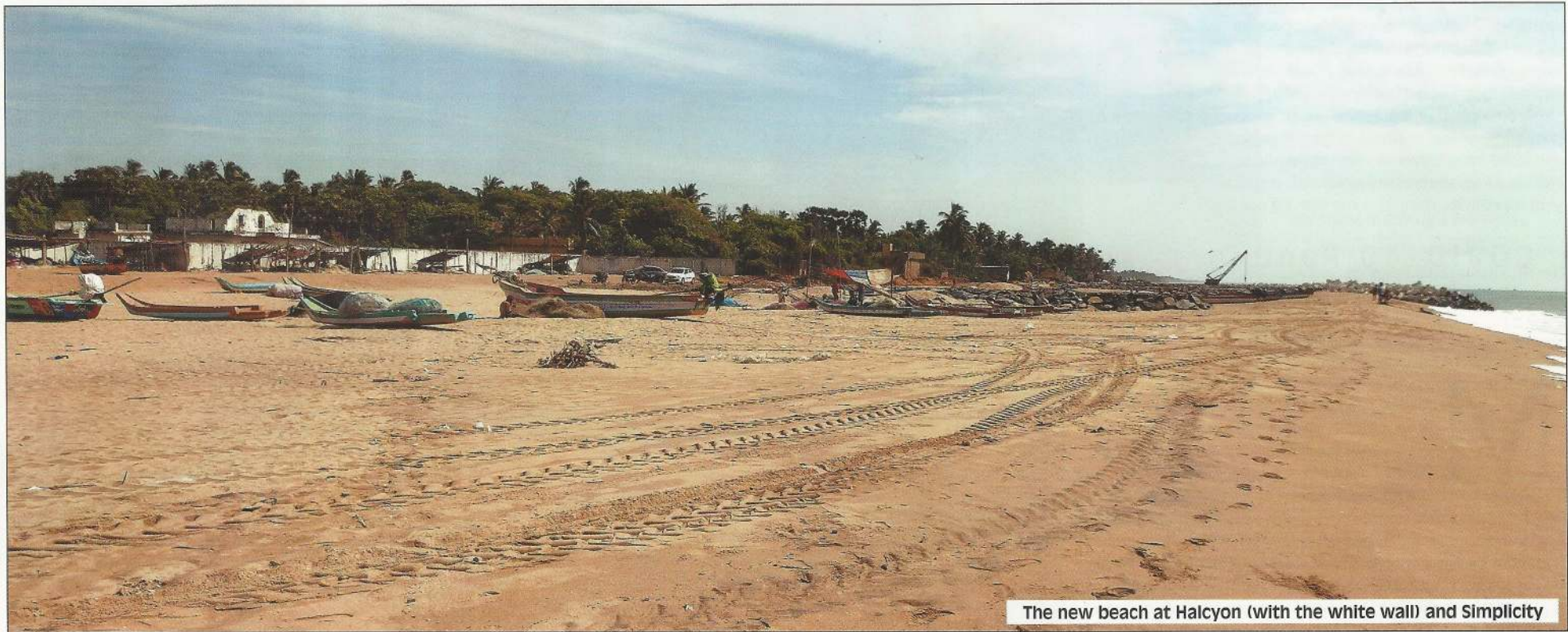


Recovering lost beaches

In the past decade, relentless sea erosion has badly affected some of Auroville's beach communities. *Auroville Today* reported on the problems a number of times, most recently in the article "New hope for our beaches?" that appeared in issue # 330 of January 2017. The hope was short-lived. In subsequent years, little has happened to recover Auroville's beaches and beach lands. A new initiative of the Tamil Nadu government may now be changing the picture.



The new beach at Halcyon (with the white wall) and Simplicity

Auroville has 10 beach communities. The most southern one, about six kilometres north of Pondicherry, is Quiet, home to the Quiet Healing Centre. 500 metres north are Samarpan, Samutra and Gokulam, communities that offer guest accommodation and, a stone's throw further, Repos and Waves. At another further 500 metres north, you find Halcyon (also known as Varuna beach, as this is the location for the future Auroville desalination plant) and Simplicity. The community of Sri Ma is about three kilometres north of Simplicity, and Eternity a three kilometres north of Sri Ma.

In the last decade, the southern beach communities have suffered badly from sea erosion. Beaches and vast tracks of land and buildings owned by Auroville have been lost to the sea. While Quiet, Samarpan, Samutra and Gokulam all lost more than 50 metres of their beach front land, Repos and Waves have virtually ceased to exist as almost all their land and buildings were swallowed by the sea. Halcyon and Simplicity escaped erosion but, during the last monsoon, the sea almost touched their fence.

Auroville's efforts to protect the communities from further erosion have largely failed. In October 2019, helped with a private donation of Rs 13 Lakhs, Quiet hurriedly built a wall of sand bags to protect its land and buildings, which was completed just before the monsoon. It withstood the rather 'gentle' monsoon of 2019, but gradually disappeared under the battering waves of the heavy 2020 monsoon. "It effectively offered protection for two years," says a Quiet executive. "We'll have to see what happens this year."

Samutra guesthouse was less lucky: one of its buildings is now on a precarious ridge and may well collapse into the sea during the next monsoon.

Vasu, a resident of Repos (the small part that is left of it), managed to get a donation of Rs 10 lakhs to build a concrete wall to protect it. But less than a year later a large part of the wall has already been undermined by the relentless sea.

Today, one finds a nice 60-metres wide beach at Quiet and a small beach that stretches from Samarpan to Waves. "It looks nice, but it really isn't," says Vasu. "The beach covers land that was once owned by Auroville. And these beaches may well disappear when the winter monsoon starts, and further erodes these communities." "We have no security that our

communities will remain safe," says a resident of Quiet, resignedly.

The situation at Halcyon and Simplicity, however, has recently changed for the better. In November last year, the Tamil Nadu Government started a major shore protection project to prevent further erosion and reclaim the shoreline at Bommaiarpalayam coast where the sea had caused damage to more than 70 houses. The Government is now building seven short groynes – barriers built out into the sea from the beach – of various lengths at a distance of approximately 200 metres from each other. The project is expected to reduce the intensity of the waves, prevent erosion, and provide safe boat-berthing beaches for the fishermen communities. The first one, just north of Simplicity, has already dramatically changed the landscape. While last year the sea licked its boundary wall, now a beautiful 40-metre wide beach has come into existence.

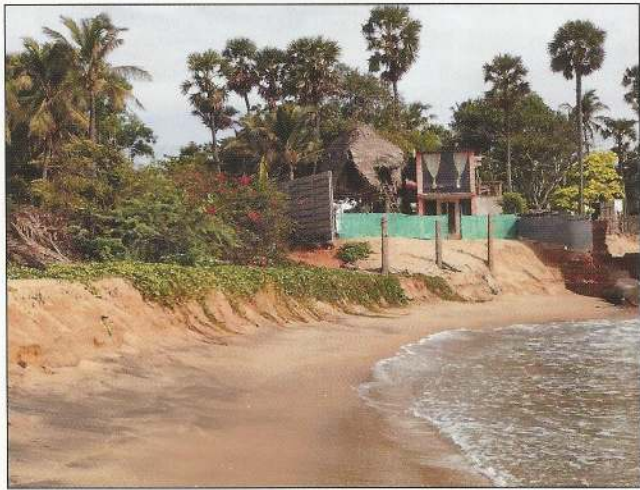
But not everybody is happy with the developments. "I'm doubtful that these groynes will be able to protect the Bommaiarpalayam coast for a long time. For I think they are too short. We will see how they act when the next cyclone hits the area," says Vasu. And he warns that the groynes may have a negative impact and erode the beach and Auroville land at Sri Ma and, ultimately, Eternity. For groynes don't solve the problem of erosion; they merely transfer it elsewhere. Groynes interfere with the natural movement of sand up and down the coast, creating excess in some areas – mostly south of the groyne on our coastline – and serious erosion on the other side.

But what about the situation of Auroville's southern beach communities? "Unless the Government of Tamil Nadu starts shore protection in these areas, the existence of these communities remains under threat," says Vasu. "The Government should ask the National Institute of Ocean Technology to find a solution to save these communities and recover their lands and the beaches."

Carel



Building a groyne



House at Samutra – on the edge



The Quiet Healing Centre reception building – on the edge



The undermined concrete wall at Repos

- New Secretary's address to the community
- The lockdown basket service
- Thamarai brings change

pages 2-3

- Surveing the youth
- The power of frisbee
- Kabir's message of love and oneness

pages 4-6

- The place you are right now God circled on a map for you
- Passings: Davide Montemurri, M. Durai

pages 7-8

- New books:
 - The soul of nations - Healing and Evolution
 - The English of Savitri vol. 8.

page 8

New Secretary's address to the community

The Working Committee recently shared a brief video address to the community by Dr. Jayanti Ravi, IAS, who took up charge as the new Secretary, Auroville Foundation, on the 5th of July. Here is an extract.

Namaste

Consider it a great privilege that I have been appointed, a fortnight ago, as the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. I am absolutely fascinated with this unique experiment, perhaps the only one of its kind anywhere on the planet.

I want to say that we, as officers of the IAS, are not specialists in any domain or field. We are generalists. But the one skill that I, in my career spanning 30 years, have been able to perform or deliver is the ability to straddle different points of view, different stakeholders, and actually facilitate the process of making things happen.

I do look forward to this as an exciting possibility where, with all of you together, I would be very happy to offer my services, to work in a very sincere manner towards seeing all your aspirations, dreams, come true. Of course,



Dr. Jayanti Ravi

this would only be possible with the complete grace, the blessings of Mother. This has been her vision. We are all trying to manifest what she dreamt of, a unique experimental city where you synthesise matter and spirit, and work through and towards human unity, where we are all trying to synthesise the diversity that we have.

As a living example of this, there are people here from more than 60 countries, people of different age groups, with different vocations, from urban and rural areas, but we are all trying to make the dream of the Mother manifest. It's something that I really look forward to.

The kind of people I have met in the last 15 days have been very inspiring, I cherish all these experiences and I am excited about the next three years, particularly in the context of the 150th birth anniversary of Sri Aurobindo. Of course, formally it will start on the 15th August, but the preparatory work for it has started. And I think if

we try to figure out collectively our dreams, our aspirations, and ideas to make this celebration fruitful, and to accelerate the process of Mother's vision, it could be a very strong propellant in our aim towards the highest aspiration, which is what the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo underscores.

So I am excited and looking forward to the next three years I will be spending with all of you. I look at myself as a master plumber who can help you remove some of the obstacles, the things that possibly clog our aspiration to make things happen. And, of course, all this is to be done in the warmth and complete grace that Mother bestows on us and envelops us all.

I want to appeal to all of us to re-dedicate ourselves to really make the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo, and the vision, the dream, of Mother manifest itself as beautifully, as quickly, and as firmly as possible here in Auroville to serve as a beacon for the entire world and mankind.

COVID-19 Pandemic

The lockdown basket service

May 2021: empty streets, sweltering heat, very few masked people on the road... Sounds like a scene from a post-apocalyptic movie, right? Drone's eye view of the roundabout, the glint of a huge inverted disco ball in the sun. Solar Kitchen.

Zoom in on PTDC: closed, but not shut. Empty? No! A buzzing beehive best describes the ambience there: electric vehicles smoothly gliding to and from PTDC; baskets being (un)loaded; a constant hum from the office with people zipping in and out; food being prepared for take-away as usual in the back behind the loading/unloading station; baskets in various prepping stages grouped in clusters around the room; people whirring between baskets and counters...

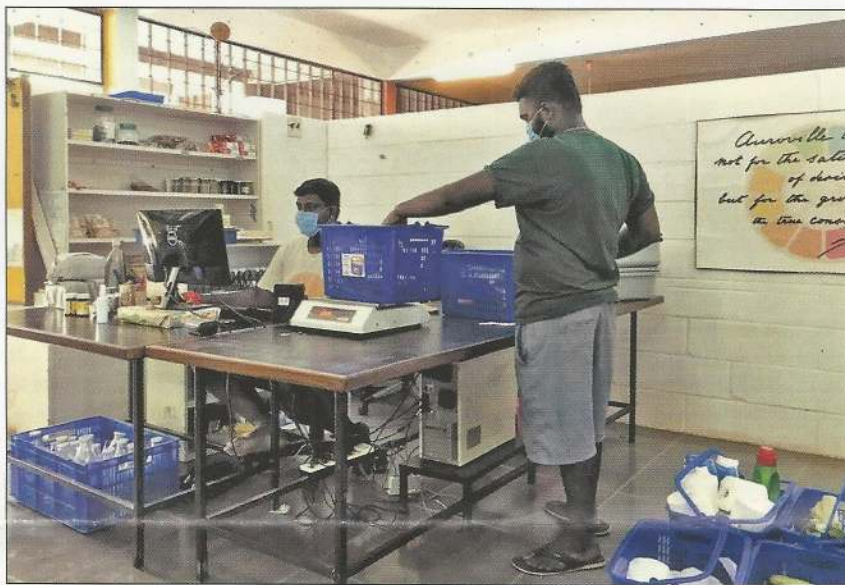
During the first Corona wave in summer 2020, PTDC had its first experience of how an emergency food supply scenario could look like, with help from the working groups to get special travel authorisations to transport food from Pondicherry and elsewhere to Auroville. The consciously.auroville app was developed in collaboration with Talam to help deliver food and other essentials within Auroville. On the basis of this, the Basket Service was initiated. Teamwork was essential right from the start, with Arul coordinating from the PTDC side, Satish in charge of deliveries and several other volunteers involved. In-shop sales continued throughout the whole lockdown, so the basket service was mainly used by PTDC members in quarantine, those among the high-risk age groups, those with co-morbidities, or those with mobility issues. This Phase 1 continued throughout the year on a small scale.

Summer 2021 was a whole new ball game. When the second wave hit India, the Government decided on new restrictions regarding food supply. It started with a week of "early shopping" which brought about a new operational challenge: instead of being able to collect goods during the usual eight hours of daily opening, the same needs had to be met within three hours. In order to serve the greatest number of members during this restricted time, PTDC developed an efficient method of service, streamlining the check-out procedure to ensure social distancing and avoid queuing. What helped was that there were enough volunteers to operate four checkout counters! Despite some PTDC users being grumpy about the whole situation, most of them were glad and expressed their relief about how PTDC organised things to meet this severe restriction of opening hours. "The really beautiful thing was that while some people really sucked out my energy, others gave a lot of energy and love back. It made all the frustrating moments easier to bear," said Harishini, one of the PTDC volunteers.

Then, on the day before full lockdown, Sunday May 23rd, nearly 600 families went to pick up baskets of food, most of them full to the brim. Despite the queue already stretching out to the road at 9 am, the atmosphere was calm, concentrated and quiet. It was a very demanding day for the team but turned out to be a very rewarding community experience. Ivan, who grew up in Auroville and is in charge of refilling the grocery stocks, said at the end of the day that he most probably filled the rice containers as many times on that one day as he would normally do during a full week.

During the two-week full lockdown, we experienced a complete stop in food-related grocery shopping, but take-away and e-commerce were permitted. PTDC decided to set up systems for three lines of lockdown services: tiffin, bread and basket. However, the existing ordering app could not be used for this purpose, so they went back to basics with emails. At that point, all the PTDC members needed baskets of provisions to be delivered to their homes. The number of baskets increased exponentially during the first week: 30 requests the first day, 70 the next, then 140, then 245!!! For hours, volunteer Manojkumar ploughed through the emails and hand-processed the basket order lists of the day.

Thankfully, as PTDC focusses on bulk procurement, dry goods were stocked up well in advance. Even a variety of fresh produce was available throughout. However, the main challenge was to how to plan ahead and order the correct amount of fresh produce needed for the day, because they never knew how many orders would come in. Twice during these two weeks, PTDC could not finish the basket orders as there were not enough vegetables.



Above: preparing the baskets
Below: the delivery service



Behind this collective service is a management team composed of Anandi, Anne and Arul, and Andrea who joined the team for this emergency. The Basket Service work was initially coordinated by Arul and Priyan, with the help of a large team of volunteers. Ankita explained that the experience gained last year meant that most things already functioned well. This year, everything was also digitised to better coordinate between various team members.

What also really helped was the prevalent understanding that community resources need to be shared in this time of crisis: a number of electric vehicles from ITS and Visitors' Centre – and sometimes even their drivers – were available to help out with deliveries, but also individuals and smaller services like Gas Service and Aikyam School, or a volunteer who offered to deliver individual baskets on his own bike.

As Roshan explained, the whole process was quite smooth as the smart division of labour and the setting up of various work stations allowed every person to fully understand their job and fulfil it. Enthusiastic to learn each task in the whole process, the volunteers were just happy to help. As Ankita said: "There are no 'thambi' jobs in PTDC! Everyone understands the importance of each task, be it cleaning the baskets, printing out shopping lists or answering complaints." Each person who joined brought a new set of skills or knowledge to the team, constantly putting forward ideas or proposals and improving the system.

Coincidentally, every time there was a void to fill or yet another aspect to organise, a new volunteer showed up "out of the blue" and took that on, like Cameron who dropped by one afternoon and ended up volunteering for several days, although that hadn't been the initial purpose of her visit. Or Roshan who suddenly began working with

ordered disproportion quantities of goods, while the team had to decipher vague orders like "a handful of beans". The communication part was maybe the biggest challenge: in spite of prior guidance, some participants were still unsure as to the ordering protocol so they would send several emails, making it very confusing for the team to follow at times. Understandably, some requests such as "Don't break the crackers!" fell through the cracks.

Nevertheless, most people (around 70%) were super enthusiastic and greeted the PTDC delivery team with smiles. The more organised communities, like Arati, Dana and Maitreye, had community coordinators to facilitate the delivery part. The Evergreen community even organised a squad of cheerleaders.

All in all, the interviewees (Ankita, Arul, Harishini, Priyan and Roshan) readily agreed that they all just really had fun! The internal dynamics of the team was good, everyone was united in their mission, diversity contributed to efficiency. This all participated in fostering a feeling of belonging and service. "Despite being born and growing up in Auroville, I never worked here," says Priyan, "so I finally got a solid work experience where I truly feel like I helped the community. I really enjoy working in a community service like PTDC, so I'm going to stay here."

Laughingly, but also quite seriously, they suggested that a programme be set up along the lines of "Learn civic responsibility for three months in PTDC. Young and old, AV Youth and Newcomer, and everyone in between is welcome to attend!"

Divya L.

Bringing change, gently

Sixteen years have gone by since two young women, Bridget Horkan and Kathy Walkling, took a big step to bridge the gap between Auroville and the neighbouring village of Edayanchavadi. They set up Thamarai, an outreach unit, to bring literacy, health and well-being to the local community. Kathy, though still an executive, stepped back about ten years ago to set up Eco Femme in Auroville. Bridget, along with her team, has continued to oversee the growth of Thamarai. 'Thamarai' in Tamil means 'lotus flower' and indicates the wish to see full potential bloom for everyone, irrespective of age, class, caste, colour, nation or religion.

Auroville Today wrote about Thamarai in January 2019. Since then, there have been some new and positive developments.

Since its inception, Thamarai has been moving from place to place (either rented or freely offered by generous friends and supporters). The team wanted to settle down and put down roots. This happened in the year 2017, when Bridget and Alok (from Auroshilpam), applied for and were granted joint stewardship of Auroville land in nearby Annai Nagar village.

This land consists of two parcels facing each other across a municipal road. One parcel of land became a sports ground. This happened because Thamarai, which encourages children to articulate their dreams and aspirations, decided to implement a child's wish. This was to bring peace and harmony in his village through sports.

The other parcel consists of a narrow strip of land which had been encroached, and which was then cleared with the help of the Auroville Land Board and the local Panchayat (village council). Thamarai is using part of this land for building the new Learning Centre, a garden and a small playground. The remaining part can be used for other Auroville projects and activities which benefit the surrounding villages.

The new Learning Centre was inaugurated on March 7th, 2021 when construction of phase I was completed. This includes a large classroom.

The new centre will eventually consist of three classrooms, one of which will be a fully equipped STEM (Science, Technology, English and Maths) classroom, a kitchen with a wood fired oven, a block of Ecosan waterless toilets, one fully accessible toilet, a garden and a playground.

Designing the new Learning Centre was an interactive process as Thamarai involved the children and asked for their ideas. Based on that consultation, the centre is incorporating features which meet the children's commitment to protect the earth and save water, such as water harvesting, a garden of edible plants and trees, bathroom doors made from recycled plastic from Quiet beach and bottle caps, and a compound wall from mud blocks and recycled plastic blocks.

Waterless toilets make a lot of sense as Annai Nagar gets water only for 45 minutes a day. In fact, on the day we spoke to the Thamarai team, there had been no water for three days as the pumps had broken down!

Thamarai is a good example of how co-operation and unity can do so much good. Many individuals and some organizations from all over the world are helping this newly hatched Learning Centre and sports ground become a full fledged reality. The draft annual report of Thamarai for 2020-21 shows that 40% of the funds came from France, 28% from Ireland (Bridget's home country), 15% from India (about half of this was from Auroville), and the balance came from several other countries.



Circle time

Aurovilians have come forward to support Thamarai in many other ways. Hedia manages the website, graphic work and takes classes for children and facilitators. Stemland, Auroville Teachers Centre and Child Protection Service offer training. Alok provided temporary space for the last three years on the ground floor of his building in Annai Nagar to hold classes till the Learning Centre came up. The Tree House community has built a beautiful treehouse-cum-slide and climbing frame for the children in the playground; Auroville architect Raman, Divij and Krishnaraj builders are providing their expertise and support for the construction; the Ecosan team and Guary supported with the design of the waterless toilet block, Yatharth built the wood fire oven with some of the children, Sathya painted the symbol and Jorge and the Min Vayu team are making the recycled plastic doors for the toilet block.

Though Thamarai has been holding regular leadership workshops with the Stemland team for some time, a new development was its translation into Tamil which made it possible to

hol shops to buy alcohol. Women protested against the three alcohol shops in the neighbourhood of the village and since then one shop has closed. In another example, a Thamarai facilitator has stopped two child marriages in her village. In this way, RTL workshops are helping people find a voice and stand up for their rights.

This year, Thamarai plans to increase its focus on alcohol de-addiction as this is a continuing source of stress and even violence in the village. According to Thamarai youth, 30% to 40% of the males are addicted to alcohol. Bridget explains that Thamarai has a donor who supports those with addiction to go through a 30-day rehabilitation programme. "Over the last three or four years we've been doing this and we've had quite a few success stories. But we have also had some participants who went through the programme and have gone back to alcohol again." Bridget and Muthukumari are designing a holistic programme on health and wellbeing which will be focused on the males in the community.

Another new development has been the use of the newly-minted sports ground where local Annai Nagar youth, who are national champions in volleyball and football, are starting daily training with the children, and Aurovillian international frisbee champion, Selvi, with the support of Smithi, has plans to start training the girls in this sport in September. "So now our girls can aspire to be an international frisbee champion like Selvi, who is an amazing role model," says Bridget.

Regular Activities

In 2019, Thamarai decided to re-open its 'After School' programme in Edayanchavadi, which had closed in 2017. This time, they started the outreach centre on neighbouring Auroville land offered by the Joy of Impermanence (Anitya) community. Vignesh, an architect and facilitator with Thamarai, modified the structure, built by Bamboo Centre, which houses the After School hall. Children were involved especially in making the flooring of this hall. Vignesh says "this was a test for my ideology of co-creating with kids and working with rural transformation."

Today, Thamarai supports about 130 children in its two After School centres. The After School programme continues to be the mainstay of their outreach work. It runs from 4.30 pm till 8 pm on all weekdays. On weekends, special programmes are offered, and sometimes external trips are arranged. Recently, the older children enjoyed a trekking trip to Kalvarayan hills with the Auroville Botanical Gardens Team.

On a typical weekday evening, children come at 4.30 pm, play for half an hour, then eat a nutritious snack.

After this, they attend an English class and do their homework with support from the facilitators. The children who finish quickly have the freedom to play games like chess, read books, use computers with access to the internet, or do art work. The last 20 minutes are devoted to circle time where they all come together to share learnings and acknowledge each other. Children lead this session with support from a facilitator which always ends with three minutes of silence and the Thamarai rhythm clap.



The new building under construction

Even during the Covid lockdown period, Thamarai continued to provide daily educational support to the children. It has moved from daily telephonic calls to the online platform. However, some of the children do not have smartphones, so telephonic calls are also ongoing and Thamarai is trying to acquire used android phones by posting a request for these on its Facebook page.

In fact, support has come pouring in during this lockdown period from its many friends and supporters from all over the world. Thus, with these volunteer facilitators, they have been able to offer online English classes, Maths workshops, mind mapping, chess tournaments, graphic design workshops and many other things. They even had an online talent show with the children.

M. Muthukumari is the co-ordinator for the health programmes offered by Thamarai. She offers yoga and well-being workshops to children and adults in Auroville units, surrounding villages and schools. In a recent three month programme for children of Auroville outreach and Government schools, she taught yoga, personal hygiene, nutrition and safe drinking water. She did tests on the children and found that 77% of the children were anaemic. Then she worked with the school authorities on improving consciousness about food to increase the levels of iron and protein in the food they provide. She also worked with the teachers and the students to address the water supply in the schools which was unfit to drink because of the presence of E coli. Together they cleaned the tanks and she showed them

how to keep the drinking water system clean. She did this work in 12 schools over a period of one year.

She also conducts yoga and well-being workshops for adults. To make them more beneficial and targeted, she does an initial survey to find the issues troubling them. For example, in a recent survey she found that a number of women felt stressed and many had diabetes. So she designed the yoga class around these issues. She takes pre-course and post-course tests for parameters like blood pressure and sugar and shows the difference, which for most of them is quite marked. She also trains some of the more enthusiastic participants to teach yoga to others in their villages and communities. Muthu says: "it's about awakening their potential".

The most important learnings

What has Thamarai learned over its 16 year journey? Bridget says the main learning over the years has been that everyone has potential and that it is really important to work across the whole community and engage all the stakeholders as a co-creation. "In Edayanchavadi we did not do that, so we are doing it differently in Annai Nagar. We have established a village committee in Annai Nagar which has members from the panchayat, the elders, women, youth and children, and we decide together on issues we care about and need to work on in the community."

Another learning is that the teachers (known as facilitators) should come from the local village so that they can

spread the knowledge they acquire in their area. The facilitators are all graduates from the villages (with the exception of Bridget and Vignesh). Currently, there are 12 facilitators from the two villages, and they are given continuous training in how to unfold their own potential and to support the children.

Thamarai also consciously locates its outreach units in the most marginalised sections of a village. Annai Nagar is a marginalised Dalit community, and when they started, all the children came from Annai Nagar itself. However, because Thamarai always tries to make its unit attractive and deliver a high quality of service, slowly children of other castes and from surrounding villages want to join. Today, about 30% of the children who come to the Centre are from other surrounding villages, and children of different castes play and work together harmoniously. In fact, caste is never mentioned. Instead, everyone is encouraged to respect each other and to treat as equal.

Bridget emphasizes that "this is our actual work, to bring about change in society, gently. It is not just about teaching English or Maths or computers. It is about creating an enabling environment so that inner capacity can unfold. This will support a counter-culture of well-being dissolving gender inequality, caste and other social constructs."

Archana

For more information on Thamarai visit <https://thamarai.org/> or <https://www.facebook.com/AV.Thamarai>

Surveying the youth

Recently Disha, which was a service that provides personalised support and guidance to the youth of Auroville and the bioregion, did a survey of Auroville youth and young adults. We spoke to Valentine and Avinash from the survey team to find out what they discovered, and how the findings could shape attitudinal and structural changes in Auroville.

Auroville Today: What motivated you to do this survey?

Valentine: The Disha project was under SAI-IER. During a conversation, one of the SAI-IER team remarked there are a lot of rumours and negative stereotypes about the youth of Auroville, but we don't really know the reality. So it was suggested we could research into this, and assess the opportunities and obstacles facing youth in this community.

Having grown up here I have my own perspective, so this was also an opportunity for me to investigate if that perspective was valid and then to share the findings with the rest of Auroville. For unless you are a parent or work in a school, it is very difficult to get an idea about what it means to be a young person in Auroville.

Avinash: I feel that the youth are rather like a marginalised community, a separate community, yet many of the issues prevalent in Auroville seem to be particularly impacting them. I thought a survey could help bring more understanding about this, so I joined the survey team to analyse the data and report on the findings.

There were only 46 respondents to the survey. Do you feel it is representative?

Valentine: We reached out to different sectors of the youth, to different age groups and nationalities – Lucrezia was particularly active in doing this – to try to make the respondents as diverse as we could, and from other conversations we're satisfied that what they expressed is very representative of the larger youth community.

Some of the results were predictable – for example, money and housing issues are clearly impacting the youth very much – but were there things that came out of the survey that surprised you?

Valentine: What surprised me very much was that a vast majority of them want to be here. I found it really heartbreaking that some of them felt they could not continue to live here, or would not be able to return, primarily for financial reasons, for many of them really want to participate fully in Auroville. This is something not widely understood by adults.

The fact that people in their 30s were not sure they would stay in Auroville is also very worrying because that is the demographic which makes the city move, which can make real change happen, and there are few people in the 30 to 45 age bracket at present.

Why is this?

Valentine: The survey revealed that these young adults experienced certain issues, like financial and housing challenges, more strongly than the younger age group, because at this age they would like to settle down and have a family. But if they can't do so here because of factors like these, they end up living somewhere else, and that is a loss to Auroville.

Avinash: I think the youth are like a barometer. If this group is doing well, the health of the larger community is probably okay. I knew many of the youth were not happy but I didn't know why and now the data is much clearer. Some things are quite striking. For example, we could very clearly see that people with poorer access to learning opportunities in their early years were less likely to want to stay in Auroville when they became older.

Why did some have fewer learning opportunities?

Valentine: Sometimes in Auroville you don't find what you need because it's simply not available. But it's also a lot to do with your state of mind. If a young person feels empowered, motivated, they will make the effort to search out opportunities. But not all youth have that state of mind because they may have financial issues or other issues which impact their confidence. I know youth who do not feel comfortable walking into Housing Service for example, because they are scared. It's very saddening to realize they feel so uncomfortable, alienated.

Actually, the survey reveals a general lack of understanding and fear of administration and governance of Auroville.

To what extent is this influenced by the attitudes of the adults to the Town Hall and working groups?

Valentine: A lot. Some of the children hear



Valentine and Avinash

terrible things at home about these groups and then take it as truth, and this is very unfortunate. Some years ago I was working on an Auroville Gap programme. As part of this programme the students visited the Town Hall offices and met people from working groups, and they were really surprised to find that people from the working groups were actually super-cool. They were very easy to talk to and answered all their questions. Thank god the kids can quickly shift attitude when they are exposed to a different experience. But until that moment, they were living through their parents' attitudes.

Avinash: I agree that individual motivation is a big factor when it comes to youth accessing learning opportunities. But a society can also make access as easy as possible so that people do not have to struggle to find them. Also, professional guidance and counselling should be available. The survey revealed that many of the youth felt they lacked such guidance when it came to understanding the opportunities available to them, or when they had personal difficulties.

I'm very surprised by this lack of information and support. I came here three years ago as a participant in a programme which is all about figuring out what you want to do in life, and Aurovilians were helping us do this. As an outsider, it was relatively easy for me to access help, but obviously this is not the case for everybody who is growing up here.

Why is there so little professional guidance for young people in Auroville?

Valentine: There are a few reasons. For a long time, there was a belief that the children of Auroville were special souls and needed to be dealt with in a different way: I was raised like this. My generation was told that when there are personal issues, there is always some spiritual answer: psychotherapy and counselling had a bad reputation. In the survey, mental problems are mentioned as one of the main issues the youth have to deal with. So people need to accept that sometimes youth do need therapy or counselling, without feeling that this means that Auroville has failed them.

Another reason why there is a lack of professional counselling is that many Auroville schools make it difficult for people to come in and do this. I am a peer educator, and I wanted to come in and do sessions on topics like safe sex, but I discovered there is a strong reluctance to letting anybody bring this knowledge to the students, because it may not be compatible with the values of the school and you might be 'putting ideas in their heads'.

So at first the community was in denial, it wasn't admitting that there is a need for counselling the youth. But now, in this survey, the children themselves have expressed such a need, so I don't have to argue about this anymore.

It would be great if the insights gained could be taken into consideration by our working groups and guide community decisions. However, things have already shifted a bit. Now Matram, a psychological counselling service exists, and a psychotherapist, Juan Andres, is working at Santé, and these people are not rigid but are blending their knowledge with the reality of Auroville. Still, issues like the mental health of our youth remain something of taboo.

Avinash: Auroville is not unique in this respect. Having grown up in India, I can tell you that it's still very difficult in this culture to talk about issues like this.

On the basis of the survey responses, what changes need to happen?

Valentine: My idea was to share the results of the survey – which makes certain concerns of the youth very visible for the first time – with the working groups, schools, and anybody who is potentially concerned, and let them figure out what needs to happen. We don't feel we should be telling them how to do their job. Now that the information is out there I can sleep better, because I feel we have done what we could.

But something is already happening. Matram responded very enthusiastically: we had a long conversation with them about the findings, and Santé would also like to meet us.

You must have your own ideas about what needs to change, and how.

Valentine: I can give you my wish list. If we had more structured higher learning opportunities available in Auroville, like an Auroville-style university, and financial support for those youth

who wish to stay here and continue their studies, I think it would completely change the outcome of surveys like this.

I know the Tamil students very much want this as they suffer most from its absence. Once they graduate from Auroville schools, if they want to further their education they have to go to Indian schools. Here, students get treated in a very different way and the teaching style may not be suitable for kids educated in Auroville, so that can be pretty traumatic for them.

Avinash: I think even some of those students whose parents can afford to send them abroad for further studies would stay here if that option was offered, because they like the style of education here.

Valentine: Another of my wishes is that Auroville provides many more apprenticeship maintenances, and these should be easier to access. This is an amount that young people receive if they are working in an Auroville unit. But there are very few apprenticeships available, and the apprentices need to work 35 hours a week, commit to working in that unit once the apprenticeship is over, and their parents should be on maintenances. That's a lot of conditions. We need more apprenticeships and fewer conditions.

Another thing is to make life easier for youth who would like to start businesses. I know a few of them who tried doing this, but they gave up because paying the Auroville contribution as well as GST etc. suffocated them.

Housing also has to change. At present, if your parents are living here, you can build in the garden: it's a form of nepotism. But if you don't have parents here and you lack financial resources, you will struggle to find a place to live.

I had grown up with the belief that if you do your best, the world will provide for you, but too often you end up in your mid-twenties, like I did, living in a "dungeon" in Vikas and struggling to make ends meet.

So if you are a youth of Auroville and you decide to stay here, you should at least have your basic needs met.

Finally, many of the respondents said that they would like to have been educated regarding community processes and to be more involved in decision making and I think this would be a very good thing.

Avinash: I see there are general Auroville issues and some that are specifically youth issues. When it comes to the youth, there is a clear need for emotional guidance and professional guidance, as well as access to higher education within the community.

continued on page 5

Main findings from the survey

46 people responded: 8 Indians, 28 Europeans, 10 from USA, UK, Israel, Russia, Korea and Indonesia. 30 were 24 years and below, 10 were 25-29 years old, 6 were over 30.

80% said they had easy access to learning opportunities in Auroville, but many complained about the lack of higher education. One third of those who did not have easy access were unsure if they would stay in Auroville long-term.

The main obstacles encountered in their life in Auroville were financial (65%), housing (48%), lack of professional guidance (43%) and mental health issues (37%). These are also the areas in which they would like support.

Those people who didn't have easy access to learning opportunities were much more likely than others to face these issues. However, 90% of those in the 25-29 age group see money as an obstacle in their life. A much higher percentage of the non-Indian groups have identified mental health and family issues as obstacles compared to Indians.

A much higher percentage of the 30+ age group identified almost every issue as an obstacle.

59% saw themselves having a future in Auroville, 39% said 'maybe'. Only one

answered 'no'.

Among those that answered 'yes', there still seemed to be a level of uncertainty. Most of these would like to go outside to study/explore, and many say they will return after they finish their studies, or when they become financially secure. Among those that answered 'maybe', the reasons for their uncertainty varied. Some cited career difficulties, gender and racial bias, and monetary issues.

The 30+ group is less sure of their future in Auroville than others, while Indians in general seemed surer about having a future in Auroville than the other groups.

However, both the "yes" and "maybe" respondents see Auroville as their home which, ideally, they would like to return to and help in its realization, but both groups also see many challenges/difficulties in them being able to do this.

Significantly, however, there seems to be a general underlying faith in the Dream and a strong belief that Auroville is a place where positive change and growth are still possible.

continued from page 4

However, I would also try to build a system that removes dependence upon privilege in general. I think with current technologies you can develop many systems that can make things fairer and more equitable for everyone than they are at the moment.

Regarding Aurovilian youths' struggle to access resources and financial assistance, as well as their wish to be more involved in community affairs and decision-making, would this be an argument for some kind of affirmative action, like having a youth quota in commercial units, working groups or housing allocations?

Avinash: I wouldn't do it in a blanket way. I'm not saying there should not be affirmative action, but it would need to be done on an individual basis, based on many factors. For finances and housing, I think you can give special consideration to people who grow up here. Perhaps it would be better to try a youth quota in our working groups or services than in commercial units, although, even here, if you have a choice between youth from outside the community and someone inside with equivalent ability, or even slightly less, than I think there's a good case for choosing Auroville youth. A lot of people who grew up here are very capable, but at present they're not given a chance.

Valentine: I think some kind of affirmative action would be a good way to start, although we can't expect units and groups to immediately welcome youth. But it would remind people that Auroville is supposed to be a community, with notions of solidarity and sharing.

Avinash: Incentive structures could also work quite well. The issue of youth who want to start a unit but have many obstacles put in front of them is something that could be remedied in this way.

However, you cannot just fix one issue because everything is interconnected. There are things we can do to help the youth, but this is linked to the wellbeing of the society as a whole, and this is reflected in the health of its economy. A healthy economy generates healthy income and values in a good way for everyone, including the youth.

Valentine: I agree, the economy is crucial, and from an economy perspective Auroville could make the youth more of a priority than its present focus, which is that of growth. After all, youth is the future of Auroville just as much as the assets we are buying or creating.

However, regarding the issue of youth in general, some things are changing. For example, for the past two years we've had a more professional child protection service. When I was growing up, a very small group of people were doing this. I didn't even know they existed, but I needed them, and I know many people with whom I have grown up have

mental health issues relating to things like child abuse.

Auroville took a really long time to get its act together on this because people didn't want to admit that such things were happening here.

Does this suggest that attitudinal change is a prerequisite for structural change?

Avinash: Of course, you need first to become aware of the issues and not deny them. But I wouldn't say you have to wait to become enlightened before you can change things. I think awareness change and structural change are interrelated. If a working group is impressed by a youth member who is there on a youth quota, they may change their view of youth in general, and this could lead to further structural changes.

Valentine: Auroville definitely need to change its attitude regarding its youth. It needs to start looking at them as a valuable resource rather than with mistrust, even fear. At present, we are treating the youth like a different species, and we are less and less comfortable with them because we are losing the habit of how to deal with them. When we were a small community, if one of them crossed a line we went and spoke to them: we dealt with them directly. Now, sometimes, we call the police.

We have to begin by getting to know each other a little bit better and seeing the kids as kids. I have a

friend who, when he was a teenager, did every dumb thing possible. But now he has one of the most responsible jobs in Auroville, and he's one of the most capable people I know. There are many others like that. They go through a difficult phase, and then they grow into wonderful adults doing incredible work.

I don't condone the wild parties and fast driving, but we need to have more appropriate expectations of the youth and be a bit more forgiving, because growing up here under everyone's scrutiny is very hard. Even as an adult, you still have to prove yourself if, as a young 16 year old here, you did something that got you into trouble.

And then there's the whole spiritual overlay. It was worse when I was young – when the youth were seen as the spiritual future of Auroville – but there is still a bit of a narrative which asks why the Auroville youth aren't more 'spiritual'.

When you are expected to be spiritual rather than just a normal kid, it is much worse when you do something 'unspiritual'. Not only do you break a rule, but you ruin your *karma*, so it's double pressure. They do find their way with spirituality eventually; we just have to trust them to find their way.

In the meantime, if we are really serious about creating human unity, let them feel valued unconditionally, just as we do with children.

From an interview by Alan

The power of Frisbee

Selvi, a teacher at Last School, grew up in Auroville. Her studies in political science took her to Chennai, but it's her frisbee prowess as part of India's national Ultimate Frisbee team, that became her ticket to travel the world.

"Auroville is comfortable, and we know each other and it's home," says 23-year old Selvi as she talks about stepping out into adulthood. "When I went to study in Chennai, it was a whole new world for me. I met so many people in college, but I wasn't talkative. Then I saw a frisbee team playing there, and I thought, 'OK, frisbee people are here – I will have my comfort zone.'"

Selvi was a shy and studious student throughout her high school studies at Auroville's NESS. "Until 12th standard, I was silent and I closed myself off. My comfort zone was with close friends and family." But she also enjoyed sports. One day, when she was 17, she saw some people playing ultimate frisbee at Certitude sports field and joined them. It turned out that she had a natural talent for the sport.

Within a year of starting frisbee, Selvi was selected for India's national ultimate frisbee team. When she first received the phone call, she found it hard to believe the news and kept checking with the selectors. "When it was confirmed, I was super excited to go abroad for the first time," she says.

While her early years of frisbee playing were dominated by determining strategies of play, Selvi soon realised that the "super fast and tall" international competitors had an advantage that often thwarted her strategies, and she learned to adapt to the flow of play within "really tough" games. As she grew in confidence and experienced how the strong team spirit could buoy her through exhaustion, the game even became "joyful" for her. "We encourage and trust each other, and give a collective effort to push forward." But even when her team wins an important game, Selvi explains that her tendency is to remain calm. "My team mates go crazy and jump around. I like seeing them so happy, but I don't do that. I just smile – I'm not a person that expresses too much."

Travelling with the team for international competitions, Selvi has seen different parts of the world, including London, Australia, Japan and the Philippines. "I like being in a different country, seeing people, eating different food, experiencing a different culture," she says, although she complains laughingly about London's weather – "It was cold and raining, and it was hard to breathe, and hard to run!"

Gaining knowledge

Selvi attributes her shyness as a child to "overthinking, and limiting myself and thinking about other people's judgements". Before she started frisbee, she was scared of meeting new people and having to speak English. "I didn't speak English well at that time. At school, outside class, I only

spoke with friends in Tamil. So I suppressed myself in speaking English with new people. I had many mental difficulties, but now I'm improving my language and communication skills."

Selvi was determined to have an independent life but concedes that she is somewhat unusual for a young Tamil woman originally from the village. She partially credits this desire to her overseas travel experiences, and partly to her stepfather Martin's influence. Martin, a long-standing Aurovilian originally from Switzerland, met Selvi's mother when she was working in Andre's boarding house. After their marriage, the family moved to Martin's home in New Creation Field, which also doubled as a boarding house, so Selvi grew up surrounded by the 'sisters' who boarded with the family.

"Martin made sure we all were treated equally and affection was always there," she says. "I learned many important things from him – how to be responsible, how to manage our budget and how to lead an independent life. Every week, he'd give us pocket money; it was a way of teaching us to manage money. We also shared responsibilities, like cooking, cleaning and watering the garden."

So when Selvi and her sisters wanted to study in Chennai, Martin was supportive and informed them about the reality of the outside world. For the first two years, Selvi lived in an apartment in Chennai with two 'sisters' who had boarded with her family, and they cooked their own food, managed accounts and paid the rent together. After the leafy spacious environment of Auroville, Chennai was something of a shock. "In the beginning, it was disturbing, because I don't like being with so many people," Selvi recounts. "Later on, I got used to the busy life of Chennai, and I started to like the city because of the friends I made."

After finishing her bachelor's degree, Selvi did her master's degree – both in political science. While the focus was on understanding the Indian political system, she also studied the theories of Western political thinkers like Hobbes, Locke and Rousseau, and international relations. "It's useful to be aware of political systems: the corruption and misuse of power, and the stuff happening in our own country," she says. "I improved my critical thinking. The stories on the TV and in the newspapers are not fully true. So, I try to figure out the back story and think critically."

Gaining independence

As she finished her master's degree, Selvi decided to become a teacher in the spirit of never-ending learning. She also wanted to understand different teaching techniques, and to "develop as a person." After observing classes for a few months in Auroville, she became an apprentice teacher at Last



Selvi playing frisbee on the beach

School, teaching Tamil language and political science. "In Last School, they give you the freedom to find your own way to teach. This is challenging, and I'm working out how I want to teach."

She also made the leap into independent living six months ago, and has her own space within a youth housing initiative in Creativity community. "I have always wanted to live alone, and experience something different [from Tamil girls]," she says. "I had seen people living alone, taking care of themselves. Whatever they faced, they managed and they stood up for themselves. That interested me. I thought it's a better way of living, rather than depending fully on parents."

While Selvi's father was supportive about her plan to live independently, she had to convince her mother. "At first, my mom thought it was not acceptable, but she adapted, and now she's fine with it." Selvi acknowledges that while her parents' open-mindedness supported her own choice to live independently, it's more of a challenge for most Tamil girls. "Here in Tamil culture, you're expected to live with your parents. If you're a girl, you live with your husband's family after marriage, and you have to sacrifice many things for them. The culture says you should act a certain way, dress a certain way, be conscious of what you say and how you behave." Selvi attributes her childhood shyness to her internalisation of these values. But as she became exposed to the wider world, her drive "to experience something different" became stronger.

She acknowledges there are "unfair" double standards of behaviour for boys and girls, but says mothers are simply trying to protect their daughters. "If they let them live alone, parents fear that society will create rumours... So parents bring up the concept of marriage as a solution to escape from the unwanted criticisms against women."

When Selvi told college friends about her plan to live alone, they were initially surprised, and were then positively encouraging. "I was happy to be an example, and show that there are other options – that girls don't have to get married at a certain age."

So far, her shift into independent living is going well. "I'm managing. I feel happy. I feel proud of myself. I get to meet new people. Of course, I'm

facing challenges, but these are part of my development – you get to progress through this significant process."

When she's not teaching, Selvi spends time reading, cycling, catching up with friends, and watching movies in different languages, especially comedies. She's also started coaching frisbee for Aurovilians, and will soon start a frisbee coaching project, Playquity, with Thamarai, an Auroville village outreach initiative [see page 3]. The six-month project teaches leadership skills and confidence through frisbee to village girls. Unlike other sports that use referees to resolve issues, the players themselves take up this task in frisbee. "We have to be fair, honest and trust each other," says Selvi, "so the game teaches those values." After the game, players participate in a 'spirit circle', where they share their perspectives and appreciate the other players, a process that encourages participants to grow. In the Playquity project, once the girls have been trained to become confident coaches, they will teach frisbee to boys in the village, in an effort to address gender inequities.

Selvi also reads books by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo with the help of another teacher, and is "aligning their teachings with my life experiences".

Her time spent outside Auroville has prompted a reframing of her thoughts about the community: "Earlier, I did not really feel the value of Auroville. But once I went to Chennai, I started to feel that Auroville is my place and I wanted to come back. Even though I want to explore more, go out of the country and travel around, I will always want to come back and contribute to life here. I'm sure about that."

"Even as you grow older, you get so many opportunities to learn and to meet people here. Outside Auroville, you see people focused on one profession and being narrow minded – most of them just follow this idea of 'I want to be a doctor or engineer'. But you can try different things in Auroville."

"Living alone was a proud moment, knowing that I can overcome any obstacles. Now I feel like I can have strength to fight against anything."

Lesley

Kabir's message of love and oneness

The couplets and songs of the fifteenth century Indian poet-saint, Kabir, have been woven into the cultural fabric of north India for centuries. Over the last three decades, Professor Sehdev Kumar has published various books on the poetry of Kabir, which foreground his own 'transcreations' of Kabir's poems from vernacular Hindi to English. Originally a physicist, Professor Kumar lives in Auroville and is spearheading a project to translate Kabir into ten languages.

Like many youngsters growing up in north India, Professor Kumar studied Kabir's poetry at school. Later, he became a nuclear physicist and an academic in Canada. He describes how his study of Einstein led him to read the works of Sri Aurobindo, which then became part of a spiritual search that led him (back) to Kabir. Having not read Kabir for 20 years, he had "quite an awakening" at the age of 36, as he rediscovered "the depth of the verses of this completely un-lettered sage and a poet," he recounts. "I had a reputation as a writer and an intellectual, but I learnt more from the simple words and metaphors of an uneducated weaver poet, than from the other great thinkers."

To illustrate his point, Professor Kumar bursts into a Kabir couplet, first in Hindi and then in his own English trans-creation:

*On the crossroads of life
Kabir stands
With a raging flame
Of love
In his hand*

O dear friend

*If you seek to follow me
You must set your house
On fire.*

Professor Kumar explains that the 'house' that Kabir alludes to is the house of one's own bloated ego and constraining beliefs, and that a true spiritual seeker must confront these aspects of the self in order to gain a glimpse of the divine. "I felt Kabir was beckoning me to remove the veil of ignorance. Because intellectual arrogance is very seductive – it becomes a new kind of veil." Aptly, the title of Professor Kumar's new book is *Glimpses of the Real in a House of Illusions*.

As Professor Kumar studied Kabir's couplets in the original 15th century Hindi dialect over the following years, he became inspired to trans-create them in English for the world at large. He emphasises that trans-creations are different from translations. That is, rather than trying to reproduce Kabir's couplets in the couplet form, "It's poetic prose that takes certain liberties. It is meant to capture some of the beauty of the original without being stilted by its format," he says. He likens this approach to the popular translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali* from Bengali to English, which Tagore himself undertook in collaboration with Irish poet W.B. Yeats.

Painting with words

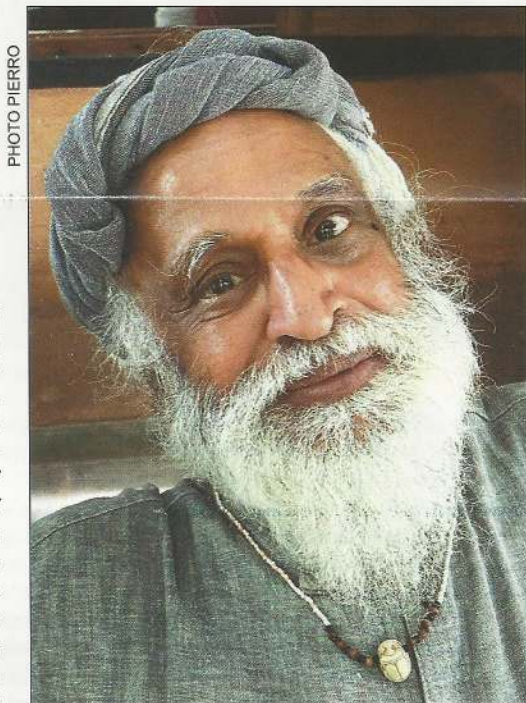
Kabir's verses flourished across North India over the centuries as part of a popular oral tradition of India. They were sung and recited in temples, schools and fields by scholars, spiritual seekers and peasants alike. It is only in the last 150-200 years that they were compiled and written down, and were then taken up by academics and educators.

Professor Kumar likens Kabir to a painter working with different colours. He underlines the poet's "great sense of sound and music for language" and his capacity to "play beautifully with words". Reciting one of Kabir's much-quoted couplets in Hindi and English to illustrate his point, Kumar tells how the poet imaginatively uses two words *manka* and *pher* several times in the couplet, but with entirely different meanings: *manka* is 'rosary bead' and is also 'something belonging to the heart'; *pher* means 'moving the beads' and also 'crookedness of the heart'.

*For eons
You have been moving
The beads in your hand
Yet nothing has moved
In your heart*

*O dear friend
Leave aside the beads
Open your hands*

*Let the heart
Turn!*



Prof. Kumar

Kabir wrote prolifically about love for the divine, and was considered to be a great exponent of the rich bhakti tradition in India, which is characterised by intense love and devotion for one's personal god. Reciting one of Kabir's couplets, Professor Kumar elaborates how the poet's longing for and the experience of the divine seems "utterly sensuous, almost erotic":

*I shall make my eye
Into a bridal chamber
In its pupil
I shall lay the bridal bed*

*I'll use my eyelashes
Like silken curtains*

*And there,
O my Beloved
I shall endear You
For ever
And ever.*

Eluding categorisation

While a few things are known for certain about Kabir – like that he lived 500 years ago in the holy city of Varanasi – many other facts about the poet remain elusive. It's unclear whether he was born a Hindu or a Muslim, yet it is certain that any notions of caste or creed were of no consequence to him.

*Neither a Hindu
Nor a Muslim
Am I*

*A mere ensemble
Of five elements
Is this body*

*Where the spirit
Plays its drama
Of joy and suffering.*

Kabir remained a low-caste marginalised weaver, even though his verses were taken up throughout the city of Varanasi in his lifetime, and touched people across all religions, classes and castes. What distinguishes Kabir from other bhakti poets is his ridicule of all religious and social hypocrisies that tend to obscure the face of the divine. He was a "radical" in this sense, claims Professor Kumar, because he questioned the scholarship of Brahmin pandits, and instead celebrated direct personal experience of the sacred.

*If by shaving one's head,
One could experience
The Divine
O dear friend
How easy
It would all be*

*See how often
A sheep is shorn
Yet how far from heaven
It is!*

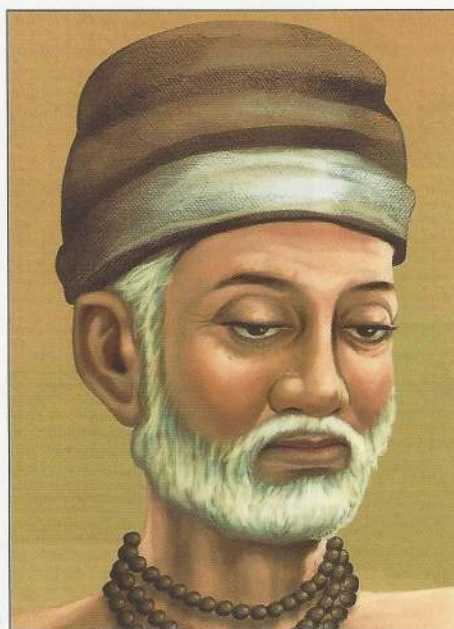
Pompous sermons, rituals or dogmatic theological debates were also questionable to Kabir, Professor Kumar explains, because they often arose from habit or pride, rather than from a pure heart.

*Sand and stone
They have piled
And they call it
A mosque*

*And there
O my friends*

*The priest shouts
The name of Allah
As though
God was deaf.*

Kabir paid a price for being so outspoken in India's holy city, and he was harassed, tortured and even threatened with death. At the same time, he had become so popular by the time of his death, it's said that both the Hindus and Muslims wanted to claim the poet as one of their



Contemporary rendering
of Kabir's portrait

own sages. "They were fighting over what to do; whether to cremate or bury him," narrates Professor Kumar. "Legend has it, when they removed the shroud, there was no body and only a heap of flowers. So they divided the flowers, and then half were buried and half cremated. So to this day, there are two funeral places for him in Varanasi, one where the Hindus say he was cremated, and the other where the Muslims say he was buried."

Five hundred years later, many religions and religious (or mystical) movements claim Kabir as one of their sages or saints. They include Sufis, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Sikhs. He is also claimed by atheists and social revolutionaries with the same enthusiasm. "Even the Marxists claim him as one of their own, a leftist, an ardent socialist!" says Professor Kumar. "Everyone claims Kabir to be one of them. Indeed, his voice has become ever more universal and encompassing, and utterly daring."

In the last few decades, Kabir's vision and songs have been popularised in many films and plays, and are performed throughout north India. There are four or five large annual Kabir festivals in India, including the popular Kabir pilgrimage through Rajasthan, in which numerous Aurovilians have participated in the past (including this writer). Kabir's verses are taught as part of the school curriculum, and many academics have made Kabir's philosophical nuances the focus of their scholarship. In short, Kabir's emphasis on direct experience of the divine clearly appeals to a very broad audience.

Sharing Kabir globally

Professor Kumar started his professional life as a physicist, but over the years his concerns grew about the role of science in the war industry, so his academic focus shifted to bioethics, human ecology, and the dialogue between science and religion. "Increasingly," he says, "I am becoming a student of human civilisation – what it has been, and what it might be."

Kumar says he wanted to offer his own trans-creations of Kabir to make his vision known globally. He had observed that people at musical performances of Kabir songs often felt "the beauty of the music", but did not always understand the grandeur of the words. "When I give an explanation of the depth of the words, it becomes a richer experience, I believe."

Now that he is retired and living in the community as a Friend of Auroville, Professor Kumar has shared his trans-creations at various community events and in radio programmes, sometimes accompanied by a flautist and Indian classical dancers. He has given lectures and public recitations in 30 countries, from Iran to China, and from Russia to the United Kingdom. "I offer them in churches and temples, for students and worshippers. People everywhere seem to be touched by Kabir's verses. They don't know the original, but the message of love moves them nevertheless." A few years ago, Kumar recalls, at a Black Church in Alabama, three women came forward after his presentation. "They said, 'Professor, we feel that Kabir could be our prophet.' So, Kabir's message of oneness transcends all distinctions. It was very touching."

As part of his passion to make Kabir known widely, Professor Kumar is spearheading a large project in Auroville to translate Kabir into ten European and Asian languages. This idea was unexpectedly conceived when Aurovilian Anandi Zhang attended one of Professor Kumar's sessions three years ago. "She seemed quite moved, and said Chinese poets have a long tradition of writing couplets." Anandi and Professor Kumar have been working together to publish a bilingual book that presents Professor Kumar's English transcreations alongside Anandi's Chinese translations. The book will be published in the near future, as *Ocean in a Drop: Kabir's Couplets in English & Chinese*, and the authors hope to do a book tour in China.

Professor Kumar emphasises the timeless and contemporary appeal of Kabir, beyond trappings of any religion or institutions. "In the first quarter of the 21st century, I believe this global civilisation is at a very crucial point in the turning of human consciousness," he asserts. "Oneness, equality, acknowledgement of all life in its varied and rich fecundity, are all crying out for a place of peace and dignity at the banquet table of history... That's why, and how, Kabir is so contemporary, so eternal, and so universal."

*Wherever
My eyes turn
I see
The light
Of my Beloved*

*O dear friends
When I reached out
to touch it*

*I too
Became part
Of that light.*

Lesley

Professor Kumar's books include *The Vision of Kabir* and *7 000 Million Degrees of Freedom*. Some videos of his recitations can be seen on Auroville Radio's webpage and Facebook page.

The place you are right now God circled on a map for you

Although relationships between Iran and India have been close for centuries, less than ten Iranians have joined Auroville. Is this because of Iran's conservative theocratic regime? *Auroville Today* talked to two Iranian women in their early 30s, Aurovilian Sheida and Newcomer Elham (Eli), to find out more.

Sheida: I had heard about Auroville from a friend of a friend and I got curious. I checked the website. It looked interesting. One of the attractions was the possibility to study Iyengar Yoga. The other was to explore a different type of life. I decided to come as a volunteer. I quit my job (I am an accountant by profession and a yoga teacher) and came to Auroville in October 2018. Even though there were many difficult moments, I gradually fell in love with Auroville. And though I had a return ticket in my pocket, I never used it. After volunteering, I became a Newcomer, then an Aurovilian in 2018.

My immediate family – that is my mother, my brothers and my sister, as my father passed away long ago – supported my decision, though they don't like that I live so far away. I too miss them terribly. I often speak with them and send them photos and show them the beauty of Auroville. But I am careful not to tell my mother about the difficult parts, as I know that would anguish her. I am very much looking forward to seeing them again, when I have to return to Iran to get my five-year Entry Visa.

Eli: I got to know about Auroville through Sheida. We had been working for the same company in Tehran and had become friends. When my 28th birthday was coming up, she asked me what I would like to gift myself. Would I like to come to India and experience Auroville? I said "yeah, why not," and got myself a ticket for a ten-day visit to meet Sheida and see Auroville. It was a nice visit. But I never thought about Auroville as a place to stay, and after ten days I returned to Iran.

But back in Iran I noticed that I had left something behind in Auroville. I got a feeling that I had to go back. But it looked so impossible. Auroville didn't fit my lifestyle – I had a well-paid job as a chartered accountant, I had worked very hard to get my degree and license, and I lived a life that I very much enjoyed. Or so I thought. For there was an undercurrent of unease. I sometimes felt that I didn't fit in my society, in my city. I was not really happy. Something was missing, which, I realised, had nothing to do with the situation in Iran; it would also have been missing had I lived in the USA or in Europe.

So I knew I had to try something else, and the feeling that I should go and try out Auroville became too strong to ignore. Moreover, I had noticed when I was in Auroville that Sheida had changed, even after having stayed there for only six months. I did not have a clear expectation of what Auroville would do for me, but I wondered if I would change as well. I talked to my parents and my brothers, who were all super supportive. And then I jumped.

AVtoday: Most people know little about Iran, only that it has a theocratic conservative regime, that the society is male-dominated and that women suffer many restrictions. What was your experience?

Sheida: The international perception of Iran is very much coloured by seeing it through a western lens and people don't know that there is more than a 90% difference between the 'public' and the 'private' side, which makes life in Iran not all that different from life in other countries. For example, officially, an unmarried woman needs the permission of her father, or if she is a married woman of her husband, to travel. But this no longer holds true in Tehran and other large cities in Iran. I have been free to make any decision in my life, and this was not exceptional. Many of my friends live with similar freedom. It all depends on one's family. There are, of course, conservative families who follow this rule strictly.

Eli: Another restriction is the prohibition for women to be outside without a hijab, a headscarf. The Gasht-e Ershad – the Persian morality police which was set up during a crackdown on "un-Islamic" dress in 2007 – has the duty to ensure the observance of this rule and also discourage women from wearing cosmetics, but this is increasingly relaxed. Many women now wear the headscarf as far back on the head as possible, and wear looser clothing. Within the houses, people do as they like and women often wear western-style clothing and even enjoy alcohol, which is legally banned in Iran but which is easily available.

Sheida: When a government tries to force its citizens to do something they do not want, the citizens will do exactly the opposite. This government is not what each Iranian would have chosen and their rules are not what many Iranians want. So they are often ignored.

But the negative image of Iran is a true burden to carry. People often ask me where I come from, and then I am subjected to a volley of ignorant questions: Do I wear a burka? No, that is not mandatory in Iran. Is it normal that an Iranian woman is beaten up by her husband? No, it isn't. Are women allowed to drive a car in Iran? Yes, they are. And when they learn that Eli and I are living together, the question if we are a couple, which would be illegal in Iran, is inevitable. (For the record, we are not.)



Sheida and Eli

We get fed up with these type of questions. People don't realise that we love our country and hate the negative image which the newspapers have been displaying, caused by the conservatism of a government which is not the choice of many Iranians.

Eli: The ignorance about Iran is a bit startling. Many Aurovilians don't know the difference between Iran and Iraq; one person asked me to teach him Arabic, a language I do not speak, as the official language of Iran is Persian (Farsi). Another one was amazed that I own a laptop and smart-phone, and asked if I had brought them from Iran – implying that such items would not be available in Iran. Then they question how we could get out of Iran, as if Iran is some kind of North Korea, or if we can get back to Iran when we want. Evidently they think that we are some kind of fugitives and that we ran away from Iran because we did not have freedom. But we did not come to Auroville to escape Iran or live with more freedom. We choose to come and live here for reasons that are similar to those of many other Aurovilians.

But we also received some beautiful reactions about our nationality, especially from those Aurovilians who either have visited Iran – mostly before the revolution – or who have or had some Iranian friends. That helped them to have a better picture of Iran and its people and bridge the huge gap between the people and its regime. Hearing those kind words was heart-touching.

AVtoday: You are working in Auroville in your chosen profession, Eli for the Unity Fund and the Budget Coordination Committee, and Sheida for the Budget Coordination Committee. Can you comment on your work?

Eli: Based on our many years of professional experience, we dare say that Auroville's accounting processes and procedures could be vastly improved. Much is old fashioned and inefficient. Some of this may be due to specific Indian conditions; but certainly, also Aurovilian habits have an influence. Sheida and I have started a new accounting activity for Auroville, and we would be glad to make a study and propose steps towards improvements.

AVtoday: Are you both happy now, and did Auroville change you?

Eli: Honestly, I cannot say that I am completely happy, but I am happier than before. In August, it will be two years since I have been staying in Auroville. The first months were super difficult, because I had parted from the group of very close friends and family I had in Iran. There is a big difference between having them close to you and thousands of miles apart. I miss them a lot and I had to adapt to a totally new lifestyle. It was a big challenge. I was fortunate to have Sheida here as my friend. But experiencing Auroville was a decision I had made, and I wanted to give it a full chance. With the passing of time, I started feeling the changes in my life, a kind of inner progress, getting to know myself more. So I am on a journey I am happy with, even if it is still difficult and challenging. I enjoy living close to nature and the wide diversity of opportunities Auroville offers to learn, to try out different things, and to grow. But the feeling of 'being home' has only come very recently, a few months ago. I used to say to Sheida that I wasn't quite sure. But now I am. And I am hopeful about the future.

Sheida: My experience was mixed as well. I lived through some great moments but also had some serious difficulties. But now, I wouldn't want to go anywhere else. Auroville is home, I am rooted here. For Auroville has so much to offer. You can meet people from all over the world, you can attend amazing workshops and learn from very intense persons – often I couldn't stop crying when our ways parted. Most importantly, I experienced many times that a certain movement or an incident led to the feeling that someone was tearing my narrow world apart to show me how I can widen out and become more conscious. I deeply saw and feel that nothing depends on anybody, that everything is up to oneself.

AVtoday: Do you have a contact with Auroville's spiritual basis?

Eli: That's the question they also ask in the Newcomer interview. No, I am not yet familiar with either Sri Aurobindo's or The Mother's teachings. I am reading their books, and am trying to understand. But for me, the mental understanding is not 'it'. Living in Auroville itself is giving me a picture of their philosophy, of what they intend to build. It is more a matter of 'living it' than 'reading it'. That's the shortcut – you live here and learn in a practical way.

Sheida: Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's teachings give answers to many questions and help overcome our pains that come from not having a big sight, from living in too small a world. They are like light in dark moments when we are lost, and struggle to find our way to goodness and peace within ourselves and around us. For example, the book *Yoga and Health* is an eye opener: every time we open it, we get the answer we need. We try to read more of their books to understand what they wish to share – understanding the English language is sometimes a problem – as we feel we owe this to them.

But I have other role models too. I am inspired by the works of the Persian 12th, 13th and 14th century mystics, such as Omar Khayyan, Rumi, Saadi and Hafiz. In India, they would be considered as great yogis. Whenever I have time, I open their books, and they fill my heart, my eyes, my breath, everywhere, about learning, about goodness. I am connected to them. But there is time to also get more deeply connected to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. We have only been here for less than three years. After all, the place we are right now God circled on a map for us..."

In conversation with Carel

The place you are right now

*The place where you are right now
God circled on a map for you*

*Wherever your eyes and arms and heart can move
Against the earth and the sky
The Beloved has bowed there -*

*Our Beloved has bowed there knowing
You were coming,*

*I could tell you a priceless secret about
Your real worth, dear pilgrim,
But any unkindness to yourself,
Any confusion about others,*

*Will keep one
From accepting the grace, the love,
The sublime freedom
Divine Knowledge always offers to you.*

*Never mind, Hafiz, about
The great requirements this path demands
Of the wayfarers.*

*For your soul is too full of wine tonight
To withhold the wondrous Truth
From this world.*

*But because I am so clever and generous
I have already woven a resplendent lock
Of his tresses*

*As a remarkable truth and gift
In this poem for you.*

Hafiz

Translation by Daniel Ladinsky

The Soul of Nations – Healing and Evolution

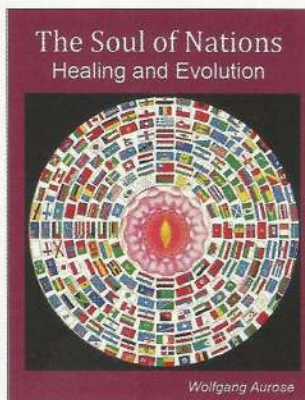
Two of the most important, and opposing, trends in the modern world are internationalism and chauvinism, or narrow parochialism. Proponents of internationalism, of a world where countries are no longer divided by narrow nationalisms, often point to the European Union as a promising supra-national experiment. Yet even the EU is experiencing the counter trend, most obviously in Britain's recent withdrawal.

In other words, while the internationalist dream is an enduring one, and an increasingly urgent one in the face of transnational threats like climate change and terrorism, it is proving very difficult to materialise. Why is this?

One possibility is that we have not understood the real nature of nations. Wolfgang Aurore examines this in his new book, *The Soul of Nations – Healing and Evolution*. Rejecting simplistic definitions, he adopts Sri Aurobindo's view that human communities and nations have 'souls' which, as in the case of individuals, have the capability to evolve. This leads Wolfgang to examine the specific ways certain nations act as expressions of their unique and evolving souls (which he defines as their 'core identity'), as well as to highlight the dangers involved in this process.

Wolfgang illustrates the dangers by reference to his birth country, Germany. Sri Aurobindo remarked by the end of the 19th century that Germany was in a very advantageous position to take the next step in its soul evolution as its philosophers and artists had provided it with the vision, and its scientists and engineers the practical basis for realizing that vision.

However, by appealing to its collective ego rather than to its soul, Hitler led it down a very dark path which, according to Wolfgang, has immeasurably scarred the German psyche.



Thus, Wolfgang's main motivation for writing this book is to present models for doing the 'shadow work', or dealing with skeletons in the closets of nations. "For a nation to recognize its shadow and ask forgiveness for its violations makes up a crucial part of the healing and maturing process of its soul. It is this discernment alone that can make a country 'great' (again). This is the true self-realization of a nation, which its leaders should aim for."

In fact, it's a work that can take place on two levels since, as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, there is a parallelism between the individual *sadhana* and the *sadhana* of the group or nation. On the national level, Wolfgang mentions Willy Brandt falling to his knees in Warsaw in apology for Nazi war crimes, as well as South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, as examples of public attempts to expiate national 'shadows'.

On the individual level, Wolfgang writes that "each of us must own those parts of our personal history that we do not like or that we deny or deliberately forget. As we do this, we contribute to the evolution of the soul field of our nations."

Wolfgang believes that on a soul-level all countries are in a state of evolution: "all are 'developing countries', moving in an increasingly self-determined unfolding". The evolution of the 'soul field' begins with identification with the land, and develops to where a nation's political alignment and constitution become the central expression of a shared national experience.

While some nations are more advanced in this process than others, Wolfgang writes that a further evolutionary step is necessary, and that is "the development of an integral consciousness in a nation in its realized phase. In this phase, the democratic and liberal nation is discovering the individuality of its collective soul".

But how is this to be discovered?

Wolfgang admits that this core identity "remains a mystery that cannot be explained" because it "is not an empirical entity. It belongs instead to the subtle realms." This means, as Sri Aurobindo's disciple, Nolini Kanta Gupta, pointed out, "Only those who have become aware and awake to their own soul will be enabled too to become aware of the self of the country."

Nevertheless, Wolfgang believes there are other ways in which features of a nation's soul can be discerned. Following Sri Aurobindo, Wolfgang points out that a nation's highest achievements in the arts, sciences and technology can give indications of the nature of its unique core being. He also mentions that Jungian psychology, along with newer techniques like Spiral Dynamics, Family Constellation Therapy and workshops like the one which Wolfgang runs with his partner, Soleil Aurore, can help people experience the soul field of their nation and confront its shadows.

In terms of a larger international unity, Wolfgang concludes that "only the nation that has become conscious of its soul-qualities and transformed its shadow can develop and fulfill its seed mission. Only then is it prepared for a sustainable international unification and for passage into a global society".

The Soul of Nations – Healing and Evolution is an important work because it stimulates us to examine much more deeply what many of us remain unaware of – the influence of our birth nation upon our thoughts and perspectives – and to take an active part in the evolution of our group or nation soul. This is of particular importance in regard to the development of national pavilions in the International Zone in Auroville, a project which has languished for years, either because we have lacked clarity about how to discover the soul of nations, or because we feel that as an international community we need not pay attention to national identities. In this regard, Wolfgang's book provides convincing counter-arguments which may help us pour fresh energy into the pavilions project.

However, I have two concerns. One is a doubt whether some of the techniques Wolfgang mentions for discovering our nation or group soul really do lead us to that target, for there seems to be considerable scope in some of them for vital enchantment, and for mistaking superficial aspects of nations' cultures for their core. There is an urgent need for discrimination here.

The other concern is that his emphasis upon 'shadow work' may actually, in certain cases, be counterproductive, because it may lock people in to past negative experiences and perpetuate, rather than abolish, those formations.

In terms of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, it is important to identify and bring to light all that may be hiding in the nooks and crannies of our own and our nation's psyche, but this needs to be done from a higher consciousness. And, once exposed, it is necessary to surrender these shadows to something larger, to offer them to the Light for them to be dissolved. Otherwise, they may merely be suppressed and their influence persist. Perhaps because he is writing for a primarily secular readership, Wolfgang doesn't mention this step, but if, as Sri Aurobindo pointed out, the discovery of the nation soul is essentially a spiritual experience, this omission may be an important lacuna in dealing with the shadow.

Having said this, *The Soul of Nations – Healing and Evolution* is a ground-breaking book which offers new, profound perspectives upon internationalism and the core nature of nations. Doubtless it will stimulate further discussion and discoveries.

Alan

The Soul of Nations – Healing and Evolution is available in the virtual bookstore of www.lulu.com as a printed book (145 pages, \$14 plus shipping) or as an ebook (\$7.75), also in bookshops and at Amazon (ask for whole title and author).

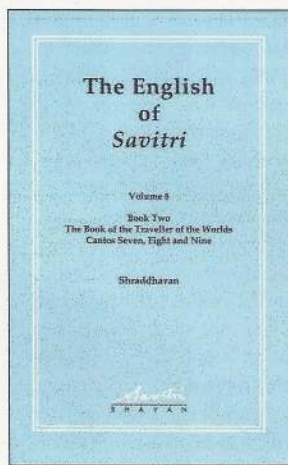
The English of Savitri volume 8

Savitri Bhavan has published the eighth volume of *The English of Savitri* series, transcribed from talks by Shradhdhavan, dealing with Cantos Seven, Eight and Nine of Book Two, *The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds*, of Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. Cantos One to Six of Book Two were earlier published as volume five and volume seven of the series.

Book Two of *Savitri* describes King Aswapati's spiritual journey through the 'Worlds', starting from the most material, and then exploring the many subtle levels of consciousness, the realm of subtle matter, the various Life worlds, the realms of Mind, and, after surrendering to the Supreme Divine Mother, the realm of the World-Soul and the Kingdoms of the Greater Knowledge.

In Cantos Seven and Eight of the present volume, Sri Aurobindo describes Aswapati's ever deeper descent into the Night of Falsehood and Evil, hoping to find their source and the possibility of transforming them, and finding 'on the last locked subconscious's floor' 'the secret key of Nature's change'. Then, in Canto Nine, he experiences the Paradise of the Life Gods.

"As we read this part of Sri Aurobindo's epic, it is worth remembering that his close disciple Dr. Nirodbaran, who acted as his scribe in the later stages of the poem's compo-



sition, has told us that it can be regarded and read as Sri Aurobindo's autobiography," writes Shradhdhavan in the introduction to this volume.

"It seems that the cantos covered in Book Two of the epic were most probably composed in the period between 1937 and 1948, in years where much of the world was threatened by forces hostile to the work of

Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and their efforts for the establishment of a better future and a more divine life on earth for the whole of humanity. Those forces were embodied by cruel and brutal dicta-

tors and despots, whose activities culminated in the Second World War."

Shradhdhavan recounts how Sri Aurobindo and The Mother during this time were dedicating their joint spiritual powers to countering these dark forces, as is known from their talks and correspondence and from some of Sri Aurobindo's poems. Shradhdhavan warns that for people who had actually lived in that horrifying period of human history, reading these cantos may be like reliving those terrible and painful memories; while for others these cantos are accounts of the present condition of humanity. Also, she writes, "these cantos bring us face-to-face with the horrifying reality of adverse forces and tendencies lurking in the shadows of our own consciousness, always ready to attack. All this makes us wonder why Sri Aurobindo would take great pains to

describe those miserable Life Worlds in such minute detail. And Sri Aurobindo himself gives the answer: 'None can reach heaven who has not passed through hell'; 'This too the traveller of the worlds must dare.' It is an invitation to observe our own chaotic inner life and understand the cause of the darker sides of our Life."

The English of Savitri volumes are recommended reading for anyone who wishes to understand the poem in a deeper manner, for Shradhdhavan's explanations often shed new light and sometimes an entirely different understanding of a sentence or section.

Carel

The English of Savitri Volume Eight.

Price in India Rs 400.

Available from Savitri Bhavan and SABDA.

PASSINGS

Davide Montemurri

On July 4th, Davide Montemurri, a longtime participant and friend of Auroville, peacefully left his body in his house at Nettuno (Rome). He was 91 years old.

Davide has been in contact with Auroville for many years, especially since he did the 'L'homme après l'homme' (Man after Man) movie in collaboration with Boni Menato. The documentary, which was an eye-opener for many, included in-depth conversations with Satprem in Nilgiris in the early eighties. Together with Boni, he also started the Italian Institute for Evolutionary Research.

Davide remained very inspired by Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's vision. A friend who was with him during his transition mentioned that he had been preparing himself to leave his body since March this year, and that he passed away peacefully with his eyes open and a smile on his lips. We remember him with fondness and gratitude. For an integral version of 'L'homme après l'homme' see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l4bWn3g5BsI>



M. Durai

On June 26th, 26 June, Durai Munusamy passed away at the age of 55 due to suicide, near his house in Agni. Hailing from Edaiyanchavadi village, Durai had been living in Auroville since 1992, and worked at Savitri Bhavan as a garden supervisor.

His remains were cremated in the afternoon of the same day.



About Auroville Today

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