

# Auroville Today

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PHOTO: VIMAL

Model of the Matrimandir Garden.  
See next page for the location of each garden segment

## Discovering the oneness of the Matrimandir Garden

Two years ago, in its February 2013 issue, Auroville Today reported on the manifestation of the first three gardens of the Matrimandir. The Gardens of Existence and Consciousness were ready, and work on the Garden of Bliss would be completed by the end of the year. Today, the Bliss garden is still moving towards completion. The other nine gardens await their manifestation; but progress on their design is being made.

Marc and Meera, who together work for the Matrimandir Garden Design Office, took up the much needed task of diving deeper into the experiential reality of the rest of the gardens. Having executed together with the larger garden team the first three gardens, they still constantly faced questions like, did anybody experience 'existence' in the Garden of Existence, or 'consciousness' in the Garden of Consciousness? If people didn't, wasn't this due to the garden designs? "It led us to the essential need to continue diving even deeper," says Marc. "Our only mantra was: 'dive deeper, find the answer, and come back.'"

That became a two-years process."

It was a very hard challenge. "The Mother hadn't given all that many indications. We had the name of the gardens, the name of the flowers and the brief description of their significance, but not much more. We started going deeper into each of the names, comments and significances that Mother gave, and we also collected whatever we could find in the works of the Mother and the works of Sri Aurobindo," says Marc.

"At the beginning of the new process each of us would write down our understanding about the significance, such as Existence," says Meera. "We were writing key words, not sentences, to remain focused. Then we would share our insights and then read again what Mother or Sri Aurobindo said about it. Often we would realize that our understanding was at quite a low level; and then we would repeat the exercise, together with long moments of spontaneous silence that came frequently. This went on for weeks, and the weeks became months. And gradually, we climbed closer to a deeper understanding of the very high dimension Mother has put into the sig-

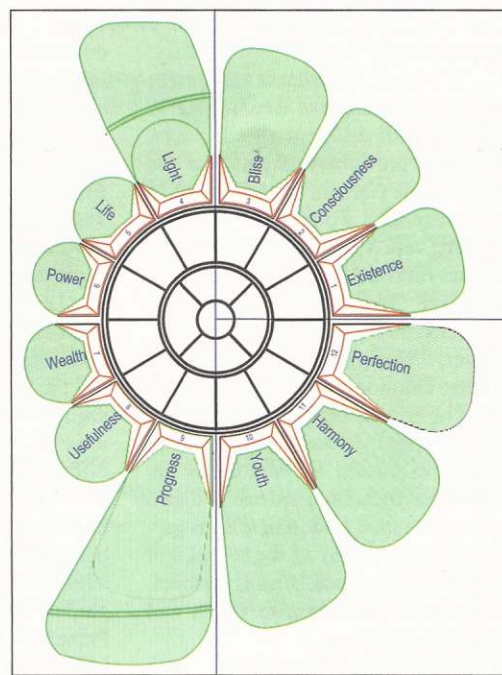
nificances of these gardens.

"Take the significance of 'Power' garden, for example. Some years ago the general understanding was of the Kali or Durga aspect of power. We knew that Mother talked about 'Power of Beauty', but when we studied the significance in its depth, we discovered that Beauty, together with Love and Bliss, is the expression of Ananda, as Sri Aurobindo mentioned, and not at all a Rudra or Kali power.

Similarly for the first garden 'Existence', the significance is "Psychic Power in Existence": the psychic aspect is clearly prominent here. Of course, we had read Mother's words on these gardens many times and again, but our experiential understanding came only recently. And we also came to realize that each of the 12 gardens is connected to the Psychic Being; that was a discovery for us."

"We did this process for each of the 12 gardens and not only for the nine that still have to manifest," says Marc.

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16 Feb





Marc and Maurizio studying the Matrimandir Garden model

### Psychic aspects of the Matrimandir gardens segments in The Mother's words:

- Existence** - Psychic Power (manifold, imperious, sweetness)
- Consciousness** - Supramental (gloriously awake, powerful, luminous, sure, infallible movement)
- Bliss** - Ananda (calm, balanced, smiling, gentle, simple austerity)
- Light** - Power of Consecration
- Life** - Power of Consciousness, power of control and domination of inconscient nature
- Power** - Aesthetic power
- Wealth** - Offering to the divine (progress)
- Utility** - Aims at teaching to surpass (progress)
- Progress** - Power to progress
- Youth** - Beauty (supramental, fresh and powerful)
- Harmony** - Power of harmony (simple, noble, dignified, powerful, charming)
- Perfection** - Psychological perfection (sincerity, faith, devotion, aspiration, surrender)

continued from page 1

"Through this process we came to the understanding that there are not 12 gardens with different significances, as we had previously thought, but that there is One Garden, 'The Garden' of Matrimandir with 12 different aspects, with Matrimandir itself as the higher dimension which is holding them all together. So Existence, Consciousness, Bliss, Life, Light, Power, Wealth, Utility, Progress, Youth, Harmony and Perfection, are all to be seen as aspects of one higher reality, which is the Supramental as clearly expressed by Mother in her comments on some gardens. We also came to realize how much each garden is connected to all the others. For example, how much Bliss is connected to Power and Power to Youth, and Youth to Perfection."

"That was a revelation," says Meera. "And that brought us to another discovery of the relevance of these significances for all of us. Our next understanding dawned: that 'The Garden' represents a journey of all the Aurovillians who have chosen to be here in The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's light, and we realized

that designing these garden segments is, in fact, a shared responsibility.

"This spontaneously led us to the next step of inviting many Aurovillians, their informal and unofficial personal sessions with them to share their connections, their insights and their views on these gardens, while we shared our approach and development with them.

"Over the months, around 50 people visited our office. We experienced many touching moments as well as some emotional outbursts.

"Some people liked what was done and some came with suggestions, such as planting trees for shade, others complained about too much pavement or concrete and wastage of water. Most of the time we would get a hint or even an explicit comment that we were on the right track. It helped boost

our confidence. Overall, it was a sharing experience that was very positive and harmonious. We felt very united."

"Meanwhile our understanding grew," says Marc. "Once we had firmly realized that we are dealing with One Garden instead of 12, we started looking at elements that could express that oneness throughout all the 12 garden segments; that could express the unity in the multiplicity. So our task became twofold: expressing the unity as well as each garden segment's individual personality. We were no longer designing each of the different segments separately."

"Today we have five elements through which we want to express that oneness of the gardens," says Meera. "The first element is the flower of the garden: we call it the 'Spiritual Presence'. Mother has given a specific Hibiscus variety to ten garden segments and for the other two she has given water lilies and Psychological Perfection. The Second element is the 'Cube'. A cube is a symmetrical three-dimensional shape, contained by six equal squares. The square, according to Sri Aurobindo, 'represents the supermind', the Supreme

Consciousness. The Third element is water - we call it the 'Living Link'. Mother mentioned this living water in the gardens. Each of the garden segments will be linked through a water channel. Each garden will also have water in it, with the possibility of it getting linked to the future lake. The fourth element is the circulation in the garden - we call it the 'Physical Link' or 'Sugar Crystals'. We will minimize the hard paving in the garden paths and do them as stepping stones to bring in more fluidity and subtlety. And the fifth but the most essential element is the Axis - we call it the 'Experiential Link'. It is the most subtle element that helped us in the expression of the garden design and it is also going to guide the experience of our visitors in time to come.

"Along with this we concentrated on the specific nature of each garden," says Marc. "Here we, together with Maurizio, explored the expression of the garden through different media, such as water colours and sand. Maurizio is a visiting professional garden designer from Italy. He has worked in different places in the world, including Japan. He introduced

us to the sandbox and asked us to make models in the sand, which we wiped out afterwards. The next morning we would start again; and when we came to something which, we felt, expressed what a garden would be, we started drawing the garden with water colours. The medium of water colour has its own specialty, and we let the water and colour express itself while we made the brush strokes. For a long time we held back from making clay models, because we were afraid that we would fix ourselves into a certain concept which would be more difficult to change later.

"We wanted to concentrate on the experiential aspect of the garden, and no longer so much on its defined physicality, which is what we had been doing in the first three gardens," adds Meera. "It became clear to us that the garden needs to be more fluid and more relaxed in its physical personality. This would give us a better possibility to catch the essence and touch the subtler levels. Maurizio mentioned the Kyoto gardens in Japan, for example. Here you see minimalistic physicality; the visitors are supposed to feel what is behind the

expression, and almost all people experience silence. We believe that this is what Mother really meant to say when she spoke about the Japanese gardens. Not that the Matrimandir gardens should be a copy of the Japanese gardens, but that, as in the Japanese gardens, people would experience what the gardens express, what is behind them, what helps you to connect to your inner being. We feel now that the physical aspect should be more subdued in order to bring out more this experiential aspect."

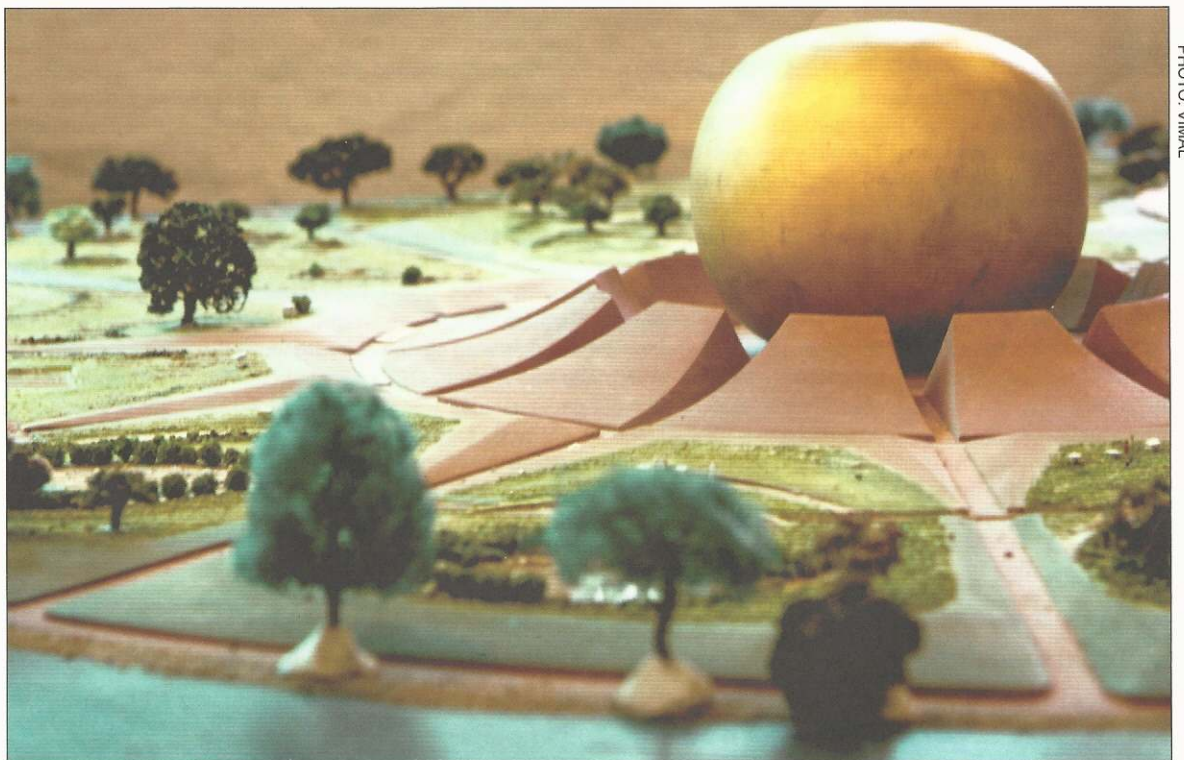
"And then the decisive moment naturally came which led us to design all nine gardens in one go, and not to restrict ourselves to designing only the next three," says Marc, "and it worked. The conceptual design has now been done for each of them, expressing their deepest aspect and inter-connection as we have understood today.

"We also looked once again at the three first gardens that are already in place. We know that today our connection and understanding is much deeper, even for these first three. Today, we would have done them differently, and we will propose some changes when the time comes. We are well aware that we will keep growing in our awareness and understanding as it is said that 'the Gardens will evolve with the Consciousness of the Aurovillians', and we have the living example of this through our experience with the Existence, Consciousness and Bliss gardens.

"The designs are now being refined and the models will be ready for community feedback at the end of February," says Meera. "We are looking at the best way to inform the community. We would like to explain about the processes we have gone through and show the new designs. We would suggest that people silently concentrate and contemplate each model and try to experience each one inwardly, for it is not only about mental understanding but about one's experience of each garden."

"When approved, we will begin their physical manifestation," says Marc. "The existing Gardens of Existence, Consciousness and Bliss will be adjusted last, when we have gained experience doing the others through our new flexible approach. These two years have been extremely important for us to get a better understanding of what Mother wanted. During this process we beautifully experienced Sri Aurobindo's motto *Solvitur Ambulando*, which could be translated as 'One step reveals the next step'. In the coming years we hope that our understanding will deepen more."

In conversation with Carel



Side view of the model



# Communicating for social change

**G**erald Frape is a social issues communicator who has been working for 35 years with government and non-government organizations on a wide range of social and environmental issues. Recently he visited Auroville again and shared his knowledge with a variety of social project teams and individuals.

## What is your approach?

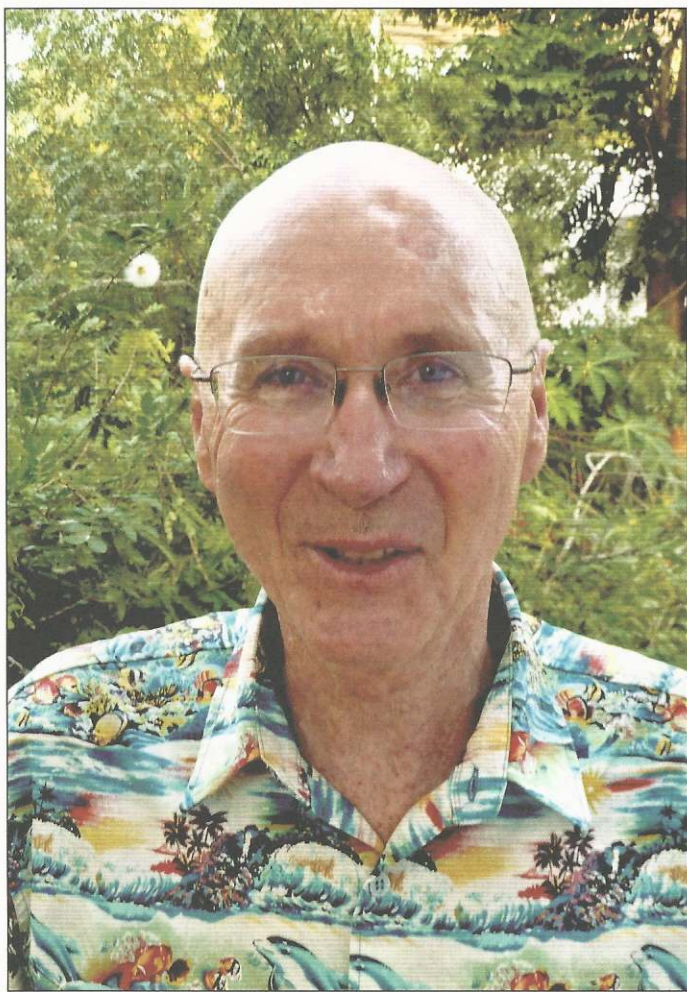
Whenever I come, I try to share my knowledge with groups and individuals working in the area of social change. My aim was to help them effectively communicate these issues to the audiences they were trying to reach.

My approach is more dialogic than top-down. I begin by trying to find out what sense the audience makes of the issue. Only after I have understood this do I design the communication strategy. Particularly when you're working in a cross-cultural context, you really need to check your ideas with your target audience while planning your strategy.

Most social change projects require about three quarters of the time to plan and research and only about a quarter to execute. However, the tendency in Auroville is to miss out the first step. Most people here think they know what needs to be communicated and how to do it, or they think their idea is so good that everybody will like it, so they immediately put out a brochure or start a website or a blog.

This time, for example, I worked with a young man who wanted to provide computer training to young people living in the rural villages. He saw this as a means of rural regeneration, but I doubted that these students would want to stay in the village and suggested he conduct focus group discussions with rural students at Pondicherry University. He met with the students and discovered that after doing computer training they all wanted to work in urban areas because this is where employment opportunities existed.

Another striking example of the need to consult first with your target audience occurred in Auroville ten years ago. Dr Devashish asked me to help him get the villagers to use toilets. For him the health implications were obvious. Typhoid is endemic in this area and toilets would greatly decrease its incidence. But he had not been successful in communicating this. So I said, let's find out what toilets actually mean to the local village. Using the women health workers in his team we conducted a survey in the villages and found that toilets meant different things to different people. For women it meant privacy, for men it meant status – they said that if you had a toilet in the house they could get a wife from the city! – and for young people it meant progress. Preventing typhoid alone would not motivate any of these people to have a toilet. So the best approach to get them to use toilets would be to appeal to each of these groups in a different way.



Gerald Frape

## So each social project requires a unique approach?

The basic approach is the same. I designed a workbook for Auroville social projects to explain this. It is a distillation of many years of work and includes some of the more effective communication frameworks for advocating social issues. The exercises helped the project teams develop a communication strategy by asking them what they were trying to do, who they were aiming at, what the target audience thinks about it etc. [see box]

## Who did you work with this time?

I have been working with a number of Aurovilian groups and individuals over the last four weeks. They included the EcoFemme and WasteLess groups, and individuals working with gypsy children and Irula tribals, as well as people from the Sustainable Living Institute.

I began by giving all of them a three-hour intensive workshop based on the workbook. Then I met with each group and questioned them about what they were doing. After this, I helped them develop a better communication strategy. WasteLess, for example, had produced 'Pick It Up' cards to make children aware of waste issues. However, it was only a tool, not a whole programme, and this made it less effective. So

now they have developed a four or five week education unit that can be delivered into schools with a card game embedded in it as an educational tool.

Everybody who pre-tested what they were planning to do on their target audience changed their original approach as a result. For example, John Peter the Tamil Social Worker planning to educate gypsy kids and provide them with livelihoods, was operating alone. Now he realizes he needs to network with people who have worked with gypsies to learn from what they have done.

Again, one of the team members at EcoFemme, Melanie Le Febvre, had designed a thoughtful graphic storyboard to show why village women should be using their reusable sanitary product. When we pre-tested it with a group of young Indian women, they were able to point out some of the errors and provide nuanced insights into meanings we had not even thought of. For example, one panel showed a bath and a washing machine, which village households don't normally have. Similarly, the toilet illustrated was a western rather than an Indian one. It was also pointed out that the woman in the panel holding the EcoFemme product was so confident of its effectiveness that she was sitting on a white couch.

The pre-testing has refined the storyboard and made it a much more effective and cultural-resonant communication tool.

## What were your reflections after your visit this time?

Connectivity is the younger generation's *zeitgeist* and Auroville needs to develop its connectivity to the larger world – particularly India, for it is a showcase for what is possible in this country.

I also think Auroville could adopt a more integral approach to sustainability. There are various people here doing things that are about sustainability, but there is no integrated strategy based upon using it as a core principle. Sustainability asks basic questions about what are we doing and where are we going. For example, is the New Age 'Club Med' tourism that I see elements of here at present, sustainable?

Actually, I see a great opportunity here for socially-engaged tourism, for people who want to offer their skills for a short time to a worthwhile project. 'Voluntourism' has grown enormously over the past decade in the outside world. It is like this generation's activism – if you want to make a difference in the world, you go and work on a social engagement project – and Auroville is

perfect for this. And it's not just younger people. There are many projects here that need high-level expertise, and there are consultants who would be happy to come in for a month, tune up your projects, and hook you up to a bigger picture and bigger funding prospects. But there needs to be a formal process, a better portal, to bring these people in. Auroville needs to share much more about what is happening here, and it should also make it much easier for socially-engaged visitors who want to help to connect with their skills and expertise.

I have been really heartened by working with the younger Aurovilians. The older generation needs to let this next generation come through and, for this to happen, mentoring is very important. I encouraged the younger Aurovilians I worked with to tap on the shoulder some of the older, experienced Aurovilians they respect and ask them to become their mentor. Mentoring is a great way to build the future human unity. And this is what Auroville is about, isn't it?

From an interview by Alan

## Extract from Gerald's Auroville Social Project Workbook

Use this checklist to plan your social project communications and think deeply about your strategy.

1. What is your aim (what you want to achieve)?
2. What are your objectives (steps to take to achieve that aim)?
3. What policies, infrastructures and incentives will assist your project?
4. What is the problem/issue?
5. What is the solution?
6. Who is responsible for creating the problem/issue?
7. Who has the power to solve the problem/issue or create desired change?
8. Identify the opinion leaders who may act as intermediaries, communicators or early adopters of the desired social change.
9. What will convince them to solve the problem/issue or make the change?
10. What is their primary self-interest?
11. Who do they listen to?
12. Which individuals or groups are most likely to create the desired social change?
13. What stage are they at in relation to the social change?
14. What knowledge and skills do they need?
15. What incentives to change will be most attractive to them?
16. Who are they most likely to listen to and be influenced by?
17. What structural or environmental changes will help them to change?

## REFLECTION

# Dancing between structure and openness

**I**n *The Agenda* Mother talks about a thought experiment she made with some Ashramites. She asked them if they would like their lives to continue indefinitely, but warned that this would not mean they could extend their present circumstances – their friends, relationships, activities etc – into an indefinite future. "For everything is constantly changing! And to be immortal, you have to follow this perpetual change; otherwise, what will naturally happen is what now happens – one day you will die because you can no longer follow the change."

The Ashramites, it seems, were not happy with the prospect of changing their present circumstances, for Mother reported that not one in ten of them elected to extend their lives under these conditions.

It made me reflect upon how attached I am to habit, to the stability of the known, from my mid morning

cup of coffee, to my evening walk, to beliefs and attitudes that I know are my default settings. At the same time, paradoxically, I recognize that something in me aches for change. I don't want to be trapped all the time in the same old mould. In fact, one of the things I love about Auroville is the extraordinary possibility it gives us to reinvent ourselves.

The problem is that often we do not take it because we, like those Ashramites, are too attached, stuck, to the stability and comfort of the known.

Dogma is one symptom of this stuckness. If we look closely, we see that many of the unresolved issues that have exercised the community for many years are actually dogmatic attitudes confronting each other. For example, the belief the township should develop 'organically' is as much a dogma as the belief that it should conform to the 'Galaxy' plan. We have dogmatic beliefs about what

we should eat, how we should treat illness, how we should develop the township and, most obviously, about how we should interpret certain words of the Mother.

Of course, dogma provides a framework and at our present stage of development we need some kind of framework within which to work. The problem is when the framework becomes a straitjacket, a dogma, that prevents us from discerning a new or evolving truth. The history of paradigm change in the sciences, from Copernicus to Darwin to Einstein, shows how difficult it is to displace established ways of thought, for the old ways fight hard to retain their supremacy.

So how can we negotiate the daily dance between structure and openness?

The first step, perhaps, is to recognise how many of our beliefs and attitudes are dogma ("a point of view or tenet put forth as authoritative without adequate grounds": Merriam-

Webster dictionary) and based upon a very partial understand of reality. If we can do this, we may begin to recognise that, in many cases, we simply don't know what the truth is about something.

This is scary since, to a large extent, we have constructed our sense of who we are around certain beliefs, so we fear that loss of belief would mean loss of identity. But the 'not-knowing' opens up the possibility of a new way of knowing, or unknowing, which allows us new perspectives and a new, enlarged sense of identity.

The good news is this seems to be happening. Young Aurovilians today seem far less dogma-ridden than their elders. And many of those older Aurovilians who experienced the struggles of the late 1970s and early 1980s have since rejected or modified the over-simplified, polarised viewpoints of those times. Auroville today is a less 'extreme' place than it was in those years. Even our present bureau-

cracy which, like bureaucracies everywhere, seems relatively impervious to change, is balanced by a counter-movement in the community that is more inclusive, flexible and expressive of trust in an emerging reality. Witness, for example, the popularity of the Monica Sharma workshops, which give guidance about how to embrace and negotiate change, and the various Auroville groups that are experimenting with different ways of meeting and knowing each other.

In the end, the only interesting thing is to get into contact with what Mother refers to as 'THAT', the ineluctable essence. "THAT is what you must truly hold on to – but then you must be THAT, not this whole agglomeration. What you now call 'you' is not THAT, it's a whole collection of things..."

But how many of us are truly ready for this?

Time for another cup of coffee.

Alan



## Community reflections on the volunteer experience

The term “volunteers” in Auroville is a curious distinction, as all Aurovilians are voluntary workers. There is, however, a population of “external” or “temporary” volunteers (including students) who contribute to Auroville and who have a distinct set of needs all of their own. Some call them the “prana”, or life force, of the township, filled as they are with fresh power, energy and inspiration. Most Aurovilians recognize the contribution they bring in terms of expertise, time, work, or goodwill. Most also recognize the importance of their presence for widening of Auroville’s ideals and outreach.

Savi is the Auroville unit that works with these volunteers to facilitate their smooth transition into Auroville and help them have a positive experience during their time here. And it was the Savi team that recently called a meeting to update the larger community on the present situation (including a decision by the BCC that volunteers must now contribute Rs 900 a month) and to invite feedback on volunteer issues.

Over 30 people attended the gathering, which began with Dominique from Savi presenting demographic data on volunteers collected in 2014. Of the nearly 380 volunteers who registered with Savi last year, roughly 70% were foreigners and 30% Indians. (The number of volunteers and students is below the reality, as this does not include people who directly contact units without registering with Savi.) Most volunteers stayed an average of 4-5 months, and most were within the ages of 20-29. Most volunteers reported working between 24-32 hours per week, and the second largest percentage reported working between 40-48 hours per week. Not surprisingly, Sadhana Forest hosts the largest number of volunteers, followed by Sacred Groves, Botanical Gardens, Buddha Garden and AV Consulting. Overall, there were 116 units that hosted one or more volunteers in 2014, with the majority of work opportunities coming in the education and environmental sectors.

Dominique then requested feedback on four major challenges facing volunteers, so as, “to prepare a renewed vision for their life and harmonious integration into Auroville”. The topics included volunteers’ integration into the community, the registration/administration process, work relationships with the units and mentoring/follow-up.

It was felt that while volunteers often contribute a tremendous amount to the community, there are challenges that sometimes hinder them from further integrating into Auroville. For instance, volunteers working more than 40 hours a week may not have the time to explore other aspects of the township. There are also few



Dominique from SAVI informs about volunteering in Auroville

social spaces, such as cafes and restaurants, for volunteers to meet each other after hours. In addition, Auroville could improve its hospitality to volunteers by giving them further public recognition within the greater community, perhaps by highlighting the story of one person per month in a public forum. Savi and the Entry Service could also continue to work closely to facilitate a smooth process from volunteer to Newcomer, a process they have improved significantly in recent times.

Regarding the registration process, meeting participants felt that Auroville should remain open to as many volunteers as it can and should continue to make volunteers feel welcome. This might include creating a simple, creative way to explain the registration process so that it’s easier and more attractive. Data collection should continue so as to understand the demographics of volunteers and to record their contributions to Auroville accurately.

There was also a call to make it as easy as possible for volunteers to work in units, and suggested that the Rs 900 contribution is not a welcoming gesture. It was also suggested that volunteers should have easier access to places like the Solar Kitchen and Matrimandir.

Finally the topic of mentoring, or supporting the volunteers’ experience in Auroville, was looked at. One suggestion was to conduct an Auroville orientation for volunteers, similar to what is now being done for Newcomers. Another perspective suggested increasing communication between volunteers and Aurovilians via home-stays. And, finally, communication between Savi and host units should be clear and constant, so that information flows freely between the two groups working most closely with the person.

Dominique thanked the participants, saying that the meeting had provided feedback and fresh ideas to the Savi team.

Ing-Marie

## A volunteer's experience

My experience of Auroville started in August 2013, as an intern at the Auroville Earth Institute. For six months, I had the chance to lead a research project on a promising new technology for construction, Poured Earth Concrete. I found it exciting to move towards highly ecological products and techniques. From another perspective, Auroville has provided me with a chance to explore myself, and I realized that I wanted to get a deeper and longer experience of that. I came back a few months later for a one-year volunteering experience, which happened to be in the field of renewable energy with Auroville Consulting. There I was given the responsibility of making a study of solar photovoltaic systems in Auroville, which should be a helpful tool to take decisions on the electrical situation in the Green Belt.

Regarding my first volunteering experience, having the trust of my mentors allowed me to concretize quickly any decision I found rele-

vant for the research. This freedom and empowerment caused an exponential increase in my interest and attachment to this project, which I continue to follow up today.

During my second volunteering experience at Auroville Consulting, I discovered a new way of caring for each volunteer as a unique individual, which also had its positive effect on my involvement. As much as possible, the strengths of each one are elegantly put forward and one always finds whatever type of help is needed to overcome one’s personal weaknesses. Thanks to an excellent follow-up from my mentors, Martin and Vikram, who never exerted unjustified pressure or gave discouraging feedback, I ended up carrying and presenting the projects I worked on with great goodwill.

Before I came back to Auroville in last July, I was familiar with the old contribution waivers policy. Upon my return, I was slightly shocked to discover that a new policy had come into existence, which says that the volunteer has to pay a monthly contribution of Rs 900. The Financial Service told me – with

little compassion – that I should pay for my expenses (right after scratching the bottom of the bank account to buy a flight ticket and get a visa), my accommodation, my food and, on top of that, pay the volunteers’ contribution to Auroville. But aren’t all volunteers already contributing to Auroville’s quality of life by working more than 18 hours per week?

I question the new policy, as it can lead to the feeling of being slightly despised and to incomprehension from the volunteer who is coming here to offer his work. Why should a volunteer not get the Aurocard (whose purpose is to help in limiting money transfers) if he cannot pay? Shouldn’t Auroville rather ask the unit for whom the volunteer is providing free service to contribute this amount? I would find it very exciting if not only this change could be made in the policy, but if also all Auroville units would be told to cover as much as possible the expenses of the volunteers. This is what the two units I have been working for have done since the beginning.

Clementine Browne

## The volunteers' financial contribution

For some time, volunteers who were working in services and recommended by the place at which they were volunteering could obtain a waiver that released them from having to make a financial contribution to Auroville. However, some months back the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) endorsed a new policy that each volunteer, or his or her work place, would now be required to pay Rs 900 a month into the central Auroville pot. This policy was agreed by several main working groups and endorsed by the Finance and Management Committee (FAMC).

This new policy has created resentment among some volunteers and the places that are hosting them. Volunteers feel that their service to Auroville is not being appreciated, and their work places are afraid that the new financial contribution may cause many volunteers to take their energy and idealism elsewhere.

Nicole is a member of the BCC. Here she gives her view about how and why the decision was taken to require all volunteers to make a monthly contribution:

Some time ago, the Financial Service expressed concern that the volunteer status was being abused. Some guests were pretending to be volunteers and obtaining a financial waiver, but they were then disappearing and nobody was monitoring what was happening.

A proposal was published in the *News and Notes* that would require all volunteers to pay some contribution, and this began to be implemented. It created a strong reaction in some quarters.

The BCC called a meeting and created a sub-group to look into the matter. The sub-group included Savi, the Auroville Board of Commerce, the Entry Service, the Financial Service, farms and forests, the socio-economic sub-group of L’avenir d’Auroville, and guest house and home stay managers as well as BCC members. It was agreed that whatever was agreed upon should apply to all volunteers. Various ideas were discussed and finally there was agreement upon a proposal, which was endorsed by the BCC and FAMC.

The new proposal: all the people on the sub-group who dealt with volunteers recommended that people who offer their energy for less than two months would be regarded as guests, not volunteers, and contribute accordingly. For people volunteering for at least two months, either the volunteer or their work place would be required to contribute Rs 900 a month to Auroville.

The sum of Rs 900 was fixed because it is the contribution required from those who stay in Mitra hostel, and it was considered not a large financial burden. It was also felt that if their work place is benefiting with their input, the work place should be only too happy to pay the contribution.

This contribution also helps cover the administrative expenses incurred by Auroville in regard to volunteers, and helps support community services and facilities, like entertainment facilities, to which volunteers have free access. It was pointed out that volunteers may only benefit the place where they are working, but they can avail of all these community facilities, as well as reductions in Auroville.

The Entry Service also argued that Newcomers have to work free for at least one year and meanwhile contribute financially, so why should volunteers who come here for a few months be treated any differently?

Entry Service originally recommended that volunteers should pay the same contribution as Newcomers and Aurovilians- Rs 3,000 a month. They explained that they had problems when volunteers who had been paying nothing under the old system wanted to become Newcomers and learned they would have to pay the Rs 3,000 Newcomers contribution. The volunteers did not understand why they suddenly had to pay.

The BCC has delegated a sub-group to decide whether or not an exception can be made in special cases.

The policy will be evaluated after a few months to see how well it has been working.

From a conversation with Alan



Louis (left) with two volunteers, Mariano and Christoff

Recently, a number of small structures with shiny roofs have come up on open ground near Citadines. This is a small experimental settlement for Newcomers and volunteers called La Maison des Jeunes (“house of the young”).

“It came about”, explains Louis, the inspiration behind the project, “because one day a volunteer was telling me there were many young people like himself who wanted to work in Auroville, and maybe even join the community, but who do not come because they cannot afford to stay. It set me thinking. The young volunteers who come here pay for their travel, they pay for their food and accommodation once they arrive, they work very hard, yet we seem to offer so little in return. I felt we had a responsibility to these people, to make it easier for them to contribute their energy and idealism to the building of Auroville. So I decided to do something about it by providing them with affordable accommodation.”

Louis decided that the best place to conduct the first experiment was

a collective clothes.

Clearly, rooms, which are an interesting prefabricated of the room pine, while t

“We will think it is a situation, heat in nice touch is colour, match petals of Mar itation rooms “We del





Volunteers at Buddha Garden



Sharing volunteer experiences



Volunteering at Nandanam school

## Are volunteers milk cows?

Sharing my time between two different works, I spend four days a week at TDC-L'avenir as a waste manager for Bommayapalayam in the scheme of the Auroville bioregional development plan, and I go farming one day a week in Auro-orchard. This is a wonderful opportunity for me to be able to split my time between my hands and my brain. And I would like to thank Auroville for this because my previous job did not allow me to work that way. Today I feel more relaxed, more peaceful.

Is it the integral yoga of Mother and Sri Aurobindo? I guess so! Moreover, if we imagine a world where everyone would have education, how are we going to produce food, to build houses? Today, the answer came to me clearly. We will have to split our time between the basic needs of the community and more intellectual work.

However, I feel a bit sad to see that so few Aurovilians invest their energy in farming and other hand labour. For instance, there are just twenty farmers in Auroville while there are more than a hundred architects.

There lie some clues that give me the feeling that Auroville can't sustain itself. For how to sustain this city? So many brains concentrated in the same place, creating, inventing, running the institutions, but where are the hands? Who are the workers?

It seems also a bit strange to me that I have to contribute financially to Auroville by giving a monthly contribution of 900 rupees. Hopefully, I am rich enough to pay it, but this is not the point. I am already working full time five and a half days a week, producing cheap organic edible goods for Auroville and helping to establish waste management systems for the villages around, an important issue which needs to be tackled

urgently as it concerns water table pollution and equity between Auroville and the villages around.

Asking a contribution from the volunteers which already contribute to the Aurovillian economy by paying for accommodation, food, workshops is the last straw that breaks the camel's back.

Finally we volunteers don't have the same rights as Aurovilians: no health care, different discounts in restaurants and workshops, no possibility for maintenance. Is it a form of hierarchy? Are the volunteers the milking cow? We are not Newcomers; we do not commit to be Aurovillian. But still the volunteers are giving their energy for free. We come with our hearts opened, willing to participate in the life of the community.

I do enjoy Auroville, the vision of the Mother. I agree with the Charter. I have met many great people, talented people, committed people. I can feel a good energy. I enjoy this amazing place to live in. And every day I embrace the chance to engage my energy in resonance with my values. I do it honestly. But the current functioning raise many questions. The upcoming Aurovillian retreat could tackle them, and as many Aurovilians seem to be aware of this reality, I trust them to bring back Auroville on track.

They have to learn to work together, to understand each other, and stop fearing bankruptcy. They should solve the economical issues in a smart way, not by always taxing more. I want to work for this project, and I am prepared to do it for free, to contribute to the wealth of the community, but I don't feel that it's right to make us pay for working.

*Guillaume*

## Volunteering at Eco-Femme

My name is Melanie and I have been a full-time volunteer in Auroville since July 2014. I contribute my time to a unit called Eco Femme where I mostly work on sales, marketing and business strategy.

Eco-Femme is a social enterprise with a global mission and reach, working in the area of menstrual hygiene management. In addition to promoting eco-positive menstrual practices, the project supports education for girls and livelihood for women. Eco Femme has designed a premium range of washable cloth pads that are available internationally and in urban India. Profits from sales help sustain the educational outreach work in rural communities, provide cloth pads at cost price to economically-disadvantaged women, and give the opportunity to school girls to get cloth pads for free.

Though Eco-Femme is where I ended up as a volunteer, it is not how I got to discover Auroville... After writing my master's thesis in France, I figured I would like to have an NGO work experience. This is how I originally arrived in South India, a year ago. For 6 months I was based in Pondicherry, which was my first gateway to the Auroville experience! Though I'm a travel addict, and find it difficult to stay in the same place for more than 5 months, I was somehow drawn to stay longer in the area and started looking for a volunteer opportunity in Auroville. Back then, I was still quite confused about what Auroville had to offer me and what I could contribute to this "city in the making".

Being a volunteer for Eco-Femme in Auroville has been one of the most amazing and inspiring experiences of my life so far. Some of the confusion about Auroville remains, but I think it has to do with the fact that Auroville has many faces. Personally, I experience Auroville as a social project incubator. There is no other place in the world that I know of where so many criteria come together to offer perfect conditions for social ventures!

It is maybe corny to say but, besides the joy of working for a beautiful project with wonderful colleagues, the highlight of my volunteering is realizing that working pro-bono can be much more enriching than working for a pay check. To actually experience this is awesome and very insightful; it's a life lesson that will guide my future choices!

That being said, I feel very lucky! My unit helps me sustain my stay with diverse compensations and I have worked before coming here so that I wouldn't lack money. For instance, I haven't been particularly impacted by the BCC decision for volunteers to contribute Rs 900/month because my unit has offered to cover the cost for me. Though I fully understand the motivation behind this decision (i.e.: everybody pays contributions in Auroville and it is needed to ensure its growth), I'm not sure I fully agree with its logic. As I said, volunteering here makes me richer in experiences and knowledge. In the same way, volunteers make Auroville richer by contributing their time, skills and expertise. Should Auroville also ask them to contribute their money?

*Melanie Le Febvre*

## La Maison des Jeunes

on open ground close to Citadines. Citadines 3, the next apartment block planned for the area, is due to be built here but it may take six years to break ground on this project. "I also felt that the spirit behind this new settlement – which is that of the gift economy – was the same one that animates Citadines. So it was a very good match."

As the site is temporary, Louis decided that the new settlement needed to be dismantled easily. In fact, the whole settlement can be taken down within one month and put somewhere else: almost everything is reusable, even the foundations.

La Maison des Jeunes consists of 12 small stand-alone rooms for 12 people. In addition, there is a collective laundry, kitchen and dining hall, toilet and bathroom block and a covered space for drying

Louis adds. "In each room there is a cupboard, bed, mattress, sheets, desk and two chairs. There is even a 24 hour Wi-Fi connection.

"The residents have to cook for themselves, but we provide the cooker, fridge, all the kitchen utensils and, in a separate room, a washing machine. And all the electrical connections are hi-tech fibre optic." The residents simply have to pay Rs.1000 a month each to maintain the place, far less than they would have to pay in a guesthouse. "And even this is negotiable; we will find a way for them to stay if they have difficulty in paying because we need people like this."

How are they selected?

"Basically you have to be between 18 and 30 years to live here,"

says Louis, "and to be willing to put your energy into some work in the city centre. Of course, rules are made to be broken – it is the spirit behind which is important. Also, we want to mix Newcomers and volunteers, so four of these units will be for Newcomers. We hope that the Newcomers will take up responsibility for the organization of the place."

Does Louis see this as a replicable model for temporary housing in Auroville? "Very much so. There is a potential space in the International Zone and I would like to suggest to the Housing Board that they let me do a similar project there, mainly for Newcomers. But we are also going to make a book, a kind of workshop manual, so that anybody can make these units. In any case, when we're finished here, I want to continue with the fabrication of the units because many people are asking for them."

What about the cost? Louis believes that, with design improvements and if the individual is willing to contribute their own labour, the cost of each room can be brought down to about one and a half lakh for the raw materials. He estimates that the entire project, which he has funded himself, has cost around 36 lakh rupees without including furniture. Of course, while they did employ paid

labour, volunteers, aided by some enthusiastic residents of Citadines, have done a lot of the work and this has saved money. Moreover, they have been able to plug into the existing infrastructure of Citadines, and Aurovilians like Carlos, Gegna and Jean Pougault have played a key role in constructing and managing this project.

However, provided you can link up with some available infrastructure, one and a half lakh for a simple but comfortable room is an extremely attractive price given today's exorbitant construction rates.

Today, after 8 months, the construction stage is almost complete and the first volunteers and Newcomers have moved in. Louis is a happy man. "There was a very good spirit here during the construction, and the whole project has been done in the spirit of a gift economy. This, I believe, is how Auroville as a whole should function. I am an unashamed utopian in this utopia of Auroville!"

*From an interview by Alan*



One of the 'Houses of the Young' at Citadines



## Pics from the Past

In January, Paulette mounted an exhibition of old photos, which she had painstakingly restored, in the Town Hall. Most of the photographers are unknown. Here she speaks about the exhibition.

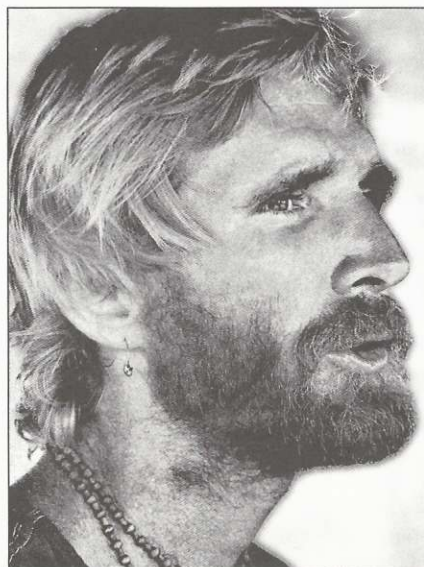
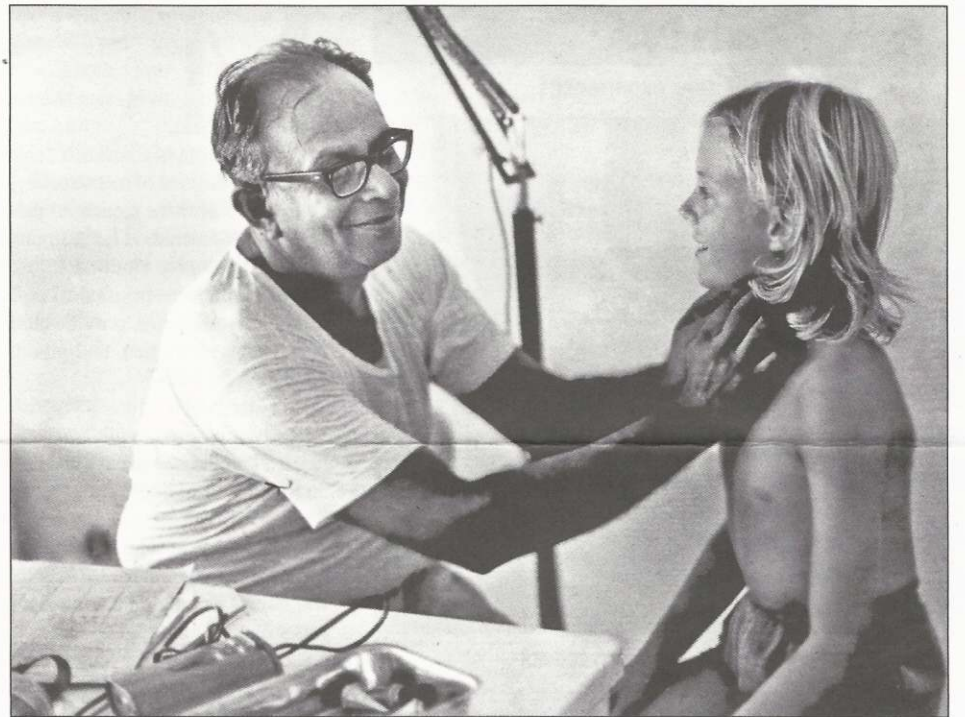
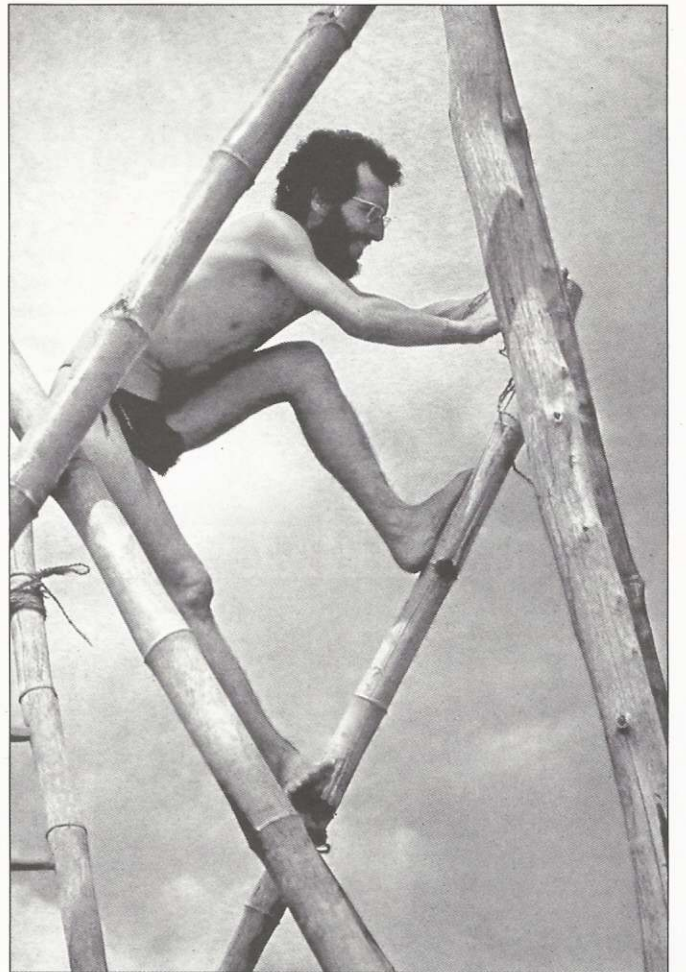
"The inspiration behind the exhibition was to show the incredible spirit of the people who came here in the early days as a means of reigniting it in Auroville today. I am reluctant to put the names of these pioneers because it doesn't matter who they are; what is more important is what they convey. They are symbols of an archetype. In this case, the archetype is the City of Dawn, and for me those people were taken over by that archetype. This is why in these photos you see their joy, their capacity for hard physical work, their fit, beautiful bodies, and their ability to live very simply. All this would not have been possible without that particular Force behind."

"The children were also different then. Those children had almost nothing in terms of material possessions but, like the adults, they had such joy."

"The only place I still feel the spirit of those early days is the Matrimandir. This is why I have also included in the exhibition some photos of the present Matrimandir because that is still there, so I hope that we can find back to the spirit of those days. I also included in the exhibition the text *The Great Adventure* by the Mother, because it embodies the spirit of that time."

"*Surrender and Life energy* were the significance of the flowers that were recently arranged around the Banyan for the New Year, and these are exactly the qualities that those early pioneers had. I hope it is an auspicious augury that things will change in 2015..."

*Paulette plans to put a selection of these photos along with a few key texts in a book for the 50th anniversary of Auroville.*





# Art Cart: connection through creativity

We move through the buzzing mass of people at the Visitors' Centre toward the quieter corners. We have heard that the Art Cart emerges every Tuesday and Friday afternoon, and have seen pictures of it in *The Hindu*. We look behind Dreamers' Café, and then behind the restaurant. We finally spot it, a colourful construction standing quietly on the stage. As we walk up, Krupa's warm smile greets us, as she extends her hands and says, "Hi, would you like to draw something?"

Hesitant but curious, we circle the Art Cart and observe. Painted in colorful stripes, this small box is designed to be a mobile creativity set. Its walls come down to create tabletops. Small stools, which can be packed into the cart, come out, as well as boxes of colours and reams of paper. There is a note posted to explain the purpose: "Art Corner: An open space for self-expression through the visual arts!"

We notice that the Art Cart draws in the curious, of all ages and nationalities. Often someone wanders over, attracted perhaps by the bright colours, or by the people who are intently engaged in their drawing. Krupa then invites them to participate in drawing something. While children often jump right in, adults often reject the invitation. Krupa then tells them that there are no marks, that they won't be graded or judged. On the day we visit, an adult couple rejects the invitation politely

and then walks back ten minutes later.

The Art Cart was launched on December 19th and was made possible by the financial support of the Dutch Stichting De Zaaier. It is open to everyone, Aurovilians and visitors, and each time the Art Cart comes out, there is a different theme for the participants to explore. Today, the theme is 'taste,' part of an ongoing series to examine the senses. In the past, themes have included topics such as 'flight' or 'anger' or 'unity'.

Krupa is the force behind the Art Cart, as well Sankalpa, which provides many other art and art therapy programmes [see *Auroville Today* #294 January 2014]. She talks about the importance of having spaces to encourage art and self-expression, but she has also observed another benefit to the Art Cart: it creates connections. When people sit at the Art Cart to draw, they are often sitting opposite to a stranger who is also engaged creatively. Conversation naturally flows from there. In this way, the Art Cart becomes a hub for people to come together.

She has deliberately situated it at the Visitors' Centre, as it is a space in which visitors and Aurovilians co-exist. She points out that villagers, in particular, may feel more welcome at the Visitors' Centre than in other spaces in Auroville. This works toward one of Krupa's many passions: to create a bridge between Auroville and the villages.

Due to the mobility of the Art Cart, it travels to



festivals and events in Auroville. Krupa also envisions replicating the Art Cart model, and travelling with into the surrounding villages.

Today, the longer we stay, the more people come and the more laughs are shared among us. While we were total strangers moments before, we are suddenly bonded over everyone's inter-

pretation of the day's theme. As we walk away, the simple beauty of doing art with people we don't know warms us. We can't help but imagine what Auroville and the villages might look like with a few more Art Carts scattered through the area.

Ing-Marie

## SOCIAL AWARENESS

## Turning 10, Tsunamika takes on a new cause

The story of the Tsunamika doll is well-known to Aurovilians and friends of Auroville. The Tsunamika came from Auroville's Upasana design and garment unit when the people involved felt moved to help alleviate the tragedy of the December 2004 tsunami. They created a simple cloth doll that would provide livelihoods for women from the affected coastal areas, and be carried around the world as a call for support and as a symbol of hope. Around a 100 women have earned their livelihoods through the making of the handmade doll, and about six million dolls have reached eighty nations worldwide, bringing overwhelming support and love for the survivors of the 2004 natural disaster. Her story has been included in the Tamil Nadu State Board School curriculum, it has been translated into many languages and been recognized by UNESCO.

Tsunamika has now celebrated her 10th birthday. Her story and impact was celebrated from the 8th – 10th January as a giant model



Tsunamika arrives at one of the schools around Auroville

Tsunamika was paraded through the streets along the coast, visiting many regional schools where she was celebrated through drama and laughter. On 10th January, people gathered at Bharat Nivas to celebrate with live performances, food stalls, craft stalls, an exhibition and an evening theatre event titled, 'Tsunamika – Daughter of the Ocean.' The event included many talented contributors, such as the Komali MeDi Clown Academy, Sankalpa's Art Journeys creative inputs, a drama group from Finland, PondyCAN and the National Coastal Protection Campaign.

Tsunamika has now taken on a new cause, that of protecting the coastline, highlighting the issue of environmental degradation that is devastating our Auroville coastal communities and the world at large. We are proud that Tsunamika has grown out of the Auroville community and wish Tsunamika the same success with this new issue as she has enjoyed over the last 10 years.

Kavitha

## LETTERS

Dear Auroville Today team,

I have to say that while sitting here this morning over breakfast reading *Auroville Today* I felt appalled by reading the front page article "Growing timber and firewood for Auroville". The amount of inaccuracies it contains was a real surprise, but the fact that an article goes out into the world of Auroville well-wishers, donors and potential donors without even checking it out with the Forest Group was unacceptable.

The first paragraph is misleading and does not contain the essence of that initial work, as it does not mention that actually the first pioneering work that was carried out on the plateau was not introducing the Work Tree, but extensive ecological restoration. This meant taking land that was highly degraded with little or no top soil, protecting and planting a myriad of species to create that precious shade and start breaking the cycle of degradation. The fact that the Work Tree was one of the few species that thrived is just a point in fact. To not mention the importance and reasoning why the Forest Group are concentrating their showcase work in planting and protecting the rare and endangered Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF) also seems an oversight.

Stating that the "foresters have given no or only little thought to the timber and firewood needs of Auroville" is quite scandalous! Over the years most foresters have consciously planted out timber and firewood either in designated areas or mixed in their plantations. A lot of work has been carried out experimenting with species and trying to understand what can grow. You also have to remember that timber needs good soil and high inputs to grow, and it is only now that the top soil is increasing and health returning to the system. Over the years, the foresters have been proud to offer their timber to Auroville, only to find that there is not a plausible market. Most contractors have moved over to other materials and though there are loyal Auroville units who regularly take from the foresters, a lot prefer to buy outside. Take a look at the Solar Kitchen and try and spot Work Tree. What you will see is Red Cedar and then ask yourself where that came from. Having said that, over the years it has actually been easier to sell the larger high quality timber within Auroville. It is the small and medium size that never gets used here and that has to be sold outside. I do not think this is a bad thing. On the contrary I feel it is positive, as it feeds into a market of local cottage industry car-

penters a good, sustainable wood which they are happy to use. If they were not getting this wood what would they be using? The ramifications are large. So to make a suggestion "to ban all sales of timber and firewood outside of Auroville" is naïve. Also, for example, a large percentage of the firewood is large or damaged chunks that does not have a market within Auroville due to wood size or burning properties, so what would we do with that? It is the management and sale of these resources that have helped pay for the development of the Auroville forest.

The Forest Group mentioned in its notes that the Cyclone Thane wood is running low, which means that the work of clearing is drawing to an end. Having said that, Auroville is still sitting on a huge stock of well-seasoned, slabbed cyclone wood. This was collected by Torkil for the Auroville Woodlink (Torkil, Divya and myself), which comprises the fallen wood from communities, roadside and forests. Again Torkil, being skilled at selection, seasoning and storage, has created an amazing asset but when it was made available for sale not many Auroville units were interested in purchasing. Where else in the world can you get a good volume of completely sustainable wood?

The facts about casuarina should have been checked also, for to say "casuarina can easily be grown" is wrong. This tree is commercially grown locally mainly on clay soil with an intense water regime. In Auroville most of the forest land is red laterite soil where it does not grow. The type of soil it needs is also good for growing food, which is what our farmers do on the soil that Auroville has of this type.

The timber species you also suggested was not so well thought out.

On 30/12/2011 Cyclone Thane hit Auroville and reduced our tree canopy by at least 70%. It was mainly exotics and emergent species that fell. This definitely brings into question the plausibility of high resource input, stand-alone timber plantations. Since the region is prone to regular cyclones, the local flora has evolved within this matrix of factors and this was demonstrated by how the dense TDEF areas supported and protected themselves from the violent winds. So spacing out tall exotic or local species in a plantation makes them very vulnerable to storm damage.

In future, when publishing information about a field of work, please check out the facts with the people doing the work.

Regards.

Glenn

Dear Auroville Today team,

This refers to the following paragraph in the otherwise excellent article 'Heeding the call: Sustainability for South India and Beyond' that appeared on the first page of *Auroville Today*'s December 2014 issue:

"From the very beginning Auroville endeavoured to share itself with the people of its region – including the 'first Aurovilians' as Mother once called the villagers within the area – through bridging the vast cultural and economic gaps."

The fact that this para was written just some months ago indicates that there is still in some of us the belief that Mother once made a statement to the effect that the local Tamil people are "the first Aurovilians". This is a misunderstanding that stems from a memo dating back to 1970 drafted by Varadharajan (then living in Promesse).

At that time there was, understandably, locally some unease regarding Auroville, with rumours being spread around the villages that people were to be forcibly evicted from their houses to make way for the upcoming international township, etc. This naturally sparked off an atmosphere of distrust and hostility, with the result that there were threats of violence against those living on the land and trying to lay the groundwork for Auroville's development. In a move intended to correct these false rumours and calm things down, Varadharajan – who was at the time doing liaison work between Pondicherry, the Aurovilians and local villagers – drafted a memo to be sent around in the area. He first offered it to the Mother for her approval. She added a short sentence (shown in bold below) and gave her blessings. The opening statement of the memo reads as follows:

"The advent of Auroville in Tamilnadu has given a new hope and cheer to the people. The first citizens of Auroville are those Tamil people who live on the soil of Auroville. The Tamil culture which is one of the oldest in the world has a unique role to play in the city of Auroville, which is coming up with the cooperation of various nations of the world and various states of India."

Some people out of their various self-interests are spreading the false propaganda that Auroville is not beneficial to the people, and does not help the poor. But we see today in society that the rich are becoming richer and the poor, poorer. **It is against this calamity that Auroville wants to fight. Auroville wants to show a new way of life.**

The two key points to note here are:

(a) it was not Mother who used the words "first citizens of Auroville" in regard to the local villagers; it was Varadharajan. Mother merely endorsed the use of his memo as a liaison tool with her blessings;

(b) at the time of the memo, and continuing throughout Mother's remaining life, no-one was accepted as "Aurovilian" without Mother's personal approval. In other words, even though Mother seemed to endorse the concept of the local people being the first citizens of the land or area of Auroville, which of course they were and continue to be in a broad literal sense, it didn't make them "Aurovilians". The latter status was something separate and special, which was given to a number of village families who specifically asked to join Auroville at the time, later known as the "integrated families". The other villagers were not seen as Aurovilian, without applying and being accepted as such by the Mother; nowadays the Entry Group.

Tim and Mauna



# Visiting the Mahatma Gandhi Home for the Aged

Albert Zwaan joined Auroville in 1997, after working for 20 years as the head of the outpatient department and operation theatre of a hospital in the Netherlands. In 1999, he started working for the Auroville Health Centre in Aspiration as a nurse-administrator. He also took responsibility for the Health Centre's village programme.

In 2006, Albert started his most treasured project. Knowing how little is done for some of the old people in India, those who end up living on the streets, emaciated and forgotten, he started the Mahatma Gandhi Home for the Aged in Lawspet, Pondicherry with the help of a Dutch foundation.

Albert was very closely involved. He organised doctors from the Auroville Health Centre to provide medical support when needed and sometimes he would personally take an old person into the Home and wash and feed her. Today, the Home houses 19 old women who receive three meals a day, a bed and a warm shower.

Albert passed away in 2013 at the age of 67, but the Home continues to be run by his adopted son, Royal.

Recently, some Aurovilians visited the Home. Here are Cecilia's impressions:

The Home for the Aged deserves its name of home, as it is simply and fully a home. No marble plaque, no sign of a fancy institution, only a simple cloth sign indicates the place, a plain two-storey family house in a quiet, clean street.

Royal welcomed us and took us inside as if we were family. And there they were, ten old women sitting peacefully in the main hall, with their bright eyes patiently waiting for each of us to greet them one by one. Their hands grasped ours with all their might as if to infuse our precious energy and store it for later. Downstairs more of them were lying down, as they could not walk. Some, it seems, had been here for many years.

Many of them were frail and vulnerable. A few were in their late sixties but most of them seemed to be in their eighties or more. One particularly talkative and energetic woman claimed to



The residents of the Mahatma Gandhi Home for the Aged. Royal is seated third from left (front row)

be 130 years old, although Royal gently reminded her that she was only 99.

Royal went out of his way to introduce them one by one, which showed how caring he was of each of them. He also explained how the Home functioned, and, above all, why it was necessary.

While India may seem to be doing well economically, wealth is distributed unequally and many live in loneliness and helplessness on the streets. All too often, these unfortunates are women. When a woman marries in India she is wished, "May you be the mother of a hundred sons", as to have only a daughter and no son, or worse still, no children at all, may condemn her to a life of misery and loneliness, ostracized by all, including her husband and in-laws.

I understood through conversations with them that some had never had children, or that the only

hope and guarantee of a safe old age, a son, had never materialized, or that their husband and children were either destitute or had died.

At one point, a surge of emotion overwhelmed me. The sight and touch of these women took me back to the day 13 years ago when my partner, Didier, and I visited the Bangalore orphanage where we adopted our daughter. I remembered a similar feeling of helplessness...

What were the sad stories of the women in this Home? And by what grace had they been taken in rather than continuing to live on one of the streets of Pondicherry, only to die in filth and anonymity, forgotten by the fast-moving world? How many more are there, of all ages, in India and abroad shovelled up in street corners, warming their bodies in cardboard boxes? And how many more Royals are needed to ease their load so that the divine bal-

ance is restored?

In India, they can rely on no government help. But help is there now in the shape of Royal. Royal, the long awaited son, the one who has 'adopted' so many mothers that, he says, "My own mother is sometimes jealous!" His sweet smile and reassuring presence day after day is a true comfort to these women. However, what counts most of all is that Royal will be there to take care of them during the last moments of their passage to another world. Royal is their king indeed!

Royal appears relaxed, but it is hard work to be here day after day. A huge responsibility has fallen on his shoulders, which he has accepted courageously and gladly. No doubt, Albert would be happy to see him now, taking care of these genuinely needy beings.

Soon it was time for our small group to depart. As we were leaving, an Indian couple arrived at the door. It was their 11th wedding anniversary, and, as many in the neighbourhood do, they had subsidized the breakfast, lunch and dinner of the Home's residents that day. A feeling of happiness and mutual gratitude was in the air.

It was reassuring to hear that Royal was not carrying the full financial burden alone – it costs Rs 60,000 a month to run the Home – and that the local population could demonstrate acts of generosity, for the future of the Home is not assured. Royal explained that without the regular support of Dr Uma and Dr Shano from the Auroville Health Centre, and the help in cash or kind from India and abroad, he would not be in a position to finance the daily cost of the home, let alone the exceptional medical costs that are sometimes needed. For the funds left by Albert are drying up.

Nevertheless, I could sense in Royal's smile a deep feeling of trust in the Divine's help that will help him carry on the work. Way to go Royal!

Cecilia

For more information visit [www.regaining-dignity.org](http://www.regaining-dignity.org) or contact [ghome.royal@gmail.com](mailto:ghome.royal@gmail.com)

## Lakshmi

It is close to dusk on a Saturday evening. The ladies of the Mahatma Gandhi Home for the Aged are seated around the two television sets, one upstairs and the other downstairs, eagerly awaiting the weekly special of the full feature Tamil movie. "Saturday evenings are much awaited," says Royal. In his mid-forties, Royal looks youthful – lightly built, and with an expressive and mobile face that breaks easily into a disarming smile. To these elderly ladies, he is their beloved 'foster' son.

Today I am there to meet and hear the story of one of its residents, Lakshmi, who lived and worked in the Auroville area. Her life story, like that of many others at the Home, is one played with by the capriciousness of fate. A life that began well but gradually bad luck descends and leads it to rock bottom and then, by Grace, the inevitable ascent to a life of dignity and joy under the shelter of the Gandhi Home for the Elderly.

Lakshmi has been expecting my arrival; she jumps down exuberantly from the high sofa and grabs my hand, shaking it vigorously in greeting. The three of us move up to the terrace where we can talk quietly.

"I am very happy here – I have

been here for the last 5 years, and I have no lack of anything," says Lakshmi, dressed warmly for the Pondicherry winter, a sweater over her sari and blouse, and a woollen cap covering her ears. "Royal is my son. There is no hunger here; he provides us with enough food, and enough tea and for me, enough betel leaves and nuts to chew...! He is like a goatherd who brings in fresh tender greens for the goat that is me!"

"I was born near Ulundurpettai in the village of Kalarukuppam; it was the day Gandhi was killed – that will tell you how old I am [66 years]. I was married off to a carpenter in Thoothukudi. He found work in Auroville under a maestro doing construction. So my husband, I, and our 1-year old son came to live in Kuyilapalayam. It was a good life. I also found work in the factory that made paper for wrapping soaps. For 16 years I worked there until the place was closed down by Mr. Ojha [the Auroville administrator, eds.]. But soon a technical unit dealing with fabric and tailoring was opened in the same building by a Hindi man. I worked 6 years at this place until I injured my knee there and could not work anymore. By this time my husband had died. I now found some garden work at a few homes in Auroville where I would cut grass.

My son was a stone sculptor. He was working for a foreigner from Italy in Thandrakuppan, near Mudaliarchavadi. That man bought some land and registered it under my son's name, and they were living there while I continued in Kuyilapalayam.

My son fell in love and married a girl from Thandrakuppan. Their first was a boy who died, and then a second boy was born. He was well and good at studies. Then fate intervened. My son found out that his wife was unfaithful so he left her and married for the second time, a girl from Edaiyanchavadi. They had a daughter and a son.

But my son's work with stone carving involved a lot of dust and stone powder. It affected his health badly and he had to be admitted to the hospital to be operated. He died during the operation.

I moved into my son's home in Edaiyanchavadi to help my daughter-in-law and my grandchildren. Her mother was also living there. Once when my grand-daughter gave me some coffee to drink, this lady told the child, "Why do you offer her coffee? Just lay her down and pour coffee in her mouth." It was an insult, and I kept quiet. However my grand-daughter got



very upset and spoke angrily to this lady. I chided my grand-daughter for being rude to an elderly person. For 2-3 days I stayed on in that house but I was mentally very disturbed. I finally decided to end my life.

I walked to the sea and try walking into the water to die, but some force – it felt like my son was putting his arms around me and pulling me back – kept

preventing me. I kept trying again and again to enter the sea from several spots, but every time I was rescued. After five attempts I gave up. I walked to the nearby Periya Amman Koil [Big Goddess temple], climbed up her steps, sat down and had a big cup of tea. Then I bought a lot of betel leaves and nuts and chewed paan to my heart's content. That was that.

Then I thought of this son, Royal; I had worked for his father Albert at the Auroville Health Centre and I knew he was running a home for old people. I decided that I would go to him and see – if he asked me to stay, I would stay, or else I would go to my birth village.

He told me I could stay, so this is now my son and this is now my home."

In conversation with Priya Sundaravalli

Lakshmi continues to be in touch with her son's family. Her two grandchildren visit her often bringing treats for all the ladies in the home, with special treats for their Lakshmi patti [grand-mother].

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