

The Matrimandir water channel is built



ALL PHOTOS COURTESY MATRIMANDIR

On the night of April 19th – 20th, 2022 a special milestone was reached with the completion of the installation of the waterproofing liner in the 7.5 metre wide water channel, one kilometre long, which now surrounds the Matrimandir gardens. This channel has a double significance: of forming a first sketch of a water body which the Mother wished to have surrounding the Matrimandir gardens, to act as an “isolating zone”, separating the quiet gardens from the activity of the outer shore. This band can be enlarged in future as work on the main lake construction continues. The second function of the channel is to act as a rainwater harvesting pathway, catching all the rainwater runoff from the 22-acres gardens oval and then directing it into the test lake section which is now being constructed on the southeast side of the gardens. Three good years of rainwater harvesting (or one year if like the exceptionally rainy monsoon in 2021) would be enough time to fill the 10 metres deep, 12,000 square metres test lake now being built.

As with all the other milestone moments, an atmosphere of joy and accomplishment suffused the air as the task was done. There were smiles all around, a step forward had been achieved. Many steps have yet to follow in the months to come, of course, – to complete the protective gravel layer of the water channel, then to beautify its borders, and finally to bring the water body alive, introducing many flowering plants and then fish, to keep it mosquito free. But the major step is done, and can now be built upon.

There were months of preparation to come to this point. First, the entire set of old Matrimandir workshops on the eastern edge of the gardens had to be modified and moved back by 20 metres to make room for the channel. Then followed a massive earthwork, shaping the red earth to create the V shaped profile of the channel, to smoothen it and make it ready for the laying of the liner. There were ground level differences to be dealt with, as the eastern side of Matrimandir is 3 metres higher than the west, so a massive granite block wall had to be built to protect the founda-

tions of the workshops on the east (see photos), while earth infilling had to be made on the western edge of the gardens oval.

Then there was the ground reality of existing trees to be negotiated. Many trees had grown up on their own over the decades of the construction of the Matrimandir, and others had been planted during different stages of the outer gardens development. All available techniques were used to find ways to lead the Water Channel around the rim of the gardens. Some very special trees were transplanted. Other larger trees which had grown to some statuesque beauty were preserved by winding the channel between them, or narrowing the channel to slide by. One tree was distinguished by having a granite wall built half around it to separate it from the path of the channel [see photo]. And, finally, several trees – being judged to be simply too much in the way or too difficult to protect – were cut down, to be used as timber wood or firewood.

Sorting all this out was perhaps one of the most difficult parts of the Water Channel exercise, but in the end, a harmonious way forward was found.

A specialist in liner installation came from Germany for this phase, and for seven nights, from April 13th to April 20th, the Matrimandir team supported the visiting welder in the intensive process of laying the liner and then sealing its 147 doubly welded joints. The welding of the two mm thick HDPE sheets had to be done when the material was cool, so the work proceeded at night under illumination provided by several spot lights. Many present remarked that the energetic atmosphere of those nights brought to their mind the similarly special feeling of the night time concretings held while building Matrimandir decades earlier. It was a wonderful, intense week, and the completion of the job was celebrated by all.

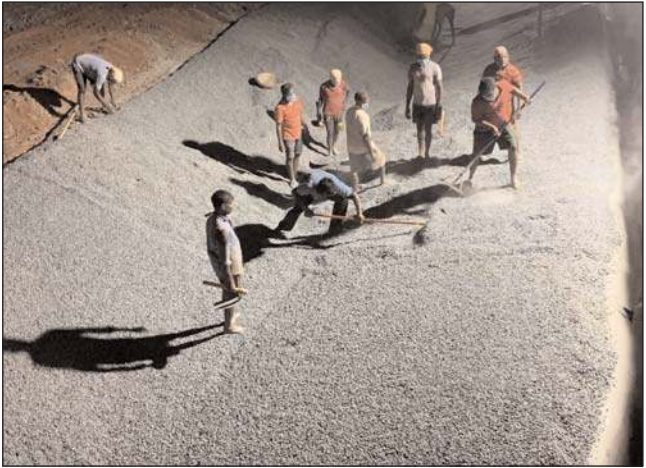
John Harper



Installing the waterproofing liner



Welding the two mm thick HDPE sheets



Laying the protective gravel

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In the eye of the storm: the Residents' Assembly Service

Auroville's Residents' Assembly Service is tasked with organizing decisions of the Residents' Assembly of the Auroville Foundation. Lately their job has become very challenging. Auroville Today spoke to the four members of the service, Tatiana, Sathish, Giovanni and Dan.

Auroville Today: You recently emailed the community asking all residents to remain respectful in their communication with you and address any concerns in a civil and kind way. You also added a list of questions and answers. Could you explain why this was necessary?

Tatiana: When we were organizing the Residents' Assembly Decision (RAD) on the question of the de-selection of the Working Committee members, we received quite a number of insults and unsubstantiated accusations. The quality of the communication was below any acceptable level, such as that the RAS was "nothing but a puppet show, a façade for the cult doctrine", that we stood for "ignorance and manipulation", that we were "corrupted people who brainwash people", and that we "fueled hatred and segregation and character assassination." One person summarized it with a "Go to Hell RAS!" We explained the obvious to the community: that all this doesn't lead to a constructive collaborative way of addressing concerns and doesn't suit our spiritual aims.

Did it impact you?

Tatiana: I have been working for the RAS for about seven years, and this is not the first time that this type of dirt was thrown on the team, and it seems I should have already got immune to this kind of attitude. Yet it's shocking; sometimes I take it quite personally, and it even affects my physical health. It took some time before I was able not to react and restore my inner calm. To some extent that has been successful as I always try to view things through the lens of yoga. But it still is a work in progress.

Giovanni: Initially, I kept pretty cool, even though I felt personally attacked. But there was a different type of frustration: don't these people remember that we are all brothers and sisters, members of the same family, all claiming to live with The Mother's guidance? Don't they realize what they inflict, and what consequences this has for themselves and our family?

Dan: I had never imagined that such a level of violence was possible. Of course, I first took it personally. And like Giovanni, I wondered how this could happen and why people couldn't be more respectful to one another when we all live in this beautiful spiritual atmosphere.

Sathish: The way I experienced it was, "that's how it is". I have been part of organizing many RADs and have seen from close-up how a hot topic is always contested by one group or another, in particular when they see that the outcome won't go the way they want. I took it like that. An RAD is not going to satisfy everybody, and criticism is nothing new. But this time, the criticism was more intense than I have ever experienced. It seemed that it had a purpose, that it was part of a conscious attempt to prevent this RAD from happening. For we did not receive this type of negative feedback when we organized the last RAD held in April, about a new selection policy [see *AVToday* # 394, eds.].

In your Questions and Answers document you explain that the RAS is a community service with as only mandate organizing meetings and decisions of the Residents' Assembly.

Dan: Some residents apparently believed that the RAS was making decisions on its own. We don't. We just follow our mandate and policies. And our policies specify that we have to initiate a RAD process on a topic proposed by at least 60 residents as was the case for the last RAD. There were people who asked us not to proceed with this RAD, but we cannot make such decisions. People responded that we are biased: but that is absolutely not true.

Sathish: The Auroville residents approved the Interim RAD Policy 2021 in October last year in an emergency RAD called by the then Working Committee. It was approved, with the understanding that within the next nine months the community will be asked to vote on a fully overhauled Residents' Assembly Decision Making Process. This is still to happen. The



The members of the Residents' Assembly Service. From left: Sathish, Giovanni, Tatiana and Dan

Auroville Council is working on it, and we assume that in the process also the mandate of the RAS will become better specified.

On May 7th, the RAS and the Working Committee received a letter from Mr. Seetharaman, the Officer on Special Duty of the Auroville Foundation, informing that the Governing Board directs the Residents Assembly to pause any decisions taken by the Resident Assembly before the updation of the Register of Residents; that all current ongoing activities such as with the RAD (Residents Assembly's decision-making processes) are to be stopped with immediate effect until the Register of Residents (RoR) has been fully updated; and that any such decision taken before updating the RoR will be invalid, null and void. What was your response?

Sathish: Surprise, mostly, in particular as we were informed about this letter only the evening before the last voting day, Sunday May 8th. We wondered why this letter came now (perhaps there are genuine reasons and intentions), one day before the closure of the RAD. The voting had been spread out over two weeks. We discussed among the team how to move on and decided to continue the ongoing process, and we announced the results a few days later to the Residents' Assembly followed by notifying the Working Committee.

Dan: Previously, the office of the Auroville Foundation had asked the Working Committee and RAS for details on the RADs we did in the past. Evidently, they considered the responses as not satisfactory.

Sathish: The letter of Mr. Seetharaman focuses on the RoR, which is to be maintained by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation in accordance with section 18 of the Auroville Foundation Act and which contains the names of all residents of Auroville aged 18 years and above. We were surprised that the letter mentioned that it had not been updated since 2005, the more so as we knew that the Auroville Foundation, in cooperation with a former Working Committee, in the years 2019-2020 had issued Auroville Foundation Identity Cards to about a 1,000 Aurovilians, in the process of which the Register got updated, making it obvious that the RoR updating was an ongoing process.

Tatiana: In any case, we have not been using the data from the RoR, we have been using the data from the Auroville Master List maintained by Auroville's Residents' Service. This list is far more extensive than the RoR, as it contains the data of all Auroville residents, newcomers and children, and is daily updated.

In the early days we would consult the RoR. This changed when the Working Committee in April 2021 decided that people who had been confirmed as Aurovilian by the Entry Board, but whose names had not yet been

entered into the RoR, could also participate in RADs. This decision was made as there were delays at the Foundation office in registering people who had been confirmed by the Entry Board. These people are called 'Confirmed Aurovilian', to distinguish them from the Auroville residents registered in the RoR. This decision was explicitly approved by the residents when the RA in October last year voted in favor of the Interim RAD Policy 2021.

According to RAD Policy: "Only confirmed Aurovilians can participate in decision-making. Those who have been announced as confirmed Aurovilians by the Entry Board are eligible to participate in all community decision-making processes along with those who have been entered into the Register of Residents maintained by the Secretary's Office. It does not include under 18-year-olds, newcomers and any other Auroville statuses."

In your Question and Answer document, you mention that you continue updating your mailing list to match with the Master List maintained by the Residents' Service. You mention that in accordance with the Master List database, on 2nd May 2022, a total of 2,391 residents could participate in a RAD vote, but you were 'missing' 329 residents - either because they had voluntary unsubscribed from your mailing list (129 people) or had not communicated their email address to the RAS (200 people).

Sathish: For years we have been actively trying to reach out to everybody to obtain their contact data. In December 2020, when the allegations of Mr. Vikram Ram were discussed by the community in an open meeting [see *AVToday* # 366], a number of residents even did a massive amount of work to check the contact data of all those who attended that meeting and cross-check them with the Master List. And we continue that work, for people regularly change their contact data such as their email address. But not everybody is interested or wishes to share their contact data. Sometimes we meet a blank wall.

Dan: But there seems to be a positive move. In the last months quite a few people came to our office who confessed that this was the first time they came to the Town Hall. In that way we got a lot more contact data.

Does the absence of these people's email addresses affect your RAD?

Giovanni: No. Our calls to participate in an RAD are not only sent to each individual by email, but are also posted on the AuroNet, in the News and Notes, by mass bulletin and through posters and flyers hung in public places. We send out reminders every few days. A resident can vote by email or in person, which can be done during our working hours or on the last

Sunday of the voting period. We have seen an increase of participation, from around 300 a year ago to about 900 now. That's about 37% of the Auroville residents. But we would like to encourage even more people to participate actively.

Sathish: The reality is that many people are not aware of what's going on. Since long we have been considering doing a survey asking why people do not want to participate. We can make assumptions, but the only way to know is to ask.

Dan: We should find a way to ensure that each individual Aurovilian is well-informed. I spoke to people who did not vote, and who expressed their disgust with what had happened. But they also clearly stated that the fact that they did not vote did not mean they agreed with one side or the other.

Tatiana: I think we need to restructure the way we function to reach out to more people, perhaps by using the concept of human networking and creating a pool of resource people, each relating to a different segment of the community. Many people need some basic education about how Auroville functions and what the issues are. Auroville has no system yet to provide that information.

The Foundation has stated that the RADs can resume after the RoR has been updated, and it has sent out an email to all Aurovilians requesting to update their data. Given the fact that you have not managed to reach out to everybody, how do you think the Auroville Foundation will be able to update its RoR?

Sathish: I do not believe they can do it in a few weeks, unless they go from door to door. I think it will take some time considering the total adult population of Auroville as maintained by the Residents Service's Master List database.

What effect will this have?

Sathish: We have just announced the new selection process of members of the five main working groups (the Working Committee, the Auroville Council, the Funds and Assets Management Committee, the Entry Board and the Auroville Town Development Council), and people have started sending in their nominations. We then received an email from the "Working Committee approved by the Secretary" asking us to postpone the selection process until the RoR has been updated.

Giovanni: We replied explaining that, as we see it, the RoR is not at stake in the newly approved selection process, for there is no final vote but the selection is done by 40 randomly selected residents. Anyway, while this period of uncertainty goes on, our RAS team remains positive, and, as always, at the exclusive service of our Community.

In conversation with Carel

The spiritual foundation of the Auroville Foundation Act

For me, it was an absolute delight to listen to Kireet Bhai on the governance of Auroville. He, so beautifully, explains it in the larger light of Sri Aurobindo’s vision. It was a welcome respite from the ongoing tug-of-war over governance.

For me, the *raison d’être* of Auroville is unquestionably to help hasten the evolutionary goal of humanity. And, as we know, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have described this goal at length.

Auroville, however, as Kireet Bhai points out, is such a bold and far-reaching concept that no nation is currently capable of hosting this unique experiment. To cite one example, all nation-states decree that land must be legally owned by some entity. And yet, our first line of the Auroville Charter (which all Aurovilians adhere to) states that Auroville belongs to no one. To reconcile such contradictions, the genius of Kireet Bhai engineered the Auroville Foundation Act with its three-tier body. Kireet Bhai unequivocally states that the Residents’ Assembly, the Governing Board, and the International Advisory Council have to be co-equal in power to allow for Auroville to fulfill its spiritual mission. This is a profound statement. What Kireet Bhai is saying here goes beyond our mental understanding of creating checks and balances in our governing system. Kireet Bhai designed the Foundation Act, keeping in mind, the evolutionary principle of “unity, mutuality, and harmony.”

This phrase, “Unity, mutuality, and harmony” almost mantric in its expression, is expounded upon by Sri Aurobindo in the very last chapter of *The Life Divine*. And I feel that unless we comprehend the essence of this phrase and act from the

depth of its meaning, we will not live up to what Sri Aurobindo and the Mother expect from us. So please bear with me, while I try to share my understanding based on my reading of *The Life Divine*.

The concept of unity is easy to grasp – the idea of an underlying spiritual oneness has for some time now been established in the collective mind of humanity. The spiritual evolutionary thought of Sri Aurobindo, however, does not envision an homogenous oneness. For him, the Unity contains all the differentiated variety – the multiplicity – that constitutes this evolving world. Moreover, he clearly proclaims that this play of multiplicity exists even in upward climb of individuals towards the Godhead: Says he, “*each realises this unity of purpose and being on its own lines and has its own law of variation by which it enriches the universal existence.*” Embracing the multitude, the mind-boggling diversity of humanity, without seeking to reduce it to a pre-ordained mental vision of unity is a herculean task. And yet, this is the task, we have signed up for by joining Auroville.

In reading Sri Aurobindo, I have always been struck by how much agency he gives to the individual, for as he explains, the individual soul and mind is the first base, from which evolution can take a participatory spiritual turn. Says he: “*The group self has no true right to regard the individual as if he were only a cell of its body, a stone of its edifice, a passive instrument of its collective life and growth. Humanity is not so constituted. We miss the divine reality in man and the secret of the human birth if we do not see that each individual man is that Self [the underlying Brahman/Unity] and sums up all human potentiality in his own being. That*

potentiality he has to find, develop, work out from within. No State or legislator or reformer can cut him rigorously into a perfect pattern; no Church or priest can give him a mechanical salvation”

Once the principle of Individuality is established, Mutuality becomes the obvious principle to achieve the differentiated Unity, which is our goal. Mutuality, also a term used by evolutionary biologists, refers to the fact that evolution actually proceeds on the basis of a mutual “understanding” of interdependence (from what I remember from my studies of evolutionary biology, there is reason to believe that Darwin was misinterpreted and also later studies hold that more than “survival of the fittest”, different species also seek to collaborate and the mutual interdependence of species establishes harmony in an ecosystem). At the level of the mind, as human beings, we have to be open to the secret evolutionary drive of mutuality and find ways to collaborate without negating the truth of any individual.

Coming back to the governance of Auroville, Kireet Bhai envisioned the Residents’ Assembly, the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council to be co-equal bodies and mutual partners in manifesting Auroville. Respecting this mutuality is *sine-qua-non* condition in developing Auroville.

If we succeed in this, then Harmony will be the sweet result of our endeavour.

Unity (a differentiated unity) is the goal. Mutuality (mutual interdependence) is the process to achieve the goal. Harmony is the experience of both the goal and the process.

Bindu

Let Thy Will be done

Mandakini Gupta, a former student of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (Ashram school) in Puducherry, was a member of the Working Committee from December 2014 to December 2019 and has been active in the areas of Auroville’s internal conflict resolution and governance. Here she shares her perception of the present situation and suggests a way forward.

The fundamental nature of any vision is that it seeks to materialise itself. The loftier the vision, the more unknown its path to materialisation.

This is particularly true in Auroville’s case. Auroville is an experimental laboratory for the evolution of consciousness, an enabling playground for the manifestation of human unity, a potent promise of the transformation of earthly life into a life divine. Auroville’s vision is unique. It is the first time ever it is being attempted anywhere on earth in the history of mankind. Its road to manifestation, therefore, has not been discovered nor previously mapped, and neither has any measure of success about its physical manifestation, nor a timeframe for its completion been deliberately provided by the Mother.

It is consciously left to all those who consecrate their earthly lives to Auroville’s vision, to discover it on the way because in this very discovery lies the possibility of the vision’s successful manifestation. The only condition that is asked of all Aurovilians, whether registered resident or not, is to have made a conscious and active choice to be willing servitors of the divine Will. Thereafter, the more sincere this collective discovery of the path, the more the ever-present help of the divine is felt and received, especially during times of difficulty.

For five years I have been a member of the Working Committee of the Residents’ Assembly and I have observed the necessity of all the working groups established by the Residents’ Assembly to work closely together, also with the Governing Board and the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. Currently, since 2020, I have withdrawn from this work to dedicate my life to creating a family. But my interest in the

general affairs of Auroville has never diminished.

In July 2021 a new Secretary joined Auroville; and in October that same year, the members of a new Governing Board and a new International Advisory Council were appointed by the Government of India. Prior to this the International Advisory Council had not been appointed for four years; the Governing Board was vacant for almost one year; and the office of the Secretary was functioning with an interim secretary for about two years. It was therefore a relief to have all three entities in place as per the Auroville Foundation Act, as in the past due to collaboration between the three entities, I have myself witnessed Auroville progressing towards manifesting the ideals of Auroville.

But since these recent appointments have taken place, I and hundreds of residents of Auroville have been feeling increasingly insecure and troubled about the ways the Secretary and the Board are perceiving their role and have been acting. At the same time there are also a number of residents who support the approach of the Secretary.

It appears that the overarching aim of true collaboration between the three entities as formulated in the Auroville Foundation Act meant to ensure that the residents of Auroville are given freedom to grow and develop activities and institutions for the fulfillment of the aspirations envisaged in Auroville’s Charter, is not being respected. Instead, the Secretary and the Board have been acting as the bosses of Auroville, using an archaic top-down method of leadership in a progressive governance system that has a flat pyramid as its base to start with; ignoring the Residents’ Assembly, even invalidating its decisions; and giving unilateral instructions for building Auroville. The Board appears to believe that

Auroville has stagnated and has not progressed, that the residents have delayed the building of the city and are incapable of building the city; and that Auroville’s internal governance needs rescuing.

There is much intellectual talk within the community about whether these decisions of the Governing Board are reasonably founded or are erroneous judgements and to what extent the office of the Secretary is implementing the decisions in a way that is befitting of an experiment like Auroville. For on a path as yet undiscovered of an adventure with innumerable permutation combinations, which authority has sufficient experience in the field and wisdom to declare whether Auroville is regressing, stagnating or progressing, and take actions accordingly?

What’s missing is the active engagement of the members of the Governing Board and the Secretary with the residents – not only with those who support their views, but also with those who question or oppose them – to talk things out together. For no matter which side each of us belongs to, are we not all instruments of the divine Will? Shall we not shift our perception so that we see each other as different parts of the One, not as divided parts against each other? Hundreds of residents have jointly requested to meet with the members of the Board to dialogue, but the Board has not responded to this call. Perhaps the International Advisory Council can initiate and arrange for such a confluence with the expert assistance of a mediator / facilitator?

As fellow-travellers on the path of transformation, our primary responsibility as seekers is to exceed the limitations of our human nature and (re)establish harmony within and without. As we deal with the external circumstances of Auroville’s current reality, we must all take the time to

turn our gaze inward and reflect; from that space of inner reflection to collectively reassess the progress of Auroville through a more integral lens; and design a road-map for a way forward for the external manifestation to come closer to the vision. And in doing so, we shall have not wasted an immense opportunity to experience true collaboration and unity.

In the light of the Integral Yoga as envisioned and brought down by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, it is absolutely essential to see the divine hand in circumstances, and use circumstances to mirror corresponding areas for growth within, and in doing so witness the change or transformation in the external again. In the brief history of Auroville every trying phase, whether it was dealing with a natural calamity or a man-made disaster, has united the community; elements that were detrimental to progress were brought to the surface, and a certain transformational leap forward was made towards the external manifestation of Auroville’s vision.

The residents of Auroville have experienced such miracles in the past. Today’s happenings are but another springboard towards a collective leap forward. Now again in the chaos of conflicting views about how to ensure Auroville’s progress, we have a great opportunity for a collective transformational leap forward in the manifestation of Auroville’s vision. What’s needed is an ardent aspiration seeking divine intervention, for it is only when the human being chooses consciously to join hands with the divine that transformation becomes a miraculous and natural outcome. Our collective power to aspire for and invoke the divine grace in action is not an impossibility, it’s not a theoretical impracticality, but the only sure way to work through this predicament.

Mandakini Gupta

Government grant for Sri Aurobindo's 150th anniversary celebrations

To commemorate the 150th anniversary of Sri Aurobindo, the Ministry of Culture has allocated a grant to the Auroville Foundation of Rs 6 lakhs for the making of two films; Rs 15 lakhs for two exhibitions; Rs 435 lakhs for four conferences including one at UNESCO in Paris; 20 lakhs for five cultural activities; and 28 lakhs for an Aurobindo Yatra.

Working Committee decision to remove members

On April 27th, four members of the Working Committee decided to remove the three other members from office. This decision was contested as being invalid. Following these communications, the Auroville Council requested all Working Committee members to remain in their position and await the result of the Residents' Assembly Decision (RAD) on the 8th of May 2022.

Residents' Assembly de-selection decision

The Auroville Council confirmed the outcome of the decision-making process of the Residents' Assembly concluded on May 8th regarding de-selecting members of the Working Committee. 92% of the 864 residents who participated voted in favour of removing four members of the Working Committee, 8% rejected it.

(Not) accepting the RAD

The four members who were voted out of office refused to accept the RAD decision. On May 10th they informed the community that they had appointed three interim members. This Working Committee was subsequently recognized by the Auroville Foundation Office (AVFO). On May 14th, the three members of the Working Committee who had been permitted by the RAD to continue in office announced they had appointed four interim members.

Working Committee office

On May 18th, the Inspector of the Auroville Police Station along with an officer of the Crime Branch Crime Investigation Department entered Auroville's Town Hall building at the request of the AVFO demanding the keys to the Working Committee office, to be given to Working Committee recognized by the AVFO. This request was refused by the Working Committee constituted by the Residents' Assembly. On the morning of May 19th, over 300 residents gathered in front of the Town Hall to show support for the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly. Subsequently, the AVFO filed police complaints against six Aurovilians, on the basis of which First Information Reports have been made. The six persons have been granted anticipatory bail by the Chennai High Court.

Auronet and Auroville.org.in takeover

Citing that a complaint had been received that the Auronet and Auroville.org.in were being used for anti-national and anti-governmental activities, the AVFO has taken over the Auronet and Auroville.org.in administration. Consequently, some individuals were barred from accessing the Auronet and some working groups' email addresses as well as the massbulletin became inaccessible.

Working groups reconstitution and selection process

On June 3rd, the residents of Auroville were informed through Auronet that both the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) and the Auroville Town Development Council (ATDC) were reconstituted by the AVFO. This information was also published in the media. All new members of these working groups were appointed by the Secretary, Auroville Foundation. The Residents' Assembly Service is currently setting up the RA-ratified selection process for all working groups: the Working Committee, the Auroville Council, the Entry Board, the ATDC and the FAMC. [see article on page 2]

Spirituality in Action

Richard Hartz works as a researcher in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives.

Auroville stands out among intentional communities for the largeness of the vision that has continued to inspire it for over half a century. That vision keeps it alive, growing and moving towards the future through all appearances of delay and conflict. The obstacles that have hindered its materialization have been unavoidable concomitants of the leap of faith that brought this microcosm of the world into existence with all the strengths and difficulties contributed by its diverse elements. The audacious experiment goes on because something in us cannot live without ideals – the higher, the better. And however long it may take, the impulse that created Auroville cannot eventually stop short of a concrete realisation of the highest and widest ideals of what life can be.

The source of this irrepressible idealism is to be found in the depths of the human spirit. Among all the strands that go to make up the idea of Auroville, a spiritual motive of some sort is clearly central. But what do we mean by “spiritual”? Shortly after the inauguration ceremony in 1968, The Mother was asked: “How dependent is the building of Auroville upon man’s acceptance of spirituality?” Defying age-old assumptions, she replied: “*The opposition between spirituality and material life, the division between the two has no sense for me as, in truth, life and the spirit are one and it is in and by the physical work that the highest Spirit must be manifested.*”

As early as 1965, when asked whether one had to be a “student of yoga” to live in Auroville, she answered: “*All life is yoga. Therefore one cannot live without practising the supreme yoga.*” This radical insight comes, of course, straight from Sri Aurobindo. But it calls for explanation, since neither Sri Aurobindo nor the Mother proposed an “anything goes” understanding of yoga. Their point was not to water down the definition of spirituality, but to elevate our view of the meaning and purpose of life, expanding its scope to encompass previously unimagined possibilities.

Life is the process of emergence of the consciousness that was perceived by the ancient sages to be present everywhere beneath the surface of things, “awake in those who sleep” (*Katha Upanishad*). When this emergence occurs so slowly as to be imperceptible except in its results, we call it evolution. When it is speeded up and takes place with an awareness of what is happening and a deliberate participation in the process, it is what in India since Vedic times has been called Yoga. Sri Aurobindo defined Yoga as “*a methodised effort towards self-perfection by the expression of the secret potentialities latent in the being.*”

A great variety of methods have been developed for this purpose. Each takes one or more faculties of our normal nature, such as thought or emotion, and concentrates it on the attainment of its special aims. It is like using a magnifying glass to focus sunlight and start a fire. But many of these techniques cannot be practised seriously without restricting our other activities. What life demands from us today is, on the contrary, an extension rather than a limitation of our field of action.

To avoid this drawback, the solution discovered long ago is Karma Yoga, which can be practised while “doing all actions” – *kritsna-karma-kriti*, as the Gita puts it. But Karma Yoga or spirituality in action can be understood in two rather different ways. We can regard the outer life as a play of ignorant forces and, even in the midst of action, learn to stand back in an inner consciousness untouched by the disturbances on the surface. Traditional Karma Yoga so conceived and practised can lead to liberation, but does not usually aim at transformation. The alternative is to make action itself a means of spiritual development and become instruments of a Force that is working to change us and the world. This dynamic Karma Yoga is evidently what the Mother had in mind when she gave one of her last messages in March 1973: “*Auroville is created to realise the ideal of Sri Aurobindo who taught us the Karma Yoga. Auroville is for those who want to do the Yoga of work.*”

But how can ordinary activities be converted into the Yoga of work? The key is to act in such a way as to progressively free ourselves from the hold of the ego, the small “I.” The ego, Sri Aurobindo observes, “*can only think with itself as centre as if it were the All.*” But this ignorance falsifies our relationship to the world: “*To recognise that we ... are only a partial movement of this infinite Movement and that it is that infinite which we have to know, to be consciously and to fulfil faithfully, is the commencement of true living.*” In the Gita’s teaching of Karma Yoga, the law of sacrifice is invoked as “*a symbol of the solidarity of the universe.*” Its acceptance, Sri Aurobindo explains, “*is a practical recognition by the ego ... that, even in this much fragmented existence, there is beyond itself and behind that which is not its own egoistic person, something greater and completer, a diviner All.*”

The difficulty of Karma Yoga lies in its tendency to lapse into ordinary action, from which it is distinguished mainly by a subtle difference in the spirit in which we do things. On the other hand, its power for an integral spirituality derives from the participation of our whole nature in the process. When we are engaged in Karma Yoga, in con-



Richard deciphering a particularly difficult manuscript of Sri Aurobindo, now published in ‘Vedic and Philological Studies’.

trast to more contemplative paths, the ego has to be confronted at every step and cannot withdraw into the background to resurface as soon as we come out of our meditation. This makes for frustratingly slow but, in the end, much more thorough going spiritual progress. Since the idea of Auroville could be expected to serve as a constant reminder that one is living for something larger than oneself, those who have dedicated themselves to it are automatically doing a kind of Karma Yoga. If the complexity of what is being attempted also raises up obstacles and maximises the difficulties to be overcome, that is ultimately an advantage for the integrality of the realisation, since it means that all the elements of human nature have to be dealt with.

Auroville was conceived on a different principle than most spiritual communities in the past, monastic or otherwise. There the world tended to be kept at arm’s length to create favourable conditions for individuals to concentrate on their inner life. Here such a simplification of the problem is not an option. Auroville has to embrace the world in order to be relevant to it. The aim has been to bring together a representative sample of humanity in which the possibilities of our collective future can be worked out. If the experiment succeeds, it would be hard to overstate its global significance. And if that takes more time than we might have wished or expected, it will be worth the wait.

Richard Hartz

The power of work and possibility

In 2014, Mandakini Lucien-Brun of Auroville International France teamed up with longtime land fundraiser Aryadeep and secretary Jothi Raj of Land For Auroville United (LFAU) to create the Acres for Auroville fundraising campaign.

I first heard about Sri Aurobindo in Formentera, Spain in 1970. It was the day after I’d had the incredible experience of my mind opening into a vast realm of pale blue light to which I immediately said “I have no idea what this is, but it is what I want!” Only much later I learned it was the color associated with Sri Aurobindo’s consciousness. Seven years after, I came across a notice about an August 15th celebration in honor of Sri Aurobindo’s birthday at the East-West Cultural Center, now the Sri Aurobindo Center of Los Angeles. The founder, Dr. Judith Tyberg, had received the name Jyotipriya, meaning “The Lover of Light”, from Sri Aurobindo. I arrived just at the moment when she raised her arms in a great gesture of aspiration and said with incredible spiritual force “Friends, we are at the dawn of a New Age for humanity!” This was THE decisive moment in my life and Jyotipriya became a great influence for me, as for so many others who became involved with Auroville.

Often during her satsangs, Jyotipriya would stop reading to comment with enormous enthusiasm, “That’s what I love about The Mother! She’s so practical!” “Practical?” – for a long time I couldn’t relate to this because the Yoga, while it attracted me, seemed so far from me. But more and more I found my head bending with the pressure of the spiritual force in the meditations Jyotipriya led, and in three years, she inscribed in me the goals and process of the Integral Yoga, and the spiritual power and influence of The Mother.

The blessing of finding Jyoti’s center added to the lucky influences on my early life as it concerned work from my parents for whom work was the key to progress. They were both children of immigrants who had fled poverty and pogroms, and both started work at age 14. My mom even went to work during New York City blizzards when transportation from Brooklyn to Manhattan and back was uncertain – but off to work she went despite! Work, creativity and reliability in work were of the highest value, and the source of personal satisfaction.

My good luck also came from coming-of-age in 1960’s America when my generation had the privilege of so many wide-ranging possibilities. As a New Yorker, I fully imbibed the city’s “Why not try?” dynamism. More good fortune came when I was present for all four days of the Woodstock



Mandakini

Festival that joyously proved that positivity had great practical power.

So I put positive possibility into action in my work life. I created a health care program for underprivileged kids for the Mayor of New York, and afterwards co-produced about 100 educational films in Los Angeles. What is “strange” is that I gained these precious work opportunities without having had any prior relevant experience. I applied the “Why not try?” attitude and offered my “services”, got accepted, and then made good on these opportunities to contribute.

When Jyotipriya shared what The Mother said about work, it added a completely new dimension to my view of work and action – that of serving the Divine. And The Mother’s words have guided my life ever since: “*Let us offer our work to the Divine; this is the sure means of progressing*”; “*Let us work as we pray, for indeed work is the body’s best prayer to the Divine*” and “*Let us constantly aspire to be a perfect instrument for the Divine’s work*”.

In 1980, I went to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where I stayed for three years and received my spiritual name – Mandakini – from Nolini Kanta Gupta, Sri Aurobindo’s oldest disciple. And I worked: in the Dining Room, as a teacher in the school, and in

the Archives where I launched the concept for “The Spiritual Significance of Flowers” (finished by Ashramite Lilo). Jyotipriya was one of the first public supporters of Auroville and so I cycled out to contribute happy hours at Centre Field School. When Jyoti passed away, Arabinda Basu, the sadhak who had introduced her to Sri Aurobindo in 1947, asked me to write her biography for “Mother India”. Later, Anie Nunnally of the Los Angeles center requested me to write an updated piece for Wikipedia.

Nights in my room at Golconde were the occasion for many beautiful mystical experiences. But I also had an astonishingly odd dream where I physically and realistically felt I had swallowed a frog! I wondered about this for quite some time until I found a reference in Sri Aurobindo’s letters about frogs meaning “modest usefulness”. So I took this as a sign that I could be modestly useful for The Mother’s work and I have tried to stay true to this perspective for the past 42 years.

When I was a child I had several premonitions about my future. One was the intuition that I would spend my mature life in France. And in fact, I met my husband Maurice in the Ashram dining room and have been in France now since 1984. It also turned out that wherever we lived in Paris, the place was somehow associated with The Mother’s life. Our first apartment was located in a small street where her art school, l’Academie Julian, had one of its premises; our second one was just two doors from where a close friend of hers had lived (and she visited weekly) and was one street in a direct beeline from her flat on Rue Lemercier. The peace of her presence is still palpable in the garden there.

In Paris, I got hired for a job that once again I had no preparation for: teaching English to French corporate executives in accounting, finance, film, television, and real estate. For 30 years, I worked 55 hours a week, with The Mother’s words, and my parents’ example keeping me on track and strong. Vacations were for re-connecting to the Ashram and participating in Auroville (Matrimandir concretings, work in the Gardens, Nursery, and at the Archives).

I retired in 2011, and was finally able to fully turn my energy to Auroville. I became the Auroville fundraising organizer for Auroville International

(AVI) France, and as such, made the first fundraising calls in the News & Notes for the Farewell Facilities, and in France for the new ambulance. Then, with Julian and Chetana of AVI-USA and B, we launched the “Build It Now” campaign to bring in the last funds for finishing the Santé building.

“Acres for Auroville” came to me as an inner inspiration in a dream one night, including the name. After discussions with the AVI France Board, I got the green light to contact Aryadeep of LFAU. He had been fundraising for the land for 20 years and enthusiastically accepted developing together an LFAU-AVI collaboration to raise funds to purchase Auroville’s missing land. With Jothi, LFAU’s talented secretary, we set up systems for accounting transparency, and rapid and creative donor responses; and with Sigrid, Sathish and Sam we built the website (later enriched by the work of Joel and Chloé). We launched the campaign on 15th August 2014. Since the start, we have closely collaborated at a distance since I work from France.

In year two, Rakhal and I started our series of campaign films, most notably “Landing Auroville” and “The Mother, an Artist”. In our second year, too, Art for Land was created by Jasmin, Aravinda and myself as a support action for A4A, with the generous solidarity of Auroville artists and friend artists. For the past six years, it has been carried by the love and energy of Jaya, Claudine and the AFL team. Other vital collaboration for A4A has come from Joel and Chloé with their IT skills.

We will soon be starting A4A’s 9th year of action which has created awareness, trust, and concrete results. Thanks to donor solidarity and the non-stop collaboration of the AVIs, A4A has funded the majority of the 85 plots purchased since 2014. With me in France, we have all closely collaborated at a distance. Our team has put into practice The Mother’s words: “It is only in harmonious collaboration that effective work can be done.”

Looking back, it is funny to see that the A4A campaign is the only work in my life that I was prepared for in advance! I came to it knowing the concrete power of possibility and all my previous endeavors came together in it with great meaning. I am deeply grateful for this enriching opportunity to serve The Mother’s vision, and along with so many friends, contribute to the building of Auroville.

Mandakini L-B

Being responsive to the psychic and the impact of the collective

Deepti Tewari joined Auroville 47 years ago and teaches at Last School. She is editor of the Bharat Nivas Journal. Earlier she had edited the Matrimandir Journals. She also offers classes on the writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother

Auroville Today: What is your perception of spirituality in action?

Deepti: Sri Aurobindo's yoga is unique in its aim of comprehensive transformation. An interesting illustration of its action can be found in Book 11, *The Book of Everlasting Day*, of Sri Aurobindo's epic poem *Savitri*. This canto is called *The Eternal Day, The Souls' Choice and the Supreme Consummation*. Savitri has vanquished Death, yet now she meets a final test: she is offered a series of sublime choices. Savitri refuses all. Her response: "*Earth is the chosen place of mightiest souls*", "*the heroic spirit's battle-field*", and, "*Thy servitudes on earth are greater, King, than all the glorious liberties of heaven*". In her unmoved resoluteness the "*great unsatisfied godhead*" meets at last an equal soul in whom to "*do his marvellous works*", build his "*golden tower*". In subsequent pages, in lines packed with the most arresting, heart-uplifting images, we discover Sri Aurobindo's vision of spiritual action to transmute earthly life. She who "*embodies the spirit of immortal love*" must "*bear all things that all things might change*". She is the "*Sun-Word [who] shall raise the earth soul to Light and bring God down into the lives of men*". She is his "*cord of universal love*" through whom spirits will learn the "*delight of creation's oneness sweet and fathomless*". Her task: "*to change the earthly life to life divine*".

And isn't that what we as a collectivity are supposed to embody? Sri Aurobindo and the Mother are the "*strong forerunners*" who have done the work of consciousness: what is needed now is a critical mass, a holding agency of self-given beings. Mother sums up Auroville's task in the 6 points: '*To Be A True Aurovilian*', the very first necessity of which is the discovery and bringing forward of the divine centre – the Psychic Being.

There are many methods of yoga and many approaches to spirituality. But in Sri Aurobindo we discover a unique, never before articulated position. Traditional Indian spirituality has not needed an elaborated delineated concept of the psychic being. Earthly Transformation was not an aim. It is the very purpose of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. The Mother suggests that it is the psychic being which will probably materialize itself and become the supramental being! And here is a defined purpose for Auroville: for Mother says Auroville is to be the '*Berceau du Surhomme*' – the cradle of the intermediate being between the human being and the supramental being. And it must come about with the conscious collaboration of Aurovilians!



Deepti

Auroville is to be a collective realization. Sri Aurobindo has written that a true collectivity – what he terms a gnostic or supramental collectivity – can be based only upon the inner realization of each of its members, each realizing his real, concrete oneness and uniting it with all the other members. Obviously, we are far from that realization but we should not forget this is the purpose of Auroville.

Most likely, many if not most Aurovilians have not made the full discovery of their inner being. What is your experience there?

We have to look at this in two different ways: an inner truth and an outer actuality. There is this wonderful answer Sri Aurobindo gives. Someone writes to him saying that there are many more people turning to Buddhism and Vedanta but relatively few to his yoga. And he replies: "*nothing depends on numbers*". The inner beings of the people who come to this yoga, however imperfect still, is often more advanced. The external being still pursues its fixed nature. It is only when this outer person changes that his yoga will have visible result! So this is the present issue we confront.

Apropos my personal way of being, over the years, I have tried to hold onto an increasingly settled sense of well-being which wants to express something deeper. I question myself if I lose that poise. And I have noticed it mirrored outwardly. You remain cheerful; it is a force to which the world responds.

You spoke about Auroville as an inner collectivity

I hope the inner collectivity is in process of being formed. But there are always elements that are missing. To create a collective wholeness you need a critical mass where everybody inwardly is in their right place. We are far from that. Seeing recent problems, I wonder wherefrom comes this self-righteousness that demands others accept one's views as the truth.

Many years ago, *Auroville Today* published a hand-written note of February 1968 from The Mother to Manoj Das Gupta. She is answering his question "who is in charge in Auroville." She replies "*Here, no one is in charge – it's very good for the egos and self-wills of people*". I find this the key solution for our overweening external egos. As long as we think we are in charge, that we know better than the other, we live in the shadow of our own egoistic condition.

So there is an inner truth and then there is the outer actuality of all these egos, these shadowy beings that are confronting each other. That is the issue of Auroville, that is indeed its impossibility. But hasn't Auroville always been impossible? It cannot be built by the human mind – it's a creation of soul-force. So, however underdeveloped we are, that's what has been given for the work of the new consciousness by Universal Life in its present material state of development.

From one perspective, we seem to represent collective incoherence. This collapse of values, this arrogance of thinking "I know better than everyone else". The new consciousness is "*digging in this horror of filth and mire*" which Sri Aurobindo describes in his poem *A God's Labour*. Rather the opposite of the "*fraternity of collaboration*" envisioned by The Mother!

It is now 50 years since I had Mother's darshan, and I ask myself: where am I? Where are we? Can I say that we are part of a collective realization? that our souls have chosen to subsume their individual progress in a collective realization? In a collective yoga each is automatically held in place by the measure of growth of the whole. And given outer circumstances, can we truly expect the psychic to act visibly in a world that is so full of dark forces?

Everybody who joins Auroville brings in their own possibilities and impossibilities. What to do about those impossibilities?

Kireetbhai [Dr. Kireet Joshi, eds.] was once asked what to do about an undesirable person in

Auroville. He replied that while we shouldn't invite more problems, once the person is there, you have to work through the problem. Perhaps the Divine acts this way: concentrate the difficulties in one spot to better work on them. Can we truly expect that no negative forces, would be present in Auroville?

A possible view of the present situation in Auroville could be that the yoga has reached a point where the new consciousness can confront and effectively address this kind of darkness. Therefore it has been allowed to come forward. If you read Sri Aurobindo's writings on the French Revolution, he shows how the action of the revolution, the action of Mahakali harnessing the *rakshasi* and the *yatudhani*, always accelerates the process. My most optimistic conclusion is that we are in a moment of acceleration and that at the end of this dark passage something interesting will emerge.

What can we as individuals do?

We have to keep faith and trust. Spirituality in action means having an indestructible faith and trust that we are part of something inevitable, evolutionary, that is going to happen. Our minds have sometimes to accept not to understand, and just "*Cling To Truth*" – that handwritten message of the Mother you find walking up to Sri Aurobindo's room.

It seems to me that when we choose this yoga, we have in principle said to the Supreme, "you can do this to us, we are at your service". Most likely, we are not very serviceable! To be serviceable, the psychic would have to be brought forward. But in principle, our souls have made this choice. If we have signed up for Sri Aurobindo's yoga, we have offered our outer natures for a most difficult process.

The Austrian holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl once wrote that everything can be taken away from a being, but his personal response to circumstances. We are always free to choose our response; and the measure of our response makes the next step. It is true that our sphere of action in Auroville, because it is a collective yoga, is limited, but not our response. Our response is our own choice. Mother says that receptive is one thing, responsive quite another. Are we receptive, are we open to the forces of the future? And, secondly, are we responsive? There individual choice remains. If we can create a collectivity of responsiveness in our outer natures to the psychic demand, Auroville will become a divine garden.

In conversation with Carel

The Matrimandir Journals have been published at <https://mmj.books.prisma.haus/en/>

Karma yoga

Working in Auroville has its own specialty. As novice honorary volunteers, drawn to the idea of Auroville and with stars in our eyes, several years can go by slightly tinted. Brazenly leaving a highly paid job and career, I was happy to take up any work and naïvely shared my innocent outlook on Auroville issues.

At that time, I participated in the wonder of Auroville as if by magic: no expectations, no groups, not many responsibilities, etc. Then, as one grows, more and more work starts flowing towards you, responsibilities are offered and taken, with exceptional experiences like the completion phase of the Matrimandir, the soul of Auroville. There was a feeling of being blessed to do this work.

Non ownership, non-hierarchical functioning, and group work were lessons still to be learnt. In Auroville, all projects are for The Divine, for the Mother. The Mother wrote down and said some things about how to go about it, but the rest is left to the individual and group to figure out. Thus, the functioning and decision-making processes of Auroville are unique and cannot really be defined. As active participants in the creation of this place and despite differences of opinion, this is the biggest challenge.

For a project like Auroville where you work for the Divine, it plays out in hardly conceivable methods. To be a true doer of divine works, one has to be free from desire and ego. Though the intention is given, this experiential discipline is extremely hard to realise as the ego is clever and sneaky, it shows up all the time. We regularly witness these effects within and without.

After all, Auroville is an experiment of the Divine, and we are guinea pigs being rolled around in the research lab of the Divine. So the journey becomes exhilarating, painful, and intense, with nonstop pain, growth and action. As The Mother promised, you come here for growth of consciousness and not fulfillment of desires; circumstances around ensure that this is tested a million times.

Sometimes, decisions do not seem to be based in logic or common

sense, but after going up and down in this roller-coaster ride for a while, a design and plan start to reveal themselves. This Auroville soup is meant to change us, change us for good. The only constant truth: "Surrender", "Let go". Let go of our opinions, our ideas, our thoughts, our tangible and intangible possessions.

Spirituality in action emerges in this act of surrender: surrendering one's sense of ownership, surrendering one's control over the outcome, surrendering one's being, ideas and all of oneself to Her. This is hard, it is difficult, and it does not happen without constant practice.

Another feature that appears constantly and evidently in working for Auroville is that, easily my own will, ego, desires, opinions and views are put out as that of the divine. This happens to all of us, hardly anyone is spared of this feature.

Group functioning is a special phenomenon, worthy of research by a doctorate student, the challenges and the highs and lows come while working in groups. We work and create for ourselves and the community: the ownership is common and the result is also common. If we are together and harmonious, we can create; if we are not, we destroy or definitely delay. It can only be compared to a family functioning. Families though are naturally socially, genetically, and culturally homogeneous; here the family has 50 other nationalities along with educational, social and cultural differences. The ecosystem of decision-making and of work can only proceed with an alignment of ideal. If not, it is impossible to proceed.



Divya Kapoor

Since last year, Auroville is undergoing a shift, a drastic shift of collective consciousness, with strong forces in action. The violent methodology and lack of consensus to build have created a big division in a community of collective ownership and an aim of Human Unity. Further attempts to force a decision as well as disrupt, dilute and modify Auroville, have brought a spontaneous unity, a spontaneity to act, putting aside small differences to stand up for Auroville. This action to stand despite personal threats and risks, brings a hope, a hope for the survival of Auroville, that the cradle of superman will survive the crass, petty-minded, brute attempt to crush the New World.

This rise of collective consciousness visible in recent weeks and months is a rare phenomenon to protect A Dream. The one example that comes to mind are the sacrifices of

Bhagat Singh or Chandrasekhar Azad for India's freedom. Boldly and courageously risking comfort and life for an ideal greater than oneself. Can this giving be a collective Karma yoga? I don't know, the Mother has said this is an experiment, so many new phenomena will emerge, and we will be the instruments that are moulded, used and ultimately changed through this process.

So ultimately how is it to work in Auroville, for Auroville? When it is sincere, working is a joy, a learning and progressive experience. When it is mixed with desires, ego and personal goals and aims, it becomes a struggle. Any which way, it is changing us, as willing or unwilling servitors; working in Auroville is, and probably will remain, a transforming experience.

Divya Kapoor

The first necessity, the inner discovery

Didier Weiss joined Auroville in 1994 and started a few years later Sound Wizard, an Auroville unit that specialises in turnkey design of high-end acoustics and audio-visual environments such as music studios, auditoria, and elite home cinema theaters.

AV Today: Can you speak about your inner development after you joined Auroville?

Didier: Like many Aurovilians, I came to hear about Auroville through Satprem’s book *‘Sri Aurobindo ou l’Aventure de la Conscience’*, and soon after joining the community, I spent a good deal of my initial years reading Sri Aurobindo’s and The Mother’s works. But at some point, there was this felt sense that I was doing all those readings from a flawed perspective. This is when I realized that the first thing that I needed to do is to make that inner discovery of this ‘being free, vast and knowing’ which The Mother describes in *To Be A True Aurovillian*:

The first necessity is the inner discovery in order to know what one truly is behind social, moral, cultural, racial and hereditary appearances. At the center there is a being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active center of our being and our life in Auroville.

I could not continue to envision my life from a restricted specific point of view which evidently has no true reality, so I attempted to understand – or rather realize – what She means, what that vaster and freer being is. I avidly searched for answers from different traditions and walked different spiritual paths until I met in person Ramesh Balsekar, a non-dual teacher in the lineage of Nisargadatta Maharaj – a renowned Advaita master – who at that time lived in Mumbai and welcomed spiritual searchers from India and elsewhere in his home. While still in France I had read one of his books *Pointers – 1982*, which had had a significant impact. His message had resonated and I was thrilled to be able to have a face-to-face exchange on this central burning topic. Following a first visit in 1996, I made sure to visit him a couple of days at a time, every time I had a work assignment in Mumbai till his death in 2007.

Ramesh was neither a philosopher nor an Advaita scholar; he offered several practical tools for inner discovery. He would painstakingly and relentlessly demonstrate, but always with affection and a twinkle in his eyes, how to use them in daily life. He would invariably open his talks by saying his concepts were not the Truth, but only pointers. They were not concepts to accumulate as mere intellectual knowledge and be quoted or recited by heart, and they were certainly not to be taken at face value. On the contrary, they were to be heard once, and put to the test of life until they made total sense, until there was a seeing/knowing that was alive, that did not come from mind. He gently discouraged people to sit at his feet for months waiting for some divine sign or intervention, and would send them out of his home – sometimes even a bit ruthlessly – into the world to live their life fully, as a friend, as a husband, as a father, as a professional, etc. no matter their role. This talked to me deeply as there was never an intention to study scriptures and to live a so-called spiritual life separate from daily living. In fact, there was this intuition that spirituality and daily life were seamless. So I trusted Ramesh and put his tools to use, which helped me greatly in understanding – not through mind but in direct experience – what was meant by that first paragraph of ‘To Be A True Aurovillian’.

What were these tools?

When you tackle this essential existential question about who we really are behind all appearances, you quickly see that many of the answers that you generally come up with are not really true. You cannot possibly be limited to your identity and social status (name, age, marital status, profession, etc.), nor your body, mind and emotions. All these are constantly fluctuating so they cannot possibly define who you really are. So the first step is to de-identify from that ‘which you are not’, and then look at what remains. In my case, this process of complete deconstruction of what I thought I was took several years ... as I had an active mind and a rather stubborn and rebellious spirit.

Ramesh did not teach me to live my life in a certain spiritual or not spiritual way. He only suggested that I deeply looked at a few assumptions that I had taken for granted. These unverified assumptions determined the way I lived, which often included optional emotional and psychological suffering – not to be confused with body or psychological pain, which is alas not avoidable in the course of a life.

One of his tools was to explore what we usually call our ‘sense of doership’. Do we make choices/decisions and do we act with total control, or is it merely an appearance of control? Is what we really are defined by our choices, decisions, actions, thoughts, will or feelings?

Through the analytical investigation the Indian philosophers called *Neti Neti* – not this, not that – you might realize that you are not the doer of your actions, you are not the perceiver of the perceptions, and so on. But then you wander through all the avenues that indicate that ‘someone’ is there, and then you realize that yes, you are! You exist 100 %, there is a sense of being. There can be no doubt about that, but not as a separate individual localized in time and space! And this is a life-changing discovery, which brings us back to that first paragraph of ‘To Be A True Aurovillian’.

AV Today: Then how do you take actions? Do you step back?

It is not at all a question of inwardly taking a distance and stepping away from life, there is a fuller involvement on the contrary. There is simply no longer separation: a ‘me’ here and ‘an outside world’ out there. The discovery is that “I am” is absolutely not localized. We could say it is “without a center”, Life knows itself and lives itself directly. When the sense of ‘me’ is de-identified, it is still Didier who goes through life, as we know it, who makes choices, takes decisions and actions, but there is a simplification. There is no sense of authorship: choices and decisions are



Didier

made and actions are taken, according to the elements that are there in the moment, without a single exception.

This seeing/knowing comes with a side effect, a sense of deep peace and harmony, a sense of fundamental well-being, whatever the circumstances, as what we really are is not bound in time and space. There is a void, but not a void that is cold and full of desperation. It has instead the vastness and fullness of life. At this point in time in the history of Auroville and the world, we could easily say that circumstances are excruciating, however peace prevails. There is a force, which moves us, makes us do what we do. We could say that when The Mother acts, She uses us as Her instruments.

So you see a play of forces?

“I” don’t see anything; there is only a play of forces. The force pushes X to take this decision or to behave in that way, for X is very much part of the whole thing. A force to get X to act in a specific way uses his specific set of genes and conditionings through upbringing, belief systems and cultural background and so on.

The Mother, in a conversation in 1969, said, “It [the city] will be built by what is invisible to you. The men who have to act as instruments will do so despite themselves. They are only puppets in the hands of larger Forces. Nothing depends on human beings – neither the planning nor the execution – nothing! That is why one can laugh.” This seems to correspond to your experience.

Yes, but it means also that everyone will act at the position he or she is at, according to the whole context.

Let’s take a practical example. You wake up early morning and you want coffee but there is no coffee. How do you ‘act’ if the shop around the corner has just sold out?

I might jump on my bike and get some coffee as soon as possible in a neighboring store, or stay home and have tea instead, depending on the mood of the day.

Any action comes from a context. Supposed individuals act at any time according to their own specific angle in life at that time, and that is also how an action can become impaired, when it springs out of misidentification. What I am saying is that this sense of existence, as a separate being doesn’t need to be there, because Existence is, Life is, and this is the only player. It is not ‘us’ who act. If we think we do, we may want to verify whether this is true in our direct experience.

So how do you emotionally deal with a very serious event?

It is not that ‘I’ need to remember to be cool and detached when facing difficult or happy times, the belief system in the existence of a separate ‘me’ is gone and cannot be revived. The context dictates how the story develops, but the ‘poor me’ story and related emotional and psychological suffering disappears. There is

an opening towards peace and harmony, there is only silence. Actions, thoughts and emotions appear, but they come from a deep sense of peace.

On a day-to-day level, when this non-dual seeing/knowing permeates our life, the ‘poor me’ syndrome and accompanying symptoms are gone and there is a growing sense of equanimity, whether at home with family and friends, at work with clients or colleagues, within a collectivity like ours or with perfect strangers. It is spirituality in action. But until this realization is fully lived, the sense of relaxation and contraction still depends on fortunate or unfortunate life events.

The proposal here is in realizing the utter ‘undividedness’ of life, and to remain there. This is the definition of Advaita: “not two”.

Let’s look at the current situation of Auroville. Many things have happened over the past months, which have made many people very anxious and upset. What is your response?

The deep fracture in the fabric of Auroville and the chaos it entails is of deep concern. A non-dual perspective on life does not turn us into insensitive apathetic blobs!

The way out of the hamster wheel is when judgment about yourself or seemingly others goes out of the window. It is like a game of chess, we need to look at it from an impersonal perspective, like an impersonal game. You don’t hate the queen of the opponent because she captured your pawn, or point the finger at the fool claiming that he is responsible for your ‘poor me’ misery ... And similarly the opponent king can’t take credit for his prowess, for his actions based on the ‘great me’ or ‘superior me’ syndrome – the opposite of the ‘poor me’ – which is also on the forefront right now in Auroville. A response based from the non-dual understanding, therefore the practical mind – versus the auto referential mind – might be complete stillness or involve a strong action. Nothing is excluded.

Do you believe that the present hullabaloo is caused by the absence of people who have no or little contact with their psychic being?

References to the psychic being is not part of my vocabulary, I have no competence in this field. But in my direct experience, the misunderstanding on the nature of what we really are causes the hullabaloo you are alluding to. The one and only cause of this whole turmoil is this sense of misidentification with a personal ‘me’ with a goal, a destiny and a mission.

How could we opt out of this hamster wheel in Auroville?

From this non-dual perspective, I see that even if we were to change the Working Committee ten times, or make ten more master plans, it would not change any of our current and future problems. The cause of our failure is not the belief in a perfect circle or not perfect circle [*of the Crown Road, eds.*], a preference for an organic and friendly development as opposed to a rigidly planned strategy, but the erroneous assumption about what each Aurovillian believes he truly is at the core of his being, which has become his identity, his limitation, his nightmare ...

At present, these identities are clashing. I am not saying that we should not make choices as to which makes more sense. What I am saying is that the solution lies in stopping believing in a ‘me’ story, in being identified with this or that image of myself, and in acting from the unlimited and undefined vast and knowing space we really are. The essential work in de-identification is key.

The first paragraph of ‘To Be A True Aurovillian’, the search for the inner being, ought to be taken up seriously and persistently. I am not talking here about theoretical knowledge to be learned. I am talking about a direct and truly alive experience of what She said, which might change radically one’s perspective on life forever. Then, Life will unfold in a different way within, of course, the limitations of our mental, emotional and physical being. Then, there will be the very much-needed peace and harmony to take things forward in a harmonious way, leaving aside personal identities, like we cast old clothes that have done their time and are no longer needed.

The first necessity for manifesting the greatness of Auroville in all its magnitude is to have ‘True Aurovilians’ who have made this inner discovery, and can act from there. It is not about having a growing population of thousands of people unaware of their true nature and/or merely looking for an alternative life-style.

What The Mother talked about was discovering our shared being, that ‘free, vast and knowing being’, of which most traditions speak from time immemorial. We might then see different decisions emerge from the core of this being and a true human unity manifest. The Mother is pushing us in that direction, towards the discovery of that Center. This is part of the ‘Divine Conspiracy’; it is about time that all of us take up this work, or else we might simply fail her, whatever sophisticated artifacts we use or brilliant reasoning we entertain.

In conversation with Carel

Didier is the founder of Sound Wizard and the author of Explorations non duelles – Retour au paradis perdu – Editions Accarias – L’Originel, 2017 and Une vie libérée – Le guide complet du dépouillement personnel – Editions Almora, 2022, both in French language only.

'Pour la joie que cela nous donne' (‘For the sake of the joy that it gives us’)

Pushkar studied at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (Pondicherry), where he started studying music. He furthered his musical studies in Spain and at Oberlin College (USA). He first joined Auroville in 1991, and is presently composing, performing, and teaching music to adults and children.

AVToday: *How did your musical journey start?*

Pushkar: As a child, it started with the love for singing. When I was five, I got a little organ that sits on the floor. When playing it, I remember feeling inspired, like something beautiful was happening to me. I remember this experience of entering into a magical world. Maybe for me it had a connection to The Mother's organ music, because even though I was in Italy at the time, my family was connected to the Ashram and The Mother was shown pictures of me as a baby.

When I was seven, I moved to Pondicherry and shortly after joined the Ashram school, where recorder classes were compulsory for all the children. I enjoyed that very much. Eventually, I discovered that there was a piano in the school, and very eagerly I started playing it and getting some lessons. By the age of 13, music took over my whole life. I started dedicating all of my free time to music because I wanted to be a concert pianist. I started my preparations in order to go to a music conservatory in Spain, and then I moved there with my family for a few years.

During that preparation, I was playing five hours of piano every day. I didn't have a piano at home, so I would wake up at 5:30 a.m. to go to the Ashram school to practice, since that was only possible during non-school hours. It required extreme discipline, but I had that enthusiasm. I often was the first to open the school at 6 a.m. and the last to be sent out when they closed at 9 p.m.. Whenever I could, I was glued to the piano, even Sundays weren't an exception.

My piano teacher was good and attentive, but I had to prepare my own lessons, and if I wanted to know something, I would have to ask him. It's beautiful to have the chance to do that, of not having things imposed on you, of deciding what you want to do. There was no radio at that time, no TV, no internet. The only way I could discover a piece of music was if I played it. I became proficient at sight reading, I had so much thirst for music, every book I could get my hands on, I played.

I've heard you say that Auroville is special and that only here you can teach, perform, and compose in a certain way. Why wouldn't it be possible anywhere else?

It is not only important to have a good teacher, but also the support of the society that surrounds us. And I don't separate teaching, performing, and composing. They go together. The people around us have to support us in what we are doing, conceptually. The importance of changing the standard parameters is crucial. In the outside world, everything is based on the parameter of quantifiable success, whether it is as a teacher, a performer, or a composer. That is what I feel is erroneous. Even in my education at Oberlin College (USA), everything was always based on that. There was something very beautiful about being there, because at times it felt like this place could be like Auroville. But there were things that were unfortunate: the focus on time and success, the attitude that time is money, and that everything one does has to be successful.

Sometimes I would go for walks in the moonlight in the middle of winter, and tearfully think... if only we could have these musical opportunities in Auroville, or that freedom of Auroville at Oberlin; that mentality that nobody has to know how good you are, that others do not decide whether you're learning something or not. Only you are the judge of that. There is no external recognition or prize, your personal growth and progress is your only reward. This alone can change the parameters. The following lines express it best; they were printed in French on every notebook at the Ashram school and we often recited them in the mornings before starting the day: *'It is not for our family, it is not to secure a good position, it is not to earn money, it is not to obtain a diploma, that we study. We study to learn, to know, to understand the world, and for the sake of the joy that*

it gives us.' (The Mother)

Because this approach is not a utilitarian mentality, it is rare to find it anywhere else in the world, and I believe it to be the foundation of the education system of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. This is what Auroville needs to give the space for. And if children decide that they want something else, that's also okay. But at least this possibility is there.

And then the question of how to go about it arises. If, for example, the parents want their child to become a musician, and if I were to get financial remuneration for my classes, and if that child would be stuck on the same lesson for two years, that would be a problem in the outside world. But here it can be an opportunity. I had a student like that, and I could have given him a medal for his perseverance, because he wanted to keep trying to play the same piece for years. His goal wasn't to become a skilled player; he just wanted to put his fingers on the piano and play. And that's enough for me. In this situation, if the parents felt that they are paying so much money for the classes, they would want to know if he is going to become a pianist. And in this case, I would have to say, no. But this would take away from this child the opportunity to hammer on those keys and to let his fingers dance, which was maybe something important for him. Maybe it was a yoga of the fingers, because if you hit one key and you are meditating on that key, it becomes the whole universe, in that silence.

This is a very Eastern mentality, which by the way, gave birth to the 'zero'. Because that emptiness is everything. This mentality is fundamental for me, and from this place of joy, this child wants to do it.

It's difficult if the society around you does not give you this possibility. In the West, for a teacher not to spoil his reputation, he would have to select only the students who will succeed. And then these students would be forced to do certain things in a certain way, within a specific timeframe, as it was for me at Oberlin. Although I enjoyed studying abroad, I sometimes wonder if it was a good choice for me. With the system of teaching there, the examinations and merit-based scholarships, you become good at memorising only what gives you a good grade. There is very little room to explore things, take them apart, go beyond the set requirements. By having spent time in that system, I feel that I lost the opportunity to learn certain things in a deeper and more meaningful way. Maybe the space to be unsuccessful allows you to go deeper and more truly into your search, especially when you realise how little you know and how not good you are, you allow yourself to become truly open to something else.

When I was 14, I also became career-oriented. I wanted to become a concert pianist, and I lost a lot of that joy of making music from the previous years because suddenly, someone told me that I need to make my music 'perfect' and produce results. Even here in Auroville sometimes the parents interfere by saying things such as 'What are you going to do? You're already old enough, you have to go to a conservatory, don't waste your time, I don't see any progress'. But that's how progress works, it's like a frozen river; there is a current that is ever flowing under that still surface, and at some point, there will be a breakthrough. That applies to both my students and me. And I don't approach my students as students. I consider that they are knowledgeable in their regard, and that they are in control of their world. So they have that chance to discover things for themselves. There are techniques they will have to learn, but maybe they can do that with their own approach. So I try to see where they want to go, and never take the attitude that I know more than them. If I want them to discover something new that I don't know, I can't impose on them the ways that I've explored myself. So I push them to discover their own path. Like with rock climbing,



Pushkar

you can teach them how to climb a rock. But if they follow your every step, they will not discover a new path on the mountain. And because I want them to forge their own path and make new pieces of music, I encourage them to be creative right from the start. That is why most of my students also compose right from the start. They compose things to be creative, as this is an art in itself.

I also notice how my teaching style evolves over the years. It went from systematic, to completely free, to knowing exactly what are the things that need to be taught, so that the students are perfectly equipped with the best tools to keep exploring themselves. I always tell them that they are colleagues of mine.

But the parents have to be very careful not to impose their ways. They should of course support and nurture the child, and give them all the possible opportunities, but without telling them what they ought to do. I always tell my students they shouldn't be trying to please me, they should become responsible for their own progress and growth. This is the beauty of it, they should not want authority from somebody else, they should never accept that.

What is most precious to you?

What is most precious to me is that there is something wonderful behind everything. And if that does not exist, then nothing is worth living for. One can express it through music, through other means, or through nothing even, simply by existing. That is what Sri Aurobindo and The Mother bring me towards. They connect me with 'that'. It's such a simple answer but it is an extremely difficult thing to do. In my compositions I'm mostly interested in seeing if I can make the piece connect directly to what is most important in life to me, that ultimate Ananda, that joy, that beauty. You can feel it, this is what art should be able to create. I've started composing in a way that is new to me, trying to find out how much of 'that' can be translated into a form that you can experience. But we are constrained by rules of the material plane, and I have no idea what these rules are. I'm trying to see how much the mind can help and allow things, or block them.

For Sri Aurobindo to manifest *Savitri*, a very good knowledge of English was necessary. So maybe when translating that source into musical sounds, to convey that thing of beauty and harmony which one can hear in *Savitri*, it has to take a form that has these material rules. And then the question remains of

how to not crush it with the mental rules. Some musicians talk about spontaneity. When I'm spontaneous on the piano some nice things come out, but mostly, your fingers go into patterns that they have already learned, and that have become instinctive.

Even when you're improvising, there are rules. With a raga, for example, the rules help bring out its essence. If you change something or break the rules, the essence is lost, as if you were smelling a rose, and suddenly, it becomes a jasmine. The beauty of the rose is that it's so quintessentially itself in all of its elements. The same happens with music, it has a fragrance, it appears to follow logical principles. It's a constant exploration to see how inspiration can take form within these logical structures. To follow these structures while composing, I created formulas that wouldn't let me fall into a pattern where my ears are pleased only with what they are familiar with. I want to create something that my ear says 'yes!' to. And sometimes, suddenly it's like a completely new sound to me.

In February last year, I experimented during the Auroville birthday week. I spent nearly 100 hours on something that turned out to be completely useless. So then I just put it aside, because I was falling into patterns of hearing that were already familiar. These things have a specific place in history and in the evolution of music, which I wasn't interested in developing. Instead, I focus on what is behind. At the present time in Auroville, that's all that matters.

And that ties right back into what you said about success and society's expectations...

I always thought that there should be a university of failures. Failure takes away the pressure of pretending to be something one is not, and it also allows one to be more true and humble. This is indispensable to be able to connect to others and to the essence of life. If you were to tell a child: 'You need to fail at the piano'. What would they do? Maybe they would discover a new world? We already know where the trodden path goes. But a different way of doing things can connect us to that world, where you can always be in contact with that emotion of the Beyond, that incredible Ananda that unifies everything. We're so lucky to be surrounded by so much of that here. But even in a place where there are only concrete buildings, it's all still there. The idea that you're breathing 'it', simply that you 'are' breathing... That is the essence, a life force of love and joy, our hearts wouldn't be beating if it weren't for that. As artists and musicians we don't often live up to that, and it makes me wonder, what are we aiming for then?

Often I find that the first thing I need to learn is to eliminate myself. I'm not aiming for personal pleasure, but for something completely different. Personal pleasure has a place, but it is a small one. But one also can't be arrogant or feel superior because of this. Rather feel that one is incapable of anything. And in some cases, I look back at a composition of mine and am surprised by the beauty of it, because I know that I would be incapable of composing such a piece ordinarily. And then you realise that there is something else, and it is not just something unconscious. It's not an automatism, because that is the first thing that gets eliminated when you study, so that you are paying attention to things you were never paying attention to before. And those things that once mattered, suddenly don't anymore. You're not even thinking what's next, you're just there. And suddenly, the whole world comes out of one single note. And you know it, and you're just paying attention to where it wants to go, what it wants to do...

In conversation with Chandra

Reaping Mother's gifts

Amudha joined Auroville 43 years ago. She helped start the Kindergarten in 1984 and continues to teach there today. Along with her husband and two sons, she runs Kottakarai Farm and Ganesh Bakery.

I was born in Pondy and grew up there until I was 6 years old. In 1968, we moved to Alankuppam, which was my father's village. My family owned some land in the intended Auroville Township area. So I used to go to the fields with my parents on the weekend when they would organise the farming work there.

I am someone who loves to see new things. So at that time, when I went to our farm land on the weekends, I saw there were these young people, super friendly, who were starting to work on Auroville land. I felt a good connection with those people. I didn't know who they were, but I would go every weekend just to see what they were doing.

My mother worked in the amphitheatre. When The Mother passed away, she got a chance to see the body. She talked about it, and I told her, "You are so lucky, amma." I don't know why I said that, but I had heard my family refer to The Mother as a guru of the Ashram.

Auroville calling

After finishing high school, I was supposed to continue with higher studies. In the summer holiday, I happened to go to the Auroville Bakery, then located at Celebration. Sundaram was working at the bakery, so that's how we met. It wasn't easy to do at the time, but we got married. This was in 1979.

I have always been interested in new things and equality. Arriving in the village after living in Pondy, I experienced the difference. Girls in the village didn't ride bicycles, but I rode one. I wasn't allowed to sit with any man, not even my father. Neighbours and relatives told my parents they were giving their daughter too much freedom. Later, when I chose my husband myself instead of agreeing to a traditional arranged marriage, the neighbours and relatives again blamed my parents for giving me too much freedom.

So then I came to Auroville, and stayed here, and it was a very nice experience. I became a member of the community after I got married, but I didn't go through any process or meeting. People who knew me spoke to the Entry Group about what I was doing.

Judith in Angira's Garden had asked me to take care of her baby so she could work. There were more children in that area, so I was asked to take care of those children too. Everybody had to work. They were all planting the trees, working here and there, and I was taking care of the children. Everyone liked how I handled the children. And then my son was born.

At that time, there was no school for younger children. So then in 1982, the Crèche started at Samata's place in Transformation. All the small children were brought there, and parents would take it in turn to go twice a week. My husband couldn't always leave the bakery, so I got a chance to go even more often. And people saw that I was more connected with the children, so they asked me to work more.

Then it was felt that a Kindergarten was needed for children once they turned four years old. We started in 1984 with one big hut, Miriam and myself, with several young people. Odile also joined after two years. And we three are still there.

Unending education

When I came to Auroville, there was so much dialogue, real education, not like in the books. I'm a person who asks a lot of questions, and when I asked, people gave explanations I could understand. "You see that when we plant trees, the soil will not go away from here." Even if you didn't ask, they would give information. They were happy to tell you what Auroville was about, why they had come. Without pulling, we could get information.

Meenakshi was like a treasure. She really explained each thing individually. How much you could take, she would always give, and she would give all the information in Tamil. I would ask when the Matrimandir would be finished. Meenakshi would say that if we all think of it, it will be finished. We all have to work, not only physically but internally also. It was a really good opportunity to learn about the Mother, Sri Aurobindo, the yoga, and what Auroville was going to be.

Barbara from the Matrimandir office would give us a class every week. Then it became twice a week. It was spiritual talk, but for us it was like a storytelling. She would make coffee for us, and we would sit and drink and listen to her talk about the Mother, the story of her life, how she was when she was young, how she went to Japan, how she came to Pondicherry and met Sri Aurobindo. It was not like what I read. It was alive. And then we would have discussions about the stories. Nobody does that now. That is really lacking now.

There was a lot of group meditation and connective activity. We were living at Kottakarai Farm, and everyone would sit together every week. It was new to me. Sitting together in silence, chanting Om, thinking on the development of this place. Not verbally, but deeply. So you don't even need to speak, you will feel



Amudha taking a class

that energy. Automatically I could understand.

The amphitheatre and Matrimandir work were just starting. We were brought to the Matrimandir site, and we would sit there under the banyan tree. That time there was no road, and transportation was only by cycle, horse cart or bullock cart. If we went to the Free Store or the library, we would also stop at the Matrimandir site. It was another opportunity for us. It was not finished, but we felt a pull to go, we wanted to see the progress, and we would always feel different when we sat under the tree. There is a special feeling when you sit there.

I also read a lot. We had a good connection with some Ashram people. And they gave me many books in Tamil, about the Divine, about education, about Mother's life. So I had this opportunity to read, and then I shared the books with all my friends and other people who wanted to read about these things. The people in the Entry Group knew I had these books. They would send [Tamil speaking] people to me, after they joined Auroville, to borrow the books.

There wasn't an easy relationship between Auroville and the Ashram at that time. But my son was born on April 4th, the day that Sri Aurobindo arrived in Pondicherry. So every year, we would go to the Ashram on that day, and they would open the doors and call us inside.

Then I became good friends with Sadhana at the Ashram. Mother herself had named Sadhana's son when he was a newborn baby. After that, we would go to the Ashram quite often to visit Sadhana and to see the samadhi. And every time, Sadhana, who worked at the Ashram bookshop, would offer me a book. I read many books on educating children, what to do, how to do it.

Sadhana would also come and stay with us in Auroville. And

she shared how she came to the Ashram, how she surrendered to the Mother, how she was given many opportunities to take care of different things at the Ashram, all her direct experiences with the Mother.

Taken separately, these were all small things, but they built up my spiritual capacity. I would not say that I chose to come to Auroville. Mother invited us. I strongly believe that people join Auroville by Mother's invitation. We are the tools to realise her dream. I also believe that Mother chooses the children who are born in Auroville. That is my strong faith. That's why I feel that the children of the Kindergarten are special. More than that, we cannot differentiate between people who came before or after. Mother has brought us here at different times to do the work. And more than outside work, we have to do the work inside ourselves. Mother has given us the opportunity to do this yoga. That is the unending youth and learning Mother talked about.

The yoga

When I joined, I wouldn't say I came to find a spiritual place. I came and learned from people who were doing their karma yoga. So I had the opportunity

to grow. Some people feel they have to sit and do yoga asanas. Some people feel their work is their yoga. So everyone practices and experiences yoga and spirituality in a different way. It was very important for me to participate in the growth of Auroville, in Mother's dream, as a yoga. I feel most connected to what I learned here, to Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but even they left us free to look within ourselves to grow and find our spirituality. That is why the Matrimandir is there. Everywhere else in the world, there is some figure, some practice. Here we don't have anything. We can just sit with an empty mind to receive and connect to the Divine Consciousness.

Whatever work you do, even pulling weeds, if you sincerely give your heart, that is the yoga. You can connect through that. When I work with the children and see the growth of the children, that is my yoga.

Auroville has given me many priceless and unbidden opportunities to learn about education, organic farming, and inner and collective work. These opportunities have taken me to the USA, Spain, France, and the UK. I believe each of these was Mother's choice, a gift of knowledge and understanding that I could pass on to Auroville through my work.

But I feel that the environment in Auroville has changed too much. When people join Auroville now, they don't have access to the kind of welcome, sharing, and openness I experienced and grew with. The collective sense of togetherness is not strong, and everyone is busy running like a horse with blinders on. I hope the community can find the affection, forgiveness, and trust to participate, talk, take decisions, and work together for the Auroville everyone came here to achieve.

In conversation with Gita

Youth's musings on

In Future School, students can choose to follow an elective course in which the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother as well as the ideology of Auroville are discussed in an informal manner.

What is spirituality?

Spirituality is about inner development and progress, it does not relate to standard societal criteria such as financial, professional or material growth.

It is finding the truth about yourself, about your inner self. It is to become closer to what we truly are and live in line with that.

Spirituality is the awareness that there are no boundaries between things, we are all one.

How does one recognise someone leading a spiritual life?

Indicators of spirituality generally cannot be seen by the naked eye. A spiritual person may seem detached or retired from society, and have unconventional behaviour and habits, but that is not a reliable and assured criterion.

The attributes are more of a psychological nature: peaceful, calm, gentle, the space is non-threatening; accepting, open-minded, non-judging, the ideology is open; observing, curious, kind, differences are accepted.

How does one develop one's spirituality?

To strive for progress and growth is a very individual thing, each one does that by themselves, for themselves.

Slow down, be in the present moment, try to listen to and understand others (oneness).

Be aware of subconscious, think (of everything) first, do not (re)act to situations and events based from places such as fears or ego, understand where frustrations and anxiety come from.

Be truly interested in everyone, try to accept everyone (with)in, not only the people whose opinion is important to us. Don't push yourself to the forefront or in the spotlight. Lead through example, do not impose your ideas. Be open to constant growth, there is no "end goal".

Can spirituality be studied?

Learning about different philosophies can help understand other ones better.

Writings can help get a deeper understanding, like studying or reading up on a topic that is of interest. They can be seen as a guideline or guiding line, with an introduction (or more details) to the concepts and ideas.

Spiritually "advanced" people cannot explain their understanding or progress because the "less advanced" would not comprehend what they are describing; not everyone can comprehend the writings or even the message.

A place or person cannot be defined as spiritual simply because the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have been studied. However, the key message could be discussed more openly, without making it a convention, requirement or necessity.

Spirituality: the magic hat of consciousness and the Auroville magnet

Spirituality is a very perilous word because its meaning can be adapted to whatever you feel like at any given moment. It is the magic hat of consciousness. You can use it to say everything and its opposite, it will remain Spirituality.

To enjoy a satisfactory inner life is much easier when following the paved roads of conventional religious spirituality. It provides crystal clear rules: Follow the user guide and you will touch the divine within you. Don't respect it and you will suffer dire consequences. It's like driving in western cities, with traffic lights, one-way signs, and speed limits everywhere. A codified path for the soul. Ideal for some people, too restrictive for others.

Spirituality becomes a more complicated journey if we choose to discover the divine in us without external help. It requires us to travel on uncharted paths, with just a few poetry books in our bag, and decide constantly in which direction we want to take the next step without really knowing where it will lead us. It's more like driving at rush hour in Pondy or finding our way in the Himalayas with only the picture of a compass. Too risky for some people, ideal for others.

"The Mother Said" syndrome

The main obstacle on this adventure towards a rich spiritual life is that human beings are very uncomfortable with uncertainty. So even while discovering ourselves "freely", we prefer to follow the enlightened ones. A part of us craves traffic lights and lines on the road. In Auroville, I call it "The Mother Said" syndrome: The need to justify everything by constantly using the wise words of other people.

Unfortunately, books and quotes are not wisdom. They are merely the seeds of potential future skills. Reading them a million times won't change the reality. It's their integration, their resonance with our higher self that slowly teaches us how to dance a divine life and bring this energy back into the physical world.

Let's replace spirituality with bread for a minute

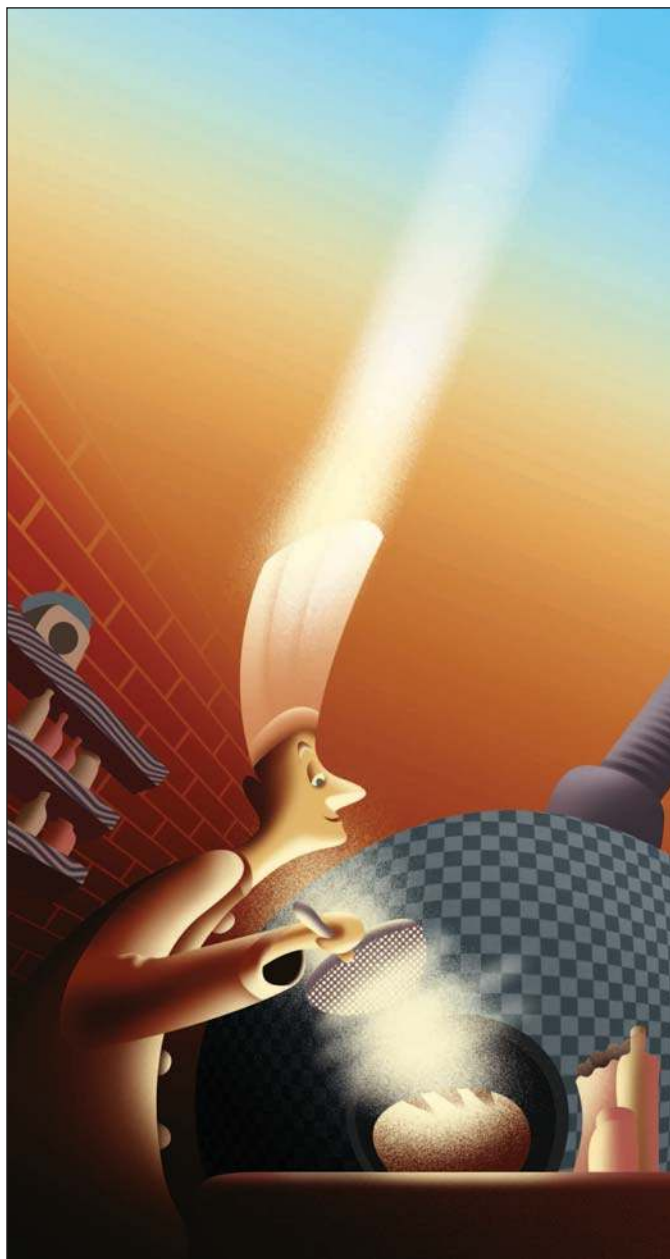
Did you ever try to bake bread? You can read all the books in the world about baking. Watch videos. Talk to people. Quote the Master Chefs. Ask experts to write a study about the optimal way to create the perfect loaf. But all this research will never provide food on the table. It's only when you start collecting the ingredients, that you find a bowl, wheat, yeast, and salt, that the knowledge starts to transform into reality. It's only when you start baking your first bread that the recipe you choose is important. If you never reach the point where you start applying what you think you know, you will end up trying to convince the baker that you know everything about bread, and he will just smile at you and hand over your daily order. He is the master of his craft, you are just talking.

It is the same for our spiritual life. We need to collect glimpses of wisdom, take the time to nurture our inner life, and transmute a part of the created energy back into the physical reality. We need to learn day after day to bake better bread and share it with others. We have to become masters of our craft.

The Auroville magnet

Living a rich spiritual life is easier in some environments than in others, which is why people love to spend time, even lifetimes, in Ashrams. They are then kept safe from the outside world and can focus on their inner life without being disrupted. A rich inner life in a big city is a lot more challenging, because the building blocks of life in these places are often far from the values spiritual seekers hunger for.

That is why we are so lucky in Auroville! And that is also why



hundreds of thousands of people have been attracted to this place since its creation. Auroville is a magnet for anyone in a quest for meaning, an oasis that tries to change things for the better, and a perfect example of spirituality in action. The more the world situation becomes unbearable, the more intensively people are looking for a place like this to escape the old dying model and help create a more conscious one. In other words, Auroville offers many "building blocks" that can help to manifest a future that makes sense.

The building blocks of a conscious tomorrow

The more we work on ourselves, the more we get rid of old patterns, the more we listen to the witness hidden in our hearts, the more receptive we become to beauty in all its forms. The fog of our old personalities slowly vanishes and we can start to enjoy a clearer vision of life. And in Auroville, this beauty and this energy are everywhere,

constantly. We wake up to the sound of hundreds of birds singing. We smell the scents of thousands of trees, plants and flowers around us. Our eyes are lulled by beauty. We live in the calm womb of mother nature. And there is no better way to nurture the divine in us than to enjoy, respect, and protect the divine outside. Relationship with the sacredness of nature is the main building block.

But that is not all. Being immersed in this divine city in the making sets a very special pace to everyone's daily life. Everything is slower here. It sometimes seems that Auroville respects the law of the farm in every aspect of its organisation (sometimes a bit too much, *tamas* is hidden in the details). Even buildings take years to be finished, no pun intended. They seem to grow like trees: They take their time. This is sometimes a good thing, as most societies are burning out because they want to go faster and faster, without even knowing why. Here people learn to "shanti up", to give a different value to every passing day. They take the time to rejuvenate. And if they choose not to stay, they bring a glimpse of this new rhythm to the outside world. The value of time is another building block.

But... that is not all. Auroville residents are like a unique living body. No, really! Everyone is a part of an active spiritual life that remains mostly invisible. Do you know any other place where you know the potter who made the coffee cup you use every morning? And the person who roasted the coffee beans? And the baker? A place where a good part of the food is produced locally, and you know all the farmers? A place that takes care of its organisation, education, research, health, and art? This is not the place to describe all the things created every day in Auroville, but if you think about it, you will realise that Auroville is a mini world where everyone participates in creating a life that makes more and more sense. A life that is conscious of the challenges of our times. A life where we do not want to repeat old mistakes, but instead explore alternative ways. Of course, it is sometimes hard to see that because we are all busy with our little lives, but if you stop for a moment and look around, you will certainly feel a sense of connection with hundreds of people. That is a community in action, spirituality in action. And a real community is yet another building block.

Flip the coin: From integral yoga to integral bullshit

If Auroville is a blessed land at many levels, one must not forget the ultimate danger that can easily transform this beautiful attempt of applied integral yoga into integral bullshit.

When you talk with guests, volunteers and newcomers, you often end up having the same discussions, over and over again. A lot of people come here in their quest for meaning and have an infinite appetite for knowledge. They want to eat it all. They participate in workshops every day, they meet very different people at La Terrasse, practice pranayama at dawn, and want to share with everyone their discoveries about the "true meaning of life", the divine connection between people, etc. They want to discover Their Spirituality, they need to reconnect with their soul, and they want to put their newly discovered selves into action. Here and Now. They have been on a forced diet of meaning for so long that they eat everything they can from the Auroville buffet.

But then... Novelty erodes. Daily routines take over, and the law of entropy reminds us all that reality is what happens when we stop believing. They become residents and discover that living in Auroville is not a sinecure. Most people live under the poverty level and quickly end up getting back on the hamster wheel of labour to make ends meet. They get away from the Newcomers to avoid the same endless discussions over and over again. They try to create a life as comfortable as possible. They quickly stop getting involved in community life and decisions because it is so boring compared to Netflix. They become part of the decor and not willing participants of the dream. They feed the *tamas* instead of human unity. The *tamas* take over. Spirituality dissolves in the master list. And Spirituality in Action becomes just another subgroup of a self-elected temporary task force (SATF) to find a solution that will be quickly buried in the archives.

Life is a balancing act

The recent events in Auroville showed us quite abruptly what happens when we do not stay awake and alert, when we bury our heads in the sand to feel more secure, when we do not measure every one of our thoughts and actions in the light of consciousness. Will this next step I take bring light, or will it bring darkness? And this thought. And this desire. Why don't I change the things I don't like? What part of me can benefit the greater good, unity? How can I transform that into action in the physical realm? How can I use this pressure I feel to reveal the diamond in me? Every time we are too bored or tired of asking ourselves these questions, we attract more stillness. When done collectively, this attitude leads to the ultimate stillness of a community: death.

Now dance, spiritual being, dance

If a single candle can ward off the darkness, we have to remember that every one of us can be the wax, the wick, the match, the darkness or... the flame. That we all are the guardians of our own achievements, as individuals, and of Auroville's future, as a collective. When only a few of us choose to light our flame, we just look nice, like fireflies in a lonely night. When all of us make the same choice, we become a bonfire welcoming a new dawn.

The more we can express this fantastic inner life and make it stronger, the more we accept it, dance with it, celebrate it, the more we will participate in bringing Auroville to the next stage of its evolution. And by doing so, we grow up. The diamond in us can shine. It is a divine dance. We are not just dancing. We become the dance. And the dancers dancing are danced. And spirituality meets action again.

Yann

spirituality in action

Divya Lieser joined them a few times to facilitate a discussion around the topic of "Spirituality in action"; their musings can be found here in an anonymous compilation.

The most important is to not make it into a religion, but find connections between the writings and one's own personal growth, use them as a basis for exploration, not only for semantics.

Is spirituality in action like karma yoga?

Not necessarily all workers practice yoga, unless the intention behind the work is that everything you do is for the Divine, and make it a constant practice.

It happens every second of every day, and comes from oneself, from within.

Awareness Through the Body classes help with inner growth, especially on the physical plane, for example exploring one's different bodies, yoga nidra, etc.

"Exercises" can be done to practice and raise one's awareness, such as doing things with consciousness, intent and purpose. Another example is forgiveness: learn to let things go instead of keeping them within, nurture compassion instead of animosity.

Actually, anything can be interpreted as spirituality. Vagueness is needed to be able to apply intention to all situations.

Is Auroville special?

For us, it does not feel like a human experiment: it is our normal day-to-day life. The beauty of this place is hard to recognise before going out and experiencing the "rest of the world".

For some age ranges, Auroville is conducive to development, but after a certain point it feels constrictive due to the prevalent "small village mentality", there is no privacy.

Nowadays, globalisation, social media and Internet do paint a clearer picture of what is "out there". Fortunately, Auroville has developed with regard to technology and other activities such as food venues.

Auroville has a different culture that is not focused on material wealth. Materialism and capitalism are the models and base of society elsewhere; people over there don't really have a choice but to follow that path.

The awareness of how special Auroville is, is starkest when talking to Volunteers and Newcomers who are initially thrilled about the magic of this place. At some point though, this enthusiasm plateaus, patterns set in...

The ideology behind AV is different than the rest of the world; it is spiritual, progressive. People here (some at least) are working in that direction, so Auroville demarcates itself from the "outside world" even just in that dimension.

The people are what make Auroville, they nurture the space for individual and spiritual growth. The atmosphere around a spiritual place can be felt, like for example when getting closer to the Ashram in Pondicherry or when driving into Auroville after a while out.

Very few other places have the openness of Auroville. A spiritual community needs to be nurtured through mentality and atmosphere, to nurture an environment that is welcoming, kind and accepting.

Charlie and the Aurogreen Farm

Covering about 25 acres in the northeast part of the Greenbelt, Aurogreen is one of Auroville’s oldest farms and was the first to go organic. Charlie started the farm in 1975 and continues to manage it today along with Shanmugam. In conversations with his neighbour Suzie, Charlie described some of his initial adventures and survival challenges, as well as the ingenuity it took to turn Aurogreen into a success story.



In the beginning



The road to Nilantangam



The first house in Aurogreen

Charlie first learned about Auroville through Kireet Joshi’s brother Prabodh, who showed up as a visitor to his family home in the USA. (Charlie’s Indian stepmother knew the family from her early years in India.) He arrived in Auroville as a young man, on the last day of 1970.

In 1974 Charlie was living at Success and working on the land: bunding, planting trees, keeping them alive. He started his first vegetable garden where he experimented with rain-fed crops.

Because of the abundance of palmyras in Forecomers, he and others decided to try processing palm jaggery (unrefined palm sugar). A special team of tappers was hired to prepare the trees, a lengthy process. The palmyra sap was boiled down in large clay pots. The jaggery was sold to other Aurovilians to help support the Forecomers community. It was used in tea and cakes, and also mixed with cocoa to make fudge. This was a very popular luxury item at the time, selling for a hefty 75 paisa a piece!

The trenches were filled with 50,000 *Acacia farnesiana* – “supramental knowledge” hedge plants, which had been grown in the Success nursery. But there was still no well, so Charlie and Jurgen spent their days driving the tractor back and forth to the Matrimandir where they filled barrels with water for the seedlings. This went on for two years.

The first house at Aurogreen

With support from Johnny in Fertile, Charlie began planning and building a house in Aurogreen that would be large enough to serve as a collective community space. Johnny and Charlie worked out the floor plan together. Then Ramu and his ‘kheet team’ were called, and Johnny directed the erection of the wood roof frame. Some time later, thatch was added on top of the initial kheet roofing. The team of carpenters (including Kumaraswamy, who later opened a carpentry workshop in the area) made the roof frame, doors, windows, tables, everything! At that time, “fresh” Indian wood was plentiful and cheap. Mango wood at Rs.14/cubic foot was used for the floor of the upper room. A mason and his helper were called for the brick work and the black cement floor of the “big” room. When it was finished in November 1975, the house was much more spacious than other houses constructed at the time. For twenty years, it was the site of the community’s kitchen.

The big well

In order to do serious agriculture for Auroville, it was understood that a great deal of water, and so a deep well, was needed. At that time there were only two or three rigs in all of India that were capable of going as deep as 300 meters. These were all under the umbrella of the Central Government Hydrological Survey, which was in the process of conducting research on the sub-continent. It had been decided to dig several deep test wells a certain distance apart in the area: at Kalapet, near JIPMER, by the Lake Estate, and at Aurogreen.

In each location there were to be three wells, with the first an observation well. At Aurogreen, this well was drilled to 390 meters, with casing all the way down. Bentonite (a very fine clay) was used as a sealant to prevent water flowing into the well from the top two aquifers. In this way, data could be collected on the third aquifer alone. The second well was drilled down to the bedrock granite basement at 500 metres, with all the aquifers above sealed. The third well was to be like the second, but with all aquifers above left open.

The Hydrological Survey sent a 60-man crew to dig the wells. They camped on-site and worked in shifts of 20 men at a time in order to keep the rig working 24 hours a day. The water in the observation well was found to be potable and also fit for agricultural use, though it had a rotten egg smell due to sulphur gas. The second well had a much higher yield, but could only be used for agriculture. And the third well was not dug at all once it was determined that the water in the deepest aquifer was unsuitable for use.

The government officials intended to remove the casing from both of the drilled wells. Charlie wanted to keep the first well, but was told it was not possible to purchase a well intended for observation. The government offered to sell the second well, which didn’t serve the farm’s purposes, so no agreement was reached. Finally it was agreed that Auroville could buy both wells, but Charlie didn’t actually have access to enough money for that, so the wells remained closed.

Months later, the Governor of Pondicherry called Charlie into town for a reckoning. He asked if Charlie had not signed a paper agreeing to buy both the wells. Charlie replied that he couldn’t recall. Next the Governor reached into a drawer, pulled out a paper and

asked Charlie if the signature on it was his. Charlie admitted that it was and said that he must have put his signature on the paper in a moment of stress. He then explained the on-the-ground situation: that all the money had been spent on bunding, planting, setting up the rest of the infrastructure that would be needed to start a large organic farm, and that he had not put aside funds for two very costly wells. Luckily the Governor understood and let him go.

In the next chapter of this saga, Chamanlal of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram played a prominent role. As he was about to board a domestic Indian flight, he saw the Chairman of the South Indian Hydrological Board. Although Chamanlal did not know the Chairman personally, they were both aware of each other’s work as members of the Indian scientific community. Chamanlal arranged to be seated next to the Chairman and was able to explain the whole story over the course of the flight.

This Chairman then issued orders that further studies were needed on the Aurogreen wells. He arranged for the casing to be left in both wells and sent the remaining crew and equipment away. Once the crew had left, the casing was sawed off the observation well, and the farm finally had its well. Years later, the Central Government, with the help of their accountants, shifted the project costs elsewhere in order to clear their books and the matter was officially considered closed. Once the well was opened, it became an important resource not just for agriculture in Aurogreen but also to help establish nearby forests. Almost daily, bullock carts from the neighbouring Greenbelt communities would be lined up at the well to fill barrels and tanks with water for hundreds of new saplings.

Charlie and Aurogreen today

Today cashew, jackfruit, chikkoo, mango and tamarind are grown under dryland conditions in the Aurogreen orchards. The 1.5 acres of irrigated land yield quite a variety of produce: papaya, lime, lemon, orange and pomelos; tomatoes, aubergine, long beans; lettuce, basil and other aromatic plants. Water is pumped from the well and to the drip irrigation and micro sprinkler systems using solar energy.

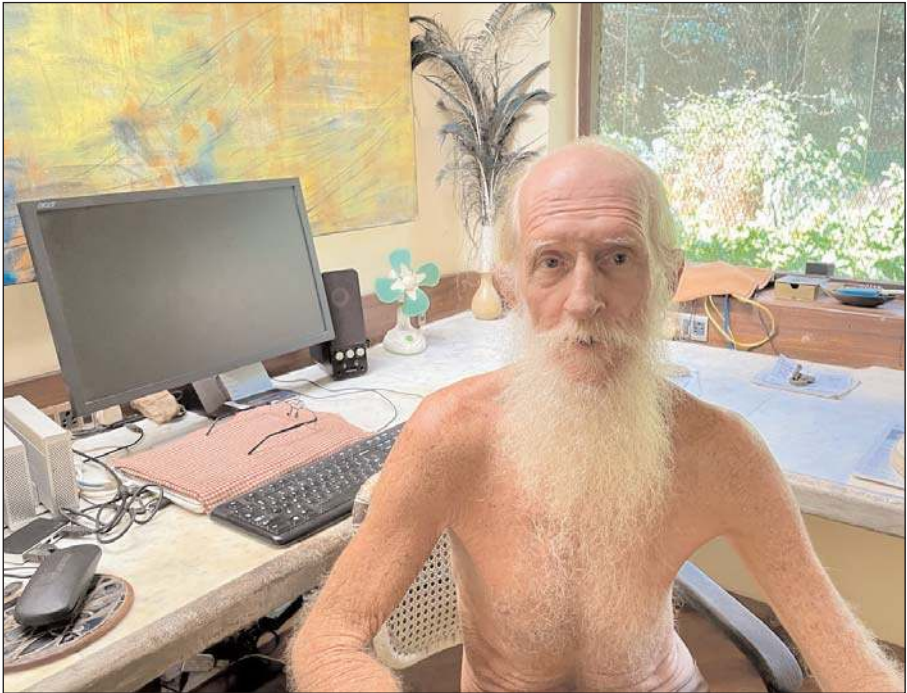
With the 5 cows in the small but growing dairy, Aurogreen supplies milk and varieties of fresh, middle-aged and grated Parmesan-style cheese to Auroville outlets. The cows are raised on green fodder grown on the farm.

There is also forest land, with timber trees inter-planted around the farm and in a number of separate plots.

Charlie, with his pioneering vision, ingenuity, steadfastness, and intensive work has made extraordinary contributions to Auroville. His house stands in all its beauty, the fields continue to yield, the water flows from the well, and life continues in Aurogreen for the coming generations.

Suzie

This article first appeared in the Land for Auroville United newsletter.



Charlie, 2022

By that time, Charlie already aspired to start a large organic farm for Auroville. Everyone – which was only a couple hundred people at the time – encouraged him to go ahead. The idea was to find a 50 acre piece of land, but in 1974 no one was very clear which fields belonged to whom. In fact, Forecomers residents grew crops on fields that belonged to villagers. The Auroville town planning office offered Center Field on the condition that when the city grew the farm would have to move. It didn’t seem wise to invest all that energy into a farm that would later be overtaken by urban development, so Charlie searched for outlying land.

Finally it was land brokers associated with the Sri Aurobindo Society who located some plots near several existing pieces of Auroville land on the northeast edge of the Greenbelt, near a community that Rose and Boris had just started. They had already built a hut and planted a small mango orchard. Three attempts at digging failed to secure a well good enough for agriculture. Charlie, now joined by Jurgen, offered to dig a deep well on the 30 acres being acquired through the land brokers, so they all agreed to join forces. The land was secured in January 1975, and the name Aurogreen was proposed by Shamsundar.

Laying out the roads, bunds, and hedges

Initially the land was nothing but sandy fields and palmyras. Experienced agriculturalists at AuroOrchard and AuroBrindavan helped Charlie decide on a grid pattern of roads and fields so that it would be relatively easy to install sprinkler irrigation later. A Harvester tractor was purchased from abroad with project money. This was used to help level the land, build bunds and carve trenches, but without JCB extractors, almost all land contour work was done with manual labour. It took months to complete even with Govindaswamy’s team of around 100 men.



Shamugam and Charlie

Measuring Eternity

On April 14, Tamil New Year, a frantic voice message for help was heard by many in Auroville. A bulldozer was uprooting the living fence bordering Eternity, a densely forested Auroville community located between the beach and the East Coast Road near Kalapet. Over a period of several days, the destruction resumed at unexpected moments. Each time, a number of Auroville representatives and residents hopped on their motorbikes, travelled 15 km to join Eternity's residents on the beach, stood under the summer sun, and requested authorities to put a stop to the clearing. Between four to nine metres depth of dense plantation were uprooted along approximately 800 metres of Eternity's eastern beach front.

Mother's gift

All in all, the situation was very confounding. Eternity is situated on Puducherry land that was originally gifted to the Mother as a place of respite from the noise of Pondicherry town and the ashram. When Mother decided the time had come to establish Auroville as a Township, she chose to gift the land to Auroville.

At the time, land boundaries were generally marked very simply with palmyra palm trees. When the Skoles family arrived 35 years ago to steward the land, Eternity was pretty much a barren sand dune. Over the years, tough shrubs and cacti were planted along the boundaries indicated by the palmyras to grow the live fence. At one point, one of the village neighbours requested that the boundaries of Auroville's property be clearly demarcated, so a detailed survey was finally conducted in 2010. This was an expensive endeavour funded by the Skoles family and Auroville together. However, the Skoles felt the funds were well invested when they experienced how intensive and participatory the process was.

Eternity is flanked by two villages and a pharmaceutical company. Before the 2010 survey even started, every single concerned person was first informed in writing. Conducting the survey brought together the Survey Department of Puducherry, Auroville representatives, the Kalapet ward councillor, panchayat (village council) officials, all the immediate neighbours, and police personnel. In certain places, borders had to be adjusted to what was most sensible for all parties concerned while respecting overall property size. As Jonah Skoles recalls, "We came to (signed) agreements with all the neighbours that everyone could live with." On the eastern side of the property, bordered only by the beach, the panchayat officials stated that there was no need to survey. The northeast and southeast corners had been set, so the property ran in a straight line between these two points, and that was that.

The detailed, largely amicable process was a testament to two things. First, Auroville, as represented by the entire Skoles family, had clearly established a strong rapport and relationship with the local community around Eternity. Second, the Survey Department and all the participating government officials demonstrated great care and rigour in carrying out their work. At the time, it was very strongly suggested that Auroville's land should be marked by walls at all the corners, so the Skoles family subsequently invested a great deal of energy and money into doing this. The Puducherry government then laid a road adjacent to the southern boundary.

The current predicament

Unfortunately, this 2010 survey has been misplaced. Neither the Survey Department of Puducherry nor the Auroville Foundation Office have been able to locate their copies in order to bring clarity to current land challenges. A new, expedited survey was undertaken, starting on April 27, but the results along the southern border (immediately next to which the government laid a road based on the previous survey) and eastern border (which was destroyed by the bulldozer) do not seem to match that of the 2010 survey.

All sorts of rumours have circulated about who is behind the bulldozing, but no official papers or notice have been forthcoming to shed light on the matter. There may be plans to develop tourism infrastructure directly on the beach, but this would seem to run counter to official guidelines for coastal protection. And certainly, any such development raises both ecological and



The Eternity fence destruction in full swing

human safety concerns given the frequency of cyclones, the 2004 tsunami, and the increasing severity of weather and storms in the area and around the world.

However Auroville chooses to respond to this particular land issue, the concern for the Eternity forest and the exposed beach is the damage that has already been done. After 25 to 30 years of careful nurturing, the green fence had become almost self-sustaining. The mangrove cactuses and thorny shrubs protected the forest from the salt wind, the sun, intense storms, roving cows and goats, and human intruders. To reestablish the fence will likely take another 25 years, and it is not yet clear what effect this may have on the overall health of the forest.

Just to the south of Eternity, a canyon outlet drains large amounts of water to the sea every monsoon. A huge field of natural creepers had grown over the beach and checked erosion here,



This will take years to regrow

but this too was uprooted by the bulldozer. The beach itself and the local communities will certainly be impacted by vastly increased erosion in this area, an increasingly serious issue up and down the coast. In fact, Auroville has already ceded to erosion on three formerly beachfront properties.

At 18.4 acres, Eternity may be the largest beach reforestation project on India's east coast. Just one week before the fence was torn up, Auroville's Forest Group had visited Eternity as part of a current effort to conduct detailed surveys of all Auroville forests. Old time foresters were amazed to see what was growing, how well certain species were doing, and how different Eternity's coastal ecosystem is from the rest of Auroville's forests.

History

Whatever lies ahead, Eternity has proven an important model of what coastal reforestation and protection can look like when supported by a passionate and tight knit community. Although the Mother herself chose to make this parcel of land a part of Auroville, no one at all came forward for stewardship in the 1970s. The land was at quite a distance from the Township center and the barren beach was even more hostile as an environment than the barren main plateau. At the time (and still today) Auroville forest and farm development was also largely dependent on individual stewards' abilities to invest personal funds or raise funds to do the job.

In the early 1980s, François Samson, originally from Switzerland, relocated to Eternity from Meadow as he felt strongly that this was

Mother's own land and must be cared for. He was able to begin planting, put up a windmill, and build a rudimentary shelter, but he was then obliged by circumstance to return to Switzerland. By the end of 1986, when Anna (Dutch) and Yuval Skoles (Israeli) arrived in Pondicherry with their four children, the land had again been untended for several years.

The Skoles family had just spent the last two years travelling, mostly in Asia, looking for "something different", something they could pour their love and energy into. They were immediately convinced that Auroville was the right fit for them. However, each community they looked at was a little overwhelmed by the size of their family. Somebody then suggested they go check out this piece of land on the beach that no one was taking care of.

Nurturing Eternity

There was nothing there really. Just sand, three neglected trees, and a broken windmill. Still, when Anna saw it, she knew. It was, as Jonah recalls, "one of these pieces of land that really demanded a certain pioneering spirit and a lot of money to tackle. Everything had to be done. From roads, to fencing, to pipes in the ground." When the Forest Group met Yuval, they judged he had what it took and fully backed him as Eternity's steward.

As soon as the Skoles moved to Eternity in 1987, reforestation work started in earnest, and everyone participated. With 2 adults and soon 5 children, the Skoles were themselves a small battalion. They would tackle a particular area with intense planting, and then water, water, water. Jitta mimes the action as she describes repeatedly walking back and forth, day after day, filling and carrying the koojas (clay pots) full of water. Planting was much easier here than in the hard, red soil of Auroville's central plateau. The challenge was keeping the trees alive for the first five to eight years until they established an adequate root system.

Watering was a little easier after Yuval was able to temporarily repair the broken windmill. It was easier still when a crew of Aurovilians helped build and erect a new windmill. However, windmills only work when the wind blows. So Yuval and Anna adjusted their schedule. They would put the children to sleep and water for hours under the full moon at night because that's when there was wind. Bleary eyed and exhausted in the morning, they would hurriedly pack the children off to school so they could catch a nap.

Slowly the impact of this dedication became visible. A 1993 article in this magazine reported that Eternity had by then "turned into a small oasis", with coconut and fruit trees, acacia, neem, and banyan trees, and a "windbreak of casuarinas facing the sea". There was even a telephone, electricity, two houses and several guest pods.

After 2000, someone from the Israeli Forest Department visited. He was ready to share best practices with Auroville foresters. After walking Eternity, he had nothing to say. Instead he asked Yuval, originally a hairdresser by training, how he had known what to do. Jonah recalls Yuval's reply, "I did what felt right."

The coastal ecosystem is not forgiving. Any plant that can't take root dies within weeks. What survives grows very slowly. For years, the Skoles planted up to 5000 trees a year. Then, as the forest started to establish, they slowly came down to 1000 – 2000. Jonah is amazed at the transformation right at ground level. "In the areas where we started planting first, if you look at the earth, it's become dark, rich. Then you walk out onto the beach, and you look at the sand and it's just white."

Storms

While there has been damage during major storm events, the established forest protects itself as well as the area inland. Around 2003, a severe cyclone destroyed any trees that had grown above the canopy. Anan remembers the explosive sounds, like rapid gunfire, as the tree tops snapped off in the gale winds. The 2004 tsunami swept through and destroyed anything small that hadn't established itself well enough yet. And in 2011, super cyclone Thane again destroyed some very tall trees.

During each of these events, the forest functioned as a whole organism, dramatically slowing the force of the wind or the water. In fact, there was visible proof of this after the tsunami. Just to the south and north, the villages surrounding Eternity suffered intense damage, but immediately to Eternity's west, there was no damage at all.

This contrast caught the eye of the Tamil Nadu and Puducherry governments during post-tsunami rehabilitation efforts. Government representatives visited Eternity and subsequently tried to replicate what they saw and learned, planting casuarinas and all kinds of things along the east coast for several years. There are some patches near Mahabalipuram where the effort continues, but for the most part, the project was abandoned. People found it too much work and too hard to keep the plantations alive.

Sanctuary

Jonah says it requires deep passion for the work, the land, for creating something beautiful. He references a well-known Tagore quote when he says, "I really feel that's what my parents did. They worked on this to create a certain sanctuary that would benefit Auroville in the future, beyond all of our lives. For 35 years, we have all put our devotion for the divine into the land." He sighs deeply when he thinks of the destruction that has just taken place along the beach. "This event has set us back, but we'll just continue what we've always been doing, which is taking care of the land and hoping that it regenerates."

At different points, the Skoles had thought to develop various projects at Eternity. Anna and Rauf Ali, another Aurovilian, looked into setting up a marine research centre, but they didn't have the right Forest Department permissions. Then there was the idea to process virgin coconut oil. But the water and fertiliser requirements of such a commercial venture didn't fit with ecological considerations. When the Puducherry Government began promoting tourism in the area, around 2010, the Skoles submitted a proposal to Auroville for starting an eco-resort, but the project did not get approved. Jonah says, "I think Eternity was just always meant to be this safe and quiet place, this forest on the beach."

Community

Over the years, the Skoles have always welcomed and hosted Aurovilians who needed a break and time to recover from something happening in their lives. "There was always an extra place at the table, extra food. There was always someone who showed up to eat," says Jonah, "that was just how things were done." Anan remembers there were often up to twenty children (Aurovilian and from the neighbouring village) running around on Sundays. Jitta remembers all the classes that came out regularly for sleepovers, stargazing, storytelling.

The first generation of Skoles who grew up in Eternity have all become pillars of the Auroville community, supporting governance, economy, education, construction, and ecology sectors in Auroville and beyond. They have their own families now, and all reside in Auroville, with a strong contingent in Eternity, including a new generation of children and youth. All are keen to continue supporting Eternity's function as a place of sanctuary and retreat. But for this, Auroville may need to take a more proactive stance in the face of rampant area development and coastal erosion.

Auroville youth are often asked why they choose to go abroad. The majority answer that they wish to pursue higher education. Others want to travel to see the world or take up work outside.

Some youth are able to do higher studies in their parents’ country of origin. For most, the major factor is cost. In some countries, higher education is free; in others, it is prohibitively expensive. Youth often have to fundraise for visas, tickets and tuition. A lucky few have family abroad to support their integration. Many try to connect to Aurovilians or Friends of Auroville to have a feeling of “home away from home”.

Over the years, there has been a tendency to opt for Europe, and especially programmes based in the

Auroville youth abroad

Netherlands, England, Scotland, France, or Germany. However, there are also a large number that pursue their higher education here in India, or as far away as the United States. There has been no discernible trend to pursue any particular field of study or work. Youth have travelled to learn everything from visual arts, carpentry and artisanal training, medicine, business, hotel management, culinary arts, communication and design, pure sciences, environmental sciences, humanities and social sciences.

By age 18, most Auroville youth have tried the range of activities available within Auroville. They are eager to explore wider horizons in search of new challenges. So many enjoy the

dynamism they experience in the larger towns or cities where they end up.

The majority continue to call Auroville “home” and express a clear need to eventually return. Many express a growing understanding and commitment to Auroville’s ideals, regardless of where they may be physically situated. Often, it is only after they leave that they discover their own deep connection with Auroville. With distance comes greater clarity. In the process of finding the words to explain such a complex experiment to those who ask, one is forced to reflect more deeply on it.

Those that have been out, tend to strongly encourage their peers to also try to explore the world.

On account of the widening of perspective, and reflection on Auroville from a distance, many feel that it is a necessary step in discovering who they are and what they would like to contribute to Auroville on their return. Many realise that Auroville is nothing but a smaller reflection of the world, as it embodies a multiplicity of cultures, and many of the challenges that humanity struggles with at large. However, it is when the youth go out that they also realise how Auroville, with its unique Charter and Dream, calls for a very specific commitment to work for an ideal that exists nowhere else. And so, when the opportunity to return home becomes possible, many tend to return. Some stay a few years longer to earn enough to pay back their debts, or save enough to kickstart their lives back home, but they do return.

Kavitha

Pradeepa



The main reason I left Auroville was to attend university. I was set on staying in India, and I’d always been interested in aviation, so I looked for the best options available to me. I got into my first choice: Hindustan University in Chennai, which is one of India’s premier aviation schools. I’m still getting used to the change because some things aren’t quite how I imagined them to be. Since moving to Chennai, I’ve learned and realised how much I took Auroville and the people there for granted. I’ve always imagined myself wanting to leave Auroville and live in the city, but I’ve realised that in the end, I’d like to return to Auroville and live a tranquil life. One thing I’d like to tell the younger ones back home is that it’s fine to want to get out and explore, but don’t take for granted what you’ve been given, and always remember that we are privileged in comparison to most.

Gauri



I chose to leave Auroville to study further and gain different experiences. I chose to study in Brussels mostly due to practicalities. I found a good English programme and could stay with family, which made everything much easier. I have an EU passport, so Europe was the most accessible option outside of India. Brussels is also a very spirited and diverse city, which was an attractive feature.

I think I have grown more comfortable with large, dynamic settings. There are always new things to see and new people to meet. Finding people I could relate to was made easier because I was studying with people from different countries, and we had similar interests related to our studies. Some things were challenging at first, but after adapting to a new way of life, I began to enjoy it more and became more confident. The biggest lesson for me was being more independent and learning how to live in a new place without much guidance. In Auroville, everything seemed obvious because it was the only reality I knew. In Brussels, I had to learn a lot of things which were obvious to people here but completely new to me.

I do plan to come back to Auroville as it will always be my home. At the moment I am not sure if I will live in

Auroville permanently. I want to explore more of the world before deciding that.

Auroville is a very special place, both subjectively and objectively. It is unique. Regarding my newfound perspective, I think I have understood more of Auroville’s failures and successes which were not as evident when I was living there. In some ways it is quite extreme to contrast Auroville, which is community-driven, close to nature and experimental, with Brussels, which is more individualistic, metropolitan and structured or organised. It has definitely made me look at Auroville in another light, situating its character in the world, and how it is affected by different currents existing in the rest of the world. I appreciate certain values we hold in Auroville more now, such as the emphasis on learning, and that learning is not confined to academia or a specific aspect of life. I think that this is a great innovative attitude to have.

I would say that Auroville is a place of experimentation and gives a lot of opportunities and resources to learn so many different things. I think when you are young in Auroville you should use these to your advantage and try as many things as possible even if you are not sure if you will like it or be good at it.

Chandana



Leaving Auroville after high school was never a question for me. Despite its positive attributes, Auroville was no longer serving my individual growth. I was really desperate to go out and find different ways of learning in the world.

The Netherlands was the smart choice due to my nationality. I decided to study Hospitality Business Management as the Netherlands has one of the top three universities in the world in this field. I have always been interested in business development even though it is not my strong suit. And with my prior experience in the hospitality industry, I was easily accepted. I would say that I am not an academic by nature, but I enjoy learning through active implementation of knowledge. Therefore Hotel School with its combination of theory and practice was ideal because I can challenge myself and also build more hands-on experience within the industry.

I can’t even begin to explain how much I enjoy my time abroad. In addition to my time at the university, I have completed a six-month internship in Malta. I have also had the opportunity to travel within Europe. I am truly thankful to have met so many people who have changed my life for the better. My biggest learning has been to discover that the world is absolutely unlimited. There are endless possibilities and countless opportunities for new, beautiful, and unexpected experiences.

The question of whether I will return to Auroville causes me a bit of internal

struggle. At this time I feel like I have outgrown the Auroville life and I want to continue to grow within this community abroad. I do see myself eventually coming back, likely on a part-time basis, with consideration of how I may be able to contribute to the community.

Auroville is an experiment that has brought to life a truly unique environment that extends into the development of forward ways of living. These, as with everything, can be both positive and negative. However, I must say that I have never seen anywhere else that comes as close to it as Auroville does. The environmental mindset, gift economy, supportive community, and general open-mindedness are values that I am grateful to have grown up with. I try to carry these positive aspects into the world around me. They have become my strong core values which shape the way I move in the world. I am proud and thankful to have grown up in Auroville.

Auroville, in all its beauty, also does have its limitations. My advice to my peers in Auroville, even if it may sound extreme, is to leave as soon as you are able to. Whether you have just finished high school or have just turned 18, leave and stay gone – not forever of course, but there is so much more in the world out there to experience. It will not always be easy, there will always be times of struggle and homesickness, but I believe these moments are critical for one’s personal growth. It can be the easiest route to just stay in Auroville for your entire life, but I am so thankful to the people who helped me leave, that I too want to support others to go out.



Aarnav

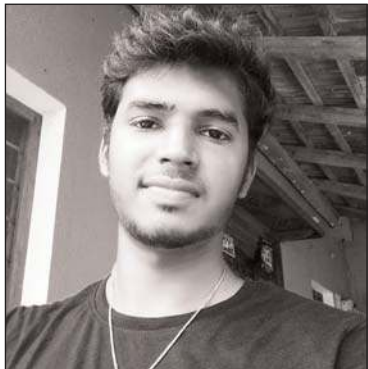
I felt like I was stagnating in Auroville, and I wanted to pursue my interests in a more challenging and resource-full environment. I chose Berlin because it’s the epicentre for alternative music, and I found a university whose approach to education is very similar to some of Auroville’s schools: interdisciplinary, with a diverse student body, and with an emphasis on curiosity.

With new opportunities, experiences and faces, I really noticed the value of being outside my circle / echo chamber.

Auroville to me has always been about community, sharing and freedom, and it remains so. By sharing I mean open knowledge, open ideas and welcoming initiatives / projects.

To my peers in Auroville, I would say this. Do not pay attention to rigid academic structures and people that discourage you from pursuing what you want. Be curious and engage in community / youth initiatives. The alternative path is harder, but worth the effort, and definitely better.

Dinegar



I left Auroville to see the world from a different perspective. I also needed a break for myself and I wanted to make a change in what I was doing. I went to Münster in Germany where I joined a volunteering programme with the German Red Cross.

It was a great experience, as I was exposing myself to new surroundings. There were good and bad times, but it was all part of the experience. It made me realise how advancement / technology is making a huge difference, but at the same time it made me think about what is missing in that advancement.

My perspective on Auroville has changed. I saw Auroville as a magic bubble full of potential where cool new experiments take place. And this bubble is often taken for granted. I feel that what we have in this magic bubble needs to be scaled outward. I would recommend that my peers back home get more involved in Auroville. Get to know the history and current situation. Care for and respect Auroville.

Dhwani



After Transition School, I went to the Lycée Français. Once I was done with my baccalauréat, I chose to leave Auroville to pursue my studies. I moved to Paris and enrolled at La Sorbonne.

Paris is wonderful. It’s challenging and hard to understand, but living here is a great experience. I’ve learnt how to survive. I’ve learnt how to take things one step at a time and to deal with the pressure and stress that come from living in a big city. I’ve also learnt how to be completely independent and live my life the way I want to.

I do plan to come back to Auroville. I have been thinking about it quite a lot lately, but uncertain about when I’ll actually be back.

I appreciate Auroville a lot more with this newfound perspective. I am who I am today thanks to Auroville, and I’ll always be grateful for that. I’ve always believed that Auroville shaped me in the right way, and exposed me to all the right things in life, but unfortunately, it doesn’t really prepare you for the “real world”.

Go out into the world, see it, experience it. It will help you grow on so many

levels. It will not be easy, it will be stressful, and you’ll feel all kinds of pressure, but it will definitely be worth it. What you experience will make you appreciate Auroville a lot more.

Aiyana



I chose to leave Auroville because I am passionate about psychology and wanted a degree that will later be useful to me in Auroville. Scotland has one of the top universities offering this degree, and they offered me a scholarship.

I love Glasgow. It is the friendliest city, and the experience so far has been incredible. There is one saying that has always stuck with me which goes, “There is no bad weather, there is just the wrong clothing.” I try to live by this in life. I think it’s really funny.

I do plan to come back to Auroville. It is and always will be home. My entire family is there, and I couldn’t imagine raising my kids or settling down in another place. However, things can change, so you never know.

Auroville is an oasis of sorts, and as cliché as it is going to sound, I do truly think it is a chance for a better world. Not only does it strive for a better humanity, but its ecological and environmental focus is incredible. At the same time, leaving Auroville has also allowed me to see it from a different perspective. I can see that it still has a lot of growing to do, but don’t we all?

If I could say anything to my peers in Auroville, it would be to leave, because it is the single biggest gift you can ever give yourself. Leaving Auroville, even if it is just for a short while, will allow you to see if from outside the bubble. It will allow you to not only appreciate it, but to also see its faults. Leaving also gives you the space and tools to grow into yourself.

Hannah



I chose to leave Auroville to pursue a BSc in biology in Ljubljana, Slovenia. I wanted to have more experiences outside of Auroville, and I also just missed Slovenia. As great as Auroville is, it’s still a bubble. So I’d say it’s definitely worth getting a different perspective. I do have plans to return to Auroville, but I am not sure when. Auroville is a part of me, a part of my childhood and my home.

Dance, Talk, Love

Vega is a facilitator of Nonviolent Communication, a “language of compassion” focussed on deep listening and deep awareness of what we perceive, feel, and need. She has also explored movement and dance and plans to include this in her Auroville workshop offerings when she feels ready.

I have never thought about defining spirituality before, but I think, for me, it is simply my relationship with life. I deepen my spiritual connections by growing my love and awareness more and more, and I do this mainly through both movement and Nonviolent Communication (NVC).

My spiritual quest started because my life was uneasy, often miserable, and it was so difficult to live with myself. So I longed for peace of mind, ease, and freedom. Freedom from pain, suffering, stories.

I tried randomly following different practices, without really knowing what I was doing. And I did experience bliss, great presence, connection and beautiful moments in meditation or other practices. But when I came back to daily life, I was still easily angry, desperate, or frustrated. I wondered why it was so difficult to listen to somebody with a quiet mind. Why couldn’t I express myself easily? What was I scared of and why? And how could I communicate authentically while at the same time maintaining my connection with the other person?

Through movement, I found one way to connect to my body and emotions on a deeper level. When I reach the deeper spaces, many confusions or difficult emotions just dissolve, and acceptance arises. I find it is also a very good way to release the tension and tightness in me, and to dissipate stagnant energy. And through Nonviolent Communication, I found a tangible tool which lets me really measure where I am and how I am. It gives me grounding and insight. And I get immediate feedback from the people I communicate with. Although movement and NVC seemed like two separate journeys, they ultimately met and mingled and have become my wings.

Movement

From my childhood, I always thought I was no good at moving my body. At school, sports class was very stressful for me. Then I signed up for a psychodrama workshop in Korea about 15 years ago where, unexpectedly, there was a dance session. I felt so embarrassed. But the facilitator guided us to close our eyes and just move slowly. At first I felt very awkward and self-conscious, but still something started opening in me.

Later I went to a Center for Movement Meditation. We were in a basement room, and the facilitator switched off all the lights. It was so dark that I could hardly see anything. We were asked to close our eyes and move, from inside. The darkness gave me an opportunity to free myself and listen only to my body, nothing else. My body started moving, stretching, twisting, rolling on the ground.... I cannot say it was dancing, but I could feel my body had been longing for this moment. Each body part had its own voice telling me, ‘Give me attention!’ ‘See me!’ ‘Listen to me!’ I felt each part moving in its own way, without direction from conscious thought.

Later, in Auroville, I discovered Gabrielle Roth’s 5 Rhythms practice (and even later, her book, Sweat Your Prayer). In this practice, we listen to ourselves and dance in our own way. I think approaching movement in this way prepared me to open myself further. When I reached a certain maturity, I could step forward to open verbally as well. As I explored my body’s movements, I felt I was touching a sweet and tender space within, with heightened presence. And this is the same space I access through the NVC practice.



Vega

Nonviolent Communication

I first participated in an NVC workshop around 15 years ago in Korea. And again I joined another workshop seven or eight years ago. But that time, it didn’t enter into me. It was kind of nice, but I was too scared to open myself up.

Then, when I came to Auroville in 2016, I thought, “Ok, maybe I can try now.” But I struggled to understand the (English) language, and also had so much resistance to and fear of exposing myself. I was not used to expressing my feelings or what I wanted in my life.

Still my misery was too big, and I just couldn’t live or bear my life anymore, so I needed to do something. I remember I would become restless two or three hours before the weekly group practice was scheduled, and I was torn between wanting to go and not wanting to go. Sometimes I managed to be there; sometimes I escaped. And then, very slowly, I could be there, stay with my pain and emotions, share with other people, and listen to them.

At some point, I realized this was what I was missing and longing for as a daily spiritual practice. I joined two intensive international NVC training programmes, and it changed my life. That was one of the most challenging but crucial steps in my journey. When I was finally able to share what I was feeling or what was alive in me, and that feeling was accepted with care and presence by another, it was an astonishing and healing moment. Slowly I felt able to open myself up more and more, with greater trust and safety. For the first time, I felt that I was okay, that my feelings could be accepted as they were without

Nonviolent communication really grew from my attempt to understand the concept of love, and how to manifest it, how to do it. Love is something we manifest, something we do, something we have, and something we give.

Nonviolent communication helps me stay connected with the beautiful Divine Energy within myself and to connect with it in others.

*Marshall Rosenberg
(Educator and Peace-Maker)*

blame or judgment. What a relief!

It became clear that I wanted to walk this path and share the practice with other people. A natural enthusiasm arose in me because I was experiencing so much that I was lacking and had been longing for my whole life. Through the NVC lens, I could slowly discover what was underneath my own and others’ feelings and actions, and this increased my acceptance, compassion, clarity and, most of all, connection. Because in the end, I believe we all want the same things - love, connection, understanding, acceptance. Now I am able to hear other people’s heart’s desire and longing. I see the other’s humanness and that softens my heart.

NVC and me

NVC has brought a lot of awareness in my personal life as well. Before, for me, raising kids was just a burden. I couldn’t enjoy the juice of it. Even after my exposure to NVC, I couldn’t apply the practice to my sons. In the beginning, I felt a great deal of frustration and hopelessness. I had learned this beautiful tool, but I wasn’t able to apply anything with my kids. This made me feel very distressed and small. So at one point, I just focused on myself. And as time passed, I felt more at ease with my kids. It was not as heavy and desperate as before. Still I would regret it and feel sorrow when I did something that I didn’t wish to or that didn’t align with my values.

Now even with my mistakes, I don’t suffer as before. I see my sons, and think, “I am so grateful that I have them in my life. I feel so grateful they are healthy. They are just amazing. Gentle, caring, loving, kind....” I can enjoy their beauty and celebrate in a way I couldn’t do before. My view has changed, and everything has become lighter and easier.

It has also been a great revelation that I can communicate, express myself, and listen, for example to my partner, without conflict and fighting. if there is a conflict, it doesn’t stay for long, or I have trust that I can manage and digest it.

The way forward

I only started offering workshops myself one year ago because I was not confident and had a fear of speaking and listening in English. It took time for my yearning to share and grow to become bigger than my fear. Then finally I said, “Ok, now I want to do it. At least, I want to try and then I will see.” But how nervous and tense I was!

So I am still a baby, but I take it lightly, aware that I am just learning, and sharing what I learn or what

I want to practice with others. And whenever I see people experience a shift or transformation, or when I hear how the practice was meaningful for them, I feel so much gratitude that I found NVC and brought it into my life.

Recently, I heard from three people in Auroville that they would like to join the journey of NVC certification. It gives me so much joy and excitement to think that we can grow as a community together.

In the end, NVC is not a tool but an embodied state of being beyond language. I aspire to embody this awareness and compassion more and more, and look forward to seeing it everywhere in Auroville, in India, in the world.

Vega

IN MEMORIAM

Luigi Zanzi



On May 4th, Luigi Zanzi passed away in his apartment in Citadines. He had been struggling with his health for quite some time, and would have been 70 this year.

Luigi was one of Auroville’s more striking figures who played many a role in Auroville’s development. Hailing from Ravenna, Italy, where he undertook humanistic studies at the Bologna University, he came to Auroville when he was 22 and joined a few years later, becoming an ardent developer, fundraiser and networker. In 1980 he started the development of Transformation in the Cultural Zone; from 1987 till 1989 he took care of the Matrimandir Nursery. From 1990 onwards he coordinated Auroville’s Future, and was project manager of two Asia Urbs projects while participating as a speaker for Auroville at numerous national and international conferences and exhibitions both in and outside Auroville. In liaison with UNESCO and the Government of India, he has been instrumental in raising funds for

several projects and events in Auroville. After serving in the Auroville Planning and Development group, he functioned in his later years as executive of Auroservice, continuing his network from there. Luigi’s remains were cremated at the Auroville mandappam on May 6th.

Bhaga

In the early morning of Wednesday 18 May, Bhaga (Christiane Odile Gabriau) peacefully left her body at the age of 77 in her Luminosity flat. She had been experiencing cancer during the last year, working on it with her cellular consciousness and insight gained through intense evolutive research throughout her life.

Bhaga, French-born in Algeria, came to Auroville in August 1972. Starting off as a second-language French teacher in various of Auroville’s budding schools of that time, and working at Matrimandir, she gradually veered towards a deep and thorough research into Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s teachings. This resulted in her initiating in 1984 the ‘Laboratory of Evolution – Centre for Human Unity’ (LOE-CHU), then located at Bharat Nivas, from where she also started her extensive compilation of Mother’s Words on Auroville. The Centre evolved throughout the years and still functions today. Many of us remember her from her abode at ‘Repos’ at the beach where she lived for 18 years until the sea took over.

With her animating, always smiling and outgoing nature, Bhaga will be remembered for her many workshops, talks, private consultancies and web communications and for her persistent work in the light of our Integral Yoga.. Bhaga’s remains were buried on May 20th at the Auroville Burial Grounds.



Auralee

Auralee (Audrey McCormick) passed away on May 25, in Montreal, Canada. She was 77, and had been treated for cancer.

Auralee came to Auroville in 1986 with her two sons, Michale (Shwetaketu) and John. After her keet house in Fertile had burned down, she went back to Canada and returned in 1996 when she moved into Vikas. During her years in Auroville, she worked at Pour Tous, and later as secretary to the Entry Service. She and Shwetaketu left Auroville around 2010.

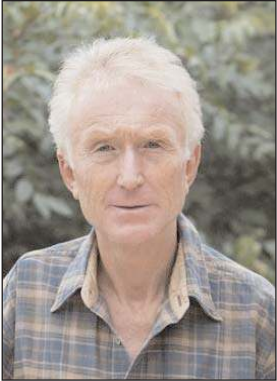
Peter Holl

On May 25th, long-term pioneer Peter Holl passed away in a hospice in Hamburg after coping with cancer for more than a year. He was 74.

Having been part of a Sri Aurobindo study group in Berlin in the very early seventies, ‘Peti’ as he was called (pronounce Peetee), left his job in the banking world, had his father drive him to the autobahn and hitchhiked overland to India, arriving in the Ashram in 1972 where he received Mother’s darshan and lived for some time. At the end of the 70s, after a track in the Himalayas which he made with Helmut whom he knew from the Berlin study group, the two came to Auroville and started the community of Grace in 1979 by building the first keet huts and digging a well.

Being passionately in love with homeopathy, Peti qualified himself thoroughly by following schools and courses in various countries and certainly India. Between his many activities – such as football and several long bike hikes with his Aurovilian mountain biker friends in the Himalayas, an occasional theatre stint, his lively partnership with Brazilian singer Eliane and walks with Sri M – he functioned as a much appreciated homeopathic therapist, whose calm and subtle healing power and advice touched many. He will be sorely missed.

Peti’s sporting life ended by a fall some some fifteen years ago, severely injuring a shoulder, but after recovery he continued his work as therapist with Auroville’s holistic Integral Health centre. When visiting his family in 2020, and discovering the onset of his illness, he was most distraught not to be able to return to Auroville because of the Covid pandemic. His love and commitment to the Auroville experiment, its yoga and high call was always up front and guided him through the challenge of these last years. As he wrote last month from Hamburg to a close Auroville friend: “My only recipe now is surrender, surrender, surrender...”



Is a tree spiritual?

I was asked to submit an article on the theme of trees and spirituality. As a species, we tend to anthropomorphise everything. Kids’ books are full of stories of animals and plants wearing clothes, living in houses etc. But what if trees had stories? Just for a second, consider what could be if trees made them all tree related? Could you picture yourself as a tree? A being without a central nervous system yet able to coordinate actions with thousands of other factors such as bacteria, fungi, microorganisms, other trees, insects, birds, animals, gravity, sunlight, wind, water? What choices would you make? How would you make them?

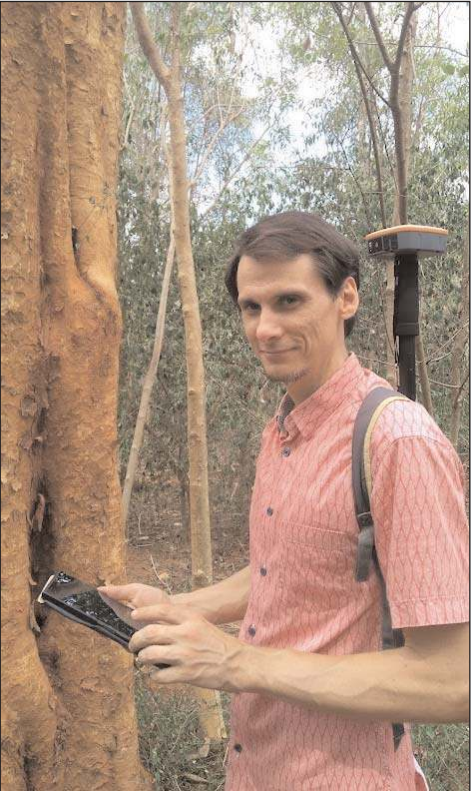
Over the years, trees have developed different strategies for living. In the same way that people decide to live differently, or in the same way businesses fill different markets and niches, trees employ different survival or living strategies. Some have evolved to live the hard and fast way where they grow fast, get wind pollinated, disperse their seeds (also by wind), and then die young because they have no defences against pathogens. Others go the middle route by dealing with some pathogens, simply growing faster than them, or by reproducing vegetatively (such as by cuttings) when a branch breaks. And yet others live slow and steady by growing slowly, making treaties with insects or birds and mammals for pollination and seed dispersal, and die only after centuries or millennia of dealing with an accumulation of adverse factors upon their systems. Within all the strategies

employed, there is a symbiotic relationship with other beings to the benefit of all.

Scientific studies have shown that trees feel, learn, and react to sound. Plants count, some lianas change their leaf forms to mimic the trees that they are climbing on. They reward, or sometimes trick, animals, birds, and insects to help them. Essentially, they have a consciousness that we are now able to perceive, though we don’t necessarily know how it is established.

In some cases, trees in advantageous positions may support trees that are not so lucky with resources and information. They employ the time strategies mentioned above but they also employ the space strategy of staying in one place and optimising their situation. Trees work with surrounding vegetation, fungi, bacteria, and microorganisms. Sometimes they support their own species but also sometimes prevent them from growing too close to their “mother” (to ensure genetic diversity).

We tend to look at trees as background vegetation, but they are rather a bit more than that. They deal with the conditions that they are in, yet they influence, create, and support their surrounding environment. Their capacities are not yet fully discovered – it is still not entirely understood how trees manage to get water up to, sometimes, a hundred meters high (yes, the theory is there but it is not proven). You can even overlap two cuts through the stem in a tree, and it will still be able to bring water up to the leaves despite having to send the water laterally through the gap between the cuts. Trees are not



Island

just full of straws that suck water up by vacuum. They are to date also more effective at storm-water management than anything that could be engineered by a human.

Why am I even interested in trees? My initial interest was basic – I needed to learn how to prune trees correctly to support the establishment and then management of a forest on a newly purchased plot of land in Auroville. This interest evolved first into apprenticing as a tree surgeon, and eventually led to academic studies to deepen my knowledge. My current interest lies in the use of trees in urban settings as green infrastructure. There is a growing body of research that links higher urban tree density with improved academic outcomes, lower stress levels, lower rates of depression, faster recovery times in hospitals, increased birth weights, reduced air pollution and safer traffic, to name a few.

Finally, going back to our anthropomorphised view: why are trees doing what they are doing? Are they spiritually driven? Clearly, we still have a lot to learn about them, but we do know that they don’t tend to amass material wealth or take advantage of their neighbours. Instead, they are in communication and trade with a multitude of beings around them that support life on many levels.

So why don’t we have more trees around us? They have much to teach us on altruism and they help us to be more functional humans. In our current social and political environment, assuming that people had their basic needs provided for, they could help show us the way to live more spiritual, integral and connected lives.

Island

Integral agriculture

One of the biggest mysteries, for me, has been the process of change itself. The transformation of one thing into another has fascinated me since a very young age. This interest in movement of time and space was further fuelled after coming in contact with Auroville, Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Every day since then has been a discovery of how this process of transformation is, in fact, in service of the Divine– a transformation of self and collective consciousness to serve the purpose of evolution.

When I started farming eight years ago, my motivation was only to get away from a life I thought was meaningless and find something truer and deeper within myself. Over the years, however, I have begun to realise the responsibility that this work brings and how it holds one of the key ingredients for the emergence of a new culture. Farming embodies change and transformation; transformation of a humble seed into a spectacular plant that attracts all beings for food towards itself, again to serve the larger purposes of pollination and dispersal of seeds, a necessary step in propagation and evolution of life. At the same time, seasons change, life in the soil changes, even the animals, bird and insects around the plant change in due time.

To farm is to observe these changes and learn to work with them, and serve the most basic human necessity, of food and nutrition.

We seek food to keep our body alive because the nature of food is exactly that of our own body. And, just as our body has physical has subtle aspects, food too has physical and subtle fields emanating from the source of the food, and from the process used to transform it for consumption. Different sources of food, the way the food was grown, handled and cooked, lead to differing results in nutrition, flavour and energy of the food. In reality, however, food is still considered as a commodity and we are content with its physical and chemical nature.

Its access is determined by if and how much one can pay and not by who needs it.



Anshul

Even our global goals of reducing world hunger limit themselves to producing more to feed the population. This, to me, is a rather insufficient objective. We should instead be aspiring for all on this planet to have access to clean and wholesome food of the highest vibration. Only with a development of the individual consciousness can we expect the collective consciousness to evolve, leading to a new culture where scarcity of food or of soul do not exist. The role of food in a larger systemic change is more important than we imagine it to be.

When we look back at the evolution of food and how humans have obtained it, we can also see, in the background, a social evolution that made the expansion of human civilisations possible. As hunters and gatherers in the wild, organization around family units was simple as humans moved regularly, mortality rate was

high, and therefore societies had impermanent structures. The activity of farming which is considered to be only 10,000 years old was dramatically different. It solidified the social concepts by grounding the family units to one place, thus giving rise to the ideas of ownership, families and succession. A sedentary life and a growing population make social systems more complex and thus people within families invented new roles to sustain the family organism – farming, animal care, cooking, cleaning, teaching, curing, giving and receiving, all could be done within one large family, or within a community. This led to the birth of a new culture based on land – agriculture. I would like to highlight here the difference between farming and agriculture, the two terms which are often used interchangeably today. While farming is an activity of intentionally shaping one’s natural environment to grow plants that are desirable for one’s food or other basic needs, agriculture is a culture of the land which springs forth from farming. It evolves on the foundations of how humans work on the land and with each other and how the social life organises itself around the activity of farming. Therefore while farming could represent an individual, agriculture essentially represents a social unit or collective. In my humble experience, I have found agriculture to be a balancing act between individualism and collectivism, the two poles of the social organism which keep it alive and dynamic.

So how to realize the highest human potential as an individual and as a collective, not as mutually exclusive goals but as complementary necessities for growth?

Food and agriculture are a big part of this puzzle and the birth of a new culture depends on how we grow, cook and consume our food for ourselves and each other.

Most of the solutions in agriculture today are based on external methodologies and physical means. And since the solutions are solely physical, they overlook barriers that are cultural and social.

Even with a growing awareness of food and agriculture, farming is still considered a livelihood and occupation. However, farming is a way of life and a way of being and we need solutions that can address the apparent conflict between individual and collective interests, the collective not restricted to human society but encompassing the entire living collective, of which humans are only a humble part. Changes in our agriculture, our diet and our social structures are intricately linked and co-dependent. I believe, that in the integral view of agriculture, the farmer and the collective are not separate entities. They need to work together, in service to evolution of consciousness. The work of cultivating the soil to receive the seeds of the future would also help in cultivating the human soul to receive the inspiration to build a future together. And the highest goal of farming would not limit to only nourishment of the physical bodies but would extend to nourishing our aspirations for a higher life, working as a catalyst for individual, social and ecological transformation.

We have been fortunate to learn about new ways of looking at food and soil from many farmers and philosophers from around the world, and of course from the experience of the wise indigenous people who have long had the answers to many questions that we face today. As we try to put these ideas in perspective and come up with contextual solutions for our community, we need a synthesis of the physical and the invisible aspects of agriculture. When we extend the ideals of Sri Aurobindo’s Integral Yoga to agriculture and attempt to discover what integrality means when working with the land, with each other and growing food as a service to humanity and all life, we arrive at a vision of Integral Agriculture.

Active participation of Aurovilians on the farms and other food services is a critical step in strengthening the foundations of this vision. With our feet and hands in the soil and the highest aspiration in our hearts, we could discover together new ways of farming and new ways of eating, and in this process learn a bit more about nature, each other and ourselves.

Anshul

About Auroville Today

Auroville Today is an activity of the Kattidakalai Trust of the Auroville Foundation. The GST number is 33AATA0037BXZV

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Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 issues : India: Print + digital edition: Rs 710 Other countries: Print + digital edition: Rs 3,540 equivalent. Other countries: digital only edition: Rs 2,480 equivalent.



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Auroville Today, and need to be sent to Auroville Today, Surrender community, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India.

3. By bank transfer. Bank transfer are to be made to account # 163101000118 of Auroville Maintenance at ICICI Bank, Auroville Branch, IFSC Code ICIC0001631, Swift Code ICICINBBCTS, reference Contribution Auroville Today.

Editorial team:

Alan, Carel, Peter, Gita, Divya, Chandra. Proofreading: the team. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.