# Raising the bar on mobility and urban planning

Architect David Nightingale has been developing a plan for Auroville's Cultural Zone, which has led him to more broadly consider Auroville's urban planning and mobility issues. He recently presented his proposal A Strategic Approach to Mobility on the Crown in Auroville, which was well received. This is an edited transcript of an interview with him.

Auroville Today: So, let's start with the early architectural models for Auroville. You believe that the Galaxy Model didn't specifically designate the Crown to be a road?

David: That's how I interpret it. When you look at the Galaxy Model, there are no roads in the image – in profound contrast to all of Roger's earlier proposals. If you zoom in, you can see that the Crown unfolds around the circle, creating a very dynamic mixture of different elements. The blue-green and white elements can be interpreted in different ways. The white can obviously be seen as buildings, but could also be covered spaces, or hard landscaping extending on the ground. The only visible circle seems to be more like a canal linking the spaces between the built sections. But the first thing people ask me when I describe it like that is, 'What?! Do you really think there will be no roads?' But the Galaxy Model is a concept model, it's not meant to answer all the questions straight away. Just because we see what looks like a canal running around the Crown, it doesn't mean Mother was imagining a Venice of south India with gondolas moving around – we shouldn't take it literally. But as a concept model, it emphasises some elements over others. It's a product of 1968 and the culmination of the work Mother and Roger did together, but I believe it's meant to be reinterpreted as we go along. It's not cast in stone,and I believe it's our task to tease out solutions from it. Evolution is a fundamental part of the Integral Yoga, so it fits for me that we have an evolving urban plan that's adapting as we evolve.

How well have we succeeded in doing this?

We have not given sufficient attention over the years as to how to interpret the Galaxy Model, and have developed a Master Plan focused primarily on efficiency. In my view, we've boiled down complex aspects into lowest common denominator solutions. What we're doing today in Auroville is the opposite of what most of the cities in the world that we consider beautiful have done. Our design decisions are responding to engineering decisions, and not the other way around. The engineering solutions should instead provide the solutions to our designs. We've focused on the essence of what we need – roads, cables, sewage pipes, water – and turned it into an engineering challenge since this is something that we can easily get our heads around. And as a result, in my view what we're seeing today, ten years after the first paved roads were started, is the opposite of what the Galaxy Model represents and the opposite of what the Mother asked for. We have over-simplified the challenge she put
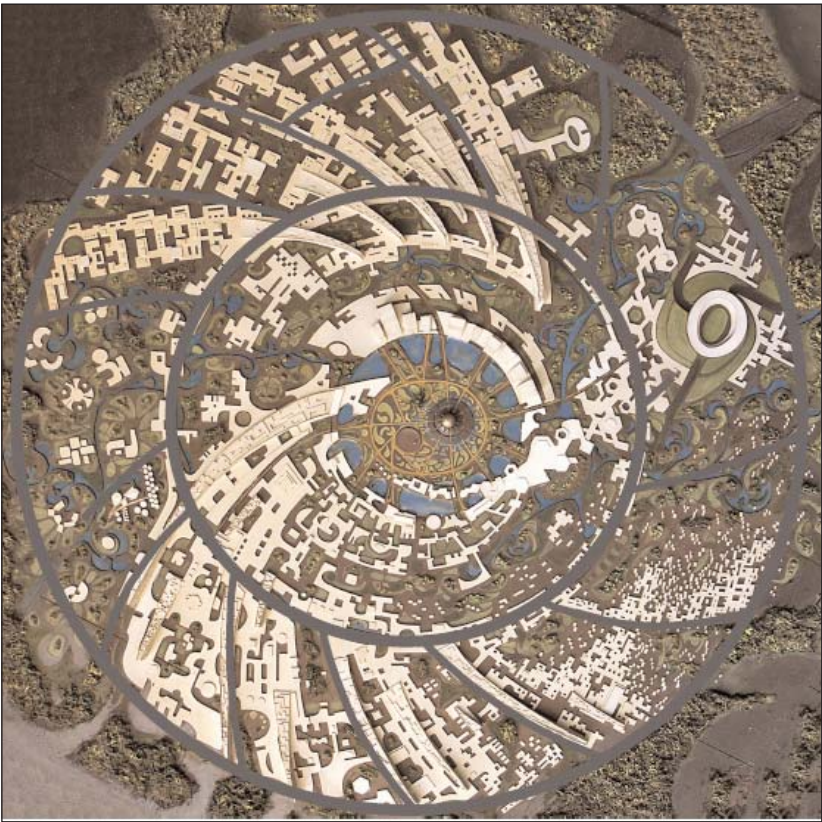
The Galaxy model with the Crown Road (dark blue inner circle), the outer ring road (dark blue outer circle) and the radials connecting the two superimposed

in front of us, in order to have the feeling that we're achieving something, and by doing so we're failing day by day to embrace the higher challenge.

For example, if I take the original Galaxy Model, and superimpose a grey circle to show what will happen to it conceptually if we build the Crown as a road – as Auroville has started to do – it shows how the whole connectivity and energy flow of buildings and spaces, and the movement of people, is completely cut. The heart and soul of the township becomes amputated from the rest. If the road is completed as it exists today, the Crown will become the absolute antithesis of the Galaxy Model that Mother approved.

So how did Mother envisage mobility?

The Mother apparently said that we should be travelling at a

maximum of 25 kilometres per hour within the city, which means in essence that we should be moving consciously and slowly, and I would also add quietly. So, Auroville was not supposed to be a high-speed city, and it's not about getting from A to B as fast as we can.

What role has the Master Plan played in the development of roads?

Roger presented the Galaxy Model just before the inauguration, and I like to think Mother took one look at it and with a twinkle in her eye thought 'That will keep them busy.' If she'd wanted us to build something easy, she could have simply chosen the first Grid Model. It would have been finished years ago. In the end it's a blessing that it wasn't finished in five or ten years, since if it had been, we would have probably ended up with a South Indian Brasilia, Canberra or Chandigarh frozen in time – a snapshot of a futuristic vision from the late 60s. The Galaxy Model is a nightmare from a planning point of view, and that's exactly the point. It has amazing qualities and amazing depth to it, which is what we're being asked to explore. We should be collectively going as high and as wide as we can, to work out how that would look today, including all the ecological and technological advances that have been made in the meantime. The Master Plan was supposed to be reassessed every five years. Twenty years later, it has not been reassessed once. I don't know why that is, but we all need to become more proactive and more involved to address this lacuna.

Because wide roads have been built, that means that cars come?

Yes, the traffic planner Karl-Heinz Posch predicted this back in 2008 and advised against it – it's naïve to think that we can build all these roads, and then everyone will be just cycling on them or taking electric buses. Those hopeful visions ignore present circumstances and human nature. Unfortunately, humanity only usually wakes up once we've made some mistakes. The Dreamcatchers presented an alternative Crownways in 2008, before the road was paved, to show how we could create beautiful public spaces which would not encourage fast, heavy traffic. But it seems there was a commitment to continuing with the status quo of the Master Plan with the Crown and Radial roads etc., which is what we have today. Aurovilians generally accept the need for quiet, non-polluting transport, but people are reluctant to sacrifice the creature comforts of their day-to-day life. They may not want to pay more for it, to take longer to get somewhere, to wait for a bus, etc. But for alternative mobility to have a chance, the majority of residents all have to want it .

What is your suggested solution?

I'm suggesting we develop an alternative mobility in phases, and create a series of urban spaces along the Crown. And where the peramboke [*common village*] land crosses the Crown, you'd have a crossover point, a place where someone coming from Certitude can park their noisy vehicle, and get on an electric cycle or take a shuttle and spend a couple of hours going around the Crown, doing their shopping and going to the library, and then park the electric cycle and get back on their vehicle to go back to Certitude. As we create each section, we'll learn from our mistakes and add new technology as it comes on-line. This was also proposed in 2008 but it was probably too ambitious for that time, because the range of options around electrical vehicles – now provided by Kinisi and ITS and City Transport – weren't there then. But the proposal sowed the seeds, and those 12 years have enabled our electric transport infrastructure to evolve, and now it's just about ripe to handle a proposal like this.

We could also develop the Crown in different ways in different parts. Take Marie's sketches [*see illustrations on page 4*] that show what the Crown could look like, and imagine you're travelling around the Crown on the electric shuttle. The first image shows how the Crown might look where the van passes through Darkali. There's very sparse housing around there within one of the parks, and there's a more alternative 'eco' feeling with a bamboo bus stand, etc. It has a very different quality to the next picture, which shows the Crown at the Solar Kitchen roundabout.That area is currently very open and sterile, so I suggested to Marie that she draw the road tighter and curvier (to 'de-road' it in fact), to put a market near the road and to put a banyan in the middle of the roundabout.

Imagined Crown at Solar Kitchen roundabout

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What are the issues with getting such designs implemented? Is it to do with L'Avenir?

L'Avenir d'Auroville is supposed to be the interface between a planning office and the community. Rather than thinking that they should be doing all the work, they should ideally be reaching out to the community for guidance. Our dreams are constantly ahead of our capacity to manage them. We need to find money for a technical office to do the planning. I would like to stress we are all L'Avenir, we are all Auroville. As long as we choose to give away the power and have these decisions made in our name, we'll keep getting roads. That's not a judgement on anyone. If you give the job of creating a system of electrical cables for Auroville to an electrical engineer, and if they don't have any other plan to respond to, they'll simply come up with the most efficient solution possible. They aren't doing anything wrong, but no one has set the bar higher. So by default, we're getting engineering solutions because the engineers are doing their job in a design vacuum.

Does that 'low bar' also explain why there are more cars in Auroville?

We have an ageing population, and many of them don't feel safe anymore on a moped. Some people get cars because it's more comfortable to have air-conditioned transport in the summer months, and yet others use them because they are 'differently-abled'. However, the more cars there are, the more danger on the roads, so people want more cars. As long as we have motorcycles driving at maximum speed and ever-increasing volume on the Crown, the urban artery of Auroville, no one can live or work comfortably there. The units operating in Kalpana, for example, apparently hire rooms in other parts of Auroville for important meetings, because their own offices are too noisy due to the loud vehicles on the road outside – and if they don't do that yet, they probably soon will.

So this is exactly the right moment to introduce an alternative. Rather than continuing the American model where you drive to the post office, and then to the library, and then to the Solar Kitchen for lunch, we need to create beautiful urban spaces where people can walk or cycle, and to invert the hierarchy so that pedestrians have priority, then cyclists, then collective transport, then private electric vehicles, and then, last of all, private non-emission-free vehicles. By the way, when I talk about polluting, I'm not pretending that electric vehicles are not polluting. But I don't want an alternative mobility solution to get bogged down in those discussions, which can continue in the background if necessary. Let's just accept that everything is polluting in some form or another, but that if we want to create beautiful urban spaces, we have to do it with solutions that are quiet and non-polluting at the place where the engine is running.

Doesn't the problem of transport also have to do with urban planning and access to services? For instance, the many Aurovilians who are not members of PTDC [which has a long waiting list] currently have to travel some distance to HERS or PTPS in Kuilapalyam just to do simple grocery shopping because there is nowhere in the centre for them to buy the basics. Shouldn't the basic services be offered to all residents within accessible distances?

Absolutely. Firstly, we need a new PTDC, and many agree about that. And we also need public transport – there's the new proposal for La nAVette. People are trying to approach this from different perspectives. And there's no silver bullet. I think we need all these approaches. As each new approach comes online, we will learn what works. With the situation you've described, it's easy for people to justify having to have a motorbike to do that. It's the easy, lowest common denominator solution, but ultimately I don't believe that we all came to Auroville for that.

An elderly Aurovilian should also not be expected to have to go to the old Pour Tous to do some shopping if they don't wish to. There should be a shopping service, and baskets could be delivered. We need
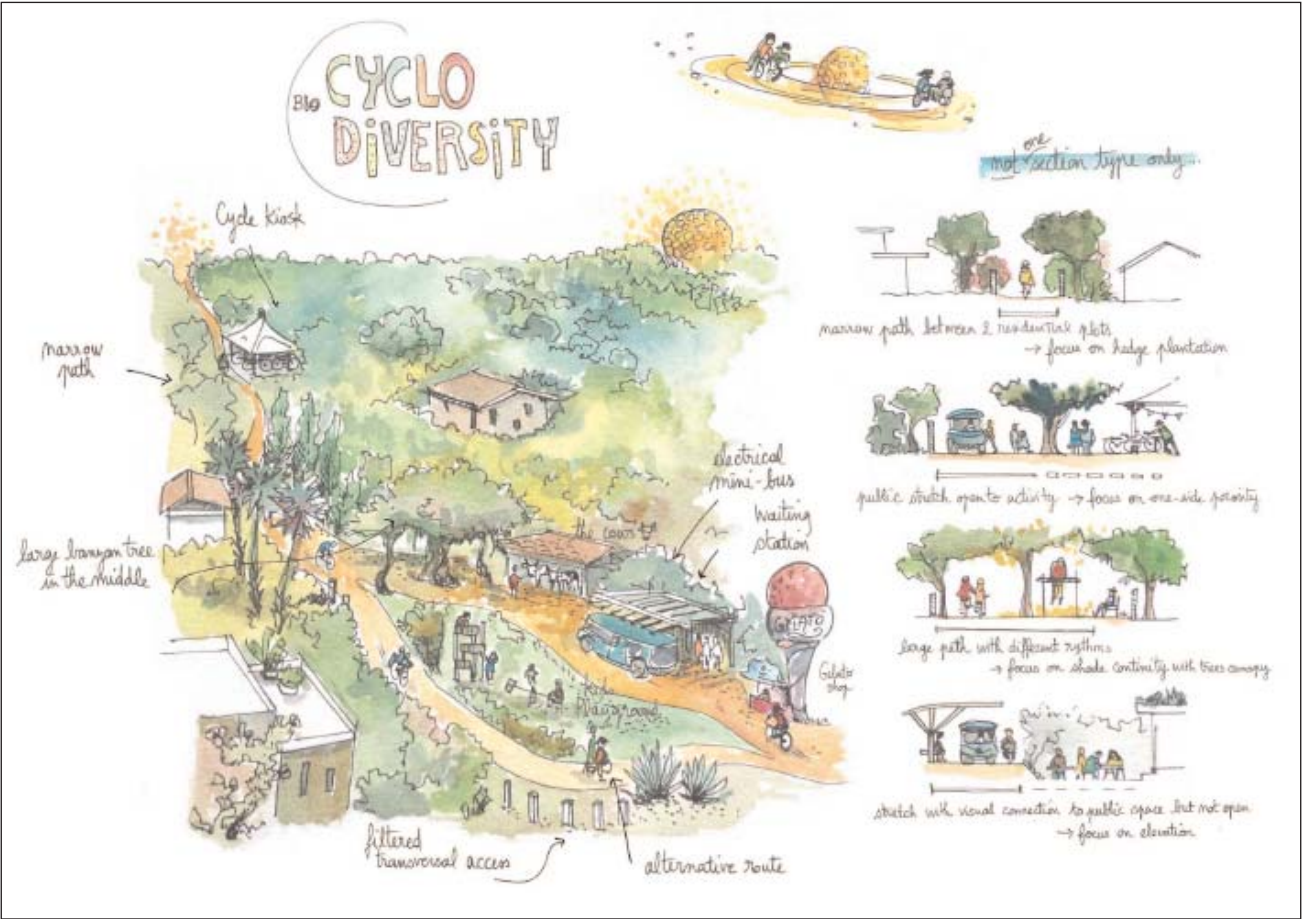
Imagined Crown in Darkali

a new PTDC somewhere on the Crown. Or create a second Solar Kitchen somewhere else, and the new PTDC could be combined with that.

What's your proposed solution for the Crown?

It's primarily a design challenge. You can see in the two illustrations how, with some simple design interventions, you can de-road the road and make public spaces more intimate and welcoming. Just imagine any townscape from 100 years ago with a series of plazas and squares – Rome being a perfect example. I believe Mother saw a similar approach in Roger's Galaxy Model: a series of spaces like pearls on a necklace, and you go through the buildings to get to the next one. Those traditional qualities were lost in many cities around the world after the Second World War, because the advertising gods did a great job of selling us the car, connected to the idea of the suburb. We effectively sold the quality of urban space to the supposed carrot of freedom of independent movement. However, if we plan it right, almost no one will need a car in Auroville.

I recently came up with a proposal to help manifest such an alternative Crown by designating different parts of Auroville for different value systems. For example, an area where there is zero cash exchange, or an area for people living lightly in temporary housing, or areas that encourage people to be entrepreneurial. There could even be an area for teenagers nearer the tar-road who want fast noisy motorbikes. So you actually encourage people to live in the most suitable area, and the planners need to just accept that that's part of the natural growth of both people and towns. The problem right now is that the most sensitive people are living amongst those who are less sensitive to their requirements, and who want to drive their noisy motorcycles wherever and whenever they want. But if we accept human nature as evolving, we can plan for different areas which people would naturally gravitate towards according to their values.

And do you think people will use a public transport system here, providing it is a good one?

If we create a beautiful inspiring Crown, that has no noisy traffic with lots of people living there and lots of activity, and there's a café on the ground floor, and services like a library and a Pour Tous just two minutes' walk away, more people will want to live on it. And if we have an electric shuttle bus going in each direction around it, and if people living on the Crown could jump on it and reach a class at Savitri Bhavan in five minutes, why wouldn't they do that? And if they needed go to Pondicherry, and there's a bus going every hour, why wouldn't they take the bus? There is an argument that we don't have the population yet for this to succeed, but if we don't plan alternatives now, it will simply be too late.

What about Aurovilians who manage production units, who need to move around Pondicherry in order to buy supplies?

Auroville should be buying in bulk. It shouldn't be sending a painter to Pondy to buy a few cans of paint for one person's apartment. There should be a central buying agency on the tar road where painters can call the day before, and they just go there the next day on their electric vandi to pick it up. It just needs some imagination.

Auroville has been progressive in so many things, but has lagged behind global standards for transport. Is there hope?

There's always hope. I think things generally happen in the right moment. My experience with Dreamcatchers was that we sowed a lot of seeds, and they germinate as and when we are ready. As time goes on, I'd like to see less fear of things going wrong, and less of a need for control. If you look at the Galaxy Model and what's on the ground today, almost nothing that's been built actually relates to it, and yet it's coming from decisions that are supposedly trying to save it. This latest mobility proposal is just that, a proposal, it is not necessarily the answer but really just a starting point for someone to come up with an even better plan.

In conversation with Lesley

Is Auroville becoming a city of cars??

The steady increase in private car ownership in Auroville, as well as the hike in outside cars and autos circulating daily within the community, gives rise to the question: Is Auroville falling well behind 'best practice' examples of transport that are thriving in other parts of the world? This article considers plans for public transport systems in Auroville, and the accompanying interview with David considers the interconnected aspects of mobility and urban planning.

Once upon a time, Auroville was a sleepy outpost comprised of dirt tracks and bullock carts. The pioneer Aurovilians moved around on cycles, carts or on foot. Motor vehicles were rarely seen, except for the Auroville shuttle bus that plied to Pondy and back. As new work areas were established throughout the landscape, Aurovilians started moving around more to accomplish multiple tasks or attend meetings, and the need to 'save time' felt more imperative. Motorbikes were becoming more common across India in the 1980s and 90s, yet many Aurovilians initially resisted the pull to buy one, in the belief that motorised transport was against the community's ethos.

"From what I have heard, people were initially embarrassed to own a motorbike," says David, an architect who also explores issues of urban planning in Auroville, "but after some time there was a critical mass of Aurovilians with motorbikes, and suddenly it was not taboo anymore. And unfortunately, we've more

recently passed the same point with cars. In the last two years, it has suddenly become no longer embarrassing to own a car in Auroville. If this keeps going on, we'll have a township with 50,000 cars, and we'll all be sitting in traffic."

There are now at least 250 cars belonging to individuals in Auroville, which means about 15 to 30 percent of adult residents are car owners, according to Chandresh from Auroville's Integrated Transport Service. Aurovilians who previously kept their cars hidden under dense foliage in order to avoid community disapproval no longer feel the need to do so, and many communities now have four or five cars parked at their gates.

Mathew, who lives in Sunship community behind Town Hall, recounts how his community's car parking area has been enlarged twice in the last two years, a process which involved the bulldozing of a dozen or more trees. The second time, Mathew tried to blockade the bulldozer, but the clearing continued as soon he left. "There was no consultation with our [Sunship] community about that," he says.

Mathew points to the irony of a big signboard outside his community's entrance that clearly states that "no motorised vehicles" are allowed into a community which includes several car owners.

While some of these privately-owned cars in Auroville are electric, the vast majority of them run on fossil fuels. As fossil fuel vehicles are polluting and harmful to the environment, many community members deem them to be contrary to Auroville's values concerning ecology and human consciousness. Added to that are the harmful effects and discomfort of noise and dust pollution.

Given that Auroville has a reputation as being a progressive place that implements innovative solutions for so many development issues, why has Auroville dropped the ball on mobility and transport?

How did we get here?

When Roger Anger developed the Galaxy Model for Auroville under the Mother's guidance, they were both aiming for a townscape

where pedestrians and slow-moving collective transport would be prioritised. According to some architects' interpretations, roads are not visible in the final Galaxy Model – in contrast to the earlier rejected models. Roger wrote at the time (1965) that he wanted to "suppress" the "tyranny" of cars, which he claimed created "infernos within cities". While in the later Master Plan (2001) he alluded to a restricted use of roads (for example, vehicles moving at 15km/h to do deliveries at a certain time each day in certain areas), he continued to state that pedestrian movement had "absolute priority", and that Auroville should be "a city free of pollution by motorised vehicles". However, Roger did not provide any detailed plan regarding mobility and transport, nor how the city's development would manage the movement of people and materials required to undertake construction. And over the years, no mobility plan for Auroville has ever been finalised and agreed upon as a step towards successful implementation.

As a result, the 'bones' of the Galaxy Plan blueprint have been translated and implemented as roads.

Now that parts of the Crown and other routes have been created as wide paved roads, increasing numbers of motorised vehicles have followed.

In this trajectory towards more roads and cars in the last decade, it seems that Auroville has fallen well behind global 'best practice' examples of transport and mobility, such as in Scandinavian cities. It must be conceded that Auroville has its own complexities that pose challenges to the development of mobility and transport: for example, land ownership issues mean that Auroville does not own key pieces of land that are necessary to create flowing routes of passage for pedestrians or vehicles; and the population is still short of a certain critical mass that is generally required to begin implementation of a public transport system.

While conceding these difficulties, Auroville – a town that advises 'Smart Cities' in India on urban planning – has not lived up to its own progressive reputation when it comes to solutions on mobility and transport. According to a 2017 survey undertaken by Accessible Bus Service, as well as the 236 individually owned cars, Auroville had at least 85 taxis and a few buses then. Aurovilians own about 1400 fossil-fuel two-wheelers, and travel an average 20 kilometres per day inside the city area, spending about Rs 960 each per month on petrol. Given that Auroville's diameter is 2.5 km (the city circle within the Outer Ring Road) and can be crossed by foot within 35 minutes, this is a strong dependency on motorised vehicles for a relatively small geographical area. While some new measures are in motion to address the issue (detailed further below), Auroville seems to have fallen into the wider trap of unrestrained private ownership of individual vehicles, especially fossil fuel cars.

Min, who operates Auroville's Integrated Transport Service (ITS), points out how the normalisation of private car ownership in wider India has started to shape attitudes and habits in Auroville amongst the long-timers as well as newcomers. "Some of the pioneers have become tired over time of the tough life, especially in summer, and they want a bit of comfort in moving around," he says. "Some of these people have shifted to four wheelers. And people who come to Auroville for the first time see some four-wheelers moving around, and assume that's normal. They then assume that it is acceptable if they have a car, too."

Min points to an inherent tension within people in Auroville. On the one hand, we aspire to live a more conscious ethical lifestyle. But on the other hand, as human beings, "we operate in certain mental frames" that are individualistic. He points to a tussle in his own community of Maitreye, where some residents want to build individual garages for their private cars. "It's an interesting phenomenon: how people weigh the cost of personal convenience against the collective commons." Min's colleague Chandresh chimes in that individual garages in Auroville go "against the total sincerity of the project of Auroville, and the world movement in mobility" that aims to reduce humans' environmental footprint.

Car owners in Auroville often feel that they have their own exceptional reasons to own a car. The common rationales generally include: to transport children or an elderly parent with poor mobility; an injury, disability or mobility issue; the need to go to Pondicherry regularly to buy supplies for a business unit; the need to travel interstate for work or to visit relatives; to protect oneself from rain or to move quickly through intense heat; the need to be protected from increasingly dangerous roads, etc.

But as Auroville's transport and urban planning pandits point out, this collective rise in private ownership has had significant negative impacts on the environment and quality of life. They argue that Auroville needs to provide effective collective solutions that will circumvent or dilute people's individualistic rationales for owning a car.

And the recent increase in cars in Auroville – particularly fossil-fuel cars – suggests that alternative solutions need to be implemented quickly. "It's urgent because of accidents, deaths, noise, traffic," says Christian, Chairman of AVI Canada and the Auroville International Board, who proposes a new public transport system. "Now that part of the Crown is laid, many communities in the Residential Zone, like Kalpana, Humanscapes and Surrender, are disturbed by the traffic noise. And old people don't want to go out because it's dangerous. There should be a change of habits, a change of culture." "If we don't nip it [private car use] in the bud now, it could be too late," says David, "assuming, of course, that it isn't already."

Existing transport services

Auroville has experienced something of a small boom in public transport options in the last couple of years, but the community's transport experts point to the need to build upon these in order to create a more comprehensive approach to quiet, green and reliable forms of public transport. The trusty Accessible Bus continues to transport Aurovilians to Pondicherry each day, and the Shared Taxi Service scheme to Chennai airport has had great uptake since it started three years ago. However, these two options – as well as Auroville's larger buses that ferry children to school and visitors between Visitors' Centre and the Matrimandir – all run on fossil fuels. Two more recently-introduced emission-free public transport services have been greeted with much enthusiasm within Auroville: the electric vans provided by City Transport and ITS (although these services have not been operating under lockdown).

City Transport has been running a pick up and drop service for Aurovilians and guests since 2012, based at the Visitors Centre. In 2018 the petrol vehicles were replaced with electric vans thanks to funding for Auroville's 50th anniversary. The vans are available on-call, free-of-charge, for destinations within the city area. They are much appreciated by Aurovilians and guests who are not able to ride two-wheelers due to age, injury or to feeling unsafe on the roads. They are also available to visitors who leave their vehicles in the parking lot and need to reach their appointments inside the city area. The organisers of the Film Festival arranged for the vans to shuttle visitors from a specified parking area to the event venue – refiguring the envisaged scheme when all arriving vehicles will be parked at the edge of the city and passengers will proceed into Auroville on internal transport options.

ITS runs a similar eco-friendly service for Aurovilians and guests, with its two electric vans based at the Solar Kitchen. Aurovilians and guests can call for pick-up and drop services, mostly within the city centre, but also down to the ECR and back, and to Pondy. ITS executive Min points to the "tremendous" response from Aurovilians to the on-call pick up/drop service, for which users can contribute what they wish. A certain number of the users are Aurovilians who have broken limbs in motorbike accidents and cannot temporarily drive their own vehicles. "It's always booked, people love it," Min says, noting that the positive demand has sparked ITS to purchase an electric auto to add to its public transport fleet.

While the Covid-19 pandemic will possibly affect income streams that support these public transport initiatives in the near future, the 'big picture' shift from fossil fuel towards electric
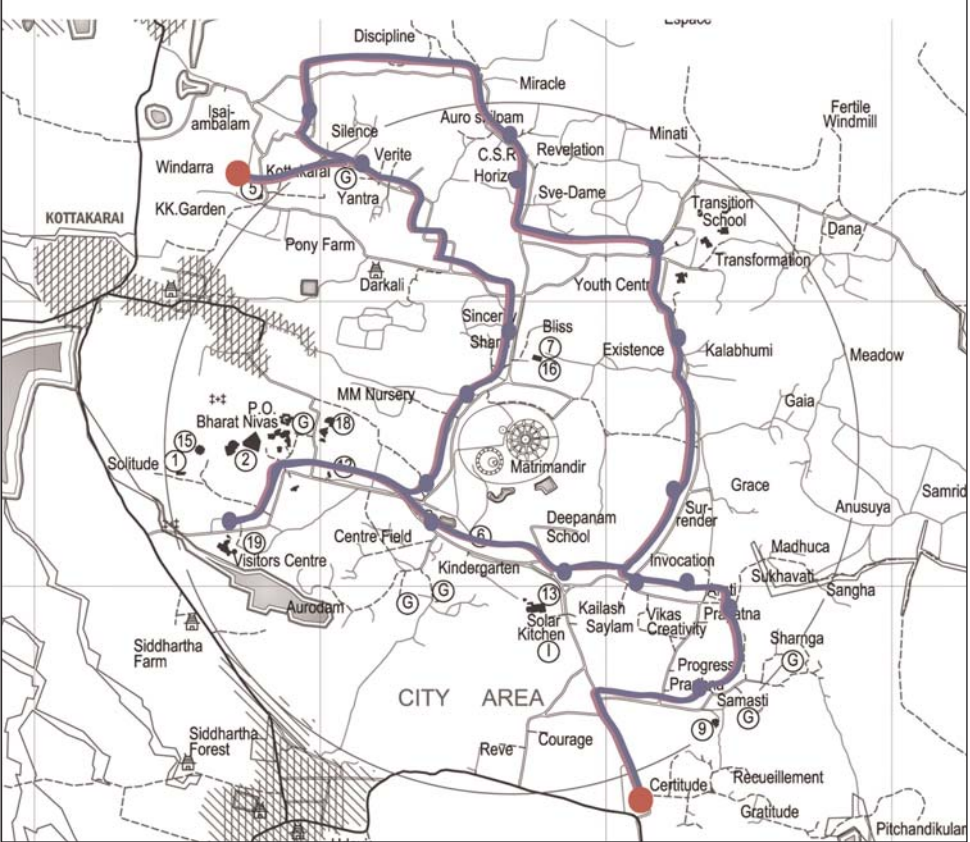
Bus route planned by La nAVETTE

technology has also increasingly shaped individual Aurovilians' personal transport choices of late. There have been recent "dramatic" improvements in electric vehicle technology, such as the Tesla car or electric buses in China, says Min, which place Auroville in a "super exciting" position to make progress. While Auroville has conducted its own experiments in making electric two-wheelers in the past – most notably by the unit EvFuture – at that stage, it was not viable for Auroville to move towards mass production, so EvFuture ceased making the bikes around 2010. Since then, says Min, "the two-wheeler electric cycle trajectory has come to a point where it's attractive in India." This technological progress has sparked ITS into the

Christian and Raju from La nAvette

purchase of 29 electric scooters and 10 e-cycles, which it hires out to the Aurovilians and guests, and ITS has also established charging points at five public and guesthouse locations in Auroville.

Auroville unit Kinisi e-Mobility is also capitalising on the improvements in electric technology to manifest its vision of shared sustainable mobility for all. From its base in CSR, Kinisi offers sustainable, "comfortable, silent and emissionless" transport to all Auroville residents, volunteers and guests, thanks to a fleet of 250 electric bicycles to date. Kinisi operates two models of usage: daily hire basis for guests, or the increasingly popular KIM (Kinisi In-kind Mobility) monthly membership scheme for Aurovilians and Newcomers, which provides an electric bicycle for a monthly contribution that covers maintenance, repairs and battery replacement. Currently, 125 Aurovilians are using this scheme that offers the advantages of ownership without its accompanying hassles. Kinisi plans to expand its fleet to include electric scooters, offering these to Aurovilians who occasionally need to switch to a vehicle with more range or carrying capacity for half a day. [See AV Today # 362, September 2019 for more about Kinisi e-Mobility.]

In tandem with the growth in electric vehicle use in Auroville, the humble cycle has also experienced a surge in interest. This can be linked to two factors: the quiet shady cycle path network which has been developed over the last thirty years by Auroville's cycle enthusiasts; and the presence of Aurovelo, the Auroville unit dedicated to cycling culture and the sale of high-quality cycles. Cycle rentals are also now available for guests and day visitors at Town Hall, Ganesh Bakery and Visitors Centre, and these are always fully booked in the tourist season.

While all of these two-wheeler and on-call van services have seen enthusiastic uptake in

the last couple of years, there is still a perceived need to expand the current status quo in Auroville and to create a comprehensive environmentally-friendly public transport system.
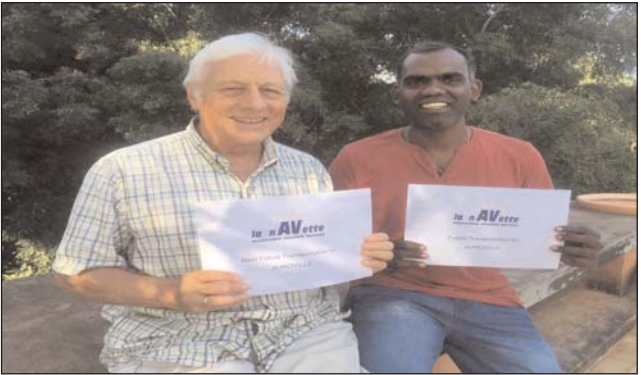
La nAVette – a proposed public transport system

La nAVette is a public shuttle service proposed by the team responsible for the Auroville Accessible Bus (which runs between Pondy and Auroville twice a day) and one of the bus's sponsors, AVI Canada. Team members Christian, Raju, Sauro and Susmita point out that a regular electric shuttle service supports Mother's vision for collective transport for Auroville. They believe that the model of the existing electric van services (ITS, City Transport) – which must be ordered by phone in advance – poses a barrier to community members who may be too shy to call, or who phone only to find the vans are booked. They argue that a regular electric shuttle bus is much more likely to encourage community members to drop their tendencies towards individual transport. "When it is frequent and reliable," says Raju, "people can trust that if they wait at the right time, it will come."

The La nAVette concept – navette is French for shuttle – is to have electric vans plying regularly on three key routes. The first route will circle inside the city and include stops at 20 communities along the way. The vans will circle in both directions every 30 minutes, which means that waiting passengers can reach their destination by going in either direction and would have to wait for no more than 15 minutes. Timetables will be widely available, and would also be posted at every bus stop.

The other two routes would serve people travelling from the bioregion into Auroville or vice-versa: one route from the East Coast Road (ECR) to Certitude, and the other from the highway tollgate (on JIPMER side) to the Visitors Centre. These bioregion routes would aim to bring passengers to Certitude or the Visitors' Centre, where they would transfer to the city circle shuttle to move around inside Auroville. These routes would address the problem of guests and Aurovilians with mobility issues who use outside autos to take them grocery shopping in Kuilapalyam and then drop them home again. Raju notes that this is "more than a habit," saying that while the noisy polluting autos are discouraged from entering Auroville, guards have "no option" but to let autos through when they see an Aurovilian or guest sitting inside.

The ITS team in front of its two electric vans.
From left:Aruna, Min, Laxmanan, Palani, Pachaiappan and Vijay

Electric cycles for rent at KINISI

Christian and Raju believe that a regular shuttle service will provide a viable alternative. They point out that many Aurovilians currently feel compelled to use individual transport options to keep appointments and do shopping, because there is no comprehensive public transport system. They hope La nAVette will encourage a significant change in practices, emphasising that the service will be accessible to people in wheelchairs, and will meet the definitions of a public transport system by being regular, reliable and frequent, as well as quiet and green. The shuttle could also possibly deliver shopping baskets to elderly people.

While the project will be "quite affordable," the team has to raise the funds as they ultimately want to make the service free. "Auroville talks a lot about mobility, but financially they give zero," says Raju, who explains that the team will apply for Government of India funds.

ITS – a proposed public transport system

The plan evolved by the ITS team (Min, Lakshman, Chandresh) for the expansion of public transport in Auroville is inspired by cities in Europe that have established progressive well-integrated transport systems. "The idea is to create a system which enables mobility to become a service," says Min, "not a tangible physical item that you have to own." In ITS's proposed scheme, users can opt into different schemes for a small monthly contribution, which will enable them to fulfil all their mobility needs on different kinds of electric vehicles.

This may include use of an electric cycle for daily life, access to an electric scooter to do shopping or go out in the evenings, and occasional use of an auto or taxi to go to Pondy or Chennai airport. "There is flexibility for the user to use the funds in any of these ways," says Min, noting that some people prefer to be on cycles most of the time, while others want to use a taxi three times a week. "They can switch up and down. For example, if my parents are in town, then I can use more taxi rides. In this model, you don't own anything, which means if something breaks down, you just bring it to the service centre and get a new one. The users don't have to deal with repairs or insurance, and at no time are they without a vehicle."

Min points to the way in which transport apps in many cities enable users to access different kinds of transport at different times, and informs them about how to connect from one form of transport to another: "I feel that we can leverage this technology to take it to the next level in Auroville."

Min's aim is to encourage everyone in Auroville to start moving towards more sustainable local modes of transport, which means using two-wheelers and electric transport wherever possible, and limiting cars inside Auroville. "Removing four-wheeler vehicles, except collective transport and emergency vehicles, is a no-brainer," says Min's colleague Chandresh. To remove four-wheelers, Min and Chandresh aim to create a large parking hub with charging points in the service area near Certitude, where residents and guests can 'park and ride'. In other words, people can park their individual cars in a guarded secure space, and take public transport or two-wheelers to their guesthouse or home inside Auroville. When coming from inside Auroville, community members can leave their two-wheeler to charge at the hub, and take a bus or their own car into Pondicherry. (Raju and the La nAVette team propose a similar concept for a transport interchange hub.)

When Aurovilians get down from public transport, how can they manage 'the last mile problem' of travelling from the bus stop to their destination? Urban planners around the world are forced to address this phenomenon. If there's no straight-forward transport option for people to travel the last mile to the office or home, this is the point at which individuals begin to justify their need for a private vehicle. Min points out that this issue can be solved relatively easily inside Auroville with electric cycles or scooters, but it poses a greater problem for Aurovilians who need to move around inside Pondicherry. "So I'm thinking to collaborate with the Ashram, to have a parking spot there with some electric cycles or scooters for us to use within Pondy. I think everyone should take the bus to Pondicherry, which should make multiple trips per day. But that will only happen if the last mile is sorted."

Min claims Auroville is a fertile ground to experiment with electric transport. "Auroville has many early adopters, risk takers, people who'll try things." While Auroville has been experimenting with electric mobility since the 1970s, Min acknowledges there are still a few "scars" from the early experiments, undertaken at a time when the technology was not sufficiently developed. From this experience, "we know how it works, where it fails," he says. And the recent global progress in electric vehicle technology means that electric two-wheelers are now a more viable option for Aurovilians. "In about six months, it'll be incredible. You'll get electric scooters for around Rs70,000 with good power, that can go up to 100km on one charge. That means you can go to Pondy and back to Auroville, and then to Kuilapalyam, and not even think about charging the battery. You can safely wait until night to charge it."

ITS is in a good position to advocate for new mobility options, given the success of its Shared Transport Service which it implemented three years ago. Min explains that the STS rideshare model to Chennai challenges conventional thinking that a taxi business will lose money

Ecological debates

All the above transport initiatives emphasise the use of electric vehicles, and are based on the common belief that electric vehicles are more environmentally-friendly than vehicles that operate on fossil fuels. But there are also concerns about the problem of batteries for electric vehicles: namely, that they contain toxic materials, are made under exploitative labour conditions in developing countries, and are not easily recyclable.

Min weighs up the pros and cons of electric technology versus fossil fuel vehicles.

"The first issue is that fossil fuel is a limited resource – it's going to run out," says Min. "It's extractive. And fossil fuels produce emissions from the tail pipes of cars." Min points out that fossil fuel technology has been around now for about 100 years, and has evolved to its most efficient possible state. "It's not going to become more efficient at reducing pollution, or more efficient in mileage." He contrasts this stagnation in fossil fuel's technological progress with the "phenomenal" innovation taking place in battery research. "A number of university research labs are working on this. When so many people work on a problem, they generally crack it." Battery life is getting better all the time and the new Tesla car batteries last for eight years. "There's a bunch of new ways through which we'll come up with new storage systems that are not based on heavy metals," says Min. "That's a given. So to discard the whole electricity system because the current storage [and recycling] system is polluting is not sensible." On top of that, Auroville generates its own electricity, thanks to the Varuna wind farm. "We're producing 1.6 times our own needs for electricity. So we're not polluting," Min argues. "In the balance of things, electric vehicles are the best option today."

if it does not prioritise individual use of taxis. "We turned the whole thinking upside down, so that ITS makes more money if people share," he says.

However, Min's larger plans for transport expansion – particularly for the parking hub near Certitude – have hit the usual Auroville bureaucratic roadblocks. "The parking hub application has been sitting with L'Avenir for two-and-a-half years for consideration. We made so many presentations. I can't tell you how frustrating this has been." A grant provided by Auroville's 50th birthday was cut down "because of in-fighting" says Min, meaning that ITS could not install as many charging stations as planned, or obtain as many pick-up/drop electric vans. "Auroville was created with this vision that we'd be able to find solutions for humanity. This is our chance. We're talking with Pondicherry City, they're very keen to collaborate on this experiment. If we can replicate what we're doing here in Pondy, imagine the impact and blueprint we can create. We can show other cities how to do it."

Sparking competition to create solutions for the future

The various transport initiatives – La nAVette, ITS, City Transport, Kinisi – clearly have some overlap. At the moment, visitors are sometimes confused about having to liaise with different providers in different places for their different needs: electric scooter hire (ITS at Solar Kitchen); electric cycle hire (Kinisi at CSR); cycle hire (Town Hall, Visitors Centre and Ganesh Bakery); electric van pick-up and drop service (City Transport at Visitors' Centre; ITS at Solar Kitchen); share taxi (STS at Solar Kitchen); and the daily Accessible Bus to Pondicherry. Understandably, people are sometimes unsure which service is which.

Min suggests that all the players should "come under one umbrella", and have one phone number or app for all these services. "For the end consumer, it should be a seamless service. That's a no-brainer. It can be multiple services at the back end, but it should seem like one service to the user. I think it's time to overcome any differences, and to think about benefitting the commons."

Min and David both point to the merits of having different players addressing the same problem because it sparks innovation. "That bubbling creativity that takes place at the beginning of things is actually good," David says. "A bit of competition and tension sparks creativity. People are trying out different ways of doing it, and we're moving in the right direction."

Lesley

Change in Auroville

Many view the disruption caused by the lockdown in Auroville as an opportunity to radically transform our economy, governance, food provision systems etc. and a number of proposals to achieve this have already been made.

However, we know very little about how change happens in Auroville because we have not documented how previous attempts have fared. Consequently, while it can be argued that what was relevant yesterday may not apply today, can we learn from previous successes and failures?

Auroville Today brought together some change-makers to discuss this. While only some aspects of this complex issue are touched upon in this discussion, and some may disagree with the perspectives expressed, we hope it will stimulate further exploration.

Auroville Today: What are the major changes that have happened in Auroville over the years which have not been externally imposed?

Jocelyn: The creation of Pour Tous in the 1970s and the Solar Kitchen in the 1990s are important ones.

Jaya: One of the major changes in the 80s was with the maintenance system, which shifted from collective sharing to the present more individualistic system. Though the intention was to take care of everyone, long term it created a very unequal system – the opposite of its intention.

Gijs: The participatory process to select members of working groups was an important attempt a few years ago to make the process more transparent, organized and accessible.

Dave: For me what has changed is there are so many of us now, it is getting difficult to represent

ourselves directly, so we are struggling to find a system to choose people who can genuinely represent us.

Min: Since 2005, which is when I came, I have observed more privatisation of interests. Today, for example, there is hardly anywhere in Auroville experimenting with collective facilities.

I see this as a trend but I don't know what causes it. In terms of work, a lot of us look outside for action now because not much is going on in Auroville.

And yet, over the years, there have been many ideas for change. Some have succeeded, many others have failed. Why? What makes for success?

Jaya: When Gilles created the Solar Kitchen initially he had practically zero support: the popular opinion was that nobody wanted to use collective kitchens any more. But within months more than 700 people were eating there because it served varied food with care, and provided a social environment where people could meet spontaneously, something which had been missing.

Dave: There are things that create and things that slow momentum. I have a tag line for Auroville which is, if you have an idea, do it yourself. If something is going to happen, it needs people who are going to push it through with tenacity, and be willing to stick it out and work through even the boring bits. Somebody needs to be doing the work, this is much more important than the talkers.

Jocelyn: A new initiative may begin with an individual, but it can't be sustained

by just one person because they will get overwhelmed. Building a strong group is very important to the success or failure of a new initiative. I've been involved in a number of change initiatives, including the Free Store, Pour Tous Distribution Centre, Creativity and Santé, and all are still functioning because of their teams which provide a solid foundation.

Jaya: Teamwork is very important. Shivaya and I carried the Unity Pavilion project initially, and we did a huge work. But I realised that while I'm good at starting things up because I have the drive and tenacity, I'm not a top manager or organiser for the detailed daily running. So with the continuous increase in activities, we've been focusing on getting a larger team to run the project. When people come to work at Unity Pavilion, they often find it messy because there's a lot of freedom. They

Items for borrowing in the Library of Things

sign up for a work that needs to be done but at the same time we want each one to find their way and expression. So we try to create a space for growth, flexibility and creativity. This can be challenging but it is amazing what comes out, how people grow and widen.

These days the first generation of Aurovilians really has to look at succession and contingency planning. This is why we want to become dispensable in the day to day work, while being assured that everybody is aligned with the vision and that there is a collective intention to realize it.

Dave: For me it's a lot about personal leadership. Inspired managers lead through example. They behave in a way which comes from their own deepest sense of self. This is quite rare in Auroville. So how can we allow those people to develop?

The hard graft part is also part of personal leadership, pushing yourself when the going is difficult or boring. Often, when the excitement has worn off, the spark goes out and then you lose people who were really excited about it at the beginning. So how can you keep people inspired?

Min: I tend to work with people who are relatively new because I've already made assumptions about the people who've been here longer. I also find they are less available because they are already into something. So if I want to do something new, I look for people who are willing to take risks and are not jaded or jarred by what happened before.

Jaya: Having researched and worked with the Mother's symbol as

represented at the Matrimandir, it became very clear that whenever your work involves people, you have to have some form of organisation. Mother defined certain qualities as relating to humanity and when you see where they are located in the petals, these qualities are all on the Mahasaraswati axis. And Saraswati is organization as rhythm, music, mathematics, precision and harmony, not rigidity and bureaucracy.

Gijs: It would be useful if we all learned more about organizations. For me, what is important is the different levels of scale and different cultures of collectivity, individuality etc. Also, I see any organisation as a living entity. It is born, goes through different life cycles, and, at a certain point, dies. If we see it evolving like this, it could make for greater flexibility.

Jocelyn: What interests me is how people know when they should start something new. I have a particular way of knowing. It starts in my body, which begins vibrating differently, then synchronicities happen and the energy starts building. Then I don't have to do anything; I just have to follow it. If you force an idea, it doesn't work.

Dave: For me it is always decided by the people I enjoy working with.

So what about all the good ideas that went nowhere? Why did this happen?

Jocelyn: I'm sure there are a lot of really good ideas that came from the Retreat but they remained ideas because we didn't have the people to take them forward. Mother said we need organisers, but we don't pay enough attention to this.

Jaya: We had some absolutely outstanding selection processes. Then the original concept of the participatory selection process began to fall apart because, to my mind, we didn't have facilitators that understood the process and could hold it when outcomes did not follow the normal political ways. At the same time, it was not possible to fully avoid manipulation. When the working groups became involved it did not work as the process was intended to function independently. So you need to keep certain processes outside the working groups if you really want change to happen as the bureaucracy has never been a mover of change.
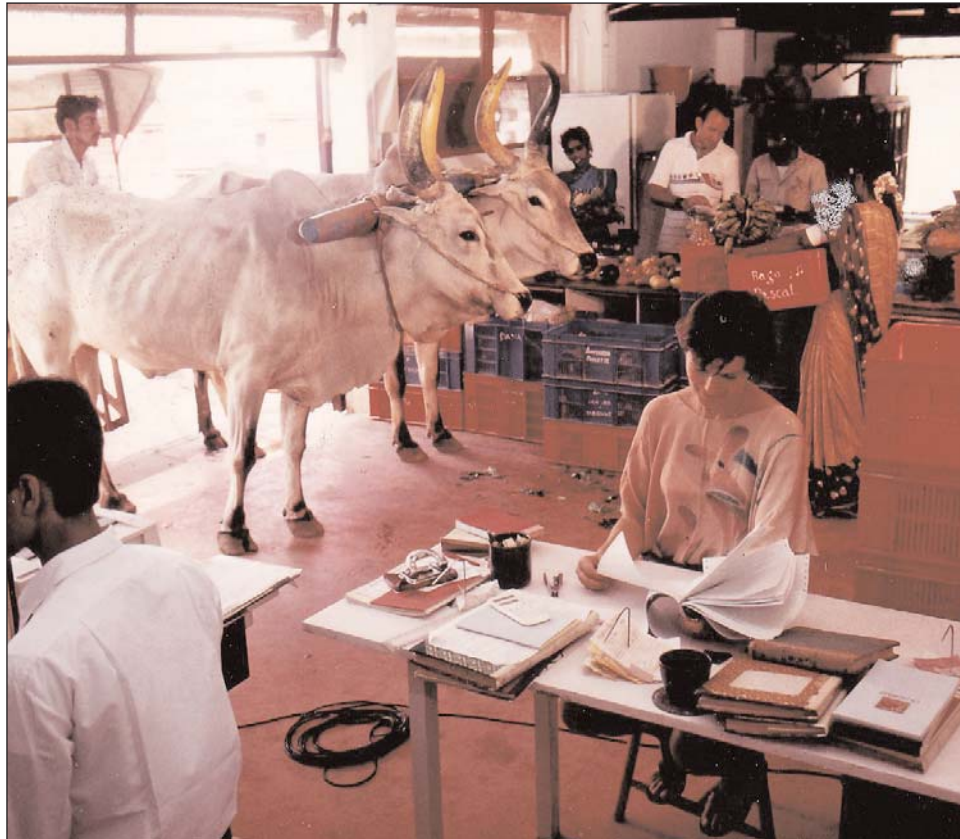
Jocelyn: I tried to create the Auroville guard with Aurovilians only. For the first year it was successful but after a year people from an outside agency were employed to do the patrolling. If I had been more involved it might have been different – I could have handled the inevitable blips that happen. So you've really got to be present if you want to drive change.

Jaya: Shyama and I took up the first running of the Solar Kitchen. We wanted to source local food, so we offered to take what our farms could produce. We had a regular menu but for each item we had maybe ten recipes, so there was always variety. But when we left, that vision got lost. The food is still good and cooked with care, but there is less variety, and no catering to individual needs.

Dave: When John died, I didn't have the motivation to keep going with Foodlink because it was his thing. It could have been carried forward by others, but that didn't happen. It was the same thing with the Farm Group. There was a plan and it was working okay as long as John and I were giving it our energy, but when he left, it changed the dynamic.

We also have many cases in Auroville of 'Founders Syndrome', people who have been associated with a process from its early days so that it has become part of their identity, making it very difficult for them to accept that the project needs to evolve. If anybody suggests this, it quickly becomes very personal.

Gijs: I can give you many examples of good ideas that didn't happen. One was the Integral Sustainability Platform (ISP). It seemed very promising as it was going to revolutionise our organisation through interlinking different groups. One of the ideas I particularly liked was that the food group would talk with the mobility group, the water group and the logistics people. But the ISP went nowhere.

What happened with ISP, according to me, is that the Auroville group who initiated the process and hired the facilitators ended up in conflict with them, and lost control over the minutes and all documentation. So thousands of hours of meeting notes were gone, and there was nobody left to pick up the pieces and rebuild momentum.

Another example I can remember very clearly was the idea to collectively procure food for all the restaurants and food outlets in Auroville. We decided the easiest thing to begin with was sugar. We got a discount along with better quality sugar from a supplier in Chennai. But it began falling apart after a month because the logistics didn't suit everybody exactly: the delivery day didn't suit some people, or the packaging was not exactly what they were used to.

I thought if it is not possible to collectivise such small things, forget about attempting it with anything more complex.

It left a bitter taste, and the feeling that as we tried that and it didn't work, why bother again? Everything that looks similar and has failed tends to be painted with the same brush, but were they really same thing or something rather different?

One of the stories we tell ourselves is we are a bunch of l losers: She gave us this job and we are just flunking. This is very disempowering. If you feel that, it is difficult for us to come together and heal ourselves. There's a collective trauma which we are not addressing and which is holding us back. I think we need to process the hurt of past collective attempts at change, that failed.

Jaya: I go back to the twelve qualities. At Matrimandir, the petal of the quality of Generosity connects to the Garden of Power. Generosity is the one quality with the capacity to dissolve conflict without creating residue. When it comes to shifts or handovers of power we need to consider this very seriously if we are to create goodwill and support rather than pain and opposition.

Min: I have some examples of good ideas that failed. One was the Library of Things. We did a survey and many people said it was a great idea to have a place where people could bring items they are not using to be borrowed and used by others. But there was very little uptake, partly because while people are used to borrowing informally from neighbours, a more organized way of doing it was unfamiliar.

Again, when I broke my hip I realised we are paying a lot of money from the Health Fund to outside doctors who were not complying with Tamil Nadu standards concerning what they should charge. A few of us came up with the idea that there should be contracts drawn up specifying maximum charges. It was a very obvious thing to do, and I must have sent at least 70 emails to the Health Fund and the BCC with this suggestion. But it did not happen.

There are also challenges with teams. People join teams with different motivations. One person is inspired by the idea, another joins because of financial need, yet another wants to work in a spirit of service. How do you deal with these different motivations? It's not like the outside world where the motivation is money and promotion, where you hire people to do a certain job and they do as you say if you are higher than them in the hierarchy. Here I can't do that, so how to get it to work? I am constantly struggling with this.

Jaya: We are not aligning our actions with our ideals. Mother says that working together is the only way to do good work, which means accepting the two ways She proposed for Auroville's organization: spiritual hierarchy together with divine anarchy. In the Participatory Working groups proposal this was the aim. But to succeed it needs time, patience, collaboration and the letting go of traditional power struggles, together with the inner work of freeing ourselves from the associated fears and desires.

We tend to evaluate success and failure in a very conventional way. What if seeming failure can lead to success, or open a gateway for something very different, many years later?

Jaya: Exactly. For me it was hell when the selection process was foundering because I could see what we had already achieved. But after one year of fighting for it, I could let go. While the initial impetus may seem to have failed, we actually did shift quite a few things and many of us had personal insights from it with which we can go on working and widening ourselves. So, hard though it felt at the time, I don't think anything is lost.

Dave: I really didn't want to be involved with the 50th anniversary planning group. But then I thought I'll try through this process to get one idea moving which could become common currency. So I introduced a standard operating procedure which is very simple but which can be used to organise something huge. About a year later, the PCG were using a format that was very complicated, and somebody said, "Use this one instead. It's much simpler. I wonder where it came from?"

Gijs: Actually, Auroville is notoriously bad at processes: we celebrate visions and individuals, but disregard methods. Also, we do not keep track. Once an attempt has failed, we ditch it and forget about it. There's no institutional memory or an effort to create one, so we can't learn and build on previous experience.

Jocelyn: It will be very interesting to look again at some of our old ideas and see if they have new relevance. For example, I think the circles idea, which failed when it was first tried, will work much better now in the context of the new 'Prosperity' proposal [*which aims to create a self-supporting circular economy, eds*].

Gijs: So maybe an original project failed completely but the tool found another application. This is fascinating. We don't actually know a lot about how change works, so where can we have these conversations? How can we share this kind of learning?

From an interview by Alan

Early Pour Tous
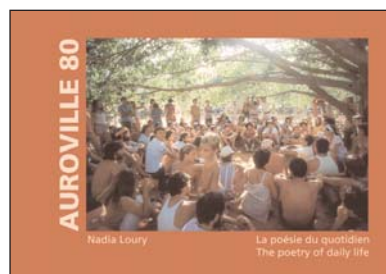

Laying the foundations of the Solar Kitchen

Auroville 80

It is sometimes difficult to place the 1980s in Auroville. The 1970s was a period of pioneering and high drama – including, as it does, Mother's passing and the conflict with the Society – while the 1990s witnessed a Cambrian explosion of projects. In contrast, the '80s seemed a quieter decade, even though it saw rather vicious internal strife, as well as the establishment of SAIIER and, of course, of the Auroville Foundation itself.

However, Nadia Loury's bilingual (French/English) photographic book, *Auroville 80*, helps us look at the 80s with new eyes. For what she captures are not the iconic moments but, as the sub-title suggests, 'the poetry of daily life'. So we see Aurovilians working in the fields, meeting under the Banyan, drinking tea at the Matrimandir, organizing food deliveries at Pour Tous. It could become a catalogue of trivia, yet through Nadia's lens something else shines through: a sense of perseverance, dedication, fraternity and even a quiet joy in what was clearly still a struggle to survive.

Indeed, one of the surprises of this book is how basic Auroville still was in the 1980s. Many Aurovilians were living under keet, struggling to erect the first rickety Cretan windmills, crowbaring holes in the unforgiving laterite. Yet even as green shoots were pushing through that soil, in the same way these photographs show that the foundations of a collective life were being laid in education, town planning, governance and health care.

And while the Matrimandir space frame emerged in its tessellated glory, everywhere, it seems, the Auroville children were having fun.

This is a lovely book. It's no easy thing to capture the texture, the magic, of the quotidian but Nadia succeeds. Along with her sensitive commentary, her fine photographs allow us to touch the heart of an experience which, while it may seem foreign to more recent residents, still fires the soul of many of those early explorers.

Alan

Auroville 80: the poetry of daily life. Published by Auroville Press 2020. Available at the Visitors Centre bookshop Rs 1050 for Aurovilians, Rs 1500 others. Also on auroville.com. Price in Europe 25 euros (+ mailing charges). People there can contact Nadia at nadialoury@orange.fr. The profits from this book will go towards land purchase via the Acres for Auroville land campaign.

AUROVILLE 80
Nadia Loury
La poésie du quotidien
The poetry of daily life

Snapshots of 40 years in Auroville

Some Aurovilians just do their work, don't attend meetings and almost never express their views in public. One of those is Jocelyne, who lives in a difficult-to-find house behind Aurovelo. Here is her sharing.

It was 1970. I was living in Paris and had lost my job. I decided to go and visit my sister who was living in a community in South India. I told our mother that I was going to check if it was a sect or not. As I had been fired, I had some cash to pay for the ticket.

I flew to Mumbai and took a train to Chennai. This was my first time to India, so I was fully unprepared – I had brought no food, no water, no bed sheets, nothing. At every station I bought bananas, chickoos and tea, and so endured the slow two-day train ride. On the last leg of my trip, my luck turned. Instead of taking the bus alone to Pondicherry, as soon as I exited the train in Chennai I saw a few people waiting: Vincenzo, Jean-Claude B., Swapna and my sister Claudine! They took me to Auroville, to Aspiration. There, Stephen told me that it was darshan day and asked: "Do you want to go and see The Mother?" I was fully zombied from the trip and didn't know the first thing about darshans, but answered: "Yeah, why not?" We went by Unimog, a small lorry, standing with the others in the back. It was April 24th, 1970. That darshan didn't impress me much but I was curious, of course.

The second time I saw The Mother was for my birthday. We had to wait in a room full of people. We were asked to sit down, and as there was someone else from Auroville next to me, I started chatting. A lady came and said 'shush!' That worked only for five minutes. The lady came back again, and repeated her 'shush!!", this time a little louder. I was miffed, but I had to wait for two more hours, so that gave me the time to cool down. In retrospect, I understood that this was for the best, so that I could be more open and receptive. When I met Her, I was blown over. She looked at me, I looked back at Her straight in the eye, despite having been told to look down. Then, something happened in me so strongly that I forgot everything while leaving: my birthday card, my chappals... For three days, I was on a cloud.

Initially, I had planned to come for three months only, but I stayed on, and on, and on, for five years. I worked a bit for Roger Anger and for a short while at the Comité Administratif d'Auroville, the CAA. Soon after, the problems with the Sri Aurobindo Society started. I remember that once we went to the CAA to ask for the accounts, and our request was bluntly refused. "You stay up there and do the yoga, we manage the money," they said. We went back to Aspiration and told the other community members that we felt that it would get worse. They didn't believe us, but it soon did. I, however, was never party to the fights that followed for I held firm to what The Mother had said, that whenever there was a problem, 'don't fight but go find a solution instead'.

In those days I had also started, together with Clare and Swapna, the first crèche for children from Kuilayapalayam village. The village was in deep poverty; the children were hungry and were not taken care of. It was clear that we had to do something. We brought soap to clean them, and discovered that they had never even seen soap in their lives. We washed and fed them every day. After about a year, there was a problem and we left the crèche.

I then had a brief stint as a painter and redid all the huts in Aspiration. After that, I started working in Fraternity, joining the first weaving section. (picture) The unit made bedspreads, lampshades, hammocks, embroidery and mats. André Viozat was there: he made the first leather-measuring machines.

My prolonged stay was a bit of an issue for our mother, who decided to check for herself why both her daughters had decided to remain in that place in South India. Given the fact that she didn't speak a word of English, had never travelled by plane and didn't even have a pass-

Jocelyne (left) learning weaving in Fraternity. Photo 1974

port, her decision to come here was very brave. She stayed one month, and it was much to her liking. She was, in fact, far more positive about Auroville than I: whenever I would criticise, she would point out the positive aspects. My mother insisted I return to see my father in France, I promised 'next year' and left it at that.

In those early years, the influence of Satprem was considerable. Claudine knew him as she had worked in the press. One day, when we met him on the marina, Claudine introduced me: "This is Jocelyne, she is completely different from me, she is always joyful." Satprem turned to me and gravely said: "This is not joy. Go inside yourself and find the true joy." I was stunned. He may have tried to make me aware of the difference between the supramental ananda and my simple joy of life, but if so, he didn't succeed. My joy evaporated on the spot; I was livid.

Divya (left) and Jocelyne (right) relaxing in front of the bamboo-vermiculite roofed houses at Ami. Photo 2004.

Nevertheless, I gained a measure of respect for him a few months later. I had accompanied a girl to JIPMER, the government hospital. She had flipped. I listened to her ramblings the entire night, but when I left JIPMER, my mind had become a sieve: I didn't know anymore what was and what wasn't important. I wanted to be shaken out of it, but nobody seemed to understand what was happening to me. A group of us had met Satprem at the Ashram tennis court to discuss another matter with him. I was standing a little farther off and at one moment, Satprem looked at me insistently and suddenly my mental confusion was gone! Much later *Mother's Agenda* came out. I've read it twice now, and although I was rather irritated with Saptrem's complaining about his lack of spiritual experiences, I am now reading the work again.

Over the years, the first caravan had delighted in recounting how their trip had been, recalling their experiences of what had happened in Turkey or Afghanistan or wherever. This had made me quite jealous as I had come by plane, which was clearly an inferior mode of travel. Meanwhile, the second caravan had arrived, and when a few of them decided to drive back to France, I boldly asked if I could tag along. It was April 1975. We travelled leisurely, first visiting Calcutta, then trekking in Pokhara, Nepal, then back to India and crossing Afghanistan – I saw the Bamiyan Buddhas – and through Iran and Turkey back to Europe. Meanwhile, I had fallen in love with the driver Jean-Claude R. and had become pregnant. I gave birth to my first daughter Sourya in Paris in 1977. To my surprise, my sister Claudine wrote that she, too, was pregnant. She gave birth to her son, Martanda, two months later.

I stayed in France for almost nine years, from 1975 to 1984. In that period, I returned three times to Auroville to see how things were developing. In 1978, everybody was fighting and there was no school. In 1981, it had started to become better. During my 1984 visit, I ascertained that schooling had become acceptable for my daughter. My 1970 visit had been pure discovery, but when I decided to return on December 5th 1984 to settle, it was for Auroville, Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Having met Rolf, we decided to live together with my daughter, but there was a housing crisis. He then built the first bamboo-vermiculite-roofed house in Ami, where I lived for 30 years.

After two years, I was pregnant again, and my second daughter, Divya, was born. Three months after her delivery, I joined Transition School at the request of my sister Claudine. Yet another teacher had given up, she complained. In fact, all the 'real' teachers were resigning as they couldn't handle the children. I left Divya in the care of my household worker, my 'amma' as we say in Auroville, and taught Maths and French there three mornings a week.

The children were indeed unruly. On a scale of 1 to 100, I was doing 85% discipline and 15% teaching. The proportion slowly changed, there was finally more teaching. I learned not to scream at the children to get their attention, but instead to lower the temperature of my voice a few degrees, slow down my words, and articulate a bit more clearly. Usually, these warning signs were sufficient to calm the children down.

For the children, Auroville was paradise. Their playground was nature: they climbed trees, swam in the sea and in the Auroville kolams [*the water catchment areas*, *eds*], ate berries and fruits from the forests, stole peanuts from the neighbouring farmers' fields, jumped in the open well of Discipline, climbed the roof of Bharat Nivas, or hung out at the Matrimandir construction site. There was no radio, no television, no internet. They were wild and free. I think that this freedom allowed them to become independent and responsible at quite an early age.

When I first came to Auroville, I knew nothing about Sri Aurobindo or The Mother, but there was such an atmosphere that you were just carried into it, you wanted to understand.

Jocelyne

When I first read the Auroville Charter, I fell in love with the expression "unending education". At the time, everybody was talking about "updating" your studies, your training, whatever, but the concept of "unending education" was really new, even smiled at and deemed impossible to achieve. I am happy to see that now it has become widely accepted.

Back then, I read The Mother's writings on education among others, but in the beginning the children were so wild and illiterate that I was already happy when they just cooled down and started concentrating. For me, what was important was to be with them, day after day, and support them in any way I could.

Joan and Aloka's *Awareness Through the Body* classes also helped. These classes began as a programme to improve the posture of the children, but soon evolved into helping them develop their capacity for attention, concentration and relaxation. They were encouraged to become more conscious of what was going on in and around their bodies and their minds. The classes helped increase the children's self-awareness and sense of responsibility. We teachers also did those exercises and I learned many things for my personal development. *Yoga nidra* has remained one of my preferential ways for focusing within.

Awareness Through the Body, like Jossy's *Sandboxes*, were complementary to the classical way of teaching in Transition School. Later on, I introduced board and card games in order to develop logic and strategy. Nowadays, my time in Transition School is equally divided between French classes and games.

In all these years, I never got involved in community politics. My interest was always in education, all the time. Only once I attended a community meeting, in 1978, in one of those circular buildings at Bharat Nivas, where at least 150 people – many of them French nationals – were outdoing each other in criticising Kalya. It was so mean, I hated it. Kalya laughed, but for me, it was awful. I couldn't relate to that attitude of the "Frenchies", even though I am French myself. I never was part of the French circle. Anyway, I would much rather stay at home and paint than go to a General Meeting.

I am sometimes asked if Auroville has improved. I think it has. I do not agree with people who complain that Auroville isn't as good as it was before. Auroville has changed, for sure. Back then, there were no rules; today we have them aplenty, perhaps too many. But that simply means that this is the situation we have got to work with now.

Looking back on more than 40 years in Auroville, I can say I have never regretted my decision to come back, but I admit that life – in particular dealing with one's own difficulties – has been challenging. I now see how foolish I was when I first came to Auroville: I was 23, and I thought I was an adult. I now understand those sweet smiles of the Ashramites in the early 1970s, and I admit that I, too, have a tendency to smile now at those young people who join Auroville, and know nothing. I have started to understand more, re-reading the works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, studying *Savitri*, trying to deepen myself, but this is too personal to talk about here.

In conversation with Carel

A natural education

As Auroville battles encroachment, nearby deforestation, water depletion and chemical farming, the green skills developed by the pioneers who brought the barren plateau back to life become ever more important. Now, this vernacular ecological knowledge is being propagated in a horticultural course offered by Auroville's Botanical Gardens.

The course was started by Paul Blanchflower, the founder of the Botanical Gardens, to train people to run ecological projects. "We are trying to create an educated society in Auroville and India about the advantages of native plants," says Paul. "If you are going to save the planet, there is a limit to what we can do in the Botanical Garden. But if we can scale up and create armies of trained people, that will help."

The course is spreading Auroville's reforestation culture to the wider world, with the first batch of students having completed the inaugural six-month course in March.

The full-time course offers a thorough training in working with nature, mixing theory with plenty of hands-on practice, focussing on three main components; horticulture forestry, eco-restoration conservation, and landscape project management. The students learn about aspects of plant biology and ecology through site visits to diverse eco-projects in Auroville and the bioregion. Paul explains that the training is for "people who are theoretical to gain practical skills; and for practical people to gain theoretical knowledge".

The trainers include some of Auroville's experts in their fields: Deoyani Sarkhot, Dr Lucas, Island Lescure and Nina Sengupta – all of whom have experience of working on the land. Island, an arborist, suggests that the training brings a spirit of professionalism to Auroville that was lacking and long overdue. He hopes that aspiring foresters will learn how to steward a forest, to know what's useful to cultivate, and to plant things in the correct order. He

Identifying TDEF species in the forest

appreciates the possibility for Aurovilians to join a course and pick up skills in new areas, and he himself partially undertook Deoyani's soil course for that reason.

Nina Sengupta, who has a PhD in Wildlife Science, teaches with a focus on how biodiversity can integrate with agriculture, tourism, other industries – including mining – and was inspired to "give young people a skill set in land stewardship with ecological focus". She encourages students to classify wild herbs accurately. An example she light-heartedly refers, is what only in Auroville is called 'chicken spinach', but elsewhere is known as waterleaf, *Talinum fruticosum*. Drawing attention to the fact the Auroville faculty works on the land, unlike faculty elsewhere, she also emphasises the benefits of the Auroville 'campus' setting: "Auroville is a unique place to study, as you step out of the classroom and can see the things we were just studying, as distinct from the urban settings of most biology classrooms."

Twelve students participated in the first course: a mixture of Aurovilians, existing Botanic Garden volunteers, German Weltwaerts exchange students, local villagers, and two employees of cement company Ramco, who sponsored the local village participants. The graduates all emphasise the joy of gaining knowledge that can be applied. "Before, I could not write '*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*', and now I can," says Shivaganesh, an Edaiyanchavady-raised youth who left school after the 12th year. He recounts how his friends now tease him on their group jogs, as he always stops to look at trees. Monica enthuses that "not only was the course fun, unlike in school, it also made more sense. I felt I was learning something I am actually going to use. The first time I saw a plant and recognised it from a photo, there was something really magical about it. It is connecting with nature at a different level." They all agreed that they had become more conscious about nature through the course. Monica recalls how what had previously seemed "like an indistinct mass of green",

slowly "revealed itself to be a new world". This became most apparent when she began sawing down a tree. "Then I stopped as I noticed a bee hive of tiny black bees, mosquito bees in Tamil, *Tetragonula Iridipennis*," she says. "It looks like dead wood, but that's the home of one of the most important elements of the ecosystem."

Shivaganesh observes that the "good bonding with nature" enables them to now think "of the whole circle; whereas before, we would think about cutting a tree but not about the birds who live there". Ritu appreciated learning that "there are so many ripples as to how you can nourish the earth, or what you can contribute. If you do not mulch, then the water evaporates and then the groundwater depletes. The course gives a big picture and joins the dots of ecological conservation – water, soil, species identification, plant care, and nursery management."

The first batch of students are putting into practice the ecological and greening skills they've learnt in the course. Shivaganesh has shifted from construction work in the Botanical Gardens, and now works and lives in the nursery there; Monica plans to give up her

Dr Lucas teaching about identifying patterns and proportions in nature

current computer-based job to work in the environmental field; and Ritu, with a Masters in Apparel Design, plans to develop her skills in making colours from plants. Ritu will also employ her new knowledge as an organizer for the second training course, which will start in December with a new batch of a dozen students. Paul hopes the course will be self-supporting in a couple of years. "In global terms, there's a crying need for trained people to do ecological projects, and we can try to meet that need," he asserts.

What the Auroville pioneers discovered through years of sweat, sun, trial and error, can now be learnt in a comprehensive manner in this inspiring Botanical Gardens course.

Peter

For more information visit http://auroville-botanical-gardens.org/auroville-ecological-horticulture-course/

Identifying TDEF species in the forest

What's in a community name?

In the Indian satirical film PK, a humanoid alien comes to study planet earth. Something of an idiot savant, he naively questions the customs and dogmas of the human race (located firmly in India, in this case). He also queries languages and names. What's in a name? Well, plenty actually. While Shakespeare argued that the name of a thing is not important because its essence remains the same, can the names of Auroville's communities be dismissed so lightly? Imagine how an alien anthropologist parachuted into Auroville might perceive things. Armed with no foreknowledge, the anthropologist moves around this strange place dubbed the 'city of dawn', coming across signposts and names stuck to gates: what would the anthropologist make of these names?

The alien anthropologist (who is strangely able to understand all languages encountered on planet earth) notes the penchant for French aspirational conceptions: Aspiration, Promesse, Douceur, Hermitage, Rêve, etc. The anthropologist also notes that this aspirational bent of names takes on a lofty spiritual tinge with the many Sanskrit-named communities: Arati, Sanjana, Sharnga, Agni Jata, Prayatna, Vikas, Udayan, Darkali, Samasti, Prarthna, Samriddhi, Kalpana, Sukhavati, Kalabhumi, Madhuca, Sangha, Nilatangam, Shakti, Kriya, Maitreye, Arka, Udyogam, Kailash, Anusuya, to name a few.

But what do these names all mean, and why were they chosen for these particular communities?

As she wanders further around the city of dawn, the anthropologist notes names that pose some ambiguity: should they be pronounced in English or French? Courage, for example? Certitude, Miracle, Discipline, Fertile, Acceptance? Then there are the seemingly English names that could go either way, with a little French twist of the final syllable, oui? Such as Luminosity, Simplicity, Fraternity, Sincerity, Felicity, Creativity? But then again, English-French translation is sometimes more tricky than it initially seems, with different meanings holding the potential to create quite a storm in a teacup. "Merde, this is tricky," she ruminates.

Krishna (left) and Mail fixing the name board of Utilité signed by The Mother with her blessing on their keet hut.(1971)

"I shall have to keep my ear to the ground as I try to conquer this strange community's naming tendencies."

The anthropologist notes the possibility that the Anglophile Aurovilians must have begun to assert themselves at some point in this community's history, and carved out some of their own explicitly Angloterritory: Evergreen, New Creation, Surrender, Hope etc. It then seems these Anglophiles got tired of dreaming up aspirational names, and resorted to the purely pragmatic: Youth Camp, Pony Farm, Centre Field, Near Beach, Far Beach, Nine Palms etc. But more recently, it seems the Anglophiles reverted to their more idealistic form as they conjured names evocative of futuristic utopias: Humanscapes, Sunship, New Lands etc.

The anthropologist notes the lack of communities with Tamil names. There's Udavi, which apparently means Tamil for 'help', which has variously been a fair trade store, crèche and site of various activities and small businesses near Edyanchavadi, before it evolved into the outreach school of today. And there's Pitchandikulam, which apparently

means "sage of the lake", which derives from a local legend of an old ascetic who lived beside the tank. There's Isaiambalam and Ilaignarkal, but not many more.

There's the evocative names: Siddhartha Forest, which hints that a forest hiker might accidently come upon the young Buddha meditating under a tree; Gaia, where the Greek goddess of the earth might emerge from the soil at full moon; and Baraka, Arabic for 'blessing', which captures the near-paradise of this lush farming community in the green belt. And then there's the people with names that begin with Auro, or who take up new Sanskrit names or revert back to their pre-Sanskrit names... "Baffling indeed!" the anthropologist exclaims. "I need some help to swim through the dense naming currents of this place."

Thirsting for information, she fortuitously stumbles upon the Auroville Archives. The excellent folk there inform her that the Mother gave names to some of the early communities and people, and it's said that some of these names reflected virtues that she believed they already manifested to a certain degree, or should aim to manifest, such as Aspiration, Promesse, Fertile, Douceur – to name a few. On the question of pronunciation, the archives folk inform her that Mother wrote the French name 'Utilité for one community, which has mostly lapsed into the English pronunciation 'Utility' these days. In other cases, the Mother gave bilingual names, such as Pour Tous / For All and L'Avenir d'Auroville / Auroville's Future.

The archivist gives the naïve anthropologist a couple of books that provide the odd titbit of information on the topic, but there's little to go on. What about after the early days? How was community naming undertaken during the middle period or the recent past? In those periods, it seems that bets were

off and communities mostly dreamed up their own names. The anthropologist hears that an architect humorously called a community "Perspiration" as an interim name during the exhausting process of creation, but the temporary name caused palpitations in some residents who were relieved when the name was changed on completion. "Ooh la la," ruminates the anthropologist, "these strange naming processes go beyond the usual structural functionalist explanations. This community functions in its own unique paradigm!"

At this point, the helpful archivist informs the anthropologist that there is no comprehensive documentation about the naming of Auroville's communities. The anthropologist is momentarily downcast. *Quel dommage*. But then she is elated! She realises she has identified A GAP in the research! A GAP is the holy grail of academic research! A GAP is the rationale to request copious research funds from intergalactic research institutes that appreciate the importance of such knowledge! This will enable stories to be gathered and documented; knowledge to be compiled! The anthropologist starts communicating with institutes on her own planet, to seek funding. But her planet operates in intergalactic time frames shaped by light years, so this will take forever in earth years...

In the meantime, she decides to ask the city of dawn's residents if they would like to contribute their own stories of community naming to this venerable publication. How was your community name arrived at? Is there a logic, synchronicity or higher goal to it? Why/how did you choose a particular language? Does your community reflect the name? Have you also noticed naming trends in the city of dawn? Did certain kinds of names evolve as the city evolved?

The anthropologist manages to persuade the editors of Auroville Today to reproduce a selection of the best naming stories received. Meanwhile, she is so entranced with the city of dawn that she decides not to return to her planet. She decides to start her own settlement in Auroville, and is currently considering names...

Lesley

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan

Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan, leading scholar of Indian culture, art and art history, and Padma Vibhushan awardee, passed away on September 16, 2020 at her Delhi home, at the age of 91. She was a member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation from 1991 till 1999, and was, as India's Representative to UNESCO's Executive Board, one of the moving forces behind the celebration in October 2008 of Auroville's 40th anniversary at UNESCO's headquarters in Paris.

Kapila Vatsyayan was known as the Great Dame of Indian Arts. Her life was marked by the exploration and promotion of virtually every dimension of India's rich and varied culture. She was not only an internationally celebrated scholar but an institution builder, laying the foundations for a sustained and deep-going study of the intricacies of India's artistic traditions.

"In the passing of Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan the nation has lost a woman of great learning and erudition," wrote Dr. Karan Singh in his eulogy. "Over six decades she has made a significant contribution not only to the administration of the Human Resource Development Ministry but to public life and scholarship in general. A prolific author, her work on the *Gita Govinda* and the Thanjavur temple inscriptions is well known, as is her role in setting up the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, including a special manuscript section to which she contributed a large number from her personal collection. She had a close connection with the India International Centre, serving it as Vice-President for five years and for another five years as President. She nurtured the Asia Project which I had started and expanded its scope which resulted in a number of significant international seminars and publications."

Her interpretation of arts, culture and literature and Indian Thought, which she shared with thinkers and practitioners in the world of arts, science and philosophy, was phenomenal. She left behind a vast corpus of writings, such as *Plural Cultures and Monolithic Structures: Comprehending India*, *Dance in Indian Painting* and *The Indian Arts, Their Ideational Background and Principles of Forms*.

In recent years she was very preoccupied with questions of ecology. She wanted to highlight how cultures of Asia revered nature as a mother, a source of nurture rather than a dark force to be conquered and harnessed to human greed. She was always interested in climate change and was convinced that India could be an example to the world if only it could return to its traditional reverence for nature and the view that all links in the ecological chain are equally indispensable to saving our fragile planet.

Many Aurovilians, whose lives she touched upon briefly but very profoundly as a Governing Board Member in the early years of the Auroville Foundation, will always be indebted to her. A number of Auroville residents joined the virtual Peace Meeting in memory of Dr Kapila Vatsyayan, on Saturday 19 September 2020, at her residence in New Delhi.

Dr. Kamla Tewari

Dr. (Major) Kamla Tewari, MBBS, DGO, left her body peacefully on September 29, 2020, surrounded by her loving family.

Kamla was born on 4th April 1927 in Jammu. From a young age, Kamla had made up her mind to study medicine, completing her MBBS degree at Lady Hardinge Medical College in Delhi in 1950. This was also the year she married a young army officer, Krishen Kumar Tewari (later Krishna).

The next few years found her raising three daughters and volunteering her medical expertise at free clinics and welfare centers. Following her father's guidance, she never charged private fees, in service to the young and developing nation. She and Krishna lived by this ethos all their lives.

Her life changed dramatically in November 1962, when Krishna was taken prisoner of war on the Himalayan heights during the short but brutal India-China war. With three children, and no income (Krishna's salary stopped the day he went missing in action) and determined to support herself and her daughters, she joined the Indian Army as a doctor.

Her fourth daughter was born in 1965, and in the next many years she and Krishna juggled their military postings with their family life. They were both posted in Calcutta, in 1971, when India and Pakistan went to war over what became independent Bangladesh. This war awakened in both a deeper quest; a moment when they discovered Sri Aurobindo's world view. Visiting Pondicherry with their daughters, they were present on 21st February 1972 for the foundation of the Matrimandir and The Mother's birthday. On the 22nd of February Krishna, Kamla and the girls were given a personal Darshan by The Mother in her room. This moment had life altering consequences for all.

Upon retirement from the army in 1976, they moved first to Pondicherry, and then to Auromodèle in Auroville where Krishna started a farm while building their house. Kamla worked at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram dispensary in Pondicherry, and the rural Health Center in Aspiration abutting Kuilapalayam, which The Mother had started. Her presence energised the Health Centre, and for years she ran an active maternity and birth control clinic, helping to deliver close to a thousand babies. She thought nothing of hopping upon the back of cycles or motorcycles in response to midnight calls to help deliveries, both at the Health Centre and at remote Auroville settlements, working sometimes with only the illumination of kerosene lamps.

While a qualified allopath and gynaecologist, Kamla's preference was for homeopathy and her practice expanded to include what she called the Multipurpose Health Centre located in Certitude and later Bharat Nivas. Many Aurovilians and villagers lined up for her treatment, not least because her deeply intuitive therapeutic approach included a warm and sympathetic listening ear. In the early years, Aurovilians will recall a

In 2009 Dr.Kamla Tewari received the Prestigious Award for Excellence for Social Service awarded for her 59 years of 'welfare work in the medical field' first in the Indian Army and then in Auroville.In the picture: HP Singhania, FICCI President; Sheila Diksit; Delhi Chief Minister; Dr Kamla; Yash Chopra, Film Producer and Anuradha Goel, President, FICCI's Ladies Organization

seemingly driverless peach coloured Jonga hurtling down the dirt tracks of Auroville, her diminutive figure wrestling the controls behind the wheel!

Kamla lived through many momentous events and broke many barriers. She did not let herself be limited by the opportunities available to women, qualifying as a doctor at a time when few women chose that route, and making her husband-to-be wait while she finished her medical studies. She was an accomplished sportswoman, horse rider, hiker, and swimmer, and won prizes for her prowess on the shooting range.

The house Krishna and Kamla built in Auromodèle in 1980, Aurogriha, was where she chose to leave her body surrounded by her family, having dedicated nearly half her life to Auroville.

Kamla's beloved life partner of nearly 66 years, Krishna, departed in 2016, at the same age, 93, as she was now. She leaves four loving daughters: Uma, Deepti, Abha and Shubha, sons-in-law Yogesh, Arjun, Claude and Narayanan, and grandchildren Rohan, Ruchir, Smiti, Achala and Kabir. Much of her family have dedicated their lives to Auroville in no small measure influenced by her deep ethos of service, her indomitable courage and can-do spirit that triumphed over every obstacle.

She leaves a legacy of many lives touched and changed forever by her love, patience, and ability to deal with anything that came her way with unflappable presence of mind.

I remember Kamla so well..., she was the one who would come out in olden days when no roads, no cars were available, and we would have some ailment, accident or other mishap somewhere out in nowhere in the greenbelt or other such godforgotten place, and do what she had to do, right there and then, with simple tools and great determination and strength. A real soldier. And a lovely woman who got us into homeopathy and another way of looking at health and healing. Rest in peace, Kamla, go with so much love from so many of us oldiegoldies... Jay MA

Mauna