

An alternative approach to planning

In 2011 L’Avenir d’Auroville / Town Development Council (TDC) was mandated to prepare a Detail Development Plans (DDP) to facilitate the growth of Auroville. In 2013 Suhasini offered the TDC to undertake a land suitability analysis for the city area and again, in 2018, to undertake a study to identify development priorities and directions of growth. This was to enable TDC to prepare the DDP with targeted development programmes and projects, including annual budgets. The final draft of the study has been shared with the TDC and other working groups that were consulted during the study.

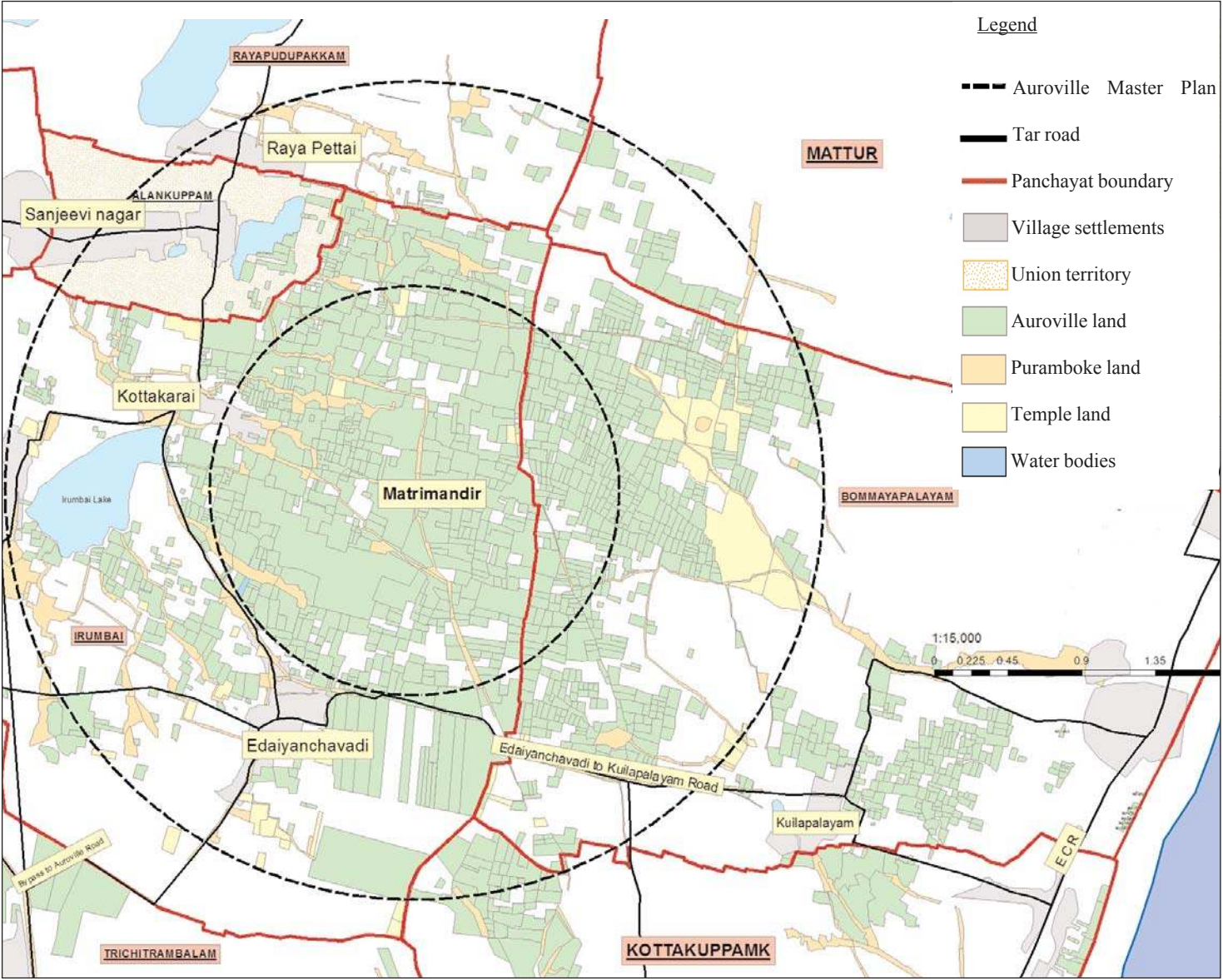
Auroville Today: What led you to do this latest study?

Suhasini: To answer this I need to tell you a little bit of personal history. I came to Auroville in the 1980s as an architecture student. As I intended to study town planning after architecture, my plan was to intern at Auroservice d’Auroville in Pondicherry, one of the rare non-governmental agencies doing town planning in those days. Till the mid 90’s town planning and development was done almost exclusively by the government. Due to a variety of reasons, I eventually interned with Poppo in Auroville. With not much to do in the studio during the internship, I explored Auroville to understand what it was all about. I started speaking to people, reading old publications and a few books on or by Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

This led me to do my undergraduate thesis on Auroville’s town plan. The thesis had three parts to it. One was the philosophical basis behind Auroville, with Kireet Joshi as the advisor, the second part was the physical aspect of the plan, for which I interviewed Roger Anger, the chief architect. The third part dealt with the socio-economic and cultural aspects of such a development in this particular context – Prof: K T Ravindran was my advisor for this – for I was very concerned about the socio-economic impact of developing a city as depicted by the Galaxy concept in the regional context that existed in the mid-80’s around Auroville.

In other words, I realized during this study that there was a huge gap between the normative and predictive planning components in Auroville. For some of the normative part, comprising Auroville’s values and ethics, drawing upon the Charter, Mother’s vision etc., content was available, but integration of other normative values, like environmental accountability and sustainability, social equity, unity and harmony, was neglected. And the predictive part, which involves evaluating future needs based on analysis of development of the last decades to arrive at quantitative goals, was completely lacking. The normative part gives us the qualitative goals to set directions with a road map and the predictive part allows for quantification with milestones. These two aspects must work together for effective planning and development.

I didn’t spend much time on the normative part of Mother’s inputs on Auroville as Gilles Guigan was researching this and sharing his work with many of us. I was more interested in the physical and human aspects. In 1985, a Canadian couple facilitated the setting up of the Auroville Resource Centre. For about three years a group of Aurovilians worked to evolve an integrated planning approach, which would include introducing environmental and social aspects into the Galaxy concept. However, in 1988 Roger and his team took over the planning office and we



Approximate map of Auroville and the surrounding areas. In green are all the lands owned by Auroville. In the inner circle, the city area, most lands are owned by Auroville, but this is not the case in the outer circle, the Greenbelt. Many of Auroville’s outlying lands are not shown on this map.

were marginalized as our approaches diverged from theirs and there was no room for divergent viewpoints. I was disheartened, and withdrew.

But at some point you resumed the work.

Yes. In 1999, Roger’s team started working on the Auroville Master Plan Perspective 2025, with support from the Asia Urbs project, focusing mainly upon the descriptive or the formal aspect of the town. This 25-year Master Plan was marginalizing the context – the physical and human geography – thus relegating the whole attempt into a theoretical exercise. Because unless you know where you are now, you don’t know how to get to where you want to go.

In the mid-90’s, I got a scholarship for a two-year programme on environment and development studies, focusing on environmental – economic – political scenarios in Southern Africa, Central America and India. The two-year course empowered me with knowledge and skills to revisit the planning process for Auroville. I proposed to L’Avenir d’Auroville, or TDC as it was called in 2013, to make a land suitability analysis of the city, which meant overlaying the Galaxy concept with the physical geography, such as land holdings, topography, climate and ecosystem services.

In this study we identified about a dozen spots where there would be a conflict between the ground reality and Galaxy concept, but all could be resolved with timely adaptations. I also looked

into the question, “Is it possible for the city to have sufficient open spaces to house a 50,000 resident population without the lines of force?”

Scenario 1, an extreme case, had the following baseline parameters:

1. Most of the existing settlements in the Residential Zone are not inclined to accept more development unless it follows a participatory model
2. Privately owned land in the Residential Zone is not for sale due to issues of ownership, sale value and/or sale to outside agencies who value the proximity to Auroville
3. A population growth rate of 4% per annum
4. Lack of sufficient capital investment from the economic sector to finance housing
5. Only low-rise walk-up buildings of ground + 3 floors with low-impact development, with permissible ground coverage ranging from low (20%) to medium (30%) with minimum pockets of high (50%) density, at 38 m2 per person.

With these preconditions, we could accommodate 18,000 persons in the Residential Zone, along with all the physical and social infrastructure required. At a 4% growth rate, Auroville would have a population of 5,000 by 2028, and the additional 1500+ could be accommodated in sectors 1 & 2 without having to change any of the parameters outlined above.

Scenario 2 had the following baseline parameters:

1. All the existing settlements in the Residential Zone are open to additional development within reason.
2. All the privately owned land in the Residential Zone has been bought before the end of 2015.

3. A population growth rate of 10% per annum

4. Public capital is no issue and livelihood options create a socio-economic climate permitting public housing projects for free occupation by the residents, according to their needs and personal situation

5. Only low-rise walk-up buildings of ground + 3 floors with low-impact development, with permissible ground coverage ranging from low (20%) to medium (30%) with minimum pockets of high (50%) density, at 38 m2 per person.

With these preconditions, one can accommodate 35,000 persons in the Residential Zone, along with all the physical and social infrastructure required. With a 10% growth rate, we would have a population of about 13,000 in 2028 and this population could be accommodated in sectors 1 to 3 within the outlined parameters.

Both scenarios demonstrate that the tweaking of the Master Plan 2025 to ensure the sustainability of the project does not in any way negate the form or population capacity of the Galaxy concept. In June 2014, I submitted the final draft report to the TDC for discussion, before undertaking presentations to the community for feedback. But discussion was not possible as some members in the TDC rejected it

Why?

They felt overwrought by the very idea of a land suitability analysis for a divinely ordained town. But there’s a larger issue here. There’s a theory of planning called Urban Regime Theory. This holds that in certain places the community leadership uses a certain framework, or regime, for examining issues.

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An alternative approach to planning

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Individuals or interest groups who argue from outside that regime will find it very difficult or even impossible to win decisions. In Auroville, the Galaxy group acts as the shadow planning body, and as they equate the Galaxy plan with the Auroville Charter, it is inviolate. For just as none of us would dream of rewriting the Charter, it effectively means that there can be no contextual adaptation or interpretations of the Galaxy. Any proposal that proposes adaptation responding to the physical and human geography is therefore unacceptable.

The sectarian politics of planning in Auroville can be very discouraging, but after doing the land suitability analysis, I felt I had to study Auroville's development pattern to understand the gaps and challenges.

Which is what led you to the latest study.

Yes. We decided to study the output of Auroville development for the period 2008 - 2018 in three areas: the overall economy, the physical infrastructure, and the social infrastructure in comparison to resident population growth and demographics. In these three areas, we studied five sectors: water/energy, health, education, housing and economy. We collected secondary data from various working groups, units, trusts, services, the annual reports of the Auroville Foundation, and primary data, using questionnaires and interviews. With the output of the analysis, we set about identifying the development priorities that could meet the projected population growth for the next decade 2019-2028 for three different growth rates. We then organized consultative meetings with a focus group of informed individuals and all the relevant working groups and individuals to get their inputs in order to frame the policies, programmes and projects. These were then evaluated

in a comparative matrix to identify the critical policies and programmes needed to meet the developmental needs for the next decade.

What were the most important findings?

One of the main findings was the lack of any structure for integrated data collection and management to have the comprehensive and accurate information needed for governance, administration and planning. At present, all sectors function in silos and are territorial with their resources. And people with capacity refrain from engaging in the public domain, either because, they will be find it a waste of time or because they will be publicly vilified for their efforts.

Analysis of the 2008-18 figures also revealed a lack of coherent policy planning linking Auroville's economic development to the development of its physical and social infrastructure. In other words, the present development modality is ad hoc, so the parts do not plug in together to create a greater whole.

But what was causing this? Was it a lack of human or financial resources?

No. The study shows that it is a systemic issue. The structural framework in place is preventing us from maximising our capacity. Our governance structure is self-defeating as it is creating mistrust between the residents and the working groups. The way the mandates of the major working groups are written ensures insularity. The working groups are appointed to administer decisions of the Residents' Assembly, but due to a lack of any unified policy making body, they are obliged to formulate hurried regulatory mechanisms to deal with crises, rather than as an output of a long-term vision. Moreover, these regulations do not relate to each other: in some cases, if you follow one, you could be violating another.

One example of this is how we regulate our economy. The commercial sector is meant to finance the public or service sector. However, the trend shows fewer residents are being employed in the commercial sector compared to the public / service sector, so the FAMC and BCC is constantly chasing after the 33% contribution on profits of the commercial units to pay for the city services' budgets. Besides the non-acknowledgement of the diversity of enterprises and differences in their production and profit cycles, this discourages start-ups and causes stagnation of small and medium sized units, as there is insufficient capital to invest in skill development, growth or diversification.

Having said this, one of the amazing things we found in our survey was, even though there not any kind of convergence of the regulations in the sectors studied, somehow the muddling through approach has not done too much damage. In fact, in some areas the present development could accommodate the doubling of our population. However, we will need targeted policies to coordinate the areas that are deficient if the needs of the projected population are to be met.

So how do you change the system in order to facilitate better development?

We need development, but not in the way we have been developing so far, which has been essentially through ad hoc projects that do not relate to each other. Presently Auroville is a mosaic of agencies and institutions. In order for them, to function together would need active collaboration. This could happen if there was a convergence in terms of programmes, with decisions taken within a unified policy planning framework. But to undertake unified policy planning we need reliable data.

The effective way to initiate and manage this change would be to identify mid-term goals for a

target population, based on a growth rate that is in sync with our carrying capacity, and undertake policy planning that would provide a framework to roll out programmes embedding the development projects needed to meet this growth.

Essentially the five main working groups (Entry Board, Working Committee, FAMC, TDC and the Auroville Council) have to come together and set up a policy planning body which looks at all existing mandates and regulations to bring convergence of policies, and this needs to be backed up with a reliable data management system for an accountable administration and an informed decision-making process. The data would give the quantitative goals while the programmes give the direction. These two must work together in a way that permits adaptation to new information, knowledge and changing circumstances. This is why it would be counterproductive to have policies that are too long term or over-arching, as they become an impediment to the very thing they were set up to enable.

I would not propose a sweeping change; this would cause regression and reactions that would entrench us in the ongoing conflicts. While the coordinated data collection and policies planning institutions need to be set up, some of the existing structures can be used to progress. In May 2017, the Residents Assembly ratified the planning principles. These could provide the baseline for a proposed land use for the Master Plan area and a Detailed Development Plan that is evidence based, and that responds to gaps and challenges in the present development while meeting the needs of next decade.

This study is the first step towards demonstrating the need for a unified policy planning body to ensure convergence between the policies of the various working groups, along with evidence-based planning to predict, plan and guide the development of Auroville.

Based on an interview with Alan

HEALTH

A bad (h)air day

Spring represents a sort of renewal of nature, with many bushes and trees budding and blossoming, and bugs and insects flying around in droves. So many airborne triggers of people's allergies; time to pop those Allium or Apis pills, whether for the fleeting sugar rush or for the real placebo effect that soothes both our body and our soul. At this time of the year, birds chirp, flowers bloom, and farmers carelessly spray thousands of litres of pesticide around to the dull drumming of the generator. It reaches the point where one does not know if the lingering smell is that of the cashew blossoms or of the million tiny droplets of pesticide. At this time of the year, everybody starts complaining about overwhelming fatigue, recurring headaches, itchy nose, swollen eyes... El Quasimodo – sorry, El Cashewmodo del Auroville!

What does not help is the temperature change that never ceases to amaze with the promptness of its arrival. This is the second consecutive year that the compulsory Covid mask becomes a mini-sauna for our noses in the heat, setting off respiratory unease and even panic attacks. Oh the bliss of taking off the mask when our errands are done!

There is ever more pollution in Auroville, including light, plastic and noise pollution, as well as electronic pollution from the various devices in our lives, cell phone towers and other sources. Perhaps one of the most pervasive and least understood forms of pollution is that of air pollution. Its effects on human health are dramatic: respiratory or cardiovascular problems, chest pain and congestion, skin irritations and rashes, hearing loss and high blood pressure, stress and sleep disturbance, headaches and tiredness. Probably the worst experience of air pollution we get in Auroville is that of burning trash from the open-air dump south of Auroville. Often, an awful smell creeps into our homes overnight, the stuff of nightmares. However, it is not the only source of air pollution we are exposed to.

So, what is air pollution?

Air quality is measured with the Air Quality Index, or AQI. It ranges from 0 to 500 and is expressed in micrograms per cubic metre. An AQI of 0 to 50 is the standard for "good air quality" in most countries. The level is, however, higher in India. Ideally, we should not be exposed to more than 20µg/m³. AQI includes ground-level ozone, particle pollution (also known as particulate matter, including PM 2.5 and PM 10), carbon monoxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen dioxide.

Particulate matter (PM) is a mixture of soot, smoke, metals, nitrates, sulphates, dust, water, rubber. PM 2.5 refers to a category of particulate pollutant that is 2.5 microns (micrometres or µm) or smaller in size; that is to say about 3% of the diameter of human hair. These pollutants are especially dangerous to our health because they bypass many of our body's defences and can then go into the lungs and blood. PM 10 are called fine particulates, and are also known as respirable particulate matter.

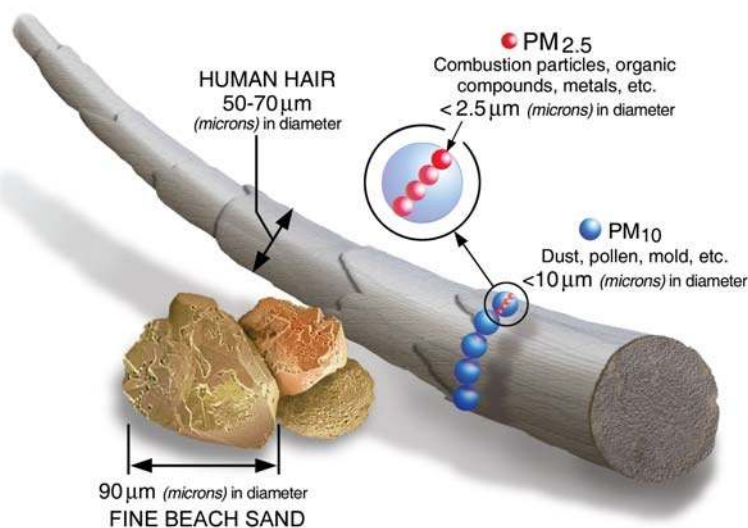
On a good day in Auroville, the measurements are at around 20 µm per m³.

This varies throughout the year, depending on the season and weather, with the worst numbers being recorded over winter and the best ones in summer. Right now, in spring, it varies between 10 and 40 during the day, with a spike at 80 if someone is burning a fire somewhere close by, and a drop if the wind picks up. Ideal weather for good air is windy in the early morning, not too fresh, with a clear blue sky.

Where does it come from?

Air pollution comes from combustion of any kind, such as man-made fires like vegetable waste in paddy fields, vehicles (especially diesel), incense, firecrackers. On Diwali for example, measurements in Delhi can sky-rocket to a record-breaking 1,800 to 3,500 µg per cubic metre!!! Breath-taking, isn't it?! Nevertheless, it also happens naturally, from forest fires, volcano smoke or by the seaside. Fires emit particulate matter, whether it is plastic, paper, tobacco or garden waste that is burning. An influential factor is the phenomenon of temperature inversion, which is when a layer of warm air develops on top of a layer of cooler air, acting like a cap that seals the cooler atmosphere beneath it, particulate matter included, thus preventing it from dissipating into the sky. Air pollutants do not remain static but generally form a "pollution cloche" or hub of smog over and around cities. It floats like a grey-red-purple haze, and is particularly good at trapping dust and chemicals that then hang around instead of dissipating into the sky.

A type of dust that is of direct concern for us in



Auroville is granite because granite dust is scattered on our roads and there is a granite quarry which grinds rocks to dust quite close to Auroville. Granite can contain up to 70% silica, and these dust particles can cause scarring in the lungs. However, studies conducted around the world, notably in India, show that non-occupational exposure to the airborne silica happens mainly in the close vicinity of the granite quarry, and particulate matter quantities drop from around 50 to 3 µg/m³ within a five-kilometre radius.

Contrary to local belief, air pollution because of airborne particulate matter does not come from other types of sand that we come into direct contact with on our dusty roads, or even pesticides, despite the latter being a dangerous neurotoxin. Whatever is visible is not considered particulate matter, because PM 2.5 and PM 10 cannot be seen by the naked eye, and act as a gas. So the sandy dust on some of our roads that many complain about does not actually get ingested by the lungs, as a grain of sand measures around 90 µm. Our body would end up naturally ejecting it via mucus.

What can I do against air pollution?

When the air quality dips due to a high presence of air particles, one can feel slightly short of breath. Other symptoms are asthma, wheezing, blocked sinuses, pain around the chest area, headache, dizziness, and heavy body feeling. When this is the case, various sites warn against strenuous physical activity until it lifts!

There are several things one can do to help shield oneself from air pollutants, such as wearing

"special" masks with HEPA filters, especially when visiting (big) cities, or single-use nose filter "stickers" from IIT Delhi which use nanotechnology. A social enterprise called Smart Air, operating in several countries in Asia, provides relatively cheap but good quality air purifiers. Several Aurovilians have already equipped their bedrooms with these air purifiers, and have suddenly recovered from years of asthma or sinus-related problems. However, all of these gadgets generate their own amount and kind of waste, such as the filters, so what is best is to raise awareness and prevent pollution, especially within Auroville and in the bioregion.

With regard to vehicle pollution, in India all new vehicles have very high emission limits, called Bharat Stage-6 norms, but it will take some time for all the old vehicles to be replaced by new ones. Within Auroville, instead of advising tourists and guests to rent petrol-driven mopeds or scooters during their stay, an eco-friendly alternative would be to encourage them to rent a Kinisi e-cycle, for example.

Another way to minimise air pollution within our communities would be to avoid burning anything. Instead, garden waste can be mulched and used as fertiliser for the plants. Compared to a big city like Delhi, our tree coverage in Auroville helps to a certain extent, as trees absorb and filter chemicals from the air, using them as nutrients. They also mitigate the greenhouse gas effect by trapping heat and reducing ozone levels. However, air pollution also injures and weakens trees by damaging living tissue and impairing photosynthesis. Furthermore, when it rains and the particles fall to the ground, known as atmospheric deposition, they can seep into and contaminate the soil and water.

So, on a "bad (h)air day", not much more can be done other than pray for heavy rains or a good wind!

Start raising awareness

The pandemic resulted in a notable drop in many forms of pollution, including air pollution. All over the world, planes stopped flying, bikes and cars stopped rolling, and air quality measurements went straight into the green, the universal code for "awesome". So there is no better time to start raising awareness and tackling pollution on all levels.

Divya L.

The Auroville Appeal Process revisited

In January 2017, the community approved the Auroville Appeal Process, a policy that regulates how an individual, a unit or a service can object to a decision of a working group. Has the policy been a success? Auroville Today talked to Elvira, Niva, Julia and Mukta, the trained facilitators connected to Koodam, the centre which supports individuals and groups with facilitation and conflict resolution, and to three appeal arbiters, Thera, Buntty and Tomas.

In 2015, the community approved the Auroville Conflict Resolution Policy which outlines three ways for dealing with conflicts. These are (1) mediation, where parties with the help of one or more trained mediators try to come to an agreement; (2) Restorative Circles, which address conflicts between people in a series of facilitated meetings to find a mutually acceptable solution; and (3) arbitration, where a decision is not made by the participants, but by the arbiters. But as their decisions cannot be considered as a conflict, the working groups did not want this Policy to be used in cases where there is a disagreement with the decision of a working group. To resolve this, a different policy, the Auroville Appeal Process, was formulated. It came into effect in February 2017.

The facilitated meeting

In accordance with the Appeal Process, an appeal starts with what is called ‘a friendly attempt to solve the disagreement’, in which qualified facilitators help the parties to better understand the decision and what lead to it, or reach a new decision. An appeal will only follow if no agreement is reached. These facilitated meetings have meanwhile proven their worth. Out of the 19 appeals that have been filed since the Process came into force, three were withdrawn after agreement was reached during the facilitated meetings, and another one, says Koodam, may also be withdrawn, as the individuals and the working group are trying to find a way forward acceptable by all.

These facilitated meetings have been shown to be essential for rebuilding trust between the members of the working group and the person who appeals. They are never held in the Town Hall, which is the source of the decision. Instead, the people meet elsewhere. With the help of the facilitator all are invited to connect on a human level: they hear each other, explain and sometimes apologize. Sometimes it ends with an acknowledgement that a process was not properly done, and sometimes there is then a willingness to discuss the matter further and find a solution which is acceptable to all. In other cases, they had the chance to share and listen.

The facilitators have observed that very often the actual pain point of people who initiate an appeal is , that they felt they weren’t ‘heard’. Sometimes they are invited to a meeting with the working group, but there is a big difference for them between being present in an official meeting and interacting on a personal level in a facilitated meeting. Often, in official meetings, the human connection disappears; the invitees feel imposed on and don’t feel able to fully express themselves. Sometimes it is different when people come together in a facilitated meeting; there an energy shift can happen and people can come to understand why a decision was made and what the consequences of that decision had on some individuals. The facilitators feel that this is something the community needs to look at: how there can be more conversation, how there can be more sharing on the personal level, how working groups can best take the feelings of affected people about their decision into account and how the individuals can understand more the responsibility and role of the working group members. “Irrespective of the outcome of the facilitated meeting, what is important is that afterwards people can smile again at each other when they meet,” says Elvira.

The acceptance of the appeal process and its facilitated meetings was not instantaneous. In the early days, working groups such as the Funds and Assets Management Committee and Town Development Council would argue that their decision was not appealable as it was made in the interest of the community as a whole. “Initially, there was a resistance to cooperate with the appeal process. Some working group members took it very personal when their working group’s decision was appealed against,” says Niva. “We met some of the working group’s members and explained them that the main purpose of the process is to improve our working group processes, asked them to cooperate and told them that they will not be criticized just for the sake of it.” Gradually, the appeal process was accepted. Some working group members now appreciate the facilitated meetings and realize that they are of help to convey their views to the appealing persons. They understand and respect the right of the individual to submit an appeal. From the community’s perspective, as working groups are now aware that appeals against their decision can be submitted, they have become more careful in their dealings with the people who are affected, and are better motivating and formulating their decisions.

Appeals, stay orders and learnings

Since 2017, 19 appeal requests have been submitted. Two appeals were not admitted as they did not meet the criteria; three appeals have been withdrawn and one more may be withdrawn after the facilitated meeting. In six cases, the working group’s decision was upheld. Four appeals are in process, one appeal was not conducted. In two recent appeals, which were dealt with jointly as they dealt with the same topic, that of the allocation the management of Roma’s Kitchen to new executives, the appeal arbiters decided that the decision of the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) could not be validated because there had been too many flaws and weaknesses in its decision-making process. This appeal was unique in the sense that, jointly with the appeal arbiters, the FAMC then made a new decision in the case, and also published the list of learning points which the appeal arbiters had identified.

The processing of this last appeal drew some criticism. Those to whom the FAMC had allocated the management of Roma’s Kitchen suddenly received a ‘stay order’ from the Auroville

The Auroville Appeal Process intends to:

1. Support fair, open and transparent decision-making processes.
2. Encourage accountability from our working groups.
3. Enable working groups to revise or change their decision-making.
4. Encourage the Auroville community to move towards shared responsibility.
5. Provide a framework to meaningfully address serious dissatisfactions of individuals with working groups’ decisions and thus harmonise and improve the relationship between working groups and the community.

Council, which meant that they had to pause the work to reopen the restaurant and wait for the outcome of the appeal. This was in order to have a fair appeal process. But that stay order was not lifted when those who had appealed later publicly stated that they were no longer interested in getting the management.

This, says Mukta, is a consequence of the Appeal Process. “When the appeal body concluded that the working group’s decision-making process had been flawed, the arbiters recommended the working group to revisit its initial decision. This is in accordance with the Appeal Process. The working group could have made an entirely new decision, or even decide to redo the entire selection process. The status quo could only be lifted after the working group had made its new decision considering the findings from the appeal.”

The use by the Auroville Council of the words ‘stay order’ and of ‘lifting of stay order’ when the appeal was over, is a misnomer. The Appeal Process says that the Council can recommend maintaining the specific status quo, which means ‘pause’. But ‘recommend’ is a weak term; one can argue that you don’t have to listen to a recommendation and can continue with what you are doing. The appeal arbiters therefore asked the Council to issue ‘a stay order’ to bring clarity. They have meanwhile recommended that this aspect of the appeal policy be looked into and be better formulated.

Two other learnings from this appeal are that decisions shouldn’t be considered as ‘final’ till the one-month period in which someone one can file an appeal is over; and that it would be good practice if a working group explicitly mentions in its decision that an appeal against it can be filed within one month. This is particularly relevant for those who would like to immediately make investments or take steps that are not easily reversible.

Authority, power and human unity

Though there is a big improvement in the way working groups are functioning as compared to ten years ago, the question of the proper use of ‘authority’ and ‘power’ often comes up. After all, working groups consist of Aurovilians who have been selected by the community to do a certain work for a certain period of time. They assume ‘authority’ to take certain decisions. But Auroville has a framework of extreme freedom; many people reject authority and will not accept decisions from a working group just because it comes from the ‘authority’. “The question is how to balance ‘authority’ and ‘power’ and Auroville’s value of human unity,” says Elvira. “Many times, the way decisions are arrived at and communicated causes pain and trauma to people, even more than the decision itself. For me, these are the big questions. It is not as easy as saying ‘We shouldn’t be authoritative and exercise power over others’, because we are not there yet either. How can we make difficult decisions that cause pain and grief in people, and hold this process together so we can heal?”

Judgemental attitudes

Over the last 25 years the awareness of the conflict resolution systems in Auroville has increased. There are now many more attempts to resolve problems using mediation, Restorative Circles, arbitration or appeal. But Koodam feels that the attitude of many Aurovilians is only slowly changing. There are still many people in the community who are asking for a process where someone decides who is right and who is wrong, and not “What is the right decision for the community?” or “How can we settle this conflict in harmony?” Often, they want someone to be punished for the mistake they believe he or she made. Also, there is a growing tendency in a number of Auroville to look for ‘legal’ solutions: they expect working groups to keep extremely detailed notes of each meeting, and they complain to the Secretary or the Governing Board when they disagree with a decision. All this, says Koodam, is contrary to what we in Auroville aim at. “For almost a decade we have been trying to establish restorative processes, processes that focus on restoring relationships and enable everybody to move on. That is in line with the ideals of Auroville. But it only works if the people in a dispute or disagreement take responsibility for it themselves and not blame others,” says Elvira.

Sadly, the judgemental attitude also comes up in facilitated meetings. A harmful dynamic is gaining grounds that working groups and its members are by default power-hungry and somehow not part of the Residents Assembly, or are even actively trying to harm it. “That narrative is gaining volume and if people initiate an appeal process but come from this stance, it is very hard to make good use of the potential of a facilitated meeting. When someone just wants the whole working group to resign because there is a deep conviction that there is systemic abuse of power, a two-hour conversation will not help them arrive at the answers they want,” says Niva. “This is not what the Auroville appeal

process is meant for. For in an Auroville appeal, the appeal arbiters, as representatives of the community, look at the decision and at the process that has been followed, with goodwill and in a spirit of service, and with a purpose to find a solution that will contribute to a growth of transparency and communication between all in the spirit of Auroville.”

Rewriting the Appeal Process

The Appeal Process 2017 states that it will be reviewed and fine-tuned after a year. But this has not happened. In 2018, the Auroville Council asked the community for feedback, but it didn’t receive any, probably because at the time the appeal process hadn’t been used much; only three appeals had been filed, and one of them was withdrawn.

The attempt to review the process was restarted late 2019. A task force was set up which met a few times and planned to ask for feedback from the community and from those who had been involved in an appeal. But the task force stopped functioning because of the COVID-19 lockdown, and some members resigned. The Auroville Council has taken it up recently again. The FAMC shared its feedback on the process. One interesting point mentioned is that the appeal process should not only focus on the working group’s process but also encourage a deep reflection by those seeking to appeal regarding their hopes for the appeal and how that relates to the wider community’s hopes and needs.

A good starting point for the review of the Appeal Process would be to study the arbitrations and appeal decisions of the last six years and make a list of all the recommendations and learning points that have been made. Many decisions contain not only recommendations from the arbiters on process deficiencies by the working groups, but also on systemic improvements that need to be done in the community as a whole. That list then should be discussed with the concerning working groups and shared with the community.

The arbiters

The appeal arbiters are selected from a so-called ‘pool of arbiters’, a dynamic group of people who are not connected to any working group. They received two trainings, and in the beginning, after each case, all the arbiters and the members of the Auroville Council and Koodam would come together to discuss the learnings from the case. Today, as the arbiters’ decision is final and binding, the draft of each appeal decision is shared with a few others from the pool of arbiters to get their feedback, to ensure that the final decision is well-formulated, as a kind of safety net.

Being an Auroville arbiter does not require a legal background. What is required is a willingness to serve and be open to listen to and to work together with others and then try and find the best solution in the interest of Auroville.

But not many arbiters are willing to do more than one arbitration or appeal. It takes a lot of energy, which is not always understood by those involved. “I have a deep appreciation for the work the arbiters are doing. They all have a full-time job somewhere else, yet they are willing to help solve an issue *pro bono* and meet three or four times a week for few weeks. I see only goodwill and true dedication,” says Niva. Her conviction is shared by all. “In the seven years of arbitration and appeals there was not once an issue with the arbiters,” says Elvira. “There were issues with accepting and implementing a decision, but I have never heard statements such as ‘Because of arbiter X, this decision is wrong.’ When Aurovilians come forward to help solve other peoples’ difficulties for Auroville’s Dream, we see real servitors, people who have goodwill and a true sense of service to the community.”

“In my experience, something higher comes out in these appeal cases,” says Tomas. “I am convinced that even people who have an aggressive attitude and have walked in heckling, will at some point cool down and be touched. That is the importance part, that the governance of Auroville gets lifted to another level.”

In conversation with Carel

LAND PURCHASES



In February 2021, Auroville purchased 19.09 acres in five Greenbelt areas, all funded by donations raised through Acres for Auroville. A major piece acquired is around the Irumbai lake (pictured)

Planting a seed

Awareness Through the body (ATB) is one of Auroville's truly groundbreaking programmes. For almost thirty years, Aloka, Joan and people who have since become facilitators in ATB, have helped generations of students, as well as adults, to know and manage the complexity of their own beings through simple tools rooted in sensory experience.

Recently Aloka and Joan published a book, *Awareness through the Body in the Kindergarten: First steps towards cultivating attention, relaxation and self-awareness*, as a companion volume to their first book, *Awareness through the Body - a way to enhance concentration, relaxation and self-knowledge in children and adults*. But what exactly is this body-centred work, and how does it relate to the process of the Integral Yoga? And what are the challenges of working with young children? Does it differ from working with adults?

Auroville Today: How did the Awareness Through the Body programme begin?

Joan: In 1992, some teachers from Transition school were concerned because the children had poor posture and they wanted something done to improve matters. They approached Ursula, and through Ursula we ended up in Transition school with a few guiding ideas from her about what we were supposed to do. However, when we figured out the situation, we realized it would not be possible to improve the posture of students who had no sense of attention, whose attention was all over the place, and moreover had no interest at all in "posture". So we started working on finding ways to address this. Simultaneously we also found ourselves working with the kindergarten children in the afternoons.



Aloka and Joan

parents for our first Open House and we saw these kids able to arrange themselves in perfect lines, both of us had tears in our eyes! Another example of how we worked is that, at first, the girls and boys did not want to sit next to each other. So at the beginning of the class we would have a game where they ran around as fast as they could, and when we clapped they had to arrange themselves quickly into a sequence of boy-girl, boy-girl while we counted how many seconds it took. Soon what began with a game became natural.

Joan: After a time, the children began to be more present in the moment, aware of what they were sensing, feeling, thinking, rather than being pulled in every direction by the impulses and moods of the group. And they were beginning to regulate themselves, which is an incredible first step.

You also work with even younger children in the kindergarten. Do you use a similar approach?

Aloka: In the kindergarten we also work by using whatever catches their attention. We always work through games, with moments of pause, moments of not-doing, as part of a game. We use their sense of imagination for this. We say, "Now we are going to lie down on the top of a mountain and look up at the sky." These moments bring them inside themselves, put them in contact with their inner world, and they begin to distinguish more clearly between outer and inner experiences.

Joan: Everybody, even a child of four years, can be helped to start paying attention, noticing different kinds of sensations and slowly develop the capacity to start using and directing their attention. At the same time they can start developing very basic mechanisms of self-regulation. From the age of four to fourteen years many things happen that could become settled habits in adulthood. When little changes happen at this age, it can result in big changes later in adulthood.

Aloka: At this early stage it's like planting a seed. The seeds grow, and sometimes the teenager or adult might not realise that the seed was put there long ago, but at a certain moment, when he or she find themselves in a certain situation, something may click. And that's not a mental click; it's in the body, in the being.

Is it very different working with older students or adults who have not done ATB before?

Aloka: It requires some time for a child who has not been exposed to ATB in the kindergarten to get into. We had kids coming into Transition school who didn't have that experience and often they needed up to one and half years to be able to deepen into what ATB could offer them. It's the same with adults. If the adult is new to this type of journey, he needs to get used to it, particularly because some adults tend to experience things primarily through their minds rather than through their bodies. This is why Joan, in his adult classes, keeps repeating as a kind of mantra, "Do not think the sensation, feel the sensation."

Joan: Children tend to be very flexible, while adults have more deeply ingrained programmes. Also, some adults think of themselves as fully formed, which creates a subconscious resistance to new sensations and perceptions, as they take for

granted that they are able to pay attention and be present. In reality, however, adults are similar to young children in the need to develop fully soft sustained conscious attention.

Basically we are working with human consciousness, and all we are doing is facilitating a few possibilities. But the thing itself, the realization in the body, has to come from inside each individual, and this can take a longer or shorter time. We are all evolving beings, children and adults alike, and learning happens at any point in our lives. In some cases, and in some aspects, one could say that there are children who integrate the work done in ATB more easily than adults, and vice versa. So what makes the difference? One is age, but there are also other factors like exposure, the degree to which individuals have been stimulated beforehand to be in touch with themselves, and then there is nature, for some people are naturally more inclined to this work than others.

Sri Aurobindo and The Mother reported that the physical mind is the most resistant to change, to transformation, and that it is better to begin with cleaning and transforming the mental and vital levels as a preparation for it being enlightened from above. By beginning with working on the body, are you not inverting that process?

Aloka: I don't think so. I started to work on the body when I was in the Ashram, and I started to work on it to open it up, something which Mother insisted upon. The physical mind is different from the body mind, and is different from the body consciousness. I'm not trying to do anything with my physical mind. Let it be there with its chitchat, I don't need to identify with it. I'm simply trying to open myself to Their light and force, and the only way that works for me is through the body, through becoming conscious of what is happening in the body.

The body has a sincerity and a clarity that the mind and the vital do not. But as the different planes are completely mingled, as soon as you go deeply into one of them, the work ripples to the other levels, too. It's all connected. But I don't like to give names to these things.

Joan: Naming is not important, the personal first-hand experience is. Although there are general directions common to all, there cannot be one process that works for everybody, because we are such complex beings and we are all different and in different life moments from one another. But if you are doing integral yoga, you need a clear framework, a direction, so that you can recognize what is happening and where you are, and Sri Aurobindo has provided us with an incredible work of reference.

The best approach is to go back to basics, to start by developing a sense for open soft attention as a body-felt sensation, and from there to start making the consciousness conscious.

So what is the simplest way to do this? To start paying attention to the sensations that are happening in the body. If you do this, you start noticing there are a lot of things happening there, and you can start to differentiate the levels and layers of perception and experience. Over time, you can first notice and then change how your attention

has been conditioned by your mind – for the mind can be very deceptive – and begin to get clear body-felt sensations which are meaningful, not imagined. You start getting clarity and if you can remain open, gradually you will become more plastic, more transparent, and more available for changes to happen. For each person the process is going to be different, but I believe that any part of the being, from the most rooted and tamasic to the most elevated, can change through bringing attention to the body in this way.

ATB can be useful for anybody because it will help them to feel better within themselves, they will find ease and they will come to know what is meaningful for them. An individual may not need or want to go any farther than becoming self-aware, self regulated, with a sense of a deeper self. However, I think it can really help people in

the integral yoga because, although ATB is not integral yoga in itself, it is fully based on the Integral Yoga. When you bring ATB into your practice, it can help bring clarity into your being and everything will become more open, more receptive to the process, even your physical mind.

For example, ATB offers an opportunity to practice freeing sensations and perceptions from judgments and preconceived ideas. When we remain in this detached "observer mode", we are able to notice all our inner and outer movements more clearly, without filters, and over time we can dis-identify our core, our deepest centre, from our thoughts, feelings, emotions, reactions and physical sensations. Ultimately, this is the goal of all the work in ATB.

Aloka: Since we follow Sri Aurobindo's teachings, our ultimate aim is to find that innermost centre or the psychic being, and then to align the different parts of ourselves around this core.



PHOTO: JOAN AND ALOKA

Working on balance, use of the feet, trust, confidence

Perhaps there was already a good foundation for ATB work in Auroville. For example, in the early years there was a huge emphasis upon working in matter, and people talked openly about the transformation, even supramentalisation, of the body. At the same time, there was a certain distrust of the mind; spontaneity was elevated above being 'too mental'.

Joan: We encourage moving away from the critical mind in ATB, but not from the reasoning mind. Until, through an inner movement, it is dispensed with, we need its ability to discern, discriminate.

Aloka: Often we delude ourselves with this talk of transformation. We need to have a real and solid experience of transformation to talk about it, otherwise it's just words. And what do we really know about the supramental? If we have not yet reached a fully true mind, what do we know? Before getting to the supramental, we need to attain the higher mind, live in the higher vital, work on them by discerning what comes from where, work on our emotions on the movements of our mind, and establish peace and quiet in the whole being.

However, in reality it is not us who is doing the work. We are being worked upon. So the only thing that we can really do is to become more open to Them, and say 'O.K. work on me'. And They are doing it in the way which is best for each of us. Today they are going to scrape down into my depths and tomorrow They are going to put a light somewhere else. So all I can do to help this process is to open up and be receptive. And, for me, the easiest way to do this is by diving deep in the body and by listening to what is going on there, becoming aware of my being.

From an interview by Alan

Awareness through the Body in the Kindergarten: First steps towards cultivating attention, relaxation and self, available from the usual outlets and on auroville.com

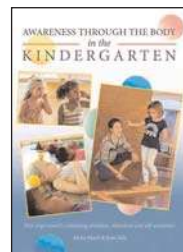


PHOTO: SANDY SOLWICH



Dead tiger: Acquiring a body felt sense for relaxation and ease

Initially, we called our work 'Body Awareness' but after three or four years we saw that this didn't fit what we were doing and, anyway, body awareness is used for a wide variety of different approaches. So it became 'Awareness through the Body'.

How did you work with the children in Transition school?

Aloka: We wanted to help them develop the faculty of attention, the fundamental building block of experience, through offering them activities in which they could have tangible experiences of paying attention in their bodies. Once they discovered how attention felt, they could begin to use it in their classes and in their life and to get to know themselves better. This is a basic aspect of the work of ATB.

Joan: We realized that many things we were doing already with adults could be introduced to children, but first we needed to catch their interest. We did this by combining different kinds of games. Some games produce quick, automatic attention and reactions, others generate focused, quality attention on one particular sensation, such as balancing a toy or balloon on one finger tip. In the beginning, we don't look to sustain attention for long stretches, but rather for quality attention, even if only for a few seconds.

Aloka: Later on, when the children are older, the balance between quick dynamic activities and exercises that generate quiet focused attention, is gradually reversed. So we started with a lot of games, but we were not playing the game for the sake of the game but to bring a little bit of organisation into their beings. The qualities we were hoping to develop through it were attention, self-control, along with acceptance of the rules. The children learned experientially that if they followed the rules of a game, they could have fun playing it.

Joan: There were things that didn't make sense to them at first. For example, if you asked them to make a line they couldn't; they would be all over the place.

Aloka: Making sense of what we were asking from them took some time, but when we invited

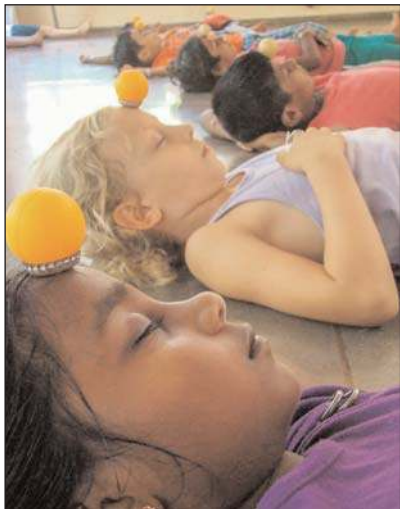


PHOTO: JOAN AND ALOKA

Focusometer: practising focusing attention and soft immobility

Learning a new language the Isai Ambalam way

Language classes often end up being dull, boring and tedious. What if there was a more interesting and fun-filled way to learn a new language? The Language Research Lab at Isai Ambalam School appears to have found a different route to language learning.

When Raghu Prashanth started volunteering at the Isai Ambalam School in 2018, he found the children struggling with English. They could not understand even simple things in their text books. Many of them did not know the difference between ‘him’ and ‘her’. Isai Ambalam is an Auroville outreach school tucked away in a quiet nook right at the boundary line of Auroville. It caters to the children of the surrounding villages. Sanjeev Ranganathan, Executive Principal of the school explains, “These children don’t hear any English in and around their homes. And that’s why they struggle with English.” And the lack of English becomes a bottleneck for the children even in other subjects.

But this is also an Indiawide problem. A report from Care India states that “In India, several large-scale studies have revealed that a significant percentage of our young children fail to reach basic levels of reading achievement.” And Raghu points out, “Whatever money the government is spending on higher education is going to waste as basic literacy skills are lacking in children. When 7th and 8th standard children in a reputed urban school were asked to read English instructions on a wrapper, 40% failed to do it. Children are passing exams by rote learning. There is no proper model to remove this bottleneck.”

Most schools in India teach English grammar by making students memorize the rules and by working on exercises instead of contextualising the grammar. Till now Isai Ambalam school has been using Glenn Doman techniques and phonics for teaching English. The children could read words but did not really understand the meaning. Often children memorised where English was required to be used.

Raghu started experimenting with different ways of teaching English. He started teaching rhymes and stories along with action and emotion and found a lot of improvement in the children’s comprehension of words. As the children were responding, he felt he was doing something right. But what? And how to enhance it?

Natural Language Approach

During his research, he discovered the Natural Language Acquisition theory developed in the early 1980s by Drs. Stephen Krashen of USC and Tracy Terrell of the University of California. This approach is based on how a child picks up its first language. According to them, there is a big chasm between conscious learning of language and subconscious acquisition of language. Only acquisition can lead to fluent language. And for that, it is very important that the learner be relaxed and in a stress-free atmosphere. They believe that just as a child unconsciously picks



Isai Ambalam students acting out the story of the thirsty crow and the low level of water in a pot. Top: the water level came up. Below: the crow flew happily away

up grammar from the language spoken at home, this can be simulated in the classroom where the students absorb grammar sub-consciously. Consequently, in this method, little or no importance is given to correction of errors or drilling the students or conscious learning of grammar rules.

Total Physical Response (TPR)

Raghu also discovered Total Physical Response (TPR), which is in alignment with the Natural Language Approach. TPR was developed in the 1970s by James J. Asher, a professor emeritus of psychology at San Jose State University.

In TPR, instructors give commands to students in the target language combined with body movement and students respond with whole-body actions. For example, the instructor will say “jump” and model the action by jumping. The students follow the action. This may be repeated a few times. Thus the word ‘jump’ gets internalized, in fact, it becomes a ‘muscle memory’ available for long term recall. Later, longer commands may be given, for example, “Kumar, tap Jack on top of his head after he completes writing on the chalkboard.” TPR activates the kinaesthetic sensory system (or muscle learning) in the same way that any manual skill like cycling, skating, swimming activates it.

TPR is very useful in the initial stages of learning a new language. Asher says that language body communication can be used to teach any language and to any age group, and also may be a useful alternative teaching strategy for students with dyslexia or

understanding and interest of the children.” Says Raghu, “We cannot just dump some lesson plans we have already prepared on the children. We have to tailor them according to their individual level and needs.” The team has also developed a systematic way of keeping track of the development of each child.

Kavitha who teaches 5th Standard English says, “Initially, I was somewhat hesitant about using these new methods. I was used to teaching English through the text book and by telling stories. For the past three months, I have been using these new methods and I find they really work. Children very quickly comprehend the meaning of a word or sentence. Earlier, they used to memorise, but now I find they understand and are able to narrate in their own words and even write, though with some spelling mistakes.” Kavitha says the children really enjoy the class now and so does she.

Tata Chemicals has employed these new methods of teaching English in six Village Learning Centres they have set up around their chemicals plant in Cuddalore, and they are very happy with the results. They want to scale it up and use these methods for an additional 13 Village Learning Centres in Andhra Pradesh and Gujarat with the help of Isai Ambalam School. Raghu says at the moment they don’t have the people to implement this expansion, but he is considering introducing an internship programme at the school to train people in these methods of teaching, for these methods are still new and untried in India.

Archana

ETHUCATHION

Maskeraid: a new form of communication

Suddenly, he knew this was the moment. It was now or never: his whole future lay in her hands. He turned to her.

“With youth marith mith?”

“Wath?”

“With youth marith mith?”

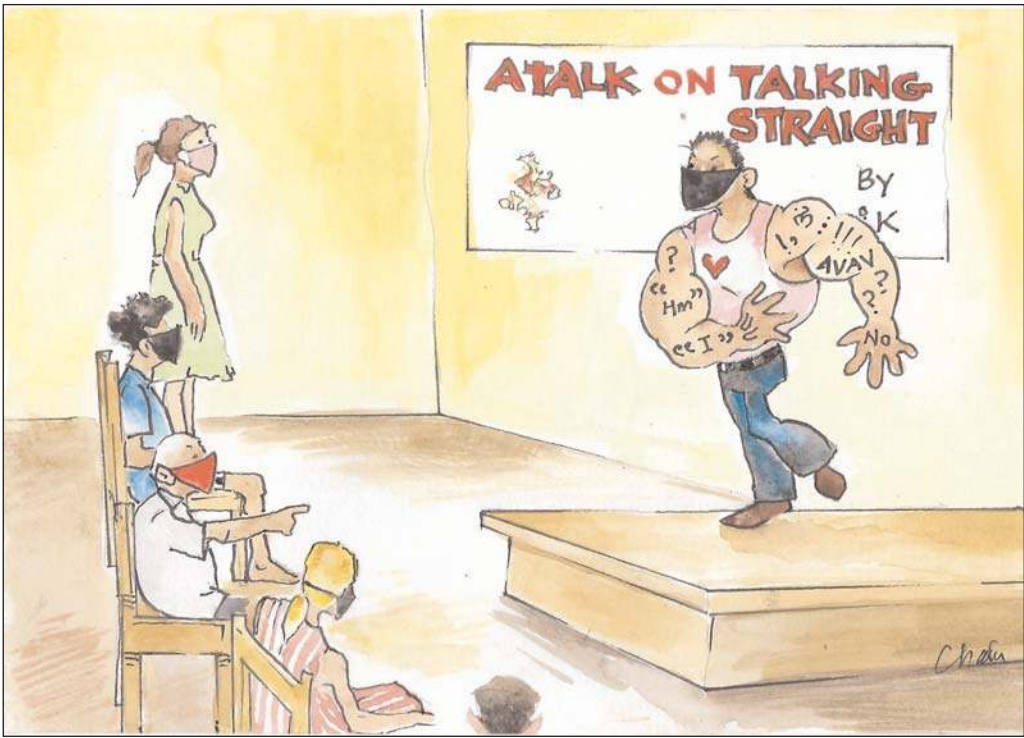
“Wath?”

“Oh, never minth.” He collapses.

And so it goes. Love and despair in the time of Covid. Or, why you shouldn’t propose marriage (or anything else) when you’re both wearing masks.

Understanding what people are trying to say is not always easy in a multi-cultural community like Auroville. While English is the *lingua franca*, it is spoken with so many different accents and intonations that sometimes it sounds more like *lingua obscura*. Add to that the difficulty of interpreting what somebody is saying when the lower half of their face is covered with a mask, and you realize that at the moment oral communication in the City of Dawn is somethimth damn dithculth.

Luckily, some Aurovilians have risen to the challenge. The Language Lab is now offering classes in what they have provisionally termed ‘maskeraid’, a new mode of interpersonal communication necessitated by the mask culture. Maskeraid sets out to augment and expand the other clues to communication which remain when the lower half of the face is



Interesting presentation: What language was that? “Maskeraid.”

hidden. For example, students are taught to ‘speak’ with their eyes and to accompany this with gestures, ‘body ballet’ and carefully calibrated grunts, howls, sighs, etc.

So a simple eye-roll, depending upon the speed and duration, can mean anything from

“You’re joking!” to “I’m experiencing global consciousness”. Similarly, a quick grunt accompanied by a sideways leap can either mean “On the other hand”, or “I’ve just had an idea”. (Of course, it could also mean “You stepped on my foot”. Context, as they say, is

everything.)

Apart from anything else, this makes entertaining viewing, for it gives even the most prosaic conversation (“Do you know when the film starts?” “I think at 7.30”) the appearance of an exotic mating ritual.

Gestural maskeraid is also useful for those moments when a masked apparition waves familiarly at you and you’ve no idea who it is. Generally, of course, you wave back, just to be on the safe side (it could be your partner). But now everybody can register with the Residents’ Assembly Service a gesture or body posture which uniquely identifies them, even when in full Hamzat gear. This database is available online, so once residents have memorized the 3,000 or so gestures and postures which distinguish one Aurovillian from another, nobody need be clueless about the masked identity of others.

Interestingly, some people have become so attached to their identifying gesture or posture that they have renamed themselves after it. A cursory glance at the new telephone book tells us that “corkscrew”, “starfish” and “one-legged antelope” now reside among us.

Is there a future for maskeraid in a post-Covid world? Who knows? Perhaps we will have forgotten by then how to form words and maskeraid will become our new, home-grown mode of communication.

For Mother did say that Auroville would develop its own language...

Alan

Bringing a distinctive female perspective into filmmaking

Earthling Koushalya's new Tamil language short film *En Udambu (My Body)* has been making waves at various screenings in Auroville and Pondicherry. Concerning body shaming and sexual harassment of women, the film has sparked lively debates and has been taken up by many of Auroville's outreach services as a discussion tool.

Hailing from Pondicherry, Earthling has been making films for the last 16 years with her local team, *Accessible Horizon Films*. *My Body* is not the first of Earthling's films to strike a major chord with audiences in Auroville. Two of her films have won the *Cinema Paradiso Award* at past Auroville's International Film Festivals: her feature-length film *Ashwamithra (Horse-friend)*, (2019), and her documentary *Metroxical New York* (2013).

So perhaps Auroville provides a receptive ground for the themes Earthling explores, and the way in which she explores them? Or perhaps, while her films may depict a Tamil-centric world, they have a global resonance that stems from the way they speak to the burning issues of the day – like sexual harassment – that are currently being debated around the world?

As Earthling sits down to discuss her filmmaking and life, her gentle voice belies her steely determination to offer an alternative filmmaker's perspective on the “pressing issues that the universe needs to address” – a perspective that she suggests can be both “powerful” while also bringing “the gentleness of the feminine into filmmaking”.



Earthling Kausalya

Becoming a filmmaker

As Earthling recounts her upbringing in Pondicherry, she emphasises that her family's values and practices were very unusual for the time. “The freedom I had from my parents was very progressive considering this culture,” she says. “They have been a big support and their efforts towards gender equality have always been empowering and inspiring.”

After gaining her degree in architecture in Kerala, Earthling practiced architecture for 18 months in Chennai and the Emirates, but she quickly became disillusioned. “They were building skyscrapers, and there was so much money involved. When I realised I had no creative freedom, I quit.”

Writing had always been a part of her life, and she soon published her first book of short stories, *Reckless Perceptions*. She and her childhood friends decided to make a film of the book's first story, and the story's title – *Accessible Horizon* – became the name of their film production company. Earthling is the sole female member of the four-fold team that also comprises Ramesh, Raghu and Mohandas, and she emphasises the team has remained aligned in values over the last 16 years – “a rare thing” – that underpins the team's sustainability.

After moving to the USA in order to push their creative boundaries and to fulfil their curiosity to travel, they began making documentaries about social issues in India and screened them at various film festivals in different parts of the world. One of the documentaries made in the USA focused on the subway musicians of New York. And on their visits to India, they made documentaries about sustainable development and rickshaw drivers (*Men of Burden*), and on an alternative school for street children of Chennai (*Wings of Evolution*).

Imbibing the spirit of independent film-making

Earthling describes the team's modus operandi as a “floating hierarchy” in which they rotate the roles of director, cinematographer, writer and editor, in order to help realise each other's visions. Gaining formal funding or turning a profit is not a priority. “Between us, we transcend money. We think

‘This project is important, let's put money into that.’ We don't think ‘It's my money, your money.’ No matter whose film it is, we're all there. That backing is a huge privilege.”

While the *Accessible Horizon* team has always operated outside the mainstream film system, this was not necessarily their initial intention. After 10 years in the USA, the team decided to move back to India to pursue filmmaking full-time, and tried to approach producers from the mainstream Tamil film industry to fund their script. When that didn't work, the team was therefore catalysed to pool their own savings to make their first independent Tamil feature film, which Earthling co-wrote, *Ayyanoorum Ayyanthum – 500&5*, and many friends helped in the filmmaking process. They released the film online, and also created video tutorials on their DIY process, including how they made their own track dollies.

In over 30 meetings with producers and distributors after the film was made independently, Earthling and her team discovered the attitudinal hurdles were just as big as the financial ones. She recounts having faced “ruthless” patriarchal situations. “The distributors would totally invisibilise me and talk only to the men in my team. I wondered, ‘Why am I encountering such a huge patriarchal force like this?’ After a point, I decided that I could not ever interact with the so-called mainstream.”

This experience was not the only reason the team lost interest in participating in the mainstream Tamil cinema. Earthling points to the nature of the mainstream narratives: “The language of films bothers me,” she underlines. “There's so much normalised misogyny in the majority of the Tamil films, so I've never been interested in that.”

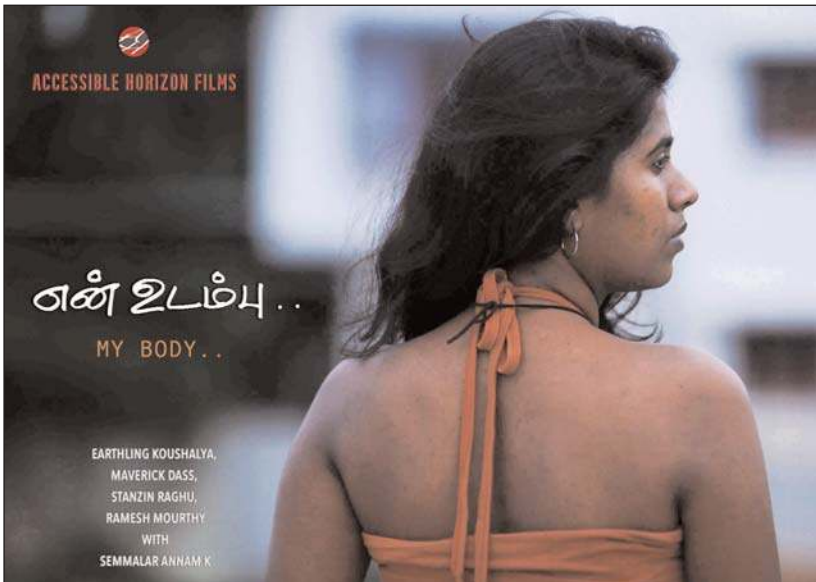
“Independent filmmaking was a powerful experience, a revolutionary movement, and the process was beautiful,” she says. “We went to a lot of film festivals and won awards, but all of that doesn't mean anything if you can't distribute it in your own region of Pondy and Tamil Nadu, which we couldn't.”

Building on her experience in scriptwriting, Earthling began directing her own films in 2017, beginning with the short Malayalam language film *Anthadhi (End-Beginning)*. Essentially a conversation between two young women in love, Earthling initially resisted the urge to label it as an LGBT film because she wanted to normalise depictions of non-heteronormative relationships. But she faced a dilemma: because she did not label it so, the film did not reach the LGBT community as much as it did when she later added the label. The film was invited to participate in many film festivals and it won the *Devaki Warriar Memorial Award* for women's empowerment in Kerala. During her last visit to the USA in 2019, Earthling made a documentary film, *Artryst – A Fluid Affair*, about an artist who does drag performance, which is currently screening in various public spaces in USA.

The spark for *Ashwamithra*, the first feature drama film she directed, came from her time as a volunteer reiki practitioner in a hospice in America. She saw many sick children in the hospice in silence and pain, and this sparked the idea of a child character who is unable to speak. “I enjoy pathos and tragedy, but I also want to give hope in my films. So I really wanted to show how the healing of trauma happens, and how parents can learn to connect at a child's level.” While *Ashwamithra* won the *Cinema Paradiso Award* in Auroville's film festival and generated interest in various other forums, the team couldn't release the film. But Earthling affirms that she's simply content with the process of making films.

My Body

The spark for her new Tamil short film, *En Udambu (My Body)*, came from a documentary she started making called *Objectification of Women in Media*, which was in turn inspired by her observations of the way women are presented and treated in the Indian film industry. “Women are used as props or eye candy,” she says of contemporary films, contrasting them with films made in the 1970s by male Tamil filmmakers that sensitively portrayed “real women, strong women, without objectification.” “In today's films, the male protagonist or hero will



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY EARTHLING

always have a purpose,” she explains. “The woman will not have a purpose; she merely pushes him to his goal. Movies like that are so toxic, especially in their depiction of rape. Forget about the woman being the victim of something so painful – it's always the man's experience which is highlighted, such as a husband ‘accepting’ his wife, or a father taking revenge. There is not a single mention of the girl's healing. And she is portrayed as feeling guilty about being raped, but why should she? And when directors create ‘powerful’ female characters, such as a businesswoman or superhero, they make the woman ‘manly’. That is, she will not cry, and will never be vulnerable. They just put male clichés into a woman.”

The documentary planned to examine three themes from a female perspective: the patriarchy of the global film industry; the roles of female performers globally; and the ‘item numbers’ (songs with obscene lyrics) in Tamil films. After interviewing 40 women from around the world for the documentary, she lost hope initially. “The saddest thing was, there was no woman who was not sexually harassed or body shamed. It's the same everywhere.”

As she looked at the films of Tamil male directors, she noticed particular tropes and clichéd narratives, particularly concerning female characters being blackmailed by men who threatened to ruin their reputations. “The male mainstream directors always make the woman character kill herself,” Earthling points out. “And then the parents or the boyfriend take revenge. And it's endlessly the same shaming. The victim's healing is not addressed.” Earthling points out that these narratives are rooted in Indian cultural values that deem the woman's body to be ‘sacred’, meaning that when she is violated, people say that the woman has become impure to the extent that the woman starts to hate her own body. And when women internalise the shame – sometimes to the extent of taking their own lives – these beliefs around impurity become normalised in the wider Indian culture.



Earthling and crew on the set of *En Udambu*

As Earthling considered these themes, she decided put the documentary on ‘pause’ and to take the themes in a new creative direction.

Wanting to offer an alternative end to the conventional blackmailing narrative, Earthling wrote an original script for a drama in which the female character reacts in an unpredictable way when two blackmailers challenge her existence. The multiple screenings of *My Body* in Auroville have been packed out, and have been followed by dynamic discussion sessions, often with heightened emotions as viewers discuss content that many find confrontational.

Many audience members at the Auroville screenings expressed that this was the first time they had participated in a discussion on such a topic, either in public or private. Some told of experiences that they had never shared with anyone before. People of all backgrounds and genders expressed

that they were speaking up despite their discomfort, because they felt that the world-wide problem of toxic male behaviour and harassment of women was pervasive and needs to be addressed. “This film was really raw,” says Earthling as she considers why it has struck such a strong chord with audiences. “It came from a place of collective grief. When people connect to it, I feel we're all breathing that collective grief together. It's time for that change to happen.”

Earthling emphasises that women's protests are not sufficient to stop the practices. “Men should start calling out other men,” she asserts. “The

other day at a screening it happened. Two men got into heated debate. I like that. It means the film has done something.”

Earthling was clear she wanted to take a different approach from conventional narratives that show perpetrators thrown into jail. “The law doesn't work, and most perpetrators are acquitted in one week,” she asserts. “My focus is on healing. If a woman empowers herself, starts loving her body, and does not let a stranger get in the way of that, then the toxic patriarchy will collapse eventually.” Another aspect of the film that has struck a chord with local audiences is the natural look of the lead female character and the way she feels empowered within her body.

Earthling perceives her approach to filmmaking and writing as ‘artivism’: art that encourages the transformation of harmful social practices. Given that a number of Auroville's outreach services have taken up the *My Body* film as a conversation starter amongst their own teams about sexism, harassment and body shaming, it seems that her mission of practical and attitudinal change is well underway. But Earthling's ‘artivist’ goal also includes the healing of women's “collective grief” that arises from harassment and shaming. “I realised, if it's time for something to be addressed, the universe will speak through somebody, through us artists. I always feel the universe speaking through me.”

Hobbies, causes

Following her meeting with the renowned clown doctor Dr. Patch Adams in the USA in 2007, Earthling became involved with the *School for Designing A Society* in Illinois. She documents the activism in the school sessions, and also does medical clowning.

Her team also works in animal rescue in Pondicherry, and they hike together on seedball treks in South India, where they scatter native seeds wrapped in clay and manure which then germinate naturally. Earthling emphasises that reading is an integral part of her everyday routine, especially poetry and graphic novels from her personal collection. She has also been taking violin lessons in the western classical tradition for the past five years, both in the USA and Auroville.

Earthling has had a long connection to Auroville, stemming back to her college days, when she would visit Auroville with her team to drink chai. She undertook a filmmaking residency in Auroville in 2013, and she now lives in nearby Kuilapalayam. “I love the music concerts and the films. So, when we returned from USA, we decided to come and stay close by. I feel absolutely at home in Auroville.”

As for joining Auroville, Earthling emphasises her need to travel outside for six months of the year, as she finds travelling and hiking in nature to be therapeutic and transformative. She's also clear that she doesn't want to be a part of any organisation. “I don't like to be part of any ‘ism’. I am a multilayered being. That's one of the main reasons I changed my name to Earthling – so I don't get boxed anywhere. I chose Earthling to represent something bigger.”

As to whether she feels she's developed a distinctive female filmmaking ‘voice’, Earthling suggests that it can be powerful to bring the feminine into filmmaking. She also points out that while she used to be “very hard and fast” about her convictions, her experiences of global travel and the overall “life process” have softened her stance. “I've mellowed over the years,” she smiles.

Lesley

The COVID-19 second wave

India is presently battling an aggressive second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic. India launched its vaccination drive in mid-January, starting with the vaccination of priority groups, followed by all those of 70 years and older. The government has meanwhile expanded the vaccination eligibility bracket to include all those above 18 years. The vaccination drive coupled with the availability of vaccines is expected to further increase the anti-COVID battle.

The 2nd Wave is characterised by virus strains that have been observed to be more contagious and virulent and – according to medical professionals – also may be partially resistant to antibodies developed by symptomatic and asymptomatic infections during the first wave. As a result, the total number of cases and active cases reported on a daily basis are currently triple the peak of the first wave. On April 23rd nationwide there were

346,000 positive cases in a 24-hour period. This has led to medical facilities being overwhelmed in many places in India. There is a shortage of beds as well as many drugs, oxygen, and medical supplies. All major hospitals that are designated for treating Covid-19 patients in and around Auroville and Pondicherry are overloaded and are concentrating their attention and resources on handling only very critical cases of Covid-19.

In Tamil Nadu the number of active cases has crossed 100,000. The Villupuram district where Auroville is located has registered more than 1,000 active cases, with positive cases in villages where Auroville employees live. The Tamil Nadu government has meanwhile ordered a daily night curfew and full curfew on Sundays. The government also ordered the closure of all restaurants (takeaway and delivery are allowed) and gatherings in large numbers. All travelers coming to Tamil

Nadu by air or ship from abroad will be allowed in only after showing the details registered (e-registration) on the website <http://eregister.tnega.org> when entering Tamil Nadu.

On April 30th, since the beginning of the second wave, Auroville counted 43 positive cases, while in all the months of the first wave only 20 people tested positive. It has been observed that most of the cases this time have symptoms and some have been/are very unwell, whereas in the initial wave almost all cases were asymptomatic. The Working Committee and the Santé medical staff have warned the community that Auroville's own resources for dealing with COVID-19 are very limited, both physically and medically, and that Auroville does not have the human and physical resources to deal with many more cases, especially if they are in a critical condition. Auroville is already challenged in assisting cases who have test-

ed positive and are unwell, and by tracing their contacts to limit further spread, and does not have the medical resources to manage Covid-19 cases who cannot be managed at home due to a deterioration in their condition. The community has been strongly advised to take maximum precautions – wear masks, practise good hand hygiene and keep a safe distance of at least 2 metres from others as far as possible – to reduce the risk of contagion and reduce activities that are not essential. The Secretary has informed the community that no physical meetings are allowed until further notice. The Matrimandir Inner Chamber and all public buildings and playgrounds have been closed as well.

A call has been gone out for individuals to meet in our own safe environment at 5 PM every day for 5 to 10 minutes to invoke the Mother and Sri Aurobindo with a call for healing and protection for Auroville, India and the World.

IN MEMORIAM

Manoj Das

On April 27th, the eminent Odia and English litterateur and former Sri Aurobindo Ashram trustee, Shri Manoj Das, passed away in the Ashram nursing home from terminal cancer and age-related ailments. He was 87. Manoj Das had been the recipient of many literary and philosophical awards, amongst which the highest civilian awards of India, the *Padma Shri* and the *Padma Bhushan*. Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi was among the many who condoled his death.

Manoj Das was not only well-known for his 'magical and impactful writings' in Odia and English but also for being an exponent of Sri Aurobindo's philosophy. He joined the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1963, teaching English literature and the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. Most of his creative writings in Odia and English – appreciated for their style, coinage of words and choice of subjects – were penned in Puducherry and some of his books were translated into several major languages of India. His writings were mainly about human suffering in the villages of Odisha – of which he himself had had his full share – but he layered them with such fantasy and satire that it left an indelible impression on the minds of readers. As Ashutosh Kumar Thakur wrote, "His short stories, novels, essays and poems presented a perfect combination of social realism and understanding of human psyche. He was the author who never knew that writing was an activity that was special. For him it was as natural as speaking or humming a tune."

It was as a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram that Manoj participated in Auroville's founding ceremony on February 28th, 1968. It was, he wrote, "The day the heavens kissed our earth." "I do not remember when and from whom I heard about the idea of Auroville, but it appeared to me natural, almost inevitable, in the context of The Mother's Dream of a place where people could lead a life according to the dictates of the highest and also her warning that it had become imperative for men, countries and continents to choose between Truth or the Abyss." He was charged with arranging for the news coverage of the event. Helped "by a young and energetic government employee, Shri Varadharajan who joined Auroville afterwards", he met with the editors or the management of all the newspapers, English and Tamil, as well as the All India Radio, in Chennai, Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata. "Some of the journalists felt inspired at the prospect of covering an event that was off the beaten track," he wrote, "but others were a bit skeptical". On February 28th, 1968, he received the journalists on site. The foundation ceremony, he wrote, was momentous. "It was as if a chunk of some celestial world had descended on our tired earth and had unexpectedly transformed its mood into that of a grand expectation and assurance. Thousands of people from the nearby



areas had collected, apart from hundreds who had arrived from different parts of India and abroad. A pregnant silence prevailed well before The Mother's voice was to enliven the atmosphere in a live broadcast from her room in the Ashram. Throughout the event not a leaf stirred. Sunil's serene music and the mantric words uttered by those entrusted with the task by The Mother, enhanced the magic of that hitherto unknown silence – a silence that could cast a spell over multitudes."

Manoj once wrote an article for Auroville Today about how to introduce Sri Aurobindo to those with no background in Yoga or spirituality. "Alas, billions in the world have no interest in Yoga and spirituality. They are absorbed in seeking happiness in their own ways, probably in the wrong ways for the most part, as we may feel. Yet we may feel that there are many among them who are truly seeking the way – the true way that would make them satisfied in life – the way to truth, if I may so put it, and out of our goodwill for them we may feel the urge to share with them the truth we have been fortunate to find – Sri Aurobindo's vision of the future of man, his assurance that despite the complex crisis through which humanity is passing today, there is the certainty of a different tomorrow, a transformed humanity in terms of evolution ... For me, this alone could be the motivating force behind any urge to introduce Sri Aurobindo to others. ... The explorers of the invisible realms of consciousness – we call them the mystics – alone are responsible for the rapid enlightenment of individuals who follow their clue, or the slow growth of the collectivity that has come a long way from the primeval chaos to forming a United Nations or participating in an experiment like Auroville."

Yet, what he will probably be best remembered for are not his outstanding achievements, or is knowledge of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, but for his humility and modesty. "I am myself looking for answers to my questions since my childhood. How on earth can I answer your questions?" Das once replied to an enquiring journalist. "He had one of those rare combinations of 'head' and 'heart,' despite all the praise and awards showered on him," recalls Bindu Mohanty. "His wife used to tease him that the praise feeds his ego, but if it did, it never showed in the kindness and deep respect with which he treated all – big or small, young or old. And thus as a shy teenager, when I met him at my parents' house, in a quiet moment when the noisy adults had left the room, he turned to me gravely and asked in Odiya 'do you write?'" I silently offered to him my journal of poetic scribbles, which no one else other than me had ever read. He took it back to his room, and then the next day came up to me and said that he was delighted to have discovered a poet in his visit, and that he was glad that his intuition about me proved to be correct. He selected two poems and later published one in the magazine, *Heritage*, and sent me my first-ever cheque of Rs. 50! It is so rare when someone is able to fathom your soul's deepest urge and reflect it back to you. And I am sure he must have played that deep mentoring role for so many other young people that he tutored at Knowledge in the Ashram school. Since that day, as he treated me as an equal, I had a relationship with him and had the occasion to ask him deep philosophical questions."

Sanjeev Agarwal too recalled Manoj's strong influence on his life. "He has helped to shape who I am. I met him during a series of lectures given by him and organised by the Centre of Indian Culture at Bharat Nivas. The theme of the lectures was the role of stories in the culture of India and particularly in the education of the people of India. ... The way he told these stories revealed his mastery of the art of storytelling. He had the ability to wrap the attention of his listeners in the story he was telling and carry this attention towards whichever emotion he was trying to evoke through the story-suspense. I can still recall, after twenty or more years, his narration of these stories as if I was hearing them now." It led Sanjeev to telling stories to the children of Udavi School in the morning assembly – a serialized version of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* and of various other stories – for about 15 minutes each day, and he also initiated a programme of publishing illustrated stories for children by SAIER.

"Manoj Das' passing has not only created a void in the world of literature, but also a void in our world of aspiring yogis," writes Bindu. "His was a nobility of soul, unsullied by the accolades that were showered upon him."

Ellen Eckelmann

Ellen Eckelmann left her body on March 30th in her New Community home in Certitude at the age of 79. Since being involved in a motorcycle accident in June 2020, she had been suffering from almost continuous fatigue and Alzheimer's; her frail condition culminated in an epileptic crisis a few days before her passing.

Ellen, born in Berlin, Germany, after numerous visits, settled in Auroville in 1981. She initially got involved in the difficult situation of Auroville at the time. Soon she started the garment unit Cocoon, doing export and eventually managing Nandini and supplying residents with a range of finely tailored clothing items. Later she became active in staging theater plays, resulting in a number of well executed performances by Aurovilians.

Ellen managed the large New Community building, hosting many people. In October last year this building became a Newcomer community. Some Newcomers interested in a community way of living moved into the apartments and Ellen, grateful and happy, could let go. As her health condition deteriorated, all the members of New Community gave time to support and care for her. As one of them recalled, "The relationship with her was beautiful. We mutually supported each other: we, the residents, by our presence and care, and Ellen by her openness, her beauty, her inner light and unconditional love which she would without fail give to us day after day. Her beauty and tenderness filled our hearts."

Ellen remains were cremated at the Auroville cremation ground on April 4th.



PASSINGS

Parvathi Jaiswal



On April 23rd, Parvathi Jaiswal, the mother of Giridev and Himel, passed away due to a stroke. She was 90 years old and had been living in Ami with her sons and grandchildren. Parvathi's remains were buried at Auroville's burial grounds the same day.

The second Art Camp

The second edition of the Art Camp took place in Auroville from 20 to 27 March. For a week, twenty artists from the community and all over India had the opportunity to work together in the quiet atmosphere of the Tibetan Pavilion. The common theme chosen for this year by the organizers, Claire and Hervé, was "The City of Dawn", inspired by several passages from *Savitri*.

Art Camp aims to create a bridge between Indian and Aurovillian artists, and to raise awareness about Aurovillian art. "It is important to connect people, create networks and support the development of art in Auroville," say the organizers. The participants of the Camp are selected for the quality of their work, their connection to Auroville's *raison d'être*, and their approach to the theme proposed for the year. The selection aims to ensure diversity in such a way that established artists, emerging artists and others can work together. It does not matter where the artists come from, if they are known or unknown, whether they have followed an academic path or are self-taught. The important thing is that they are professional artists.

The lockdown prevented the Art Camp happening last year but the selection of artists for the cancelled 2020 camp was retained for this edition. Given that the participants have been looking forward to this moment for a whole year, this felt like a special edition for all of them.

This year's Camp is more sober and intimate and the organizers explain that the artists have been given much more free time to process the experience, "This time we decided to give more freedom to the artists to experience Auroville.



Artists working on a public art installation on the path between the Visitors' Centre and the Matrimandir

This created more space for spontaneity and exchanges between the participants."

As happened in 2019, the artists had the opportunity to collectively create a public art installation. The organizers explained that it was important to have something that connected the artists with the

community through working on a public space, because usually an art camp is a somewhat closed activity. For the first Art Camp, twelve concrete pillars of different heights were designed and erected to create movement on the path from the Visitors' Center to the Matrimandir. This year, again in col-

laboration with Nicole from the Visitors' Centre, they chose to paint two walls with different shades of blue along the path to the Matrimandir.

When they start working on the public artworks, they barely know each other and it is challenging to create a joint work in a short time frame because painters usually work alone in their studios. But they bond while they are working.

As in the first edition, this Art Camp ended with an exhibition which took place at the Centre d'Art, Citadines.

Art Camp is an event that is growing more and more, surprising the organizers by the extent of its impact and its positive consequences. As ties are established and bridges are built between Aurovillian and Indian artists, new doors open, and the word about the event spreads. New networks are created to support art and artists at different levels.

Initiatives like this need to be supported, for they strengthen the experience of human unity and connections. Artistic and cultural exchanges are key in Auroville because they can help residents to widen their horizons, raise the quality of the art produced here and spread the message, both in India and worldwide, of the ideals on which Auroville is founded.

Valentina



Milo, an Aurovillian from the UK.



Jyoti, an Aurovillian from Japan



Rakesh Ray Choudhury from Assam, India



Claire Iono, an Aurovillian from France



Jyoti Singh from Madhya Pradesh, India



Xin Peng, an Aurovillian from China

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