

Auroville Today

NOVEMBER 2019, No.364

Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

The employees of Auroville

Across more than one issue, *Auroville Today* aims to highlight our employees and their valuable contributions to Auroville's daily functioning. From accountants to gardeners, village social workers to office workers, we foreground their work, their lives, and their thoughts on Auroville and their engagement with the place.

They work in our gardens, our homes, our services and units, in our schools and health centres, at the Town Hall, at Matrimandir. Yet while, in many ways, they are the engine house of Auroville, the people who keep it running, they are also often "invisible". They do not feature in the community's brochures, most visiting journalists and researchers do not write about them, they are not consulted when important decisions are taken about the community's future, and most Aurovilians know so little about them: about their lives, their hopes, their challenges. We don't even know how many there are.

The last comprehensive survey of workers in Auroville was done in 2000. In that year there were 4 179 employees and 3 709 of these were surveyed, of whom 2 971 were permanent employees and 738 were contract workers. Since then, apart from a more limited survey of institutional employees in commercial units in December, 2016, nobody has attempted to find out how many people come to work in Auroville every day. The figure of 5,000 has been banded about for years, but nobody really knows.

The 2000 survey did, however, yield some interesting findings, many of which are still very relevant today, according to Harini Sampathkumar of Auroville's Social Research Centre (SRC). There was a high level of job satisfaction (around 70%) and safety and cleanliness in the workplace and the employer/employee relationship were also rated very highly. No doubt this explains why 80% of respondents said that being employed in Auroville was looked upon as a good thing in the surrounding villages. However, employees' feelings about their salary were not so positive.

In the survey, 28% of them felt their wages were 'poor', and 52% only 'fair'. "This means they felt the wages are not good, but they didn't want to say it negatively," explains Harini. "If you ask them today they will definitely say the wages are not good, even though they tend to compare Auroville wages with Pondicherry where the daily rate may be higher, but where there is no holiday pay or bonuses and, often, little job security."

Financial pressure

In fact, when asked what she considers is the biggest concern of Auroville workers today, she is forthright: "The biggest challenge by far, 99.99%, is financial. And this is true not only of Auroville workers, but also of the villages today and also of a large cross-section of the residents of Auroville. Many of the people are living on the edge because they are in debt, some heavily. In 2000 life was still manageable, now it is a continual strain."

Why?

Harini thinks there are a number of factors. One is the increasing influence of globalisation and the consumer culture that accompanies this. "You see it on the television and definitely want to be part of that; to have a motorcycle, a car, a cell phone, etc. It's a huge pressure to go immediately from the bullock cart to the rocket, skipping the steps in between, and hence you end up taking loans for a lifestyle you cannot afford."

Another factor is the privatisation of education and healthcare. Most Auroville workers now send their children to private schools or colleges or, when it comes to healthcare, choose expensive private hospitals and doctors rather than free government facilities, because of the belief that when you pay for it, you get a better product.

"This is not true," says Harini. "JIPMER, the government hospital near Auroville, has some of the best doctors and facilities in India, while many of the private engineering colleges that have



Employees, children and Aurovilians at Auroville Sangamam, 2018

sprouted up everywhere are third-rate institutions."

Harini points out that the aspirations of many Auroville employees for their children are unrealistic. "Many of our employees, those who work in the forests, homes, etc., are not even first generation literates (in the 2000 survey, of all the workers surveyed 25% were illiterate and most of the others had less than a 10th standard education). They believe that if they can get their son or daughter into a college, after graduation he or she will be automatically earning one lakh a month in an IT firm in Chennai. But this happens in only a few cases – many remain unemployed and unemployable because of the poor training they have received, or because they don't want to leave home to take their chance in the bigger cities.

"But their parents have either sold land or have taken a loan from the bank or from private money lenders to pay for this education, and these loans have to be repaid. If the children can't get a high paying job, which is the case almost all the time, the parents fall into a debt cycle from which they cannot come out."

And then, of course, there are the marriages and other expensive social obligations. Harini mentions her household help who lives very simply. The only working member of her family, she doesn't have electricity or gas in her home, yet she ran up a huge three lakhs debt in getting her two daughters married. All of her life she will not be able to repay this from her work income. And this is not an exceptional case. A lot of our workers are living on a knife edge, under extreme financial stress, due to their increased vulnerability. I feel strongly that Auroville has a role to play here. I don't know how, but for many individuals there's something bubbling away and the slightest thing can make it go up in flames."

Limited promotion possibilities?

In the 2000 survey, only about 5% of employees described their promotion possibilities and opportunities for further learning on the job as 'good'. Could Auroville do more to provide in-service training for those from the local area to help them acquire new skills and a better salary?

Harini is doubtful. She points out that we have different levels of workers. "We have manual workers but what can they get promoted to? Perhaps after years of experience they will supervise three or four other workers but basically they will still be a mason or a gardener. Then we have

the semi-skilled people, like tailors. They may end up doing quality control in a factory but this is not a big promotion. A tailor does not become a designer. In this sense, cottage industries – which are the majority of our commercial units – do not provide much scope for promotion.

"In a bigger unit you are looking at a different skill set. In Auroville, no more than 30 units will require professional managerial skills, and the Aurovilians who are running them now will not spend time and money in training managers, in bringing them up through the ranks, they will just hire them from outside. Maybe now the younger generation has that capacity, but they are still young and need to gain experience elsewhere before coming back to manage a big Auroville unit."

Understanding the deeper purpose

How well do our employees understand the deeper purpose of Auroville? Harini feels that in the early years when people from the village were coming and working on the land with Aurovilians they understood Auroville better than today, "not in words, but in something else. They were sharing our ragi porridge, our simple living, our hardship and our passion; so they could get 'it' in another way that was beyond words. The spark was there.

"In fact, this is in line with what Mother said when answering a question about how the Aurovilians should relate to the local villagers. She said that the best way would be education by example: that when they are closely mixing in the life and work of Aurovilians, they not only would get influenced by it and start changing, but also start becoming curious and asking questions. And that is when they could be told more about the purpose of this place.

"But that spark died between that generation and the next generation, because Auroville was developing and there was no longer any time to spend together like this."

In fact, the 2000 survey showed that Auroville employees, most of whom were second generation, understood very little about the deeper purpose of Auroville. For most of them, Auroville was simply a place that offered job opportunities. Harini doesn't think this has changed. "If you ask them about this today, at most you will receive a pat reply that Auroville is about human unity."

The 2000 survey's conclusion was clear on what needed to happen: "Information

dissemination about Auroville, on its ideals and its charter and exposure to Auroville not just through their work situation, should be an active role for the Auroville community to undertake."

A paradigm shift needed

So why has this not happened? Is it something to do with the way we view employees? Although some have become Aurovilians, is our relationship primarily instrumental – are they seen merely as a means of getting certain things done, a house cleaned, a unit producing more products – rather than something deeper? Is there a need for a major paradigm shift: to consider Auroville's employees as collaborators in the Auroville experiment rather than people who just service it?

Harini has no doubts about this.

"I believe very deeply that we have to see them as collaborators, because this is to collaborate with the vision of this experiment." But she is aware that this will not be easy.

"It means, to begin with, listening more and therefore learning more. But many of us don't want to know too much about other's lives, it's a headache. Then there is fear: if seen as collaborators, they are our equals and the terms of the relationship will change. This is why sometimes I am doubtful about this happening soon. I feel we have to get bangs on the heads for people to get together. Collaboration happens effectively when there is adversity.

"When the Thane cyclone happened I thought it would be a turning point regarding strengthening the relationship both among the Aurovilians and between the Aurovilians and the workers. But we missed that bus."

So are there one or two things we can do now to start building a different relationship with our employees?

"In two words, 'Be nice'. You never know what is happening in their lives, what have been the circumstances that morning before they come to you for work at eight o'clock. Somebody destroyed their fence or stole something, maybe a sudden death in the family, but you won't know unless you ask. If you close yourself, there is no opportunity for the entry of that other life. And try not to make overbearing judgments. If an employee falls ill, and we ask 'Did you go to a doctor?' and they say 'We went to a faith healer', don't rub-bish this. It's their reality; it's what they believe in, so respect that. The problem is we think we know. Actually nobody does, but we are in a superior position and hence we think we know."

But Harini believes there is a possibility for a deeper learning and exchange to happen. She has often been asked to address groups of employees who visit Matrimandir. "Just organising such a visit is a good beginning. It's a way of saying that Auroville is not just a workplace where people work and get paid. I tell them, 'You are born free, alone, and when you die, you die alone. But from the moment you start breathing, your socialisation process is framing you into what you think you are. But your contact with the Divine is unique. So can you spend some time here for the next half an hour to experience that your soul is the true you, and the Divine is the Divine and there is nobody else in between. Can you do that?' And they get it. It makes it meaningful for them."

Harini also mentions something else. "In the end, people know that from the foreigners in Auroville there is no falseness. They may be rude sometimes, but they are honest and truthful: foreigners don't have to fear 'losing face' which, being a heavy Asian trait, is something our villagers recognize well. This is something villagers appreciate, and this is something we can build upon."

Alan

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Exploring the freedom to learn

Jagadeshwari hails from Annal Nagar, a small village on the northern side of Auroville, where she works as an administrator and facilitator in Thamarai after-school (an Auroville outreach project). She is part of the first generation in her village to gain a university education and to move into professional employment.

Her education began conventionally, attending nearby Tamil-medium government schools. But in 11th standard, her parents permitted her to stay in a hostel in Pondicherry to complete her two final years of high school in the city – allowing Jagadeshwari an unusual degree of freedom for a girl from her village background. “At that time, I felt sick travelling by bus, so my parents told me, ‘You can enjoy this different life’. It was a new experience. I learnt so many things, I enjoyed it a lot, and I spent time with my besties.”

Jagadeshwari then did a bachelor degree in computer engineering. While she remains unimpressed by the educational standard – “I didn’t learn much” – she asserts that the most valuable learning was her exposure to many different kinds of people. “It gave me a lot of experience in showing me the kind of people I will face in the future, the different kinds of problems.”

She then commenced a one-year internship in a government department, working as a computer operator. Although the small stipend meant she could not contribute financially to her family as she’d hoped, Jagadeshwari is grateful that her parents gave her the “freedom to learn many things” during her internship.

Two and a half years ago, Auroville outreach project Thamarai opened an after-school centre in Annainagar. Jagadeshwari began working there in the evenings, helping to facilitate the children’s homework, teaching computer and English, and participating in activities such as silambam and martial art.

By this time, Jagadeshwari had gained a day job in a project centre in Pondicherry. But she soon developed an eye problem. “I could not see the computer screen, my tears were coming. There was pressure on my eyes, irritation and itching. I was scared. The hospital said ‘wear the glasses’, but the glasses were not good for

my eyesight. My boss gave a lot of pressure, so after six months, I just resigned. Then Bridget offered me a full-time job in Thamarai in May 2018, and I began work as an administrator as well as a facilitator.”

Jagadeshwari says the main challenge of the Thamarai job is trying to get the villagers more involved with the project. “We try to communicate with the village people, and one by one they are starting to visit. When we started Thamarai in our village, we needed to employ local facilitators, but only six girls came for the job, no boys. Bridget said we need gender balance, but there is no boy coming from my village.”

Jagadeshwari describes Thamarai as “a bridge between Auroville and my village,” and she points to its “values-based treatment”. “Thamarai stands for full potential and well-being. They treat people like that. I didn’t see that anywhere else. Here, I feel equal. In Auroville, I never feel caste is an issue. There’s no hierarchy. That’s why I feel this is my second home. I feel more free.”

And what are her impressions of Auroville? “I can feel like a free bird, and feel the peace and harmony. I can explore myself here. I can see this is my learning place, for everyone. Before, I didn’t speak much English. Now I have international friends. Here, I can meet people who have come alone from other places, and explored themselves in Auroville and made new friends. A few times I went into the Matrimandir inner chamber. That connected to my heart. That’s my progress, through Auroville and Thamarai.”

And how does working in Thamarai compare to working ‘outside’? “Here, if I have any problem, I can discuss with Bridget, and she will give a good solution. She is a good guide for us. So I don’t feel stress. I feel pressure in those outside companies. They’re just expecting



Jagadeshwari

my work. They’re not thinking about health. Their mindset is to complete the work.”

While most people in her village work in Auroville, Jagadeshwari points out how “the mentality is different” between the two places. “In Auroville, I can move about alone, and stay alone, but in my village, my parents won’t allow it. It’s a cultural barrier. In my village, my parents have to accompany me everywhere, because of the culture.”

Jagadeshwari has filled the role of secretary of her village women’s group for some time, and more recently undertook Monica Sharma’s leadership training, doing both the Tamil and English versions. “I learned what my values are, what I stand for – I stand for courage, harmony and care – and what I want to give to my village and society. I learned the steps to do a project. It helped me a lot, personally and professionally.”

Following the leadership training, Jagadeshwari implemented a waste management project in her village. She mobilised people to undertake a village clean-up, and has approached the government to provide segregated waste bins. “Before, I didn’t think about where I was throwing waste, or about what I’m using and how to segregate. I would eat and throw! Through Thamarai and Auroville I learnt how to segregate, reuse and do waste management. And now, if someone throws something, I take it and put it in the waste bin. My cousins tease me: ‘See, it’s a clean India! Incredible India!’ But I like to do that job.”

Last year, through Thamarai, Jagadeshwari was selected to participate in a 22-day River Journey programme, which involved trekking in the Himalayas with ten other youths from across India. She had never travelled beyond Bangalore before that. “That was the best moment in my life! I didn’t know if I would manage, and I was afraid to mingle, because there is a language barrier. But somehow I managed... It was my first time for mountain travel. I’m the first girl in my village to go to the Himalayas. I feel very happy! I can still see it.”

For the long-term, Jagadeshwari would like to continue working in Auroville, but says that her future depends on her parents’ choice of a husband for her. She hopes to continue educating children in a way that diverges from conventional forms of education. “That education system is just mugging up [learning by rote] and regurgitating. I will teach in a different way, in a way that’s easy to understand. I will explain about the world, the problems they will face, and how always to be happy. I will be a good guide.”

Lesley

A life with numbers and beyond

It’s generally Auroville’s attractive products or tangible outputs that have gained the most attention for the community’s units and services over the years. Yet behind the visible achievements are the often-overlooked people in units and services who provide the backbone to support the success. And perhaps most overlooked of all are accountants.

Subbu has been working for Auroville for the last 14 years. He’s best known for his long-standing work for Auroville Village Action Trust (AVAT) – where he is now Director of Finances – and the Sustainable Livelihood Institute, where he is Executive Director. Perhaps less known is his consultation work for many of Auroville’s services and units, for which he has established new and improved accounting systems.

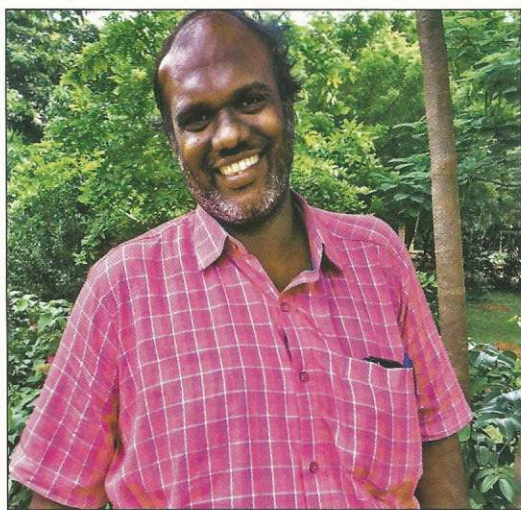
Growing up in Pondicherry, Subbu’s career direction was determined early in life. “I shared my father’s wish to study chartered accountancy,” he recounts. “We were living in the centre of Pondy in a big joint-family house; more than 42 people were there. People say we were all brilliant in maths. My older siblings all studied hard and migrated to Canada and UK, where they work as accountants.”

After graduating with his Bachelor of Commerce degree, Subbu started studying chartered accountancy. But when his father died suddenly from a heart attack at the age of 49, his plans were interrupted. “My mother asked me to close his business and I attended to that. A lot of people cheated us and did not repay us properly. I could not finish the CA exam, and my mother asked me to go for a job.”

Subbu’s launch into the working world in a Pondicherry company was something of a baptism of fire. “I was given 300 ledgers, and I had to tally the balance. It took me one month. I did it all manually, so I learned a lot.”

He was mentored there by a kind boss, who suggested that Subbu should meet Auroville’s Alain Bernard. The December 2004 tsunami had just taken place, and Subbu was invited to come on board as the accountant for Auroville’s Tsunami Relief project, a project under AVAT. He soon became AVAT’s chief accountant, and a few years later, also took on the same role for the Sustainable Livelihood Institute. He was eventually promoted into executive roles in both places.

Over time, various Auroville services and



Subbu

units have invited him to overhaul their accounting systems. He has established systems and trained accountants for City Services, SEDAB, Pitchandikulam, Bread & Chocolate, the Land Board, and the Government of India grants for Auroville’s 50th birthday. He is currently implementing a new system for the Housing group.

Subbu spends his working days moving between different Auroville services and units, implementing and overseeing the systems he has installed. “I have a big team – 11 people in different units. I can create accounting systems easily. But training new people for each unit takes six months. We have to explain accounting in a certain way, which only I can do. I have to attend each unit every day until the work comes up to my satisfaction.” Subbu recruits commerce graduates as new trainees, and he generally sources them from Reach for the Stars – Auroville’s initiative that funds talented village students to attend college. “The Reach for the Stars candidates know some English. They are already trained by Stephanie and have some experience in Auroville projects.”

Subbu claims that Auroville is still learning about good accounting systems and the

importance of maintaining them. “80% are good, SAIER is very good, but the remaining units need to improve. The problem is that they want to pay only a minimal amount for accounting. And often the older accountants are doing accounts like a data entry job only.”

He argues for the need to tailor accounting systems to each unit. “We should not standardise. I look at the unit, the trust and the management, at the overall system and the audit requirements, in order to see how they should develop their accounting. For example, a micro-finance institution needs to make different accounting reports from a unit.”

He is currently setting up a system in Housing, which requires cross-checking data from the last eight years, which is then entered into the new system. “It will take three months at least. The whole system has to be tallied and cross-checked with other parties, so that the liability, assets and figures all correlate.”

Subbu also juggles auditing work for companies and projects outside Auroville. So how does working ‘outside’ compare with working for Auroville?

“Here, there is a pleasant atmosphere, without pressure. Outside, it’s high pressure and constant deadlines. They say, ‘Tomorrow we need this report.’ I prefer a more professional and ethical approach. Nowadays, I’m not doing it to earn money. In Auroville, there are deadlines, but there is time to work on it.”

Subbu became an Associate of Auroville (a category of Auroville supporter) a few years ago, and he holds a long-term aspiration to join Auroville. “I find it very good, that’s why I’ve been working here for 14 years now. I like the environment. Before coming to Auroville, I was not systematic or disciplined. I changed myself by attending a lot of the classes here, such as integral yoga and Monica Sharma’s workshop. Coming to Auroville has changed me a lot, mentally and health wise. Before, I only spoke with the top level, like my father did. Now, I speak with everyone, like the gardener and amma, and learn about their issues and what can

be done for them.”

Subbu’s two-year-old son attends Auroville’s pre-crèche. “I like Auroville schools. I want a good education for him. I studied in Pondicherry, but it was like a jail from 8 am until 7.30 pm. You’re not able to turn this way or that way, no talking, everything is every strict. I don’t want my son to go through that.”

Subbu confesses to working 16 hours most days. “I come to Auroville at 5 am. Then I can finish the work without distractions. My family don’t like me working like this. They say that when I go home, I should not touch work, and should spend more time with them.”

He also confesses to a huge love of cinema: “All kinds! All languages! I’m a fan of [Tamil movie star] Rajinikanth. I always go first day, first show. I am part of the Rajni fan club!” However, while most of us approach cinema as pure entertainment, Subbu does not compartmentalise his life so easily. “I even work in the cinema. At the cinema and at home, I will watch the screen while writing a report on my laptop. I reply to all the emails in the cinema. I can type automatically. My wife doesn’t like it. She will stare at me. When I’m with my family at the cinema, I have to stop it, or go outside to send emails.”

Subbu concedes that accountancy is not the most visible part of a unit’s success. “Most people don’t know what I’m doing, because I take all the responsibility on my shoulders to get it done.” He has appreciated the promotions he has received within AVAT, as well as respect from government officials who have come to assess Auroville’s implementation of government grants – “they praised the accounting system”.

As for his workaholic tendencies, Subbu says the arrival of his son has forced him to try to change his habits. “I’m changing a little bit. I’ve reduced the professional workshops I attend, and now I go to the temple or Matrimandir with my family. I’m trying to have a healthy body and concentration. I should spend time with my son.”

Lesley

A special team

It is not often that you see a man and a woman employee working together as a team in an Auroville forest or garden. But Elumalai and his wife, Surya, are different.

Both of them were born and brought up in Mathur, a sleepy village to the north of Auroville. Neither of them had any schooling. At the age of seven, Elumalai's father sent him out to take care of goats, and he did this for seven years. When the goats died from an illness, he began work as a mason helper at Pondicherry University. However, he didn't like working with cement, so two years later he became a forest worker in Samridhi, an Auroville greenbelt community. Here he discovered what he really loved doing, and for the past thirty years he has worked in the forests and gardens of Auroville.

Surya's family are land workers and she began working on the land when quite young. Eighteen years ago, she married Elumalai. Within a few years they had a daughter and a son. When the children were old enough to go to school, Elumalai asked her to come and help him with his work in Auroville. That was eleven years ago. Since then they have worked as a team. When they work in the forest, he does the big cutting and hauling work, she does the smaller pruning and cleaning.

It's very unusual to see a woman doing forest work in Auroville. But Surya prefers it to be like this. "I'm used to hard work and I enjoy it. I love working outside and don't mind whether it's rainy or sunny."

After some time, the Evergreen residents where the pair worked decided they wanted a kitchen garden, so they sent Surya and Elumalai to Krishna at Solitude Farm to learn some techniques. "At the end of the training he gave us a certificate. Then we created a kitchen garden in Evergreen."

"However," says Elumalai, "we realized we were not getting enough money doing this work. We needed more money for our children's education and other things. So we decided to become temporary workers. Now we go wherever somebody calls us, although we also continue to work in Evergreen."

It seems to be working out. They have acquired a very good reputation (as well as visiting cards!) as gardeners and are much in demand. They each earn Rs 600 a day ("because people see we work as hard as each other"), which allows them to help with their children's education as well as to construct a house in Mattur.

They see other advantages in being temporary workers. "When you keep moving around," says Surya, "you are not in such a small world. You get to understand how different people are living, and how the people themselves are different. It feels like we are widening out. After you have worked in the same place for some time, like Evergreen where everybody treats us well, you begin to take things for granted. But there is always an enthusiasm in meeting somebody new and that gives us added energy for the work."

Elumalai adds another reason for becoming temporary. "Sometimes in the past when I have had permanent work there have been misunderstandings, even arguments, with the people in charge, so now I don't want to be dependent upon one employer."

He feels that, generally, their work is undervalued. "I work very hard but often I'm still seen as just another worker. I don't feel fully respected for what I do and this hurts. This is another reason why I don't want to be attached to anybody." In fact, he sees this lack of respect as a larger problem. "Many people come to work in Auroville every day. Some work hard and very honestly, but these are generally



Surya and Elumalai

on the bottom rung, and they are always undervalued."

One of the consequences of being temporary workers is that each day they have to work very hard to prove themselves to new people, as well as adjust to new expectations. Isn't this very challenging?

"Yes," says Elumalai, "it's a big learning." "We can never relax," says Surya.

They have a long day. After an early breakfast, they take their children to school. They begin work at 8 am and usually work until 6.30 or 7 o'clock in the evening, after which they pick up the children before going home. After dinner, they are too tired to do anything but sleep. "We sleep very well after this work!"

Elumalai is 47 years old now, Surya 35 years. They have been working hard since they were young children. How long can they continue working like this? What are their plans for the future?

At present they are repaying a loan they have taken to build their house. "We will work at this job for two to three more years until we have enough money and then we will feel more relaxed to do our own work," says Surya.

For Elumalai has plans. At present they have one acre of cashews. Elumalai would like to purchase another acre and then develop a small farm. "I will dig a trench all the way round with a pond in one corner. The trench will catch the rain to irrigate the land, and I will farm freshwater fish in the pond. In the middle will be a garden."

This doesn't sound like typical village farming. Are they adopting methods they have learned in Auroville? "Yes," says Surya, "As we work in different places, we are getting more knowledge, collecting ideas for the future. We will do water conservation on our land in the way they do it in the Auroville forests, but at the moment it is not possible because we don't have the time or energy."

Are there other ways in which their Auroville experience has influenced their lives?

"We are different from other families in the village," says Surya. "We eat salads. Even smoothies!"

Very few people from their village work in Auroville: most of them still work on the land or rear cows and goats. So how do the other villagers view Elumalai and his wife? Is working in Auroville looked upon as something desirable?

Surya hesitates. She's reluctant to talk about it. Eventually she admits that it can be difficult. "If there is a small difficulty, we are scolded by the other villagers. They say, 'You work for vellakaras (white people). It is meant as a put-down and it hurts. There's a lot of jealousy in the village when somebody is seen to be doing well and we have to deal with these things.'"

But what about their children? Would the parents like to see them following them into forestry and gardening?

At present their daughter and son are studying in New Era School (NESS) in Auroville. Education is very important for the parents. "We are sad because we have not studied ourselves," says Surya. "We want our children to study as much as possible because that's the way you learn more about the world." "We have been working hard all our lives," says Elumalai, "it has been a heavy effort on the body, so we don't want the children to go through this. We would prefer they work in an office."

The daughter would like to do this, but the son likes land work and has told his father that if he starts a farm, he will help him out. But if the children want to study further after NESS it will be a further expense for them. Does this mean that the biggest worry for Surya and Elumalai today is a financial one?

"Yes," says Elumalai. "It is very important both for our children's education and future and to manifest our own dreams that we are financially more secure. This is why we hope people in Auroville will keep supporting us by giving us work."

Both agree that Auroville is very different from the village. "In Auroville the people are always trying new things," says Elumalai, "whereas everything in the villages is traditional. But the early Auroville and Auroville today are different. Now, money is coming more and more into play. Before it was a more relaxed way of living and people seemed more satisfied. Even though there is more money today, people are running faster and are more stressed."

They admit they understand very little about the ideals of Auroville and why people have come here, yet they are happy that Auroville has brought prosperity to the surrounding villages.

Finally, when they look back upon their lives, what do they think will give them the biggest satisfaction?

"It's planting a tree and seeing it grow," says Elumalai. "When I was 18 years old, I planted a Vengai tree in Gaia forest. Now it is big. This makes me feel so good. Sometimes when I'm driving past, I stop the bike and hug that tree..."

"The fact that we have planted so much, and there will be something in the forest still living after we die gives us very deep satisfaction," concludes Surya.

From an interview by Alan.
Translator: Priya Sundaravalli

Keeping us connected

When your telephone line has been struck by lightning and your modem has gone up in smoke, you begin to appreciate the meaning of 'service'. For, whatever the weather or the state of the roads, Suresh and Moorthy from the Auroville Telephone Service will soon be at your door to reconnect you to the rest of the world.

They've been together a long time – Suresh joined the Telephone Service 25 years ago, Moorthy 22 years ago – and they make a fine team. While they come from different villages – Moorthy from Kulilapalayam and Suresh from Sanjeevinagar – it helps that they are cousins and have known each other almost from birth. However, it wasn't always clear that they would end up working together.

In 1990 Suresh was involved with construction work in Auroville. Later he became a painter and worked with fibreglass at Matrimandir. Moorthy studied at Isaiambalam School before training to becoming a cook at New Creation Corner, one of Auroville's most popular former restaurants.

But Suresh had wanted to work with the Telephone Service for a long time and finally got his chance in 1993. Moorthy joined him in 1998.

So what's the attraction?

"No two days are ever the same," says Suresh, "and there's a lot of satisfaction in solving people's problems." Their day begins at 8 am every morning when they are given a list of jobs. Recently, after a major lightning strike, many of those involve rectifying faults in telephone lines. But the usual work also involves climbing telephone poles to check insulators, digging up burnt or fractured cables (construction workers seem curiously adept at puncturing lines with pickaxes or mechanical diggers) and checking distribution boxes.

"Quite often we open a distribution box to find a snake inside," says Suresh, "but we're not bothered by things like this."

"It can be very difficult," says Moorthy. "We work in all weathers and sometimes at night, when we may have only a moped light to work by. Recently we had a job list of 100 faulty lines, and everyone thinks their problem is the most urgent! We feel the pressure – we are the only two people in

the Telephone Service who are working in the field, the others are in the office – but we give priority to old people and those who have sick parents abroad."

Suresh points out that their work has become more complex. "Before the Internet, people just had a dial-up connection. The Internet requires a much more sensitive line, so there is more work for us now because there are more faults and sometimes it's difficult to find them. Just fixing one internet connection can take us a whole day."

"This is why we are working on improving the quality of the lines in Auroville," says Moorthy. "We are putting all lines underground and providing proper connection boxes. This will give us less work in the future."

Suresh confirms they are always planning improvements. He has made a drawing of the location of all the telephone lines in Auroville so they can identify the weak spots, and also developed his own high-tech system which helps him find faults underground. "In a couple of years, fibre-optic cables will be everywhere and this will reduce our work. For example, they are not affected by lightning strikes."

Both Suresh and Moorthy are highly skilled at what they do. Have they never thought about taking their skills elsewhere, for example working with BSNL which offers much higher wages?

"It's true that they pay much better," says Suresh. "A BSNL man behind a desk selling SIM cards gets Rs 55,000 a month, which is much more than us for much less work. But I wouldn't work for them. In 2004 I got a government job in Pondicherry in the judicial department. It was a temporary job but after five years it would have been permanent. But I didn't like it at all: I left after two days. I want to be with people I like and who appreciate my work."



Suresh and Moorthy

"After joining here, I never looked elsewhere for a job," says Moorthy. "Anyway, this is the only work we know. I am 40 years old now, Suresh is 45. How can we find other work?"

Neither Suresh nor Moorthy are Aurovilians. Have they ever considered joining?

Suresh mentions that his family has been involved with Auroville from the beginning: his grandfather and uncle worked on the Matrimandir in the early days. "As a child I used to come to Auroville and dreamed of joining, but now I don't feel I'm losing by not being an Aurovillian: everybody already treats us as one. We don't have a Financial Service account, that's the only

difference." Both admit, however, that sometimes they still think of joining. But there are obstacles. Suresh would have to find a place to live in Auroville. Moorthy already lives in Auroville, in Sangamam community, but he says that at present he cannot afford all the financial contributions he would have to make as a Newcomer and Aurovillian.

And they have other commitments. Both of them have families. "Our son wants to become an Indian Police Service officer, so I worry about giving him a good education," says Suresh. "We buy many things to improve his general knowledge. My daughter is now studying for the JIPMER entrance exam, so she is getting extra coaching. All this costs money."

Moorthy's young daughter is studying in a private school. "When I ask her what she would like to do, she tells me many things. Sometimes it's a teacher, sometimes a nurse."

They have known Auroville for many years. What are the changes they've noticed?

Moorthy notes that there is much more construction work going on now and many people from the local villages are finding work here. "I think these are good changes."

Suresh regrets, however, that many of the pioneers are no longer here. "A lot of new people are coming, but they are different somehow. And there's more talk, it's more political now: we go everywhere, so we know all the stories. But we don't get involved."

He still feels, however, that the ideals of Auroville make it a very different place from the village. "Mother said that everything in Auroville should be shared – nothing belongs only to you – and this is a place where everybody is equal. These things are important."

Alan

Embodying spirituality – the dancing world of A

Dance practices are even older than the invention of written languages. Archaeological evidence indicates that, for centuries, dance has played a major role not only as a performance art, but also as a form of storytelling and communication.

India is one of the richest countries in terms of styles, holding hundreds of different performing dances since thousands of years, from the classical Bharatanatyam – the oldest Indian dance which originated in Tamil Nadu, enacting stories from Hindu mythology – to the modern Bollywood dance.

But you can also use dance as a tool of self-awareness, and to establish inner communication.

What is the link between dancing and spirituality? How is this plastic expression used in Auroville?

To answer these questions, Valentina took eight different dance classes with different teachers. She also observed the groups and talked with the facilitators about their objectives and motivations.

Monday – Partner connection, Dance Offering with Dariya.

Dariya has been giving this class for almost 18 years. She was doing Butoh before – post-war Japanese theatre dance – but after she had a motorbike accident she shifted to a softer practice and created Dance Offering for Auroville.

“Dancing is one of the spaces that makes the bridge between the so-called mundane and the so-called spiritual”, Dariya says.

In her class, the movements come from listening to the body and allowing it to unfold like a flower from inside. You are not dancing to give a show, but to connect with yourself and to others and to “exercise the muscles of presence and awareness”, as she describes it.

The class starts with a simple meditation in a circle to bring the awareness to the present moment. A candle in the middle helps the mind to focus, and as we start concentrating on the body, Dariya asks us to say our names and bring a quality to the group representing what is present inside at the moment. The music starts slowly and builds up subtly for the next hour. For the last part some contact improvisation may be practiced, but you can choose to fuse with the group or not. The session ends with everybody lying down, almost melting into the floor in a deep relaxation.

Dance Offering is also a celebration of our human affectionate nature and “a sharing of the fruits of the practice for mutual benefit”, in Dariya’s words. This is why she calls it an “Offering”.

Tango with Jorge

Jorge learned tango 20 years ago in Argentina, and he has been giving classes regularly in Auroville for 12 years.

With tango, you don’t dance with your mind, you don’t even dance for your partner. The first connection is with the music, which is “The Teacher”, as Jorge put it. Secondly, there is the relation you develop with your partner, which is based on feeling and harmonising the space between you, respecting the roles of leader and follower. These roles are related to the female and male principle: the Shakti and Shiva. It is a metaphor for the fact that in life you need both elements: sensibility and strength, action and reaction, giving and receiving. Tango is about respecting these roles and honouring the person that you are dancing with.

Tango has many different steps, walks and embraces. One challenge is to “dislocate” the music: to concentrate on only one of the various instruments and align ones footsteps with it.

“Meditation and tango are very linked. It requires a lot of concentration and it can be a struggle to learn,” Jorge shares. The music was created by European immigrants coming to Argentina, so it is about being a foreigner, finding oneself in a new land and discovering what to do, which is why it has a melancholic energy. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons why tango is one of the



Gopal performing

most popular dances in Auroville. There are at least thirty regular practitioners and four advanced teachers here. Milongas (tango gatherings) are frequently organised and two international festivals per year are celebrated. These are the biggest ones in India and host professional teachers from all over the world.

Tuesday – Divine feminine, Feminine Dance with Galit

Galit has been offering Feminine Dance in Auroville since 2011. It is a mixed style based on tribal and belly dance movements. She learned the techniques in Israel, but here she has incorporated something that for her is much more important than the technique: self-acceptance.

A very important part of the work is to deal with insecurity and self-image issues that may be present, releasing stuck energy in the uterus and pelvic area through the movements. “We are not here to be perfect, we are here to celebrate our bodies”, Galit explains to the dancers.

She has been doing this inner work herself, as she grew up in a repressed society where women were treated as being less important than men, being pressured to look and behave in a certain way. Consequently, the aim of her class is to provide a safe space of support and self-expression within this little sisterhood.

The class is usually small and intimate, and lasts around 90 minutes. We dance in front of a mirror half of the time, rehearsing the movements and creating a little dance routine. The other half is dedicated to warming up the body, stretching and performing for each other in a dancing circle. This last exercise helps to overcome shyness, to honour beauty and to give value to our femininity.

“If you want to develop spirituality first you have to develop a good relationship with yourself. The foundation is to work in your body, in your soul, with your emotions. Once these things are lighter and clear you can aim for higher goals,” she explains.

Odissi with Rekha

Rekha has been dancing Odissi for 40 years, performing all around the world. Her classes at Pitanga are small and attended by women only, but she has also been giving unisex classes at her studio near Auroville.

Odissi is an ancient traditional dance-drama which originated in Odisha. It is an artistic manifestation of devotional love to the divine. Originally, Maharis (temple dancers) represented the diverse stories of Hindu mythology through this dance, which combines different elements, like statuesque postures and mudras.

In this way it is probably the closest dance to Hatha Yoga and, unlike free expressive dances, it is a much more controlled movement meditation. Rekha stresses that right alignment and balance are essential to experience the flow of energy that is needed for this dance. The energy should flow from the central axis to the limbs and end in the delicate mudras of the hands. She puts special emphasis on experiencing the spine as a hollow flute that connects sky with earth.

Muscular effort is required in the legs and core, while relaxation should be experienced in the upper part (heart, arms, hands, face and eyes), integrating the two energies: grounding to earth and surrendering to the divine. In that way, “letting the dance dance you”.

She also combines other disciplines such as Kalari, Somatics and Pilates in her classes, and gets inspiration from the concept of Satchidananda (sat = existence; cit = consciousness; ananda = bliss). “If you look at your body and observe the sensation and movements with detachment, the process of tuning in and dancing is very joyful”, she explains.

Performing in front of an audience is a possible outcome of this practice, but the highest objective is to reunite and perform for the divine within, integrating this Satchidananda state not only in dance but also as part of your personality.

Wednesday – Exploring Contemporary Dance with Gopal

Gopal is a young professional dancer, trained in Delhi in Contemporary Dance.

He recently moved to Auroville and started working with Surya Performance Lab facilitating this class, which he describes as a mix of improvisation and choreography. The session starts with a welcoming circle where people share their names. Then he starts immersing the participants in an exploration of the joint movements and different ways of standing, sitting, crawling and rolling, accompanied by soft music. He may ask you to find a quality and express it to different speeds and styles of music. At the end of the class everyone makes a little dance, integrating the learned techniques.

Contemporary Dance offers a space of exploration where movement and rhythm are the tools, but the main focus is on expression. “Dance is a crucial part of my life. Before I had a total different personality, I can’t talk much to people, but when I’m dancing, something opens up deeply, so it is my way of communicating” Gopal explains.

Thursday – Releasing Chakra Guided Dance with Vera

Vera feels that dancing and singing is her means of expression. She was giving regular guided meditations and offering occasional free floor dance before. A year ago she decided to fuse these two practices.

Chakra Dance is based on the belief that different frequencies in music are related to the vibration of each of the seven energy centres in our body.

The session starts with a small meditation in a circle to relax the mind and anchor into the present moment. The instruction is to sit or lay down in a space of power, and while the music builds Vera facilitates a journey from the root chakra (base of the spine) to the crown of the head, visualizing colours, elements and shapes and making movements and sounds. As the practitioner dives into sensations and connects through movement she/he can release blockages that may have been stuck for a long time.

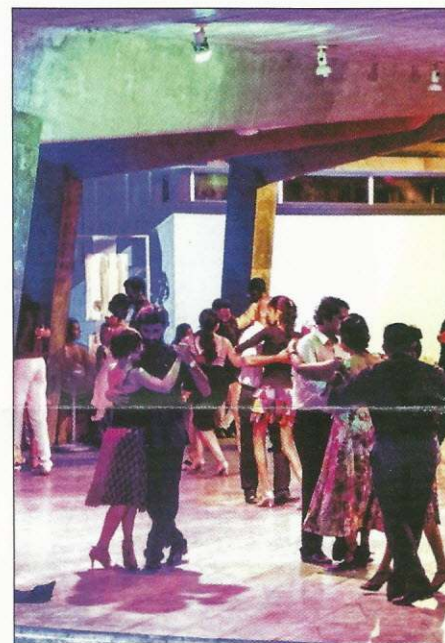
Vera explains, “You are not making up a dance, it is something that emerges if you surrender to what wants to be expressed, which is always exactly what you need at that moment.”

She adds, “Spirituality is simple. It is being in the moment, sharing your love, being who you are...but we are born with something that create setbacks and resistance. Dancing is a great help to unblock you.”

Friday – Tripping 5Rhythms with Irena

The Practice of 5Rhythms comes from US. It was invented by Gabriele Roth, who observed how traumas and events in people’s lives accumulate in the memory of the body and affect the way we move and relate to each other. She created this dance to transform the emotions that are stuck in the body from chaos into “the three big Cs”: Creativity, Connection and Community. In that sense, 5Rhythms is a therapy as much as a spiritual practice.

Irena learned it in Prague 12 years ago and she and Joke have been facilitating sessions in Auroville for one year.



Milonga on the rooftop

Auroville

Irena actively guides the two-hour session, although you are free to follow her instructions or not. The music is organised in a wave moving through five frequencies, each one of them related with a particular principle.

The first rhythm is Flowing. It is related to Mother Earth, the Sacred Feminine, and the connection with our mothers. The instruction here is to put the attention on following the movements of the feet.

The second rhythm is Staccato, which represents the fire, the male energy, and the connection with our father. The key here is to move from the hips and to allow the passion from within to express itself.

The third rhythm is Chaos, which is related to both female and male energy. Now the beat of the music is allowed to take over the body, and often people can be seen jogging, jumping, screaming and laughing. It is when emotions that have been stuck come out.

After this catharsis, the wave goes down into the fourth rhythm which is Lyrical. Irena describes it as "Letting go of letting go". The body's gateway for lyrical is the free movements of the arms. You are encouraged to be playful and dance with the soul, "as you were naturally doing as a kid before we forgot and became too serious", she says.

The final rhythm is Stillness. The invitation for this last part is to keep moving in even a minimalistic way, and to return the attention to your breathing.

This practice can be really transformative, not only in observing your patterns but also in overcoming fear and connecting on a deeper level with others. The session finishes with a closing circle in which the participants can share their feelings and inner journeys in a safe place. Irena feels that Auroville offers a healthy environment to hold the sacredness of the practice: "It is beautiful to see the genuine unconditional love from people coming here. It is starting to feel more like a community now."

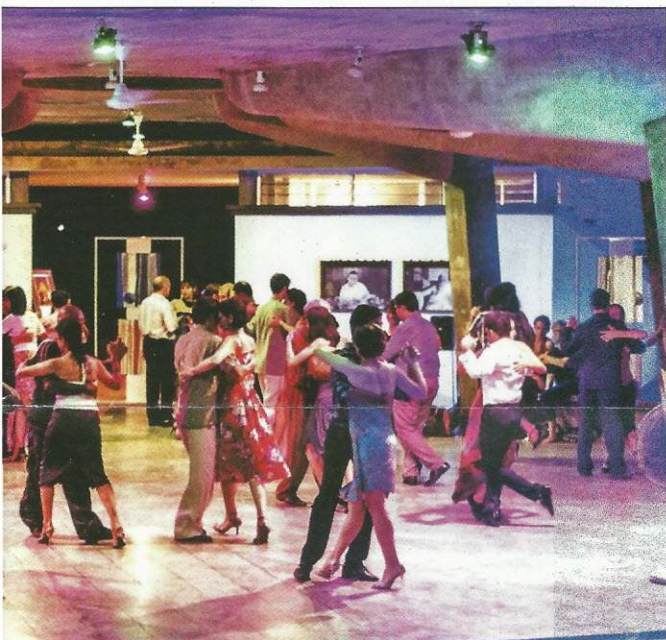


PHOTO: OLIVER BAROT

Transforming prisons through dance

Alokananda Roy is a Calcutta-based dancer and educationist who gave a dance performance in Auroville called 'Envisioning Our Mother: Sri Aurobindo' in October. She shares about her spiritual connection to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and how this inspired her to begin a dance therapy programme at Presidency Jail in Allipore, the prison where Sri Aurobindo was confined for a year and experienced a spiritual turning point.

How did your connection with dance begin?

Alokananda: My first public performance as a solo dancer was in 1955 when I was four years old and I've been dancing ever since. My family was involved with dance, music, and poetry, especially on my mother's side. My mother herself was a music teacher. So, I think it's in my genes.

I am trained in Bharatnatyam and Odissi, but in my childhood I was mainly doing free dancing. Later, I learned the different folk dances of India. Additionally, I have done Russian ballet in school and received a scholarship to pursue it at the Calcutta School of Music. And whenever there was someone coming to give a dance workshop from another country, I would participate. So, I have had both formal training and a taste of many different styles of dance.

I think that all these forms of dance have made a difference to my interpretation of dance. Although I am essentially a classical dancer, and now specialized in Odissi, I have created my own personal style, which I call the neo-classical. It is rooted in classical dance, but I have branched out in my self-expression. I have moved away from the rigidity of the classical dance forms. I have tried to make it a little more fluid and realistic when it comes to the expressive dance, because in classical dance forms, the abhinaya, as we call it, is very stylised. When I was a student, I learned it, but when I executed it, I tried to make it more natural.

How did you become acquainted with the works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother?

It was mainly the influence of my father who had surrendered himself to Mother. Since my early teens, I was growing up with Mother and Sri Aurobindo's teachings at home and it made a difference to my way of thinking and my values, as well as my spiritual aspiration, which developed very early. And so, as a natural progression, I began interpreting Sri Aurobindo's works, especially *Savitri* and *Vande Mataram*. I have also worked on some of his sonnets. Dance is the way I could express myself about how I saw Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Did you meet The Mother?

Yes, a couple of times. The first time, I would call it a very sensational experience because I had peculiar feelings when I met her. I was only 17 years old then. I was just weeping and trembling, for no reason. I didn't realize why, but when I told the people in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, they said, 'You know, you don't have to worry about anything anymore, She has taken responsibility for you.' So as long as she was physically here, whenever something happened, even if it was trivial, I would just write to her. And she would send her blessings. Even now I can still feel her in spirit. She's always there, protecting me and guiding me.

I did not have the opportunity to meet Sri Aurobindo. But I think I felt his presence in Presidency Jail when I went there. I have always felt that it was Mother and Sri Aurobindo who took me there to do their work.

Tell me more about your work in Presidency Jail.

It wasn't planned. I was invited as a guest on International Women's Day in 2007 to the female ward in Presidency Jail. The female prisoners wanted to learn dance, and I agreed. I really wanted to know about their life inside, which hardly any of us know about from the outside. After the workshop, I was taken

around to see Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's and Sri Aurobindo's jail cells. That is when I first saw Sri Aurobindo's cell. Of course, I was interested to know more.

I saw the male prisoners as well. I asked the man who was Inspector General, 'Can I also teach the boys?' He asked, 'Do you have the courage? Everybody feels scared of the men especially.' I replied, 'No. What can I fear that they will do to me, when most are almost the same age as my son?' So he agreed.

Today, I feel that I was destined to be there and that it was all arranged by Mother and Sri Aurobindo, because that is where his spiritual journey started. As I keep telling the boys who I teach there, 'Yes, he was a saint, but he was also made of flesh and blood like you and me. So if he could feel the presence of god here, you can also feel it. You just need

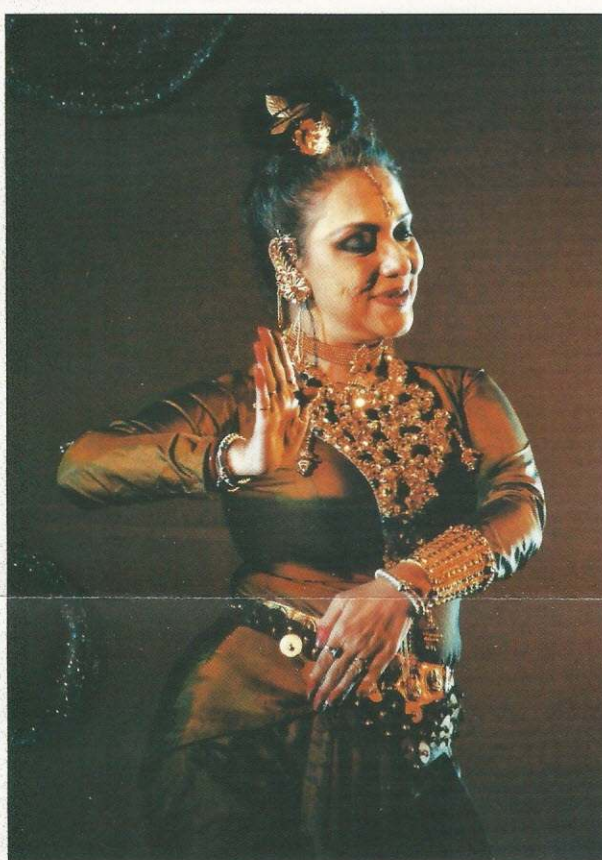


PHOTO: COURTESY ALOKANANDA ROY

Alokananda in performance

to be ready for it and open yourself up. The grace is always there.'

How did you begin to organise this programme?

I started with martial dance and folk dance because I had more male students than female students, and they had never danced before. Once they were doing well, I organized a little performance within the prison walls. It was brilliant. I had some guests who said, 'Why don't you present this performance outside the jail?' I didn't know if they would be allowed to, but the permission came through. At the end of the first programme that they did in a public auditorium, there was a standing ovation.

That experience changed them. They never ever thought that anybody would clap for something that they had done. They had been ostracised by society and despised. People were either angry with them or scared of them. So when they were applauded and feted like artists, it changed them. They felt that if they were being punished for the wrong that they have done, they were also appreciated for something good that they were doing. It was a turning point.

Can you tell me more about the specific impact that your dance therapy programme has had?

It was based upon dance, of course, but gradually it developed into a bonding of mother and child that helped them to transform. They all call me 'Ma' there. Once they are in prison, they miss their families especially their mothers. I am able to fill that void in a small way.

I remember one boy who fell ill while rehearsing. It was very hot that day and he had a black-out. I sat on the floor and put his head on my lap. I put water on his forehead and behind his ears, like you would do for anyone else. When he opened his eyes - he had big eyes - he kept looking at me. When I came back after a couple of days, he had written on a piece of paper for me, 'I don't remember my mother so much, but now when I shut my eyes and think of her, I see your face.' I was so moved, because I didn't feel like I did much. But it had made a difference.

Later they told me, 'Nobody touches us, nobody holds us.' But I do. Sometimes I give them hugs, sometimes even raps on the back when they are naughty. They don't mind because that is the kind of relationship we have now.

These little things have made a difference to their way of thinking. They are always trying to prove that they are not all bad, that they can also do good. Situations can make you do things that you wouldn't have dreamed of doing. There are numerous cases, and I deal with a lot of lifers, those who have been sentenced to life in prison, usually for murder. But they have so much repentance now.

So while people call it dance therapy, I call it love therapy - I use dance as a medium, that's all. The rhythm they have lost in life comes back through dance and music. They start feeling good. What I say is that when you feel good, you do good. When you are dancing or singing, you can never be sad. Even if it's a sad song, it becomes a catharsis. Over one hundred of my students in jail have been released so far. All of them have gone back to a normal life, doing whatever they are capable of.

Though I didn't realise it when I first began, Mother has given me this work to do. I would never have thought I would continue for 13 years - I came to do a workshop, but it has become a life project.

What future do you see for the programme elsewhere?

On a trip to the United States, I was invited to hold a two-hour workshop in one of the prisons there. I was very excited that, despite being a foreigner, I was allowed to enter a prison. They knew me, because they had seen the documentary about my work, 'Love Therapy in My Second Home', so they knew that prisoners called me 'Ma' in India.

When I completed the workshop, one of the convicts came to me and said, 'You know, Mama Roy, something behind the head felt free. I don't know what it was, but it felt good and free.' That's what rhythm and music does. Already they do a bit of theatre in the prison, but after my workshop they have been keen to introduce dance too. I remember that a psychiatrist who was sitting there said, 'You know, I could see the difference. I could make out from their body language how involved they were. And how deeply they were feeling something within. So I think we should try it here.'

That is what I want to do, to create a template so that others can start programmes in other places as well. To make people feel good and come back to themselves.

Facilitating these dance workshops has also taught me to love unconditionally, to be non-judgmental, and to forgive. I have been purified in the prison. As described in *Tales of Prison Life* by Sri Aurobindo, it is an ashram for me as well. It has changed me from within. I think it has helped me to rise above all the trifles in life.

From an interview with Hilary

Message in a bottle

'Message in a Bottle' was an inspiring, well produced community play and a testament to the creative juices flowing in Auroville. Above all, it was great fun with a street smart kick at times. Mixing Auroville references with global ecological implications and a hint of pantomime, it was delivered with funky music, dances, story line, and a moral to boot.

Describing itself as an adventure comedy thriller, telling the story of four river-dwellers in a desperate race against time to save their river from being blocked by a soft drink company, the plot involved an imprisoned Cassandra sending a message in a bottle which travelled all the way down to Waterville (sound familiar?), the sleepy river town. She appeals for help to be rescued in the village of Effluvia by the next full moon in order to succeed her recently departed teacher as the next Oracle. The antagonists were the power hungry – and imprisoning – Pompous Crumpey, who wants to be the next Oracle, and the big bad corporation, Uwanto, which is gunning to dam the river for malevolent financial reward.

The bottle is discovered by forest dwellers Fleur and Walnut who then journey for a week with friends Chickoo and Brace through jungle scenes, dreamscapes where a magical gift is given, struggling past the Sludge of Despond, and through the town of Desire where the culinary inducements tempt them to stay forever. In between, they encounter wondering shamans, magical tribes, an oily industrialist, corrupt magistrates and guards in constant pursuit. The storyline includes upbeat songs, dances and laughs such as Eyeball's – 'You need to be lost to find yourself', which mixes new age humour with lightly applied perennial wisdom. Each scene change is punctuated by Johnny's inimitable rhyming summation of what lies ahead for the protagonists.

The ultimate moral, when Fleur gets unexpectedly chosen as the next Oracle, is that we are all oracles, reflecting one of Auroville's core principles of unity.

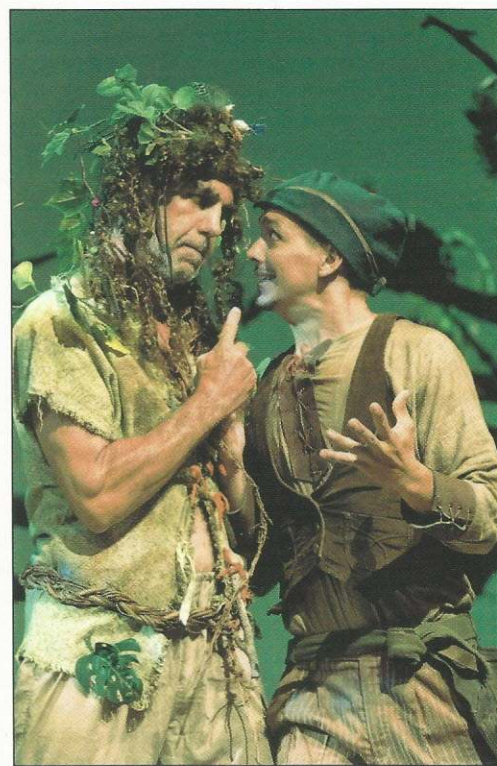
There was a high standard of acting from all. 'There was Eyeball' played with Scottish lilt and verve by Paul, the venal magistrates played with sardonic joy by Wazo, Tamar, Andre and Otto, the fabulously narcissistic Agapunctus, Fleur the oh so humble heroine and Chickoo the singing healer. And then there were children who danced, acted and sung all the way through in this big old school Jesse-run community production.

Where else but in Auroville would an anthropomorphised JCB have a star turn as a grumpy dragon which needed holistic mechanical healing after changing from digging holes for tree planting to ripping out trees? Such Auroville-centric references, along with quips about Newcomers, entry and committee selection procedures and housing availability, were all delivered to an audibly appreciative audience.

The narrative about a 'Uwanto' (...you know you do) soft drink corporation wishing to take over all of Effluvia and convert us to soda, dam up the river and destroy the villages downstream, was both a caricature and unfortunately instantly recognisable in our world. One of the punch lines about our rubbish not going 'away' entertainingly illustrated an ecological principle which reflects Auroville's environmental aspirations and values.

The overall production was slick, with high quality props, screen projection, excellent costumes and lighting. All in all, an entertaining, fun, inspiring best-of-community evening.

Peter



PHOTOS: ALESSANDRO SILVER



Smiles, threats, expectations: scenes from the play

REFLECTION

Synthesis or separation?

It is a truism that Auroville is founded upon very high ideals. But how do we deal with the fact that there is obviously such a big gap between where we are now and what we are asked to become?

Some people feel crushed or, at least, completely inadequate to the realising of these ideals. This often gets reflected in a determination to focus only upon immediate 'practicalities' and to adopt conventional methods to organize our lives.

Another response is to use the high ideals as a magnet to pull us upward. As Robert Browning put it, *Ah, but a man's reach should exceed his grasp, / Or what's a heaven for?*

At present, both of these responses can be found in our organization. Our economy, for example, is in many ways a conventional one as it is money-based, yet experiments with providing goods and services 'in-kind' reach 'upwards' towards the cashless ideal. Our community decision-making policy contains elements of the conventional approach – voting – but also of a somewhat higher ideal – consensus. And, of course, our high schools represent a very clear choice between conventional education (Future School) and an education that seeks to evoke individual 'soul' qualities (Last School).

However, the trend in Auroville seems more and more to be toward adopting conventional approaches, as in the monetisation of our services and of work ("How many hours have you worked today?") and in the ever-increasing

bureaucracy. It's a trend reflected in the increasingly heard, "We're becoming like anywhere else in the world".

Why is this happening?

One reason may be that as the challenges we face as a community become more complex, we tend to revert to tried and trusted ways, even if they are at variance with our higher ideals. It's a kind of atavism, a way of seeing and responding to the world which entered us from birth through parents, teachers, and all the other agents of socialisation.

For example, many of us are 'trained' to see the world as a place of difference, contrasts, separation, polarities. Conflict. This, after all, is the daily 'click-bait' of the media and the foundation-stone of modern individualism which stems, at least in the West, from the 18th century Enlightenment movement. This movement elevated certain mental qualities, like analysis, discrimination and categorisation, above the more intuitive and 'faith-based' faculties. The resulting specialisation has led to great advances in science, medicine, etc. But there has been a cost, which is a loss of a sense of interconnectedness and of a larger whole. Today, this separative tendency has invaded many different fields including, of course, education where different subjects are conventionally studied in isolation rather than in relationship to each other.

What Auroville's ideal of an "actual human unity" seems to require, however, is a totally different way of perceiving the world. Instead

of focussing upon separation and differences, we are being asked to focus upon the unity. Ultimately, genuine human unity can only be achieved through the realization of a shared spiritual identity. But even before we reach this point, we can practise detecting the underlying principles, patterns, energies, which bind together our outer diversity. And this requires the ability to synthesise rather than just analyse, to connect rather than to separate, to think in terms of wholes rather than parts.

This is not easy. To many of us it seems logical to try to understand and control the world through categorisation, through creating more and more compartments into which to file away that slippery thing called reality. But if we are really to understand unity in diversity, we need to begin studying interrelationships rather than fixed entities (which are rarely, if ever, 'fixed'). The examples are all around, even within, us. It is the dynamic interconnectiveness of the elements of our own bodies, and of the 'wood wide web' in which trees and plants 'speak' to and nourish each other through subterranean networks of roots, fungi and bacteria. As Teilhard de Chardin put it, *To see life properly we must never lose sight of the unity of the biosphere that lies beyond the plurality and essential rivalry of individual beings.*

We can also, of course, draw inspiration from Sri Aurobindo and The Mother who clarified that on the heights of consciousness there are no opposites or polarities, for there all has

found its true place in the whole. The mystics knew this. *Pilgrimage to the place of the wise*, wrote Rumi, *is to find escape from the flame of separateness.*

But even at our level we can begin that journey. And, clearly, there is a thirst for this. During the Auroville Retreat of 2015, an attempt was made to name the 'elephants in the room', the issues that have divided us for many years, and to propose a higher synthesis for each issue. Many of the 'solutions' were superficial, but the generous applause that followed each synthesising proposal suggested that Aurovilians are keen, even desperate, to find ways forward beyond our historic polarities.

Can we make that shift? If, as Proust observed, "a change in the weather is sufficient to recreate the world, and ourselves", think how much more dramatically our vision of ourselves and of others could be changed by cultivating a perspective of oneness rather than separation. We would learn to see ourselves – our weaknesses, strengths and aspirations – in others, increasing our capacity for compassion rather than conflict. Viewing them as the play of diversity within a larger unity, we would feel less threatened by apparent differences, and so become more inclusive of diverse perspectives in our planning and organization.

Above all, we would no longer feel alone, driven to struggle for individual security in a hostile or uncaring world, but an integral part of a larger community of aspiring souls.

The challenges of experimenting in Auroville

We are fond of quoting Mother when she writes that Auroville will be a place for making experiments. But how easy is it to innovate in the Auroville of today?

It's not always easy, according to the experience of one Auroville architect. Mona, who has been living and practicing in Auroville for about 25 years, is trying to launch a project in the Industrial Zone called UTSAV ('Celebration'). But in a new way. Usually, Auroville architects do not initiate projects. Normally they are approached by a project holder who already has funding and an idea about what they want. The architect then comes up with a concept that meets these needs in terms of the available budget, as well as satisfying the larger parameters of town planning in Auroville.

However, UTSAV was Mona's own initiative. "Other architects told me I was very brave to do it like this because I was risking putting in a lot of work without any guarantee of success, but it was an inner response, something close to my heart".

Mona noticed that there were a lot of projects, particularly in regard to housing, happening in other parts of Auroville but not much was happening in the Industrial Zone where she lived and where the new Verité radial road is located. She wanted to propose a development on a small strip of land along this radial.

"The idea was to provide office space for units that were starting up, particularly those run by young people, as well as services, so I designed UTSAV in such a way that there are several small units with the flexibility to merge them. At the same time, I wanted to provide an urban insert on the road with a colonnade running all along it to bring a sense of 'city' architecture." She didn't want to create a 'dead zone' outside office hours, so she also decided to incorporate accommodation on the upper floors for volunteers, a crying need in Auroville at present.

The first step was to get feedback on the concept from the neighbours. As Mona puts it, "Here in Auroville we don't have by-laws; instead we have neighbours who are our biggest by-laws!" She received varied responses but in the end she felt she had received a call, "so I just responded to that".

Mona drew up a scheme for ten office units with accommodation above, and presented it to L'Avenir d'Auroville, the Auroville planning office. L'Avenir provided initial site permission and asked her to come back with more detailed drawings. When she returned with these, they were peer reviewed by six other architects.

"They gave some really good inputs and I adjusted the design to what they suggested. Then they gave me the green signal to go ahead to the next level, which meant engaging a structural engineer and working out all the fine details, including a Bill of Materials and detailed costing." Recently she gave the final building application to them: "It's 120 pages long because I had to answer all their questions properly and provide substantiating documents."

Mona worked on a very tight budget, "no fancy experiments", and initially decided to construct only half the number of offices and accommodation originally approved by L'Avenir. While the eventual cost would be around 2.5 crore rupees, she estimated she could start with 70 lakhs, and the raw structure could

be completed for one crore rupees.

But how to fund it? As it was her project, she had to become the fund raiser, something for which she had no prior experience.

The most common sources of funding for Auroville projects are either Government of India grants for institutional buildings like schools, commercial unit funds when they want to fund their expansion, or individuals' private money when it comes to housing or start-ups. It is not possible to get loans from Indian banks because no collateral can be offered – all Auroville assets are owned by the Foundation – while the Financial Service only provides limited loans subject to certain conditions.

At first, things looked promising for Mona. She had many enquiries and one of the first units interested said they would take the whole building. They planned to fund-raise for the construction and then rent it out. But this never materialized.

Then Youthlink became interested. "It was perfect for them and the neighbours were very supportive. We presented the concept to the Governing Board in February and suddenly there was a possibility that the Government of India would fund it." However, this also didn't materialise.

Then Mona approached a few of our big commercial units. "One of them told me that all business is run on borrowed money. They don't give loans because they are always in debt." Another unit which already gives a big monthly contribution to the Financial Service said they don't fund individual projects, partly because if they give a specified donation they still have to contribute an extra 33% on top.

However, even if she did succeed in getting a loan, Mona was not sure how it could be repaid. "A standard loan from a bank has to be repaid with 7-8% interest. This would mean that each unit in UTSAV would need to pay a minimum rent of Rs 8,000 a month, in addition to paying for running costs. But we also wanted to provide space for small start-ups and services like haircutting, and they definitely cannot afford this."

"It's a contradiction. On the one hand we want services that are free but we are not giving any support to those who want to provide this, nor to young entrepreneurs who are starting out. It is so sad. We've brought them up with this idealism to serve the community but we are reproducing a very old economic system in Auroville which is making this almost impossible."

So what is the solution?

Mona points out that the Financial Service has something like 60 crore rupees in cash reserves. "Even if we use only one third of that,



Rear/courtyard view

it would help projects like this get off the ground and give a boost to our services and young entrepreneurs. And the Auroville Board of Commerce should set up something that helps facilitate and 'land' a project like this, just like the Housing Service does for new housing projects. I know this was my own initiative but, still, I feel that I could have been given much more help."

Meanwhile, Mona is hoping that enough individuals come forward to fund the UTSAV project. Now she has 92 lakhs in hand from people who have already committed to purchasing six units from the total of 15 units. She mentions that, as a rule of thumb, once you have 50% booked, the other 50% will come. "So I'm still hopeful."

But finding funding was only one of the challenges she faced. She was also told by L'Avenir that an architect cannot be a project holder, so she had to find somebody else. "I understand they have had bad experiences in the past with architects being project holders, but this is my vision, this is my baby. So why should anyone else be interested in carrying it?"

"The whole project has been like this, one blockage after another. But I decided I would learn from everything that comes and flow with it. So I asked many people, but they all declined because it's a big responsibility to be a project holder. Finally, I asked Auromics Bobby who is interested to see this area develop, and she agreed. She is a good person for this because she's very grounded and knows about the practical side of running a business."

"Now I have to register a unit under Auromics Trust. Then the unit will need three executives... it never stops. The lesson seems to be that if you choose to experiment in Auroville, you do so at your own risk and cost."

The 'cost' so far for Mona, apart from the continual challenges and frustration, has been considerable. She has put two years of work into the project for which she hasn't received a paisa.

In fact, the project has already cost her seven lakhs. "I can manage and it was my choice, but the worst part is that the structural engineer, a very nice gentleman who is not an Aurovilian, has not been paid for all his considerable work on the project."

Is it easier, then, for an Auroville architect to work on projects outside Auroville?

"In some ways, yes. Outside, the client contacts you, you are given your plot and some guidelines and as long as you follow the by-laws it's over; nobody can say anything. Here you have to consult the neighbours, only one of whom can veto your project. There are also lobbies, politics, interpersonal issues, all these complicate things in Auroville. Look what the Kalpana project had to go through. There was blockage after blockage. It took more than seven years to realise that project even though there was funding from the beginning. So I think the main blockages here are the neighbours, the politics and the money."

Does she regret having started this experiment?

"Not at all. I still feel the idea is valid and, after all, this is why we run architect offices in Auroville, to realize something different. And now that the project is almost ready to take off, I am excited to see how it unfolds. I knew I was going to be a guinea-pig but I have learned so much." For example, she points out that architects are trained in their schools to feel special, superior. "We look down on the developers because they are doing commercial work and we say we are not commercial: we are 'artists-cum-technical visionaries' who stick to our values. But for this project I've had to become a kind of developer as well as a fund-raiser, something many architects never have to get involved with, and now I appreciate much better the challenges that architects who work with developers and fund-raisers have to face."

Alan

Sundharamurthy Murugesan family

It was a profound shock for the community when it was announced that four bodies of one family – Sundar (Sundharamurthy Murugesan, 40 years old), his wife Mahesh (Maheshwari (35)) and their two daughters Kirthiga (17) and Samichsha (13) – had been discovered in their house in Auromodele on 17th November. While the reason behind the deaths remains unclear, it was reported that the parents were experiencing severe financial difficulties.

Sundar originally came from Kuilapalayam and Mahesh from Periyamudaliarchavady. Both attended Auroville schools. Sundar's main work was with the Dental Clinic, where he worked as technician, general assistant and handyman. Mahesh had worked for more than 20 years at the Solar Kitchen. Their daughters, Kirthiga and Samichsha, were attending New Era Secondary School.

On the late afternoon of 18 October, the four bodies were buried at Auroville's funeral grounds near Adventure with many people attending. On Thursday 24th a meditation in memory of the family took place around the Peace Table in the Unity Pavilion. Now there is an urgent need for the community to reflect deeply upon and learn from this tragic loss.

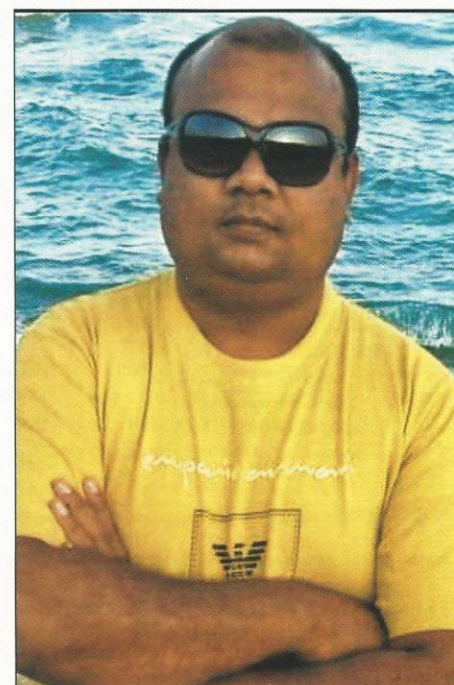


Nilesh Premji Nisar

Nilesh Premji Nisar, of Arc-en-Ciel community, passed away on Tuesday, 5th November, at the Kidney Centre in Pondicherry. He was 49. He had suffered from weak kidneys for some time and had needed frequent dialysis treatment.

Hailing from Bombay, Nilesh, Geeta his wife and their young son, Aditya, arrived in Auroville in 2000. He had a clear penchant for business and started working in a number of places, including Upasana and Naturellement. Later the couple developed the 'Natraj' unit, which developed a reputation with food connoisseurs and conscious consumers for high-quality food products. He also supported Auroville's commercial units in discovering new markets and retail outlets across India.

His remains were cremated at Auroville's Cremation Grounds near Adventure on the afternoon of the 6th November.



PASSINGS

Tsunamika, the voice of the oceans

Tsunamika, the colourful cloth doll representing post-tsunami renewal, returns in a new avatar. She has now grown into the voice of the oceans, urging us to protect our seas and, ultimately, ourselves.

In 2004 the tragedy of the tsunami birthed a child: 'Tsunamika'. She was made from scrap material sewed into small, three-inch dolls, by women from local fishing villages whose lives had been affected by the tsunami. Additionally they were part of a gift economy, branching out of the Mother's vision of a collectively shared prosperity. She caught the spirit of wishing for something positive post-tsunami and was widely featured in the Indian media. Beyond that, they were eye-catching and each one was unique. They helped transform the horror of the tsunami devastation into something uplifting. To date, six million hand-made dolls have been distributed in over eighty countries.

Recently Upasana, the conscious fashion unit founded by Uma Haimavati from which Tsunamika was born, organised a company retreat to brainstorm the next steps. Upasana had been following the work of the National Coastal Protection Campaign whose former head used to joke that Tsunamika should become the voice and mascot of ocean protection in India. Now fifty of Uma's company workers came up with the same message. The new incarnation for Tsunamika would be to protect our oceans. "Her



The Tsunamika Ocean exhibit at the Visitors Center

growth from a small doll to the child campaigning to save our seas and in fact ourselves, reflects the needs of our times which the village workers were receptive to," says Uma. "So far Tsunamika had never spoken, she was a quiet girl. Everybody loved and called her 'doll' but in her second avatar she has chosen to speak. She has taken the consciousness and form of an 8-10 year old girl. Her message is that the ocean is not just by the beach but a part of our life and that "if the ocean lives, we live". She is an archetype with heart and love and care for everybody. We didn't want to paint a horror picture of what is happening in ocean, but to make it a love story."

Tsunamika is still being made by the villagers of six nearby coastal fishing communities. When asked how the workers who make Tsunamika have changed over the last fifteen years, Uma replied:

"They are so different, so empowered. When on the retreat they talked of the new avatar of Tsunamika, nobody in the group said it will give them more money. They talked of Tsunamika being the voice of ocean protection; they were thinking so big. They could have suggested something else. It shows the growth of community, how they have held the deeper awareness of what's going on. And now a second generation has joined; girls come saying that they remember their mum making Tsunamikas when they were children and now they wish to do the same".

It has become clear in recent years that the oceans are at crisis point. Sir David Attenborough's 'Blue Planet' series for the BBC woke millions up to the overwhelming levels of plastic in our seas. There are huge plastic islands in the Pacific. Films such as 'Albatross' have shown how plastic is killing fish, birds and other fauna and, ultimately, life worldwide. We need imaginative and original solutions to the killing of our environment.

Tsunamika's message of caring for the ocean, stopping rubbish polluting the seas, is one way of the many needed for us to change

because business as usual isn't working. Tsunamika's resurgence is allied to a wider global awakening to the serious challenges of our unconscious over-consumption and the need to take action to acknowledge, address and ultimately rectify the overwhelming pollution of our society.

The new campaign has three aspects: two books, a movie and upcycling work. In the first book, Tsunamika is coming out of the ocean post-tsunami to meet her human friends. In book two she has gone to the ocean and is horrified at all the garbage being dumped in it: "My house is full of your rubbish, will you give me my home back?" As Uma pointed out, "We wanted to treat this serious subject in a very emotional way."

There is also a movie. A friend's daughter, Anika, became Tsunamika and they filmed on the beach with a young film maker. The underwater shots were animated.

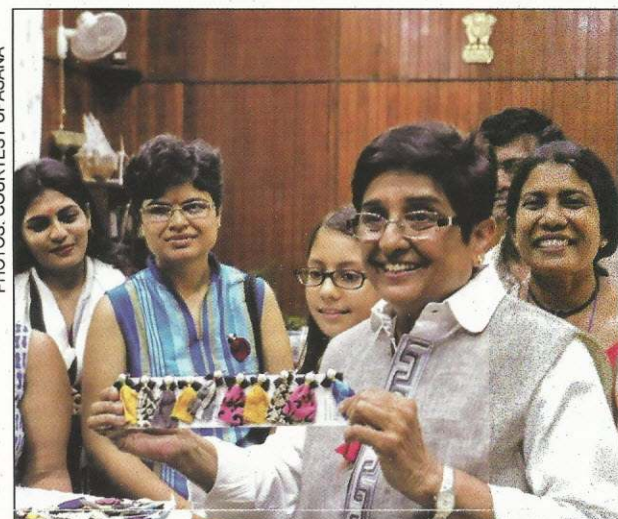
Thirdly, Upasana collaborated with Auroville artists from Upcycling Studio to create two art installations on the theme of ocean protection which will be in the Visitors Centre for a month and also in Upasana. Tsunamika is made from recycled scrap but there is no such thing as waste in nature. "That's why we promote upcycling, so that we don't have to dump it into the ocean. We are using art as a form of mass communication and social activism." Dr. Kiran Bedi, the Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry, is among those who are very supportive of the new project. She launched the book and movie on 21 September, World Clean-up Day.

Fifteen years on, the Tsunamikas are still distributed as part of the gift economy. Uma adds, "Tsunamika carries on giving, whether we receive anything in return or not. Her way of being animates me, and she animates many other people, too."

Peter

Links:

- 1) <https://ncpcindia.wordpress.com/>
- 2) tsunamika.org
- 3) <https://twitter.com/hashtag/TsunamikaSaveOcean>
- 4) upasana.in



Dr. Kiran Bedi, the Lieutenant-Governor of Puducherry, launches the new Tsunamika campaign.

LETTER

Dear friends of Auroville Today,

With regard to your 'Caring for the Sick and Elderly' article in AVToday # 363, I would like to make two observations:

1. While you correctly mention that the Auroville Health Service officially came into being in 2001, it might be proper to mention here the ground-breaking work of then Aurovilian, Dr Beena R. Naik. It was Beena who, in 2000 with her enthusiasm and sense of urgency first started tackling the hygienic situation in Auroville's collective kitchens and other eateries, and who fund-raised for setting up a team, and staunchly braved the many resistances that each and every new service in the City of Dawn has to overcome. In an article like this, I think Dr Beena should be remembered and honoured. Kudos to her!

2. I also would like to observe that a misconception might be created in the reader's mind by the following phrase in the article: "The absence of a waiting list [for the Mahalakshmi complex] may also be due to the commonly held concept that 'people come here to build Auroville not to take rest or retire.'" This gives the impression that we are dealing with a retirement home, which is most certainly not the case. Aurovilians just go on working and do not 'retire'. This doesn't mean that pioneers of the early hours, who gave their all to the budding city, might not at an older age deserve a wee bit more comfort and, if needed, some assistance while going about with their regular activities, unless, of course, they become bedridden or otherwise disabled. And, who knows, maybe then the real Work starts...

Mauna

CINEMA

The beginning of collaboration with FTII

From September 30th to October 7th, a course on **Film Appreciation - History and Aesthetics** was conducted by the Film and Television Institute of India at Auroville's Cinema Paradiso.

The course, organised by Auroville Timelines together with the Auroville units Aurofilm, Cinema Paradiso and AV Arts, was a first collaboration with the Film & Television Institute of India (FTII), one of the prime institutes of India. Almost 100 people from 17 different states of India attended, including 10 from Auroville. Many of the visitors were bowled over by the serenity and diversity of Auroville.

It was an intense experience to be steeped in watching and analysing films from 1895 to present times for eight hours a day. Sudipto Acharyya, a senior alumnus of the FTII, led the course and divided it into five major aspects: Narrative, Time, Space, Sound and Colour. Each of these sections were dealt with in detail and each major genre was covered,

starting from the Silent movies, Tableau format, Russian Montage, German Expressionism, Italian Neorealism, French New Wave, etc. The last two days were devoted to short films and documentaries.

As Richa, one of the organisers put it: "We discovered worlds beyond, traversed in between dreams and realities, met heroes and commoners from everywhere. We saw the material and spiritual pursuits of people across all nations, cultures, races and classes; and for once, we could see the essential oneness. Cinema showed us the secret heart of humanity".

What made this course possible was that FTII launched SKIFT (Skill India in Film and Television) in 2017 to "democratise film education and make it affordable and accessible in India". The FTII has 16 different film education modules in

topics such as screen acting, digital cinematography and smartphone film making, which are conducted across India in small towns as well as in megapolises.

The director of the FTII, Mr Bhupendra Kanintha, who came especially for the valedictory function on October 6th, was very enthusiastic about future collaborations with Auroville. The next workshop, a seven-day hands-on basic film orientation course by veteran filmmaker Umesh Kulkarni, is planned for November 11-17, and in December a screen-writing course may happen.

It seems the time is now ripe for Auroville to take a leap and, in the words of Frederick, "through the media of films, make the invisible palimpsest of Auroville visible, for us and for the world to see."

Mona

Auroville Today is an activity of the Kattidakkalai Trust of the Auroville Foundation.
The GST number is: 33AAATA0037BXZV

Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 months issues:

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Alan, Carel, Anusha, Hilary, Valentina, Lesley. Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville-605101, Tamil Nadu. Contact: Auroville Today, Samasti, Auroville-605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Phone: +91 413 2622572, Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in

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