taken. But it was also agreed that interested individuals can sign up for a number of smaller economic experiments. In fact, a number of experiments have already been tried where participants pool their resources while attempting to collectively fulfil the basic needs of the participants. Some have failed, some, like the 'Seed' account (one of the 'Circles' experiments) or the 'Prosperity' account, have been more successful and are still running. The keys to success in such ventures seem to be conscious and responsible participation, a high level of trust between the participants, a precise accounting and monitoring programme and, crucially, a very capable individual or group willing to hold and supervise the experiment.

Anandi is ready for something more radical. "Let's make an experiment that a group of us decide to live for some time without using any rupees in our life in Auroville, relying only upon what Auroville can provide, and see what happens."

It was noted that the major thing we have to change in our economy today is what is considered 'normal'. Today, what is considered normal is that people buy and sell things (through our News and Notes, for example) and that people's value to the community is often assessed in terms of what they generate in rupees.

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OPINION

Are we suffering from relative poverty as a community?

From the time of Auroville's humble beginnings, the common value system has supported a simple but rich and beautiful way of life. A life that is not too dependent on financial resources, but fosters enjoying abundance and prosperity in things is readily available and comes from a rich social support system.

Over time, in order to become financially independent and to meet our basic needs, activities in Auroville began to produce products that were unique and beautiful. These products soon found a market internationally and locally in high-end exclusive shops. Eateries sprung up catering to high-income tourists. Therapies, workshops and training programmes got developed to cater to the high-income seekers. It is interesting to note that all this happened with a very innocent motive to make a living for community members and to contribute to the collective.

Over the years, the indirect consequence of this development is that now the basic maintenance and ability to afford Auroville's products, eateries and therapies are completely out of synch. The maintenance system, for various reasons, just about supports a basic lifestyle, thus making our own produce simply unaffordable to most of the community members who rely on the maintenance system. In a more humble setting, one would feel privileged to receive the maintenance. However, Auroville is not a humble setting anymore. Moreover, today, only some of us have easier access to the expensive food at Auroville restaurants and items in our boutiques.

Being on the modest maintenance and being surrounded by offerings for the rich and privileged makes us feel poorer than we are. Consequently, a large number of community members are engaged in activities just to make ends meet and some of them work outside to be able to achieve that. We are losing all this human resource to deal with basic needs rather than work to manifest the Auroville Charter and work on Human Evolution. This was the last thing Mother would have wanted for us. In fact, the Mother wanted to create a place where one is free from this in order to explore the higher dimensions of humanity.

I believe catering to the rich and wealthy in our bid to bring money into Auroville has worked against us and makes a number of the community members feel deprived and financially poor.

I suggest we encourage more activities that cater to the needs of community members at affordable prices in line with the maintenance system.

The units could reflect on their strategy and innovate on how to address this. The units catering to the rich could offer deep discounts for their products and develop affordable product ranges exclusively for the community members. I am sure there are whole numbers of things we can do if we put our mind to it.

It will be wonderful if the newly formed FAMC focused on such vision-related issues that are critical to our growth.

Min (first posted on AuroNet)

Farming in Auroville: a round table discussion

Recently, *Auroville Today* brought together some farmers, planners and those involved in managing community finances to look at the present situation of farming in Auroville and to examine options for the future. Lucas, ex-steward of AuroAnnam farm, is involved in education and research into ecological agriculture and biodynamic farming. Tomas is steward of Annapurna, Auroville's largest farm. Ulli is a member of the Finance and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) and Auroville Board of Commerce. Sauro is a member of the FAMC and the Town Development Council. Bindu works for Foodlink, the Farm Group's distribution centre and writes for *Auroville Today*.

Bindu: I think we're all in agreement around this table that our farming sector does need help. But we probably have very different ideas of what is needed.

Lucas: Farming all over the world needs support and gets support. Most of the public money of governments helps farming, but we do not do that here. Our farming cannot do better than the rest of the world without support. That's where we have to start. Farms need a constant investment for maintenance and development and we don't provide enough support for our farmers.

Vivek: There are many ways that the government supports farmers in India that our farmers do not benefit from.

Ulli: So we are at a disadvantage?

Vivek: I would not suggest that we are always at a disadvantage because most of the Auroville farmers receive a maintenance from Auroville, which is not the case with farmers outside.

Lucas: But maintenance is not enough to develop farms. It is only enough for an individual to live at a basic level.

Tomas: The one thing that for me is clear is that after 50 years Auroville farming has not gone very far, so we have to examine why. Unfortunately, the Farm Group, which should be doing this, is not functioning properly, so it's not the vehicle to move Auroville farming forward. We have to find other ways.

Vivek: I think farming in Auroville hasn't evolved because the community has no understanding of its basic needs regarding healthy food and food security.

Sauro: I think that Auroville farming needs support but not in the way it is presently organized. There is a need for some kind of realignment. We have a situation where, historically, farms developed for land protection, to establish a presence on a place. The land might not have been the most suitable for farming. So there is a need for our planners to give priority in land use to farming where the land is most suitable for this.

Secondly, we need to reconnect our farming to what we are eating: we need to be eating food that we can grow here. Thirdly, we need to go beyond the individualistic trend in farm management where every farmer decides what they will grow. The farmers should adopt an approach which takes into account the needs of the community.

Tomas: Farmers do this automatically because we look at the market. If I can sell a certain product, I'll grow it, if I can't I will not grow it.

Sauro: But market demands should go in the direction of promoting food items which are more sustainable to grow here.

Lucas: The objective of growing food for Auroville comes up constantly in the Farm



From left: Lucas, Tomas, Ulli, Sauro and Vivek (not in picture, Bindu)

Group. But there is also a pressure on the farmers to make their enterprises profitable in any way possible. This may mean producing items, like cheese, which are not necessarily a staple food of our community but where the profit margins are higher. So how do you resolve these different pressures?

Ulli: There are different ways of supporting farming. One is to cover the maintenances, which is done at present to a certain extent, but this doesn't really respond to how well a farm is working. Another is for City Services to put aside a certain amount of money and then allow the farmers to decide the best way to spend that money. This could involve subsidising their produce.

Tomas: What we really need is support which stimulates development and higher quality, and subsidies don't necessarily do this. For a farm like ours, we need support for R&D, and for those Aurovilians who want to work with us. We don't get this at present.

Other farms might have different needs, so we would have to analyse carefully where to put the money to promote development because this is not happening at the moment: we are stuck.

Ulli: In the Budget and Coordination Committee we decided we were not going to throw all the money we collect into farm maintenances and recurring expenditure. We also wanted to use some of that money to make investments where there will be a return. So we looked at the farms that are already functioning rather well and we selected one farm, Annapurna, and asked, "Where do you need money?"

Tomas: I sent you a project.

Ulli: So then we analyzed it and as a consequence we felt this would give a really good return, and it would help the farm. The point is, if you give a little bit to fifteen farms then the effect is hardly noticeable, but if you take one or two farms which have proper management and support them for the next five years, something substantial may be achieved. So I think it's a question of the community setting priorities when making funds available for farming.

Bindu: Another possibility is to build stronger linkages between farmers and food processing units.

Tomas: This is already happening. Martina, who manages Naturellement food processing unit, needed certified organic fruit and I am the only farm in Auroville with an organic certification of domestic and international validity. So we agreed that I would grow some guavas for her and she invested in the farm. We still have to see how that relationship works but it is a promising option.

For some years, Maroma also supported

Auroville grain farming. Some of the money went to the farms, and some was used to provide free grain to the Solar Kitchen. This was an interesting approach because it not only supported the farms but also helped the Solar Kitchen experiment with using more locally-grown food. The Maroma support stopped because of the big global economic crisis, but these are the kind of stimulants we are looking for, ones that help the farmer but also help introduce the consumer to locally-grown foods.

Ulli: In the case of Naturellement, it's basically a soft loan, so for that you need to be able to convince the person who provides the loan that there's a reasonable chance that you will be able to serve it. And I think that if other farms are able to do this, they can also attract funds.

So there is also a responsibility on the Farm Group to be able to communicate to the community where it will receive the best return for the community's very limited resources. Unfortunately, at present the confidence level in the community concerning the Farm Group and some of our farmers is very low.

Vivek: The farmers don't deserve all the criticism that they receive. I feel that more and more our farmers feel defeated. No matter how hard they work, they don't feel that they have done something significant for the community or that the community appreciates their efforts. I think there has to be some financial mechanism to support them but the first thing that is

necessary is that we begin to appreciate them.

Lucas: I agree. In this community there's a total disrespect for farming. You hear that 'this farmer is a lazy bum' or a 'bad manager'. Yes, there are some rotten eggs in the basket but if you have one bad teacher in a school, you don't condemn the whole school.

At the same time, I don't see we have a realistic assessment of the importance of the farming sector. Do we really want food security, organic food, healthy food? And do we understand that many of our farms are on eroded, laterite soil and that you have to invest in them for many years before farms become productive?

Sauro: I think we should take farming as a priority in the community but a system should be designed where there is more shared responsibility between the consumer and the producer. The consumer should feel concerned that the food that they need in their daily life is being produced locally and healthily. This is a long process because it cannot be done by compulsion, but if you can stimulate a change in people's awareness and tastes, then it will generate a different demand within the community and we can grow a lot more crops that are more sustainable. This is how I see the support for the farmers coming in the long-term although, clearly, financial investments also have to be made.

Tomas: We do not have so much time left if we want to develop farming on a large scale in Auroville. For this to happen, we need skilled labour and mechanisation. Farming requires skill. I can't get my crops harvested, planted, and weeded by volunteers, but at the moment skilled labour is a problem because everybody wants to get out of farming into something like an office job.

Vivek: In the last five years, only about three people who have come to Auroville have taken up farming.

Tomas: Partly because of this, it is obvious that mechanization has to happen on all levels, including the use of computers. But a lot of our Auroville farmers can't handle this level. Farming is changing but some of our farmers still follow a kind of subsistence farming where if you have a few acres, you grow peanuts and some kombu. This doesn't feed the community: you can't run a community farm like this.

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The Annapurna Support Fund

Annapurna is one of Auroville's oldest, largest and most productive farms. It is the only IMO certified farm of Auroville producing grain and dairy products.

Annapurna also serves as Auroville's granary—procuring, processing and storing grain from other farms. It has 135 acres, out of which 30 acres are intensively cultivated with food crops—rice, millets, oilseeds, while the remaining land has fodder, timber, and forest. For the viability of the farm in the long run, and to manifest Annapurna's vision of meeting the needs of community, Annapurna needs periodic investments. To that end, Annapurna now has a group of Aurovillian volunteers as a Support Group. To raise funds for necessary investments, the Annapurna Support Group has decided to solicit support from the community by inviting all to join an Annapurna Support Fund.

The Annapurna Support Fund operates on the basic principle of asking people to invest a minimum amount of Rs. 10,000/- for a

minimum period of 1 year. The interest accumulated during this period goes to fund actual expenses that further Annapurna's growth as a farm. The fund will be built up by:

a) Individual investments: In this case, the capital or the money invested by an individual will always belong to its owner. This option is available only to people directly connected to Auroville and via the Auroville Financial Service Account.

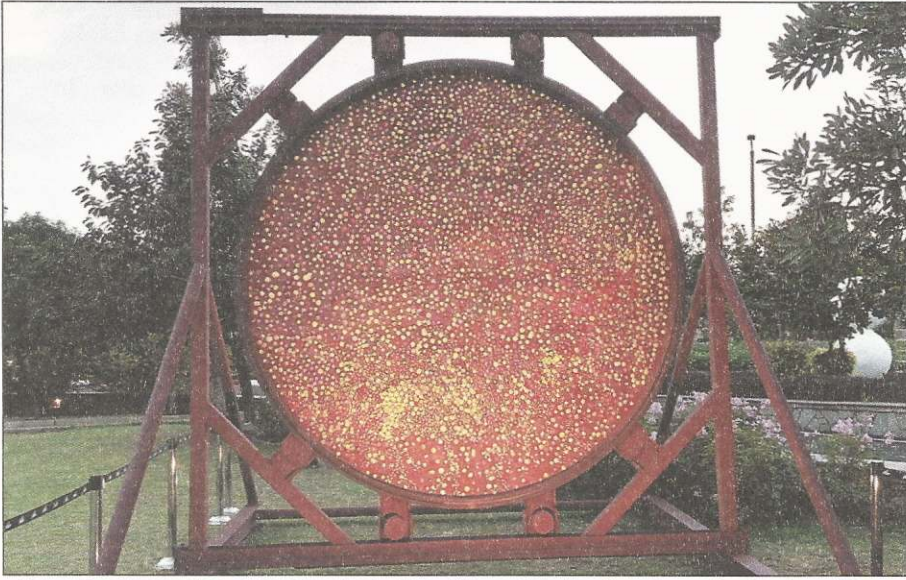
OR

b) Donations: Donors will not be able to withdraw their money from the Support Fund, but their donation can only be used for the specific purpose of supporting the farm.

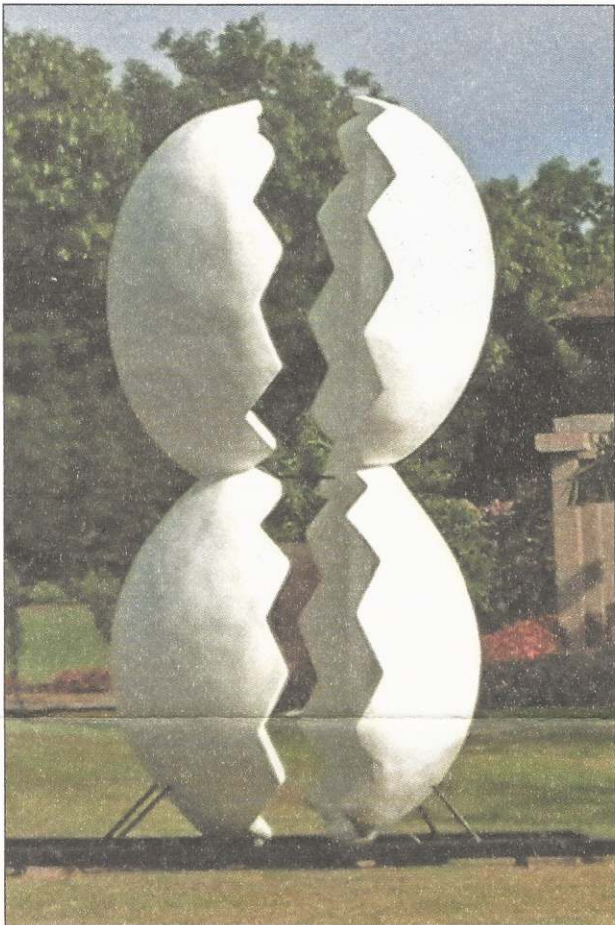
Response:

Within 24 hours of reaching out to people, there was already an overwhelming response. For further information, please contact annapurnafarm@auroville.org.in.

Inner Space Outer Space



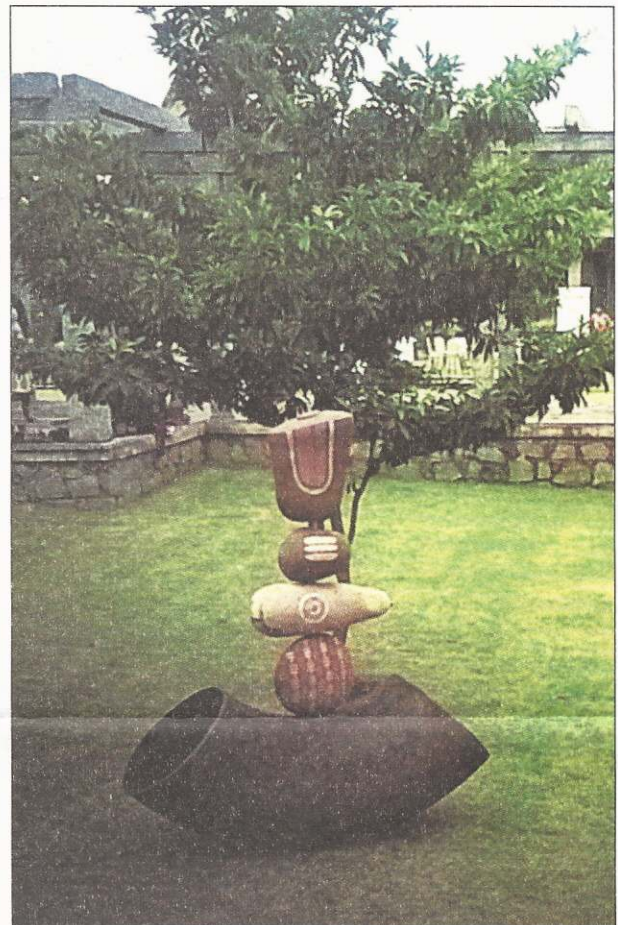
Priya Sundaravalli Sudharsan: Prakriti and Purusha, the two faces in all of us. (Ceramic tiles stuck on both sides of a 3-metre diameter disc found in the JSW scrap yard)



Chantal Gowa: The Flowing Light



Marie-Claire Barsotti: From Chaos to Peace



Sabrina Srinivas: The Witness



Kratu: Cosmic Mother - A Trilogy



Puneet Bar: The Nest



Marie-Claire Barsotti: The Dreamer



Nausheen Bari: Movement of Life



Puneet Bar: Wings of Steel

ce – Rendezvous with Vijayanagara



Nele Martens: Tree of Life

Toranagallu is a remote village in Karnataka, near the ruins of Hampi, the capital of the once mighty Vijayanagara empire. Located in the heart of a high-grade iron ore belt, Toranagallu is home to the Jindal Steel Works, one of the factories of the JSW conglomerate, India's second largest steel company. Around the factory, Jindal Steel has created three spotlessly clean and well provisioned townships to house its employees and their families, complete with schools, relaxation facilities, sports grounds and, in the largest township, Kaladham, a beautiful museum. The latter became the focal point of an exhibition of the works of eleven Auroville artists who, at the invitation of the JSW Foundation, the social development division of the JSW Group, had come to create, teach and interact with local artisans and the community for a period of two weeks.

The initiative for the art camp and training project had come from Mrs. Sangita Jindal, the Chairperson of the JSW Foundation. Concerned about the plight of local artisans, and potters in particular, she was looking for ways to help them find new forms of expression. Mrs. Jindal proposed a ceramic art camp, a two-week long art workshop involving artists from Auroville who would not only create art and interact with local artisans but also give training in clay to the JSW employees and their families. "We thought of an art camp focused on the ceramic medium because the process gives an experience of touch, feel, squeeze, and smell which is an engaged activity involving amateurs and professional artists," wrote the JSW Foundation.

Her invitation was taken up by eleven artists and one artist's assistant, ten from Auroville and two from the surrounding area. All had extensive experience in the medium of clay and ceramics. Five nationalities were represented.

"We were overwhelmed by the warm reception," says Priya Sundaravalli, the coordinator of the programme. "It was hospitality and generosity unlimited. We never heard the word 'no' to any of our requests. The staff was extremely caring, the attention to detail for our comfort was unimaginable, the materials procurement was immediate – it was beyond expectations every step of the way."

The biggest surprise was the industrial scrap yard. After a tour of the immense steel plant and an introduction to the various aspects of JSW Steel Works, the artists were invited to visit the company's vast scrap yards to see if there was any waste material they could use in their art work. "There we went totally crazy and didn't want to leave!" says Priya. "It was supposed to be a metal graveyard of sorts, but these objects offered and suggested so many creative possibilities! We all went into creative overdrive." Priya herself selected a 3-metre diameter standing metal disc to be covered on both sides with tesserae (small ceramics tiles), Chantal chose a damaged rowing boat, and others smaller scrap pieces.

The artists set to work in the several studio spaces made available to them, except for Nele who had chosen to decorate the façade of a building at the sports centre. Besides creating their own works,

they also shared their knowledge and skills through hands-on activities with clay. Participants included art teachers from the JSW schools, children, spouses as well as employees. The sessions were very popular. The primary instructor was 17-year old Masha, a student of Last School and a pottery instructor at the White Peacock Studio in Auroville, who had accompanied the team both as an artist-assistant and to teach.

The international nature of the artists' team along with the wide age range of the artists led to interesting and positive cultural exchanges and also broke down age-related misconceptions – that people over 70 cannot work, and that a high school student cannot teach adults. The studio where most of the artists were working became a central hub, open in the late evenings and occasionally up to midnight, welcoming drop-in visitors, especially employees at end of the day or after sports activities. The art teachers from the various JSW Schools benefited as well. They were present during the entirety of the workshop, learning both by observation as well as by direct instruction.

However, the engagement with local craftspeople did not work as expected. Only one potter attended as the timing of the art camp just prior to the Hindu and Muslim festival season made it impossible for others to participate, as they were busy fulfilling orders.

At the end of two weeks, the artists' and students' works were together exhibited at the Kaladham Museum amidst great fanfare and interest from the JSW employees and their families. Over the coming weeks, special trips for school children were organized, with as highlight over 1,700 children visiting the museum on one day.

Overall, the project was a huge success, says Priya, even though a two-week period is too short for a ceramic camp. "Working with clay, a minimum of 3 weeks is needed, and ideally a month. Clay needs to dry slowly, otherwise the surface cracks. Then there is the firing cycle. Objects made of clay need to be fired twice, and three times if gold or enamels are used. Each firing is an 8-10 hour process and requires a long cooling time. Some works broke as the kiln was not able to reach the required temperature. We had to improvise and come up with Plan B. But we all succeeded in exhibiting the works in time. The opening night at Kaladham was magical. The presence of Auroville was in the air."

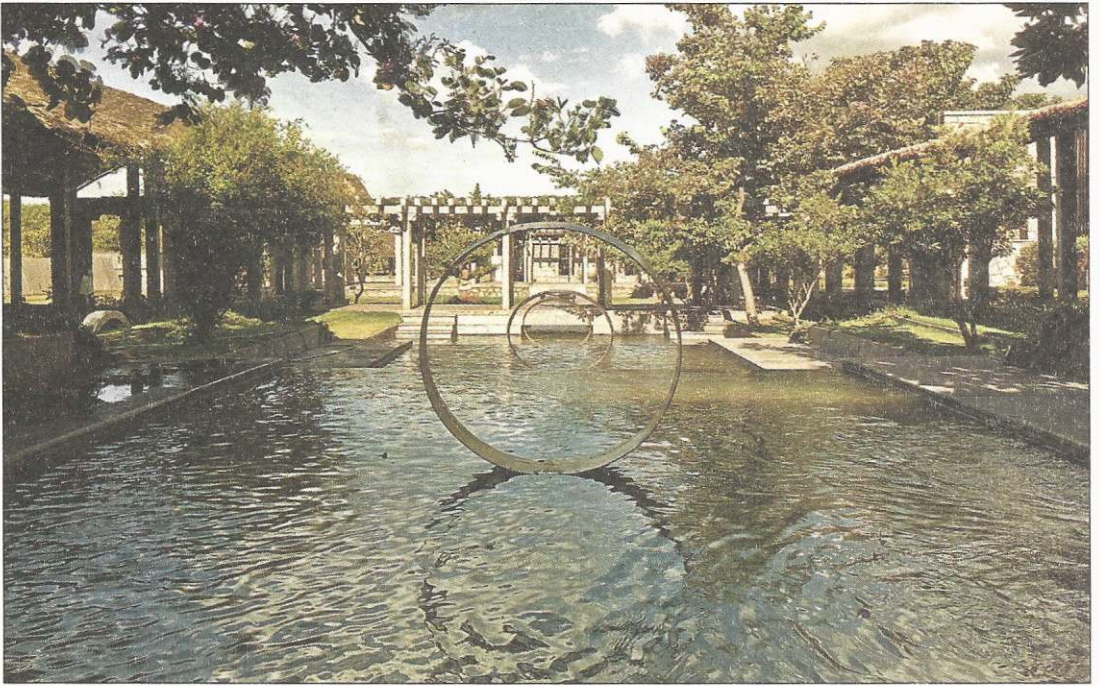
The works created are now the property of the JSW Foundation, which will find a permanent location for each of them in their offices across India. But, says Priya, this will not be the end. "The JSW Foundation has expressed interest to continue its engagement with Auroville artists." Among the ideas mooted is that a programme will be developed in which Auroville ceramists will help the local potters improve the designs and quality of their work; that the Kaladham Museum shop sells the works of both local and Auroville ceramic artists; and that Auroville ceramic artists help train JSW School teachers to set up a permanently functioning clay studio, along the lines of the White Peacock studio in Auroville, for use by employees and their families.



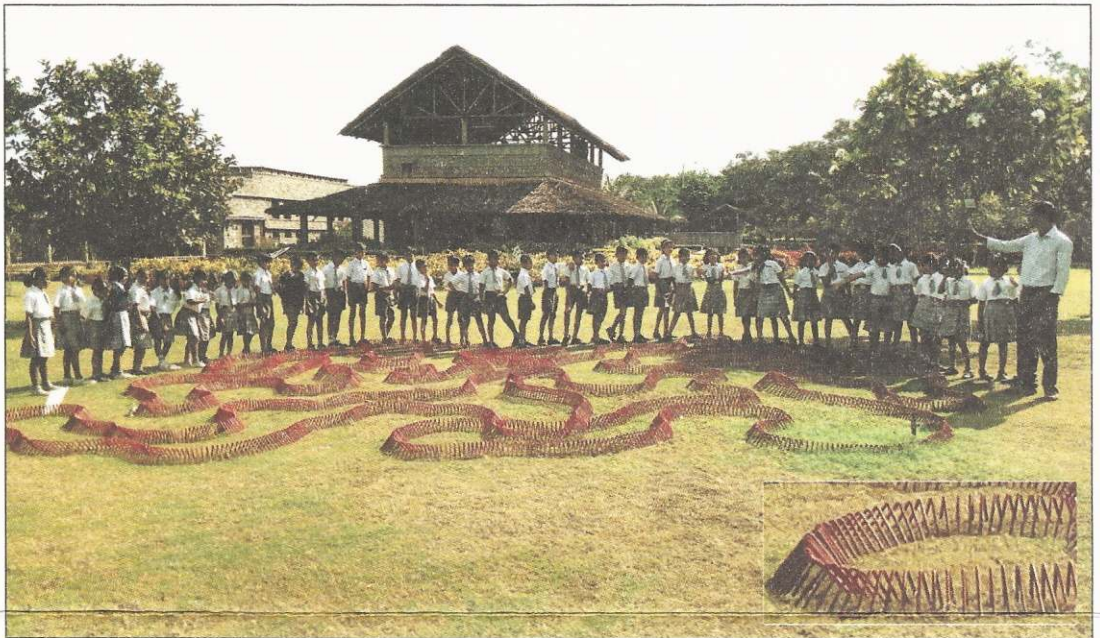
Saraswati: The Bridge

Carel

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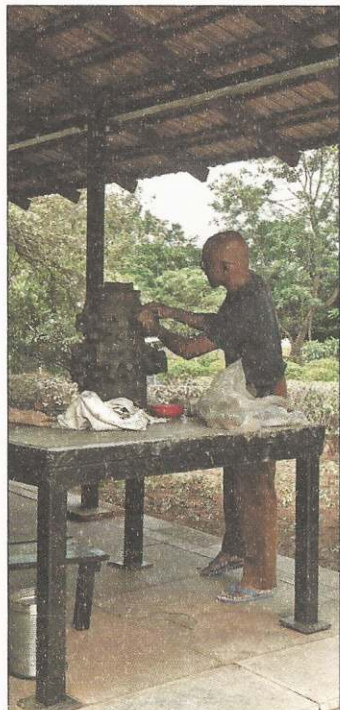
Nausheen Bari and Marie-Claire Barsotti: Wheels of Life



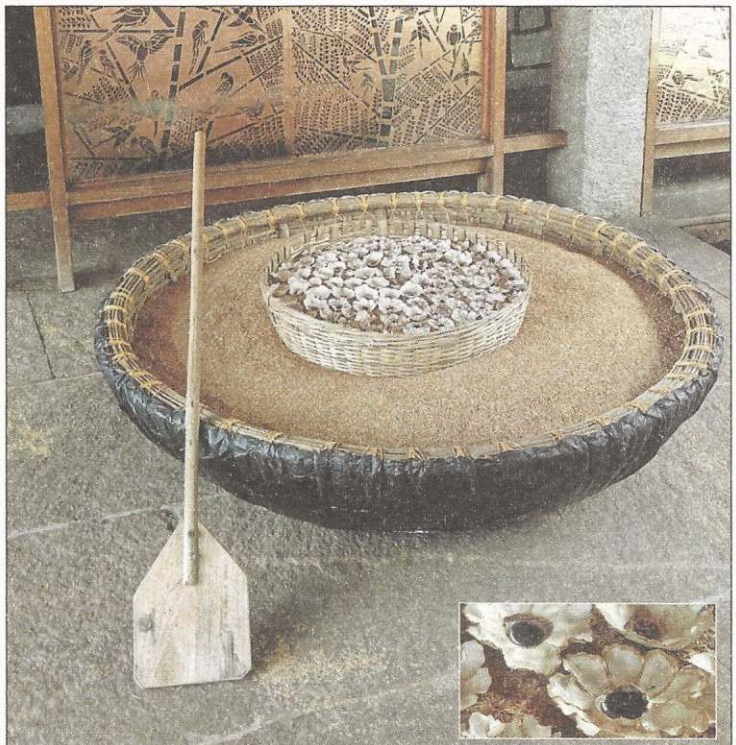
D. Saravana: An Unending Beginning. insert: detail



Chantal Gowa: Retired Boat



Ramesh at work. The art piece broke in the kiln



Priya Sundaravalli Sudharsan: Garden of Heavenly Delight. Insert: detail

Auroville will always be my home: Binah's story

I first came to Auroville in 1969 with my Mom, when I was about eight months old. We went to see the Mother quite a few times, but I don't remember being in the room with her. I remember leaving the room, and Champaklal running after me and giving me a big box of chocolates and flowers.

My mother, Jocelyn of Ravena, was an adventurer. After having me in Berlin, she travelled overland through Europe and Asia, baby in hand, until she reached Pondicherry. She was so inspired by the Mother and what she was building, my mother stopped wandering. At first, I lived with my mom in the area where Bharat Nivas is now, in a community that Mother named Silence. At one point, my grandfather and grandmother came to rescue me from this crazy trip to India, and my mom said, in the blind faith of the time, "Go see Mother. If you still feel like you need to take Binah, then take her." So the myth is that my grandfather went to see the Mother with a basket of flowers, and he was smoking a cigar, which is pretty unacceptable in the Ashram. Apparently, the staff there were rushing to put it out, and Mother said something like, "Oh leave it. It reminds me of Sri Aurobindo." Whether that's true, you have to ask someone else! Apparently, my grandfather came out of Mother's room, put the empty flower basket on his head and skipped down Beach Road, very happy and inspired by his experience. He visited Auroville five times during the early '70s, and was so inspired that he supported it in many ways: he paid for the bore well and electricity poles for Silence community; sent books to the school in Aspiration; helped Cow John start the first Auroville dairy; and he sent gifts to the Mother, whom he liked very much.

After that, my mother started the community at Far Beach, which is now named Sri Ma, so we lived there. For preschool I went to our beautiful school in Aspiration which was filled with adults from the Ashram and Auroville who were inspired by Mother's love of children. We then went to America for a couple of years, and came back when I was seven and moved to a forest community near Vêrité. During that time our amazing school in Aspiration was shut down and I went to school at Center School but it was really only for really young kids. My mother stayed in Silence and I went to live in the community run by kids at Ami. We were quite sweet kids, aged 6-13. The core was mostly girls: Gazi, Dorle, Tashi, Kesang, Kathrin, Marta, Miriam, Nelly and some others. We were a magnet for other kids to come. Kids such as Sasha, Alok, Giri, Jonas and Isaac came and went – they didn't really live there.

It functioned well. Sometimes adults stayed there to provide security, such as Claire and Nico, and other adults like Johnny and Joan popped in and kept an eye on us, but there were no adults in charge. Some teenagers – Kathrin, Miriam, Marta – herded us around, enforced some rules and made sure we did laundry. We received a generous Pour Tous basket for kids, and we cooked all our food in the community kitchen. We had lots of good times together. When the politics in Auroville didn't always make sense, we made sense as a family. I don't know why they let us run our own community – it was never done before or after! It's not the sort of thing I'd let my own kids do, but we had a great time. It was pretty cool!

We'd go and visit our parents on weekends. It was a time when parents were very busy building this new world, so I don't think they were too sad to not have us there. We kids had more structure by being together than if we'd been living apart.

I felt very comfortable around Tamil culture, and I spent a lot of time in the teashops in the



Binah

village. Bhoomadevi used to take me to Tamil movies in Alankuppam, where I was often the only foreigner. Before going, we'd put powder on our faces, flowers in our hair, a puttu on our foreheads. We also went to village festivals with Johnny. He would put us in a *vandi* [bullock cart] and take us to the fire walking in Edyanchavadi. Our borders with the village kids were permeable. I slept many nights in someone's hut in the village. I got to see a lot, and I feel privileged. Now that I have a Tamil husband, it's good to know the culture a little and be comfortable with it.

I then had the privilege of going to the Ashram school in Delhi, for three years from 5th to 8th grade. It was hard going to a proper Indian school and wearing a uniform, and it was overwhelming being in a dorm with 40 kids. I was the only foreigner, and the kids would come up and say, "You looted us," confusing me with British colonialists. But kids are forgiving, so I eventually made some great friendships. After three years, I could read the Mahabharata and Ramayana in Hindi and I became very comfortable in North Indian culture.

Back in Auroville, we Auroville kids were doing some schooling with Johnny, and at one point, we wanted a proper school and we went to him and said, "We want chairs and desks. We want Math and English." He was surprised that we wanted so much convention, but we were hungering for structure. Being as open-minded as he was, he was willing to give us the form of education we wanted.

By the time I was a teenager, most of the kids in the Ami community naturally went in different directions. Some of us went to Kodaikanal International School, but we would stay in Ami when we came back to Auroville on holidays. Giri is still there in Ami – the longest standing member at this point!

In Kodaikanal, we didn't have to be in charge of laundry or cook meals. We just had to show up to classes and do homework, in this beautiful place. That was so easy after the adult responsibilities we had had. It was fun and I didn't find the rules inhibiting. All the kids who went to Kodai at the same time as me – Alok, Nelly, Stephanie, Isaac, Jonas – enjoyed it very much. It was a privilege for us, coming from Auroville where there was only informal schooling.

I went to the USA for college, and I came back and forth to Auroville a lot during those years. I did a Bachelor degree in Government and History, and then I got a Masters degree in International

Development Management. I then did village development work at an ashram outside Bombay for 18 months. I trained there with World Vision in their 'participatory rural appraisal', a technique which uses alternative methods to spark an internal conversation in villages to analyse current issues and to propose what they want to do next. With this approach, the development workers are merely facilitators for the villagers' analysis, and the village has to take ownership of the process. Only at that point are funds provided. In the past, the UN and many organisations have done development projects where outsiders come into villages, build things and then leave, and then the building or project collapses. The challenge for well-intentioned development work is: How do you make things that won't just be a monolith to failed foreigners?

After my studies, I worked in Washington DC for the Agency for International Development, and then I got a job at the UN Development Programme in New York City. I worked on programmes that aimed to empower local populations to solve their problems. We targeted small informal groups that were not officially on the development radar, such as women's groups, midwives, singing groups. However, the UN is a very big political organisation. If you think working for one government is hard, imagine working for many. Coming from Auroville, I was very idealistic about being a bridge between cultures and making a difference in the world, but I saw a lot of waste and expenditure in these organisations, which blew my mind. The distorted perspective of how we use wealth and power was bizarre to me. So I realised the people who make the biggest difference in the world are those who start from inside their own sphere of influence, with their neighbours. When you work locally, you are also a stakeholder. If you fail in your promises, it has an effect on your own life as well as other people. It is one of the advantages Auroville has, that it is here to stay.

For a while now, my main job has been as a mom. I live in Denver Colorado, and I work at a pre-school, where I support their resources, library and art programme. I get to challenge teachers to think outside the box, and to be supportive and inspirational. That's been fun. I always wanted to come back to Auroville, but I was always trying to figure out the next step, both financially and academically. It was just 'one foot in front of the other' that led me on the path I've been on.

I've been working with AVI USA for a couple of years. I recently became the president and I appreciate that I can work with these wonderful people, some of whom were there in Auroville in the early days. They are full of hope that Auroville can make a difference in the world.

My husband is Sri Lankan Tamil, and he grew up in America. In a lot of ways, we are opposite sides of the same coin. People think he's the Indian one, and I'm the American one, but it's really the other way around – he has more experience with American culture than I do, and vice versa. It's good to know Tamil culture a little bit, but my Tamil friends in America laugh at my spoken Tamil, because I don't know the polite form of speaking, so I often sound rude! As a kid, I always felt that I had so much more to learn about Tamil culture. I always thought we would grow into a deeper understanding of this rich and ancient culture – like I had the opportunity to do with North Indian culture. Perhaps because of our deep ties with the Ashram we seem to have a better grasp of North Indian traditions. We have the informal understanding of the villages around us but I think we need the

formal understanding of Tamil culture from books and scholars, and the *thevarams* (Tamil *bhajans*), in order to start to appreciate how nuanced and soulful our local culture is.

This is my first visit to Auroville after five years. It's so good to be back. When I'm in America, I have a sense that I'm an island that's floated off from the mainland. People want to know who and what I am, but I'm not American really, I'm not Indian, so I have a sense of loss of culture. And everybody who knows my history is here in Auroville. When I come back here, I'm rooted. So there's a deep affinity with so much – I drive past places and remember things, and think, "Oh look at that!"

The quality of life in Auroville is so much higher now, it's incredible. Food was a big issue in the early days, but now everyone's well fed and there are so many restaurants. There's centralised water and electricity – all these things were unimaginable to us then. I'm struck by all the guesthouses being built around the edges of Auroville. The lure of these comforts is strong, and Auroville has become very attractive as a tourist economy. I enjoy having AC when I visit. I know the young me would have made fun of the older me, but the older me loves the comfort!

Yet I question the cost: how do we not just become another town or another tourist economy? How do we push our vision in terms of ecological and spiritual understanding, and new forms of politics and economy, without falling into the lure of having these wonderful modern things, such as fast internet and video in our homes? All of this has a benefit and downside. How do we walk that balance and stay true to ourselves?

I love the existence of things like conflict resolution – we never had that before. There's an attempt to create harmony in so many ways. But here too, as we create more processes to address the needs of a growing Auroville, we tread a fine line between effective groups and an encumbered bureaucracy.

The biggest challenge with a collective governance process is that "the squeaky wheel gets the grease", that is, the people who step forward to lead are generally the extroverts, and not necessarily the most wise or thoughtful people. So how do you create a collective process where you tap into the people who are not talking? I think it's a challenge. There are very good people in Auroville constantly revamping this process with very good intentions. But it may be a challenge to be sure we are tapping into the collective wisdom of the most silent or overlooked people.

I'm impressed by the variety of people in Auroville. I don't know if we always embrace our differences, but we seem to celebrate variety. A big question for me is: how can we live in harmony with our local environment and with India, before taking on the rest of the world? I can't answer that, but my belief coming from development work is that you start from the inside out, rather than the outside in.

Coming back, I'm reminded of all the good will and love I received when I wandered Auroville as a child: all the people who parented me, fed me, gave me good advice, tucked me in at night and hugged me. I probably ate and/or slept in almost every house in the greenbelt. It's great I can revel in all these people and places again. And it's not that I don't see all the politics and cynicism, it's just that I don't care about it. It's like a parent-child relationship – you get to a point where you look at your mom and think, "Thank you for giving me life", and all the other things don't matter so much. You become an adult and take ownership of your life, and you write your own story. My story is that I grew up in an incredibly magical place, where I got to do the wildest things. I have so many great stories to tell my kids, and they're blown away because their lives are relatively mundane.

I'm a child of this place so it will always be my home and I will spend time here in the future. My kids have been a few times, and I can imagine this place will draw them back. When I see my friends and former teachers who have stuck with Auroville through the years, I see a lot of determination, passion and deep-seated devotion, and I think, "Auroville will do great things". When I sit in the Matrimandir meditation chamber, I think "Wow, we created something special here." I remember thinking it would always be a construction site.

When I'm in America and I think of Auroville, I think of the smells and sounds, such as the brain fever bird at night, and the imam in the village singing the morning prayers in his beautiful voice. I also think of that line in one of Johnny's songs from a play about Tomorrowville: "It's not just a place, it's a state of mind!"

Lesley



Binah, AuroJina, Aruna and Jonas taken by Jan

Revisioning Auroville's economy

continued from page 2

"It's often about small daily choices," says Isha, "recognising when something 'negative' is happening and deciding not to go that way. We don't have to enable access to everything within Auroville itself."

How will it be paid for?

But a question remains. Many of these experiments, particularly the comprehensive prosperity packages, will cost money. At present, City Services covers the basic budgets of our services but cannot provide funds for the development of the services or for setting up new ones. Meanwhile, we hear frequent reports that the Auroville economy is in trouble. So how will they be paid for?

There are a number of options. Nicole, who is on the Budget Coordination Committee, suggests we should require non-participating residents to pay at the very least the true cost of what is provided to them by the community. She points out that at least Rs 10,000/- a month per person is the monetary value of what we all enjoy here, if we consider what is being supported and created both by our central economy and by Aurovilians personally. Mother, Nicole clarifies, saw three ways in which Aurovilians would contribute, "work, kind or money". Shouldn't residents who do not work for the collective contribute very meaningfully in money? Shouldn't Rs 10,000/- be also the minimum monthly contribution from commercial unit holders to City Services, rather than the Rs 3,150 they are asked for at present, if running a unit is their only contribution to Auroville? At present, she says, we see a mushrooming of new units and activities that contribute very little to the collective economy. Moreover, the contribution of units should be based upon turnover and not, as at present, on profit.

Social media and crowd-funding are also options to raise capital for projects vetted by the BCC, FAMC or Board of Services.

Manohar, like several others in the community, makes a more radical proposal. He suggests that, after deducting all possible legitimate and documented expenses for running an Auroville commercial unit, the totality of its net income should go to Auroville, not merely one third or less as is happening at present. "In this way, the community would have more funds available for a general increase in service maintenance and for the many other needs for which we

constantly have to fundraise." In fact, this was agreed to at the time the Unity Fund (Auroville's financial umbrella) was created but it has never been acted upon.

Jocelyn concurs with this suggestion. "I don't see any reason why everything should not go into the common pot and get re-distributed according to needs. When we started the first Auroville commercial unit, *Aurocreation*, we gave everything we earned to the community because it was Auroville's money. When we needed money we asked for it, and we always got it. This is what happens in the Ashram and I think that is how Mother wanted our units to function – give everything and you will be provided for. And it worked."

Nobody has any illusions that changing the way our present economy functions will be easy. Certain attitudes and assumptions about what works – or doesn't work – have become deeply embedded over the years. Some of the solutions mentioned here may be questionable and based on assumptions about the willingness of the community to change. Generalizations, for example that commercial unit holders are primarily interested in enriching themselves rather than in contributing to the collectivity, are also clearly unhelpful in creating a unified approach to revisioning our economy.

The key, as one of the participants put it, is attitudinal change. "We have to have the consciousness that we are all working for the same goal, even if it is in different ways. If we all came here knowing that everything we did would be service, that all we are asked to do is to give, it would be a different place."

"Somewhere we have to ground Her dream on this planet," says another. "We have to ground Her truth somewhere, even if there are only a hundred of us doing it. We should not just be accommodating all these different tendencies in human nature."

"What Auroville can uniquely give us, what we can give each other," concludes Nicole, "is this sense of having the needs that enable our inner growth met and catered for with a psychic attitude. Mother gave a model of a society for Auroville that is based on work and services and specifically not on commercial exchanges between Aurovilians. We are probably the only place on earth where this is given to us as the way forward and, as She says, it is an experiment. We must give ourselves the means to come closer to it."

Edited by Alan

FARMING

Farming in Auroville – a round table discussion

continued from page 3

Bindu: We started in Auroville with a lot of western farmers but now we have a lot of local people farming in Auroville and they have a rather different approach to farming.

Tomas: They say their father and grandfather farmed land, but this was not professional farming: it was just growing a few basic crops for the family. This is why, once they get a piece of land in Auroville, they are stuck: they have no idea about investment or what organic farming really involves. In Holland, if I want to become a farmer I have to go through a four-year rigorous training and only then am I allowed to start a farm. Farming is a profession; it's not just putting a few seeds in the ground. We have to take it more seriously and abandon this idea that anybody can farm.

Bindu: Are there training programmes available at present in Auroville? Because it is not just learning about farming techniques. Some of the local farmers don't have the ability to put down a proper proposal or to have a vision of what they could achieve in the next 5, 10 or 15 years. This is where support groups for the individual farmers could be useful.

Tomas: At the moment, there are no training programmes running.

Lucas: When I was in the Farm Group, we never made it a very formalized thing. We said let all of the young apprentices be on a farm and, simultaneously, I developed a few lectures. But I don't think formalization of a training programme is necessarily the answer as people might simply attend the lectures to tick the boxes.

When I was still in Farm Group meetings I had the impression that we made it very tough for someone to take up the stewardship of an Auroville farm. I didn't see the reason for this because we need stewards for the land. I don't see a quick solution for improving training, but if there are a few people who really want to go for farming I would give them whatever they need, including financial support, to help them make a success of it.

Bindu: What about the future? Should we be prioritising acquiring good agricultural land for Auroville?

Vivek: At present, we have 365 acres of farmland in the Farm Group. Do we need more here? The current situation is that we can grow more on this land, but we can't distribute it. So perhaps it is better to have farmland somewhere else where we can produce things that people like to eat but which we cannot produce here. The other problem we have is that some of our farmland is in small parcels, and you can't do much with just one or two acres of land. We need to consolidate, otherwise we will have all this land but we won't have the human resources to do anything with it.

Lucas: We keep going back to the fact that we don't have enough people who are interested in farming, or willing to invest in farming.

Ulli: What I am picking up here is there are certain things which we did for the past 30 or 40 years which are not viable anymore because of the changed labour situation, our inability to buy all the land etc., so we need to reassess our approach. We need to secure our food supply but that doesn't mean it has to happen here or that we have to own all the farms where our food is grown. It might also be an option to partner with other organizations who have similar understandings about the need for healthy food, because awareness of this is increasing in India. Can we start looking at alternatives like this, or acquiring good farmland elsewhere?

Tomas: I agree that we should examine, re-examine and keep examining our approach to farming in Auroville because the times are changing and reality is changing. For me, partnering with local farmers has a lot to do with connecting to the bioregion and helping make it more green, healthy, both for the people and the environment. But, at the same time we should develop our own agriculture to the best of our ability, which means looking at it critically and seeing where and how we can improve.

Edited by Alan

Evaluating the Selection Process



The new members of the Funds and Assets Management Committee. From left: Yuval, Chandresh, Lyle, Stephanie, Bindu, Chali, Ulli, Amy and Prabhu.

On three days in October, replacement members for the Working Committee (2) and Auroville Council (4) were selected, as well as a complete new Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) of 9 people.

The community had, in July, nominated approximately 700 Aurovilians, most of whom however declared no interest or availability. As the process unfolded the list narrowed down to 78 names. Some wished to serve on one of the committees, others just wanted to participate in the selection process. Jointly they took the decision about who would serve on which committee.

The 3-day process had been preceded by the work of the Temporary Feedback Review Committee, which had studied all feedback given on proposed candidates. It concluded that nobody was to be disqualified.

The process used some of the Stewardship tools that Dr. Monica Sharma has introduced to the community. Nevertheless, views widely differed on what went well and what didn't. Praise was given to the good organization of the event by a group of tireless volunteers. Some people were inspired by an exercise where the participants had to reflect on the qualities of their psychic being in the modes of "being" and "doing," and then realize, in the second part of the exercise, that each of us have a role to play in our society. Listening to the experience of individuals who are currently serving in the working groups was a humbling process for some, when they realized

how selfless and dedicated all the people were. Also the process of selecting was appreciated, where one first expressed one's individual choice and afterwards discussed in a group the best composition of each working group. Here one could see the emergence of collective wisdom.

As always, there was also criticism. Space had not been given to the individuals to express why they wanted to serve in a working group, what their preferences were, and what were their motivations, skills and strengths. The profiles of the participants willing to serve had been posted on a wall, but they did not clearly give out this information.

Another issue was due to an omission in the new FAMC policy. No thought had been given to the transition between the old FAMC and the new. This problem was luckily solved as some outgoing members were selected to serve on the new FAMC. But a problem arose when someone who had already served for six years in the old FAMC, was again chosen to serve on the new, though both the old and the new FAMC mandate limit the term of office to two terms of three years each. At the moment this issue goes to press, this matter is being studied by the Auroville Council, which is also looking into the question if the six-year limit should also be applicable to someone who has been serving that period in more than one working group.

Bindu and Carel

For more information on the participatory selection process see *AVtoday* # 318, January 2016.

THE LANDS

Land acquisition – The views of the Land Board: a clarification

In the article "Acquiring and protecting the lands – the views of the Land Board" which appeared in the October 2016 issue of *Auroville Today*, reference was made to a statement from the Land Board to the Auroville International Centres that Auroville can develop and build the city for the next 10 years before there would be any standstill caused by non-ownership of a plot of land in the city area.

This statement has been misunderstood by some people in the sense that the Land Board would not be committed to acquiring the lands for the city area. Consolidation of all lands in the city area at reasonable prices remains the prime objective of the Land Board and the continued support from all donors towards land purchase remains essential for the manifestation of The Mother's City.

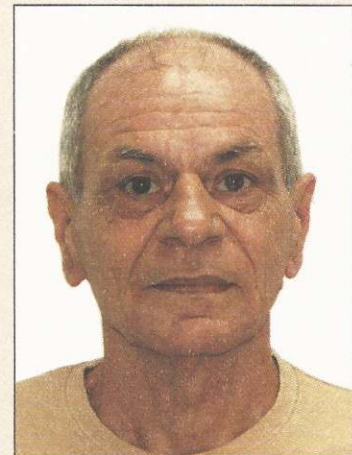
PASSING

Patrick Joubert

On Friday, September 30th, long-term Aurovillian Patrick Joubert left his body at his home in Dana in the presence of his partner Marie Angèle and daughter Emma after a battle with cancer. He was 63.

Hailing from France, Patrick came to Auroville in 1975. For almost thirty years he has been living with his family in Dana, where he planted a small tropical dry evergreen forest, lovingly cultivating it through the years.

On the afternoon of Monday 3 October, Patrick's body was buried in Dana. Family and friends had arranged for a peaceful setting in the forest he had cared for so dearly.



The practice of Iyengar's yoga: Tatiana's journey

I left hatha yoga classes because of pain. I was doing (or rather, attempting) one of the most basic poses of hatha yoga, *ardha-mukha-svana-asana* (downward facing dog), and I was in pain. My neck and shoulder muscles were silently screaming at this torture. And worst of all, instead of the graceful "V" that all other students were making with their bodies, my lower back was humped up, more like a cat arching than a dog stretching its back. "You have no feeling for this pose," said my then yoga-teacher unfeelingly and walked away, leaving me to my misery. I walked out of that Iyengar yoga class in Pitanga and never returned to one for almost a decade.

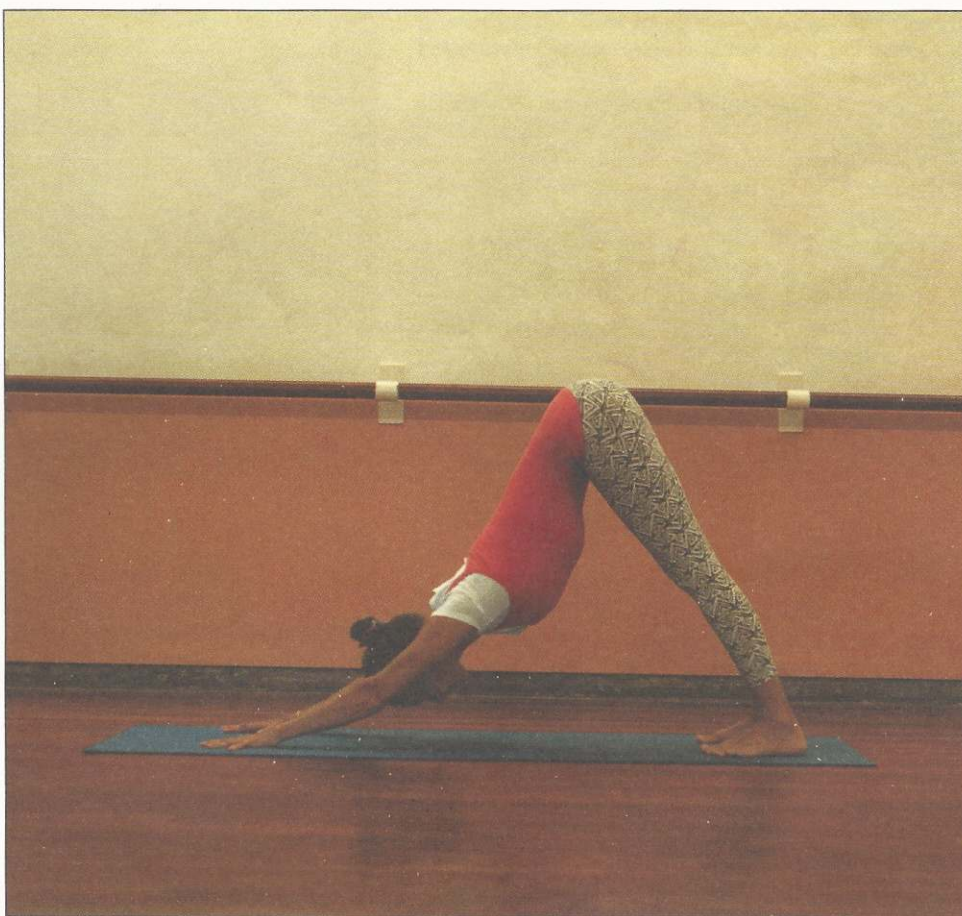
I came back to yoga because of pain. Yet another bike injury (the bane of our life here in Auroville) had resulted in chronic pain in my lower back. And someone told me that there was a new yoga teacher, Tatiana, who held individual consultations for people with lower back pain. I sought her out but learnt that due to pressure of work, she no longer worked with people one-on-one. She asked me to join one of her beginner's classes, and I reluctantly agreed, resigning myself to one and a half hours of misery.

And yes, of course, minutes into the class came that dreaded pose *ardha-mukha-svana-asana*. "Arms straight, legs straight, rotate your upper arms from inside out, and from the arms and legs, pull your pelvis up," reeled out Tatiana, striding down the rows of seasoned practitioners, until she came to me and stopped. I think my knotted face and scrunched neck muscles told her more than I could have explained verbally. My arms were not straight – my elbows jutted out – but at least, that way there was no pain in the arms. "Put your hands further out," she said, "and grab the edges of the mat." That simple step of extending my arms further out and widening the gap more than shoulder-width did wonders: I was no longer in pain, and my back, if not fully straight, was not so obviously humped either.

After that experience, I faithfully returned to Tatiana's beginner classes, twice a week. I haven't yet mastered the dog-pose, but at least now I know where to start my journey towards that full mastery of an asana. And, a few hours of yoga with Tatiana each week ensures that I don't experience back pain on a daily basis.

It turned out that it was back pain that brought Tatiana to hatha yoga. As a young mother in Moscow, due to injuries suffered in childhood, possibly exacerbated with childbirth, Tatiana had severe back pain. The doctor she consulted, however, shared with her a startling insight: he said that back pain is the price that the human species has had to pay for evolution. Biologically speaking, the geometrical frame of our body has still not fully evolved to support the heaviness of our head to ensure that we can stand and walk upright. So unless one consciously works to support the spine, back pain is inevitable for most.

That insight led to Tatiana to start working with her body. An avid reader, one of the first books Tatiana picked up as an aid in her quest was B. K. S. Iyengar's classic volume *Yoga Dipika* or *Light on Yoga*, translated into Russian. According to Tatiana, since the turn of the nineteenth century there was an opening in Russia to understand the wisdom of India from the perspectives of science and psychology. And good translations of the *Rig Veda*, the *Upanishads*, and other Indian spiritual



Tatiana doing the *ardha-mukha-svana-asana* (downward facing dog) pose

literature were easily available in Imperial Russia.

Under the communist regime, hatha yoga was a punishable offence, but a few people practiced it in secret, and the tradition never died out. At the end of the 1980s, the situation started to gradually change. Thanks to the support of several academics and scientists, yoga came out from underground. The Russian Ministry of Health sent a psychologist, Elena Olegovna Fedotova, to India to study altered states of consciousness. Elena travelled widely to different ashrams and yoga schools. But she was most highly impressed by B.K.S. Iyengar, whom she subsequently invited to Russia in 1989 for the first Conference on Yoga. The event marked a new era in Russia. Yoga devotees could at last meet openly, and the tradition of Iyengar Yoga was planted in Russian soil.



Tatiana

once a week at the hatha yoga center in Moscow. But she studied and practiced on a daily basis at home, diligently following the sequential guidance of asanas offered in *Yoga Dipika*. At that time, she was married to a man who encouraged her in her quest, for he, like her, was attracted to the mystic. Her ex-husband, in due course, became the first certified *Astanga Vinyasa* yoga teacher in Russia.

Tatiana's journey as a yoga-teacher began in 1998 as a substitute-teacher, but soon thereafter she started offering her own classes at a yoga centre in Moscow. "The first class that I taught happened to be on Guru-ji's (B. K. S. Iyengar) birthday," says

Tatiana, smiling at the synchronicity. "And I," she continues, "witnessed the spread of Iyengar yoga in Russia. Yoga classes moved out from being offered off-hours in school gymnasiums to the yoga centres and health care centres that were mushrooming everywhere in the country. And soon after, *Astanga Vinyasa* yoga became popular as well, with my husband being part of that movement!" It is interesting to note that, unlike the USA, where hatha yoga swiftly became a fad with the multiplication of new styles, in Russia there was a reverence for and an adherence to these traditional schools of yoga.

As a child growing up in the beautiful coastal city of Sochi on the Black Sea and as an adult living in cosmopolitan Moscow, Tatiana never felt the need to travel internationally. It was her pursuit of Iyengar Yoga that brought her to India in 2003 to the classes at Yoga Institute in Pune. Subsequently, she came each year to India to learn, to deepen her practice and work through the various levels of certification of yoga *asanas* as well as *pranayama*.

It was in 2004 that she came to Auroville on a chance visit, accompanying other Russian yoga-practitioner friends. "I had no expectations about Auroville, which was good," she reminisces. "I had already come across Sri Aurobindo's writings in Russia, but they did not make much sense to me. It was not Sri Aurobindo's work per se but, as I found out much later, the early translations were very poor."

About her first impressions of Auroville, she says: "There were two clear thoughts in my head. The first was, 'What is going on here?' The second, 'I want to live here'. And when I returned to Moscow, I understood for the first time in my life what it meant to be homesick. I was homesick for Auroville."

The ensuing years saw Tatiana caught up in the throes of transformational life-changes. Her classes were increasingly popular, but she admits that she was not emotionally mature enough to handle the added responsibilities of an increased class size. "People take yoga classes for different reasons. Only a few are dedicated enough to take the practice of *asana* to the true depths of yoga – the harmony of the body and the mind, the union of the personal with the transpersonal," says she.

"And even as I was being appreciated by my students for my Iyengar Yoga classes, at home my husband, by now a celebrated *Astanga Vinyasa* yoga teacher in Russia, was convinced that I was on the wrong path. The conflict was hard to bear."

So in 2007, after separating from her husband, Tatiana along with her teenaged son joined Auroville. "It was a smooth transition, which gave me the reassurance that I had made the right choice," she says about her entry process.

Gala, another Russian yoga teacher, introduced her to Andrea who was then managing Pitanga. "I was so shy at that meeting, I was totally terrified of taking classes in English for I barely spoke the language. Andrea wanted me to offer both yoga and *pranayama*, but I started only with yoga classes – I could not have explained the more esoteric details of *pranayama* in English back then. Even the yoga classes were challenging – I would spend 10 minutes before each class focusing on my breathing just to calm my nerves."

"I was just so insecure about teaching in this foreign language and having the vocabulary to explain all the details. But my students were kind and patient. I started teaching as a guest. When I came back on an entry visa, at the request of my students, within three days of my permanent arrival in Auroville, I was back in Pitanga teaching yoga."

"To me, teaching means allowing the students to learn for themselves. They have to experiment with the instructions that I give. Sure, it would be easy to be a popular teacher by not being strict in disciplining the students, either in their practice or in their use of the props. But that's not the point. Yoga is not just about gaining flexibility and feeling good. Yoga is about *sadhana*, a committed discipline to work on oneself for individual change and transformation. And transformation has to be embodied in the body. Why speak about cellular transformation when our own experience is that cells follow repetitive patterns, lose their resilience, and eventually die? But we know from biology that the cells of the organs renew themselves perennially, and they follow well-established paths that are already there due to unconscious habits. So the new cells continue to exhibit diseased patterns. But if we try with a regular and conscious yoga practice to change our muscles and align our skeletal frame, then we begin to give new information to the cells. We start to inculcate new habits for the body to follow. And this practice can be taken quite deep."

"More than workshops, I like teaching regular classes, for then I can see the progress the students make. Also, each person is different; each body that is trying to do the *asana* that I have just demonstrated allows me to understand more about the structure and the biology of the human body. I gain an insight into the working of my own body and with this the knowledge to help others."

Tatiana is not everyone's choice for a teacher. Some of my friends dislike the stern flow of instructions that Tatiana rolls out in her Russian-accented English and the unique vocabulary of Iyengar yoga, which not only refers to the names of the muscles but also has developed terms for different parts of the body. "Neck of the big toe down, move your inner ankle in to lift up the inner arch of your foot," would be a typical example of Tatiana trying to get her students to stand straight. But listening closely to her instructions, and aided by demonstrations or a physical tap from Tatiana, I have started to be able to feel and work with parts of my body that I could not consciously move before.

Tatiana concludes, "The mind is constantly tugged by different forces, but when it gives up and becomes silent, clarity comes. When I am troubled and don't know what to do, I simply practise, and then the answers come. For me, Iyengar Yoga is a complete yoga that allows one to access all the 8 limbs of yoga, leading to *Samadhi* (deep spiritual trance) that Patanjali speaks of. You only have to practise!"

Bindu

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