Auroville Today

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"Auroville must start a COVID-19 awareness drive for its employees"

"Vaccination lag in rural India points to a looming crisis" runs the May 19th front page article of *The Hindu*, one of India's national newspapers. "In a time that the second COVID-19 wave shows signs of easing, the spread of cases in rural areas and the relatively lower vaccination numbers there points to a burgeoning crisis." The article mentions that by May 14th only 12% to 15% of the inhabitants of rural India had received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, as against an estimated 30% of residents of urban and 19% in semi-urban areas. "The lower vaccination numbers in semi-rural and rural areas suggest that the impact of the pandemic will be more severe there," it warns.

"The article reflects the situation in the villages around Auroville," says M. Muthukumari, a Tamil Aurovilian who for the last 12 years has been conducting yoga-based wellbeing workshops in ten villages around Auroville. "In my workshop, COVID issues inevitably come up. It appears that there are many villagers who have mild COVID-like symptoms, but they refuse to go for testing. They are afraid that if they would test positive, they will be isolated in a quarantine facility and that's what they don't want. They feel safer at home and prefer to treat their symptoms with herbs and steam inhalation. But as social distancing at home is not possible as people live together in small houses, infection may spread very easily."



Yoga and health education: Muthukumari taking a class in Nesal school

Vaccination is not easily accepted. "The main reasons are fear and lack of proper information," says Muthukumari. "People are afraid of possible side-effects or say that the vaccination offers no guarantee." One reason for the suspicion is the death of the popular Tamil film star, Vivek, last month. A strong proponent of the COVID vaccines, he received the vaccine together with the state's Health Secretary J. Radhakrishnan and other government officials. But the next day he died from a massive cardiac arrest. Though Radhakrishnan said in a press meet that Vivek's cardiac arrest had no connection to the COVID vaccine, the fear and hesitancy continues.

Tamil Nadu has had a long history of vaccine hesitancy. According to the National Family Health Survey-4 (2014-16), the coverage of basic vaccines in the state was 69 per cent, despite some of the best health indicators. A 2019 Chennai-based study, published in the *Indian Journal of Community Medicine*, said: "The main drivers for vaccine hesitancy (in Tamil Nadu) were skepticism against newer vaccines, concerns about safety and fear of adverse effects, and the feeling that vaccines against uncommon diseases are not necessary."

In Auroville there are widely differing opinions on vaccination. "The employees are getting contradictory messages," says Muthukumari. "They see that many Aurovilians have chosen to get vaccinated and that they are not suffering from any serious side-effects. But they are also aware that some Aurovilians are actively propagating that vaccines are unsafe or that there is no need to get vaccinated."

The Government of Tamil Nadu, says Muthukumari, will soon start a massive vaccination campaign. But, Auroville, too, can offer support, for example by organising workshops or talks about COVID-19 and vaccinations. "It is a very stressful time. Many Auroville employees have lost their job due to the pandemic and the lockdowns; if this pandemic continues others may lose their job as well. They also see the effects of COVID around them. A workshop will help them to better understand the pros and cons of vaccination for themselves and their families and overcome their fears. I have been giving such workshops at a few places in Auroville, last month for the employees of Creativity. I was amazed to learn how little they actually knew and how confused they were. At the end of the workshop, many were more positive and confident."

Muthukumari is concerned about the possible heavy impact of COVID-19 on the villagers in view of the changing lifestyles she has witnessed. "When I started my work 12 years ago, people were connected with nature; they ate organic food, did much physical work, and treated any illness with oil baths and locally-available herbs and ate steamed foods. This was a traditionally healthy lifestyle. But that's fast disappearing. People now consume more fast food and sugar-sweetened beverages, and alcoholism is on the rise. The unhealthy diets, the physical inactivity and the harm from alcohol can cause comorbid health conditions which are a high risk factor in this pandemic."

Her health and healing workshops address these issues, except alcohol addiction which can be treated at the Mother Care Foundation Re-hab and De-addiction Center in nearby Kottakuppam. "My work is part of the work of the Thamarai Learning and Cultural Centre, a unit of Auroville's Village Action. Thamarai interacts with the Kottakuppam de-addiction centre when required."

Many Auroville employees consider Auroville as 'family'," says Muthukumari. "They are happy to come to work, as Auroville shows them how they can develop themselves and gives them many opportunities. They will be grateful if their unit or their community would help them to better understand the COVID situation, the importance of vaccination and the need of following safety protocols. It will contribute to the sense of belonging. It is in our common interest."

In conversation with Carel

Dears,

I am passing on some information to you all with this email. We have been hearing from everyone that the local villagers who are coming to work for us are scared to get tested. The reason we hear is that they are worried they will be "taken away" to a COVID isolation facility which they are unsure about.

A couple of Mondays back, my household worker arrived looking sick. She said she had fever. I asked her to go home to rest, called her son and requested him to take his mother to get tested at the COVID facility at Thailapuram.

There was a lot of resistance to get the tests done, but they did, and a couple of days later I got a call that they were both positive and they would need to go to Dr. Pauls Engineering College / hostel which is currently a government facility for isolating/quarantining COVID positive patients. I was told an ambulance came to pick them up.

I was in touch with them for the ten days (or so) they were there. They told me that there are nearly 80 rooms at the hostel, where they accommodate two to three persons in each room. Toilets/bathrooms are "satisfactory". They get three meals a day in plastic bags, left on a table and an announcement is made on two large speakers telling them to come pick up the food. (Breakfast is idli and sambhar; lunch is a rice based thali; dinner is a chapathi based thali, all vegetarian.) Twice a day a nurse comes to monitor them and give medication as required. They got retested and tested negative a couple of days back and are home now.

The reason I am sending this is to see if there is some way you could pass this on to our domestic help through telling others or via social media, to tell them that this is first hand information. That this government facility is good and not to be "scared" or worried about being "taken away".

The son thanked me for insisting he and his mother get tested and go to this facility, this being a safer option than staying in the same house with his wife and daughter. Upon reaching home, he wrote to me "Now only I am happy after seeing my mother's improvement".

Sending out this email seems like the right thing to do.

Warm regards, and stay safe.

Adil

Dear Subscriber,

India is in the second wave of COVID-19 and Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry have been in many weeks of lockdown. It was therefore not possible to print* Auroville Today *at the usual time. The May issue was only sent out in the beginning of June.

Some subscribers have not received some of the earlier issues. If this happened to you, please email us at avtoday@auroville.org.in and we will send you the missing issues.

We hope you will enjoy this special summer issue.

The editors

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Auroville Village Action's response to the second wave

In April and May 2021, India witnessed a surge in COVID-19 infections, with the country seeing over 3,50,000 fresh cases of COVID-19 daily, one of the highest one-day tallies anywhere in the world and the number of deaths was also increasing every day. Though the wave is subsiding, Tamil Nadu continues to be one of the most infected states of India with over 250 deaths per day.

The second wave has impacted our region also very badly. While there was no death reported during the first wave in our area, this time there are more than 200 people affected by the virus and 22 deaths till the end of May. Yet, many more with symptoms do not go for testing for fear of infection and death due to hospitalisation.

This wave has impacted the socio-economic fabric of our region terribly, and apart from the unskilled and semi skilled workers, drivers, construction workers and people working in private schools and guest houses are the worst affected.

Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) has launched a collaborative pandemic response and prevention initiative planned to assist 20,000 families in 75 communities in the bioregion of Auroville, to reduce the spread and the impacts of the pandemic. This initiative has different aspects.

Immunity boosting natural medicines and education on prevention

The pandemic is burdening the health facilities badly. To help the communities control the spread of the disease, AVAG has run an extensive natural health care awareness campaign and education and prevention initiative. It aims to educate people to follow preventive measures and boost their immunity. Educational flyers and autorickshaw canvassing and social media have been used extensively to raise awareness and create a better understanding of the second wave. During the first wave of the pandemic, AVAG distributed *Arsenicum Album* homeopathic immunity booster to 16,000 families. The local DSP said the places where the dosage was given had significantly fewer cases of COVID than elsewhere in Vanur block, which is why AVAG is distributing it again. As per the request of the villages AVAG also plans to distribute Siddha medicine in the communities around Auroville.

There have been some concerns in the villages about the safety of vaccines. Village representatives asked AVAG to invite the Block Medical Officer and the police to speak on this matter. The villagers asked a lot of questions and received clarification. With the cooperation of the village groups, AVAG also assists the block medical office to organise vaccination camps in the villages.

Providing support to the most vulnerable people

Many have lost their livelihoods in the second phase of the pandemic. In India there is a minimum job assurance scheme called MNREGS to help the most vulnerable families earn a minimum amount by doing jobs provided under the scheme. However, in our area the scheme has not been operating for the past few months and, anyway, the latest government order has banned people above 55 years and ones with co-morbidities from doing work under this scheme.

Many single women, widows, the physically challenged and the aged depend on this income in a big way. AVAG plans to distribute Rs. 500 worth of hygiene and food materials like masks, soaps, dhal, oil, garlic, turmeric, to each of the 3 000 most vulnerable families in the communities around Auroville.

AVAG will also distribute these packs to all families in which there have been cases of COVID.

Distribution of Masks

There have been repeated requests from Women's Groups and the communities around Auroville for AVAG to supply reusable two-layered cotton masks, which are effective in controlling the spread of the epidemic. Normally, these are not sold in the local market, and they are also quite expensive. However, AVAG will endeavour to supply all who are in need.



Distribution of immunity boosters



Masks making



Preparing hygienic food packets for distribution



Awareness meeting with village leaders

Regarding the mental health of the villagers, AVAG has given the mobile numbers of the staff to call in case of a need, and we have asked the leaders of the networks in the villages, like the task forces, women SHG (Self Help Group) members and youth club members to be supportive and inform us in case of an emergency. There is a psychologist who is willing to give online support to the traumatized people and AVAG is sharing his number with the people through its network.

The pandemic response and prevention initiative was developed with village representatives who have worked closely with AVAG since the beginning of the pandemic. Village and street level task forces, consisting of village leaders, women's federation, youth and the members of sports associations and Government departments, as well as members of Auroville units and schools, are helping AVAG execute the project, ensuring that Auroville and the neighbouring villages support each other at this critical time.

This project is also fostering unity and harmony within the communities, as in almost all settlements different sections of the communities are working together to control the pandemic.

AVAG is very grateful and thankful for all the support they received for their previous campaigns, without which they would not have been able to help the rural communities to overcome the first wave. Though AVAG would like to execute all the above activities in the neighbouring villages of Auroville, their support to these communities depends upon how much they can fundraise.

To support the 20,000 families in the rural communities in the bioregion of Auroville during this critical time, AVAG needs INR 40,55,000.00 (Euro 45,554.70 / US $ 55,331.90) and so far it has raised roughly half of it. If you would like to contribute to this initiative, please contact avagoffice@auroville.org.in for more details.

Any support is deeply appreciated.

The Auroville Village Action Group

COVID 19 "Nal Valvu" BOOKLET

Auroville's Institute of Integral Health Santé and the Auroville Village Action Group have issued the booklet "Nal Valvu" (Good and meaningful life), which aims at raising awareness about COVID-19 – how it spreads, how to manage the risk of infection, what community transmission and herd immunity are, and how the Covishield vaccine affects immunity. The booklet contains multiple strategies to boost family immunity and protection. It has sections on factors that depress our immune system, and on lifestyle recommendations to maintain wellbeing, such as exercise, positivity, mental health, sleep and immunity-boosting diets and supplements. It also mentions Ayurvedic immunity enhancing preparations approved by the Indian Government (AYUSH), homeopathic remedies, and acupressure as a way to stimulate the flow of Chi energy.

The booklet will be distributed to homes in the villages surrounding Auroville by Auroville Village Action Group.

New Secretary appointed

On June 2, 2021, the Working Committee informed the community that Gujarat-cadre IAS officer Dr. Jayanti S. Ravi, who has been serving as Principal Secretary in the Gujarat Health and Family and Welfare Department, has been appointed as Secretary of the Auroville Foundation on deputation. Dr. Ravi, a 1991-batch IAS officer, will be Secretary of the Auroville Foundation "for three years with effect from the date of assumption of charge of the post", states the transfer order. Dr. Ravi will succeed Mr. M.V. Chunkath IAS (ret'd), who demitted the office of Secretary, Auroville Foundation on June 13th 2019. It is unknown when Dr. Ravi will take up her post in Auroville.

Dr. Ravi has visited Auroville on several occasions in a personal capacity and had worked with Dr. Kireet Joshi, who mentored her in studying the works and philosophies of Sri Aurobindo. She is a native of Chennai, is married to Shri Ravi Gopalan and has two children. She holds a Master's degree in nuclear physics from the University of Madras, a Master degree in Public Administration (MPA) from Harvard University and a PhD in e-governance from MS University, Baroda.

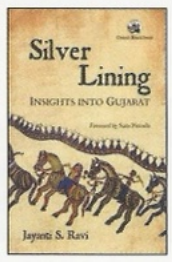
Dr. Ravi's achievements as an IAS officer are impressive. As a 25-year old working in the district of Jamnagar in Gujarat, she managed to rescue over 500 bonded labourers from the ships anchored in the high seas off Jamnagar coast. As District Collector of the Panchmahals district in Gujarat, she was able to secure lasting peace in the city of Godhra after the 2002 incident, when 58 Hindu pilgrims returning from Ayodhya died inside a train compartment, which caught fire. Her effective handling of communal tensions won her accolades from the media. During her tenure at Panchmahals, she also started an e-governance experiment to make government information and forms readily available to the public.

In August 2004, she was handpicked by Congress President and UPA chairperson, Smt. Sonia Gandhi, and was deputed as Director of the National Advisory Council which was headed by Ms. Gandhi. She was deputed at the UPA-led NAC till July 2007.

She then served again the state of Gujarat in various functions, such as Labour Commissioner and Director, Labour & Employment. She has worked as Commissioner, Higher Education and as Commissioner, Technical Education in Gujarat. She has worked with Prof. Kireet Joshi, the advisor to the then Chief Minister of Gujarat, to establish the Children's University, the Indian Institute of Teacher Education (IITE) and the Gujarat Educational Innovations Commission.



Dr. Jayanti Ravi



In this period she also wrote the book *Silver Lining: Insights into Gujarat*, which carries a foreword by Sam Pitroda, Chairman of the National Innovation Council. The book is a collection of some of the experiences and instances that Dr. Ravi found herself in at various points in her career. Originally written as columns in the magazine *Frontline*, the vignettes show the career life of a bureaucrat credited with turning around a dormant system of higher education in Gujarat. It shows another side of administration, the human face of development, portraying, among others, educated youths returning to their villages to usher in a transformation of life; children whose demands for books to read force a sleepy public library to order three thousand books; illiterate women ensuring that the village school is functional and well kept; and persons afflicted with leprosy who struggle for the right to a dignified life. All these diverse stories give an account of the manner in which government intervention could catalyse the lives of common people.

Dr. Ravi subsequently became the Principal Secretary and Commissioner, Rural Development, in which time she championed the Swachch Bharat Mission for Rural Sanitation in the State. During this period she authored the book *Sanity in Sanitation*, published in 2019, which talks about the journey of an IAS officer who strove to fulfill the dream of an Open Defecation Free Gujarat. The true meaning of Swachh Bharat was seen as village after village transformed into a cleaner hub as citizens took up the responsibility to keep their village open-defecation free. The book's cover shows a mother leading her toddler to squat on the toilet, a 'luxury' which at the time was a far-off dream.



Dr. Ravi was posted as the Principal Secretary and Commissioner, Health and Family Welfare, in Gujarat's administration in June 2017 and was spearheading the COVID-19 control activities in the state.

She focused on the 7/11 approach based on a total of 11 indicators, seven of which were related to mother & child health such as MMR (Maternal Mortality Rate), IMR (Infant Mortality Rate), Sex Ratio at Birth, Low Birth Weight babies, Spacing between births, Immunisation, Anemia as well as four other indicators related to Communicable diseases, Non-Communicable diseases, Nutrition and Mental Health. She leveraged technology to scale up a ten-year-old digital health initiative pilot across the state, which was launched by the Prime Minister in October 2017 and given the name TeCHO (technology enabled Community Health Operations). With her focused and result-oriented leadership over the last four years in the Health sector, with a large number of innovative, strategic interventions and initiatives, the performance of the state in the health sector underwent a dramatic transformation. In the SDG India Index by NITI & United Nations, Gujarat's performance for Goal 3 – Good Health & Well-Being has significantly improved. From the 17th rank in 2018-19, Gujarat moved to the 8th position in 2019-20, and obtained the first rank across the states of India, with a score of 86 for 2020-21 in the SDG India Index report released in June this year.

As chairperson of the UN Mehta Institute of Cardiology & Research, she led the team to enable the dedication to the nation of the country's largest Cardiac care facility, with over 1200 beds. During her tenure as Principal Secretary, Health, Gujarat's handling and response to Covid has been appreciated and documented by WHO along with IIM, Ahmedabad and IIPH, Gandhinagar in the Intra Action Review. A case study on the Gujarat response to Covid has been published by IIM, Ahmedabad on Gujarat's response to Covid under her administrative leadership.

In this period she also promoted a study by the Gujarat government's AYUSH [*Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy, eds.*] department, with the approval of an expert allopathic committee into the effectiveness of using Ayurveda treatment along with standard allopathic treatment on COVID-19 patients. The study was conducted on two groups of patients admitted in the 1200-bed COVID facility in a hospital in Ahmadabad. One group received standard allopathic treatment, the other a government-approved combination of Ayurvedic and allopathic treatments. The second group of patients was shown to recover faster compared to those who received only standard allopathic treatment. Dr. Ravi spoke about this treatment in a talk with members of the World Ayurveda Foundation. *(See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CM8vIT1t35o.)*

Dr. Ravi is known for living a simple lifestyle. She is passionate about hatha yoga and carnatic singing. Some of her recitals are available on YouTube, such as the musical tribute *Walking to Freedom* she gave in 2007 at the Mahatma Gandhi Ashram at Sabarmati, Ahmadabad, Gujarat. *(See https://youtu.be/wQf6CPwbcTU.)*

Dr. Ravi is active on Twitter (twitter.com/jayantiravi/), Facebook (facebook.com/jayantiravi/,) and Instagram (instagram.com/p/Bjp3_u1jjMc/)

Governing Board and International Advisory Council not yet appointed

In its May report to the community, the Working Committee informed that the appointment of the Chairman and members of the Governing Board, vacant since November 2020, and the appointment of the members of the International Advisory Council, vacant since September 2017, is still awaited.

EDUCATION

Education during the pandemic

The lockdown which began in March 2020 required schools to shift from classroom teaching to online teaching. *Auroville Today* interviewed Divya Lieser, a teacher in Future School, to understand the challenges of online teaching and to hear about her other perspectives on education in Auroville.

Did the online learning platforms successfully replace classroom learning?

Divya: No, there were several issues. Firstly, a relationship could not be developed between the student and the teacher. It was difficult for me to understand if the students understood what I explained to them. Secondly, there were internet issues and voice disconnections. Thirdly, not all students have access to smart phones and devices to be able to access online education. Lastly, it's neither fun for a teacher to teach, nor for a student to learn through this medium.

The pandemic demands teachers rapidly adapt to a new pedagogy. Do you think that there is a need for Auroville teachers to be trained in how to equip themselves in the fast-changing world?

I think it would be helpful if there is support for teachers in Auroville, especially the older teachers. It would be helpful if teachers could be assisted in getting acquainted with new applications for taking clear photos and being able to use digital learning platforms, such as Google Classroom, Google meet, Zoom etc.

How do you see the future of education in Auroville? Will online education have a part to play?

I see the future in classroom learning. When I physically met students and asked them what they remembered from the online classes, they said, "Nothing". Online learning works for the older students who are mostly at the university level as they are mature and motivated to understand the study content. However, for the younger age group, the online teaching is harder.

What according to you does 'integral education' mean?

In Auroville, schools are very different from many other places around the world, because they offer a wide choice of 'alternative' or non-conventional subjects. In TLC (The Learning Centre), they teach gardening and baking, for example. When in Transition School, I followed a programme called 'Awareness through the body' which helped me a lot to develop my capacity for attention, concentration and relaxation.

So integral education for me is equipping oneself for life physically, mentally, vitally and spiritually. It is important to gain the basic tools and sharpen oneself in different dimensions at an early age. Other 'learnings' will come naturally at a later time.

You have translated Fabrice Dini's new book called 'An Integral Education for Growth and Blossoming' from French to English. This is a practical guide for teachers and parents. Are there some suggestions in the book that you think are important?

It is a wonderful book. The book is built on solid foundations of Integral Education: mindfulness, emotional intelligence, positive psychology, outdoor education, ethics, character strengths. The techniques mentioned in the book are the ones which I learnt in Transition school and in TLC.

What is the message you would like to give to the students who are badly missing meeting their friends, and sitting at home feeling demotivated to do anything?

Remain flexible and adapt to your new reality, however long or short it may be. Learn to live with yourself, love yourself, and enjoy your own company. You are after all the only person with whom you will spend your entire life.

In conversation with Shakti Sharma

VACCINATION

L'Entente Cordiale

At the end of May, an Auronet post announced that the French Consulate in Pondicherry would be providing free Moderna vaccines for any Europeans, due to the Consulate's probable overstocking for the French residents. I'd been umming and ahhing about the vaccine, starting the process to get a PAN card (an Indian ID card for tax registration, I belatedly discovered) in order to ensure a certificate upon vaccination for potential travel. Many Aurovilians have already been vaccinated with the India-manufactured Covishield (of AstraZeneca origin) or Covaxin vaccines, in numerous sites locally. But when I read this news I jumped, even though I had only once been vaccinated in all my previous forty years. Although I am a British citizen, my mother is German and I had applied for German citizenship some months back, the Consulate accepted me. There even was an American in our group.

Suddenly the 34 or so Aurovilians who registered for the Moderna vaccine were given two days to be in Chennai rather than Pondy, as a lot of the French citizens had left Chennai for France during the pandemic. At this juncture, some people opted out due to the long drive there and back. A sufficiently large cohort of us decided to go, so we looked at booking a bus, but this was not allowed in the strict lockdown. Then we split into separate taxi parties.

On a day that *The Hindu* newspaper described as 'searingly hot' we drove up along an eerily empty East Coast Road and I discovered that when the bumper-to-bumper traffic jams of my airport runs are removed, Chennai reveals itself to be quite a pretty city. We were stopped four or five times at police checkpoints, but our e-pass and consular permits allowed us to be waved through.

At the pukka Apollo Hospital we were met by numerous efficient hospital staff and a consular official. There was a noticeable 'esprit de corps' with the Aurovilians on foreign turf and I got to meet new people. There is a kind of identifiable sartorial commonality in how we looked.

After registration we had a preliminary chat with a doctor and a 30 minute wait after the jab and the prized certificate. Then back through the bare roads and highways, past a totally smashed car, which we guessed was disoriented by the lack of traffic, and we were home. The return journey plus the hour in the hospital took six and a half hours – a record for me. In a month we will return for our second injection, probably with traffic, but hopefully just as smoothly and well organized.

Afterwards, a lot of those vaccinated thanked the Consulate for their efficient organization. It was a generous exhibition of 'egalité, fraternité,' and if your medical philosophy extends this far, 'liberté'.

Peter

No more 'business as usual'

While Tamil Nadu is in a second lockdown, Auroville entrepreneurs reflect on how they handled the first lockdown.

On March 24, 2021, a year to the day after the first lockdown was suddenly implemented, Uma from Upasana, a clothing unit, invited Auroville businesses to meet and learn from each other about how they had so far navigated the challenges of corona. Over half a dozen managers shared personal and business insights from pandemic times and how it had changed them and their companies. The participants were Bobby (Auromics), Kathy (Ecofemme), Uma (Upasana), Torkil (Prakrit), Clemens (Aurorarchana), Margarita (MG Ecoduties) and Aurelio (Svaram).

The event was introduced by Torkil, who noted that businesses have had sharply divided fortunes in corona time: units that produce items for indoor life (such as food, interior decoration and online living) have thrived; while businesses focussed on outside life (such as entertainment, restaurants and outdoor clothing) have been in low demand. He encouraged Auroville businesses to listen and learn from each other's experiences.



Employees at Ecofemme making sanitary napkins

Personal blessing

An unexpected and notable commonality was the number of presenters who began by sharing how positively-impacted they had been by the halting of normal life and having more free time. Bobby began her speech by saying that "The lockdown was one of the best times of my life. It was so nice to have these six weeks when you didn't have to get up, with no workers waiting for you. I treat this lockdown as a blessing." The first lockdown was "a welcome opportunity to stop, slow down and take a reflective break," reflected Kathy. Uma mentioned that the lockdown "personally, was a spiritually high time and I am very grateful for that."

Challenges and closures

The lack of income from sales, while they still had to pay outgoings like wages,was obviously a financial challenge for the units. Some of the participants said they contemplated closing their companies. Clemens was prepared to run for another month or two, and "June was a difficult time, a crunch time." Bobby also noted that by the time it got to April," I thought, wow, let's close, let's be locked down forever, the time has come. But I still had so many orders, and I realised it was not fair to the workers to close, and people wanted goods. So I decided to keep going." However, she did have to close down her tailoring unit which employed six people because it was mainly supplying Mira Boutique in the Visitor's Centre, which was shut for six or seven months. Uma realised that she had two choices; she could continue till her reserves ran out in July, or close down the production and tailoring side of her enterprise. She decided on the latter in order to save Upasana and, in what she termed her 'hardest moment', reduced a team of fifty to fifteen.

Essential Services?

Officially, companies were not allowed to work during the six weeks of the first lockdown, but there were exemptions. Margarita of MG Ecoduties was called by the Tamil Nadu Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises in the first week of the lockdown, which suggested she apply for a pass to continue working as an 'essential service', because they recognised the value of her products in a time of heightened hygiene concerns. After one month, Ecofemme was told that sanitary products were considered essential items, so they were one of the first units to resume operations and receive income again.

Anxieties

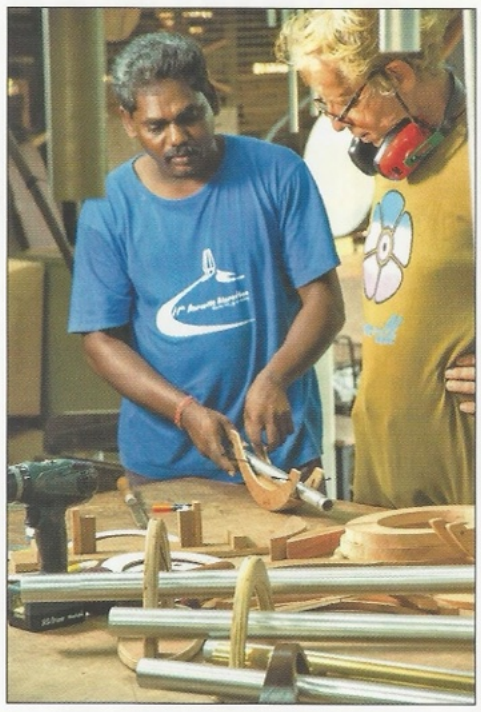
April 2020 was a time of great uncertainty for many people, especially for local workers who had less economic ability to weather job loss or months with less pay. Kathy remembers that her biggest challenge as a manager was "trying to make sense of the uncertainty, with people in the unit who were all at sea with this situation and who didn't know if their jobs were secure. The emotional toll of navigating people's anxieties was something I found most stressful." Clemens also noted that "psychological pressures were very high for everyone in the early corona time, not only for managers, but for workers as well. Even today, everyone is a little bit jittery. We talk to them but they have not yet full confidence that this is their home, which is what we want. Psychologically we are all a little bit in recovery."

Successful

After the initial loss of six weeks of work and doubts about continuing, many businesses had some unexpectedly good business months. Clemens recounted that from August 2020 onwards, customers for his furniture antique business started coming back." It was a blessing and surprise, and suddenly we were inundated with orders. Now we are in the nice situation of rejecting orders because we don't have production capacity." When they restarted in May 2020, Ecofemme had their best sales month ever. Due to receiving enough big international orders, Svaram was fortunate to not go into a crisis. MG Ecoduties had a very good 2020, just 6% down on their previous year, despite all the tumult. They started a new line of six skin care products, and looked at new markets, notably the pet care industry, eco hotels, urban laundromats and spiritual communities. Their offerings to the Auroville outlets PTDC and HERS increased 12% compared to 2019/20, even though they sold the items at a four rupee loss each.

e-commerce and online development

With one main exception, a common feature was that businesses became far more e-commerce and online-oriented after the first lockdown. Torkil, who is an economist, pointed out that e-commerce had accelerated all over the world during this time. This was true for Aurorarchana, who noticed that they had a lot more online sales. What was a novelty for Clemens was that "a lot of people in India who I have never met were placing orders. Normally you meet your customer." All the Auromics hand-knitted clothing exports went to online retailers. The lockdown provided the time for Svaram to redesign their website and make it highly interactive and refined, and since then they have been receiving enquiries every day. While Margarita went into the lockdown planning to do e-commerce, she instead changed direction and focussed on B2B (business to business) retailing. Her company MG Ecoduties increased its aquaculture and composting production, the latter by 250% to 700,000 tonnes. As part of Ecofemme's menstrual advocacy work, Kathy noticed that they were increasingly invited to speak to webinars in India and internationally.



Making a wind chime at Svaram



An employee of Auromics knitting a sweater

Production

Whether to focus on production or not was a mixed issue for many of the businesses. Uma decided that Upasana can't be a production unit and refined her business to focus on "creativity, our key asset." Bobby on the other hand, ended up realising that "I love production. I sat down and noticed I am doing what I love to do, being a production unit."

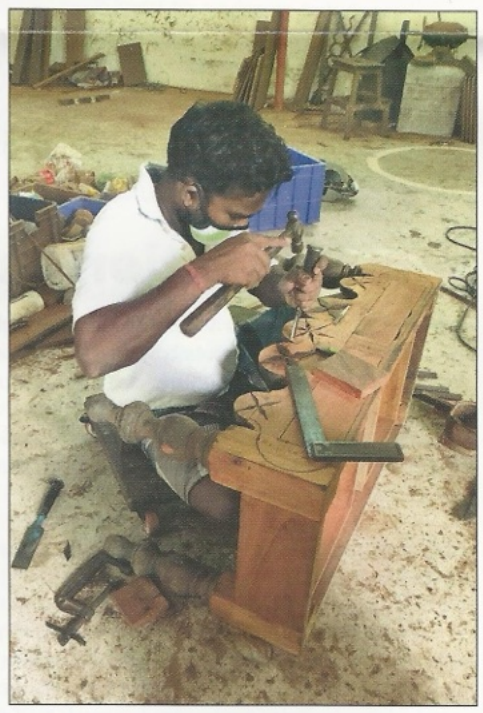
Workers

The relationship companies had with their employees was brought into sharp relief by the challenges of COVID and reduced income. Most of the companies still paid annual bonuses and some even paid full salaries in April 2020, with others paying 60% of the wages. Kathy felt the need "to pay more attention to the human dimension. Everybody went through a lot, with uncertainty and anxieties about personal health and jobs." During the first lockdown when Svaram's workers returned to their villages, Aurelio noticed that "they went back into traditional ways of food and preventive care."

Even though the unit didn't have enough work for the unskilled workers, Svaram committed to going on together and managed to sustain that.

Reinvention

The lockdown became an opportunity for some businesses to radically restructure their work and for many to change from 'business as usual'. Uma used the lockdown time to meditate on what the new Upasana would look like and how to be more relevant than before. Upasana's home is now reborn as a 'conscious living' campus. "We went back to being creative," Uma noted and focussed on collaborating with others, including Auroville Village Action Group which has production capacity. She realised that this fundamental change could only "happen because of Corona." Aurelio took a leaf out of the concept of slow food and wondered what 'slow business' would look like and reflected that it was "very beautiful to slow down. The team enjoyed a bit more breathing space, so we had space for innovation, for us to be able to develop new things and think out of the box. Now we have a nice media studio running." Torkil realised that there are times when it's good to have to clean out a space and move somewhere new. He also realised that he "had grown his company out of passion: it was more a passion than a company, and there is a limit to how much my passion can grow a company." Kathy became less inclined to push herself and her team, and realised that she could no longer work the conventional 9-5 and needed to take time and space for herself. As Ecofemme changes, she notices that "it still feels a bit loose, but the joy and productivity has not fallen back; if anything it has increased. We've become more relaxed as a result, and are trying to listen to what wants to happen rather than push on with an agenda."



A carpenter at Aurorarchana

Auroville

The presenters also mused on Auroville's reactions to the lockdown and future opportunities. Margarita wants to increase prosperity in Auroville and divert her bank accounts from outside banks to the Financial Service. The Auroville Board of Commerce (ABC) supported Auroville units with 44 lakhs of loans during the pandemic. Nearly all the loans requested were granted and are being repaid.The lockdown threw up a chance to look at ourselves anew, and in that spirit, Aurelio reflected on how well Auroville unites around challenges and wondered whether in the future Auroville could focus more on being an educational and design research hub.

As Auroville is intended to be an experiment dedicated to unending education, it was perhaps no surprise that the first lockdown brought learning in its wake, with life changes and units adapting to this newer world. The sense of something new being born beyond 'business as usual' was palpable, even if at times it was uncomfortable and difficult for those involved. And it began with the managers finding time to listen more to themselves.

Report by Peter



Employees at MG Ecoduties packing soaps

PRISMA reinvents itself. Again.

Having been a niche publisher for many years, PRISMA, like many other productive units in Auroville, faced a crisis which threatened its future as a result of the lockdown in 2020. PRISMA responded by reinventing itself. But how did this happen? And what does the new reincarnation look like?

Auroville Today spoke to one of the founding members, Franz Fassbender, and the two volunteers, Loretta and Pranav, who have been instrumental in birthing the new PRISMA.



From left: Pranav, Loretta and Franz

Auroville Today: Actually, this is not the first time that PRISMA has had to reinvent itself.

Franz: No, it already happened a number of times. But the story begins before that. Many years ago Tim Wrey and I were running a unit called Spectrum, which was doing the advertising and marketing for Aurelec computers. Tim had language skills and, among other things, was editing the Aurelec magazine while I had a design background, so we made a good team. After the Auroville Foundation Act, the situation with Aurelec changed and our unit was dissolved. However, Tim and I wanted to continue the work together. We had a few clients who gave us jobs printing computer manuals, leaflet and brochures and this managed to keep us going for some time.

We had been using offset presses for our printing jobs. But then the whole printing business changed as a result of the internet, and suddenly our clients told us they didn't need any more 'hard copy' leaflets and brochures, because now everything could be online. So we had to reinvent ourselves.

At that time, not many people in Auroville were working with this new technology to do graphic and design work, so we formed PRISMA to do this. To begin with, we got a lot of work, mainly from inside Auroville, but then more and more people started offering this service and our income shrank. That is when we started to design and print books ourselves.

We started with the Auroville architecture book which was very successful; it was our main source of income for some time. We specialize in small editions and have always been most interested in printing books about Auroville and Sri Aurobindo and Mother, but during the last ten years people have also been coming with their own texts to get them typeset and printed.

Then last year we had the first lockdown.

We had been selling our books in Auroville and Pondicherry, but suddenly all the outlets closed and no visitors and tourists were coming to Auroville: we had been very dependent on these visitors for our books sales. So, suddenly, there was no income.

But I had realized some time ago that PRISMA could not go on in the old way. The market for physical books was changing because the new generation has completely different reading habits. I knew that we needed to reinvent ourselves again, but I didn't know how. That's when I met these people who offered to help.

Loretta: A friend had introduced me to the works of Medhananda. We visited PRISMA because we heard they were publishing his works and that we could get Medhananda's *Eternity Game* here, but we were not able to meet Franz at that time because he was in Europe. In 2015 I met him on 'The Walk of Hope' in Amritsar and he invited us to visit Auroville again. I started coming regularly, as well as doing work with children in northern India. When the lockdown happened, I decided to stay in India and make Auroville my base.

Pranav: A few years back I stumbled across Auroville on the internet and thought it would be an interesting place to visit for a couple of weeks. I often thought that my time here was up but, somehow, one thing led to another and I've been here for three or four years now. And one of those things was working with PRISMA.

What interested you in working with PRISMA?

Pranav: As a programmer I've not had many opportunities to participate in a project like this. They don't have a lot of money to hire highly skilled professionals but they have something very precious to offer, which is the story of Auroville which they have been sharing for many years. So my hope is that through a change in the technology, the words of Mother and Sri Aurobindo and the story of Auroville will now reach hundreds of thousands of people. It's very meaningful to be part of a project like this.

How did you set about reinventing PRISMA? Was there a strategy?

Pranav: We learned that PRISMA needed some kind of transformation but we didn't have any grand strategy. I am a programmer so I offered to do a website for them, and that's how it all started. After that, I think we were making stuff up as we went along.

Franz: It was a developing story.

So you began by creating a website.

Pranav: Yes, the first website was basically a catalogue of all the PRISMA books. I didn't expect a big response, but I was totally surprised that in the last two months it got over 5,000 hits from individuals in 25 countries.

But this website is just one part of it. Last month we added a web shop so that you can buy books directly from the website. Then there are web-books. A web-book is basically a book on the web which has its own interface: it is not a PDF or an e-book. Janet Fearn's *Memories of Auroville*, about the very early days of Auroville based on interviews with Aurovilians who lived here between 1968 and 1973, is the first [*see review on page 7*].

Loretta: In the beginning we were just trying to catalogue the books. But then Franz is actually a very good artist and has a collection of meaningful artwork, so we developed another website called PRISMA Arts for his own art and what he has collected. It provides art prints, posters, merchandise, and other art-inspired objects made on demand, featuring original artwork, rare photographs and creations from Auroville, India and other places.

There is also PRISMA Design because Franz is a graphic designer, and together with our new team we are able to offer a complete range of design know-how. We also created PRISMA Dreams as a way of passing on Auroville's rich heritage to the younger generation.

These projects are still being developed.

You've also made interesting choices in terms of the technology you have adopted.

Pranav: Yes. As a small publisher PRISMA finds itself in a world dominated by large technology companies, like Amazon, that have private profit as their guiding interest. We have decided to adopt open standards and open-source technologies in publishing web books. By developing this platform as a progressive alternative to proprietary e-books, we hope to keep PRISMA independent so that they can freely narrate the story of Auroville, as they have been doing since 1988.

The technologies we use are not only cutting-edge but also minimize the running costs. For example, running the six PRISMA websites and the ten web-books will cost us about 20,000 rupees a year.

All this means we don't have to be obsessed with the bottom line, with making profit.

We have about ten more web-books lined up and I think at a very modest projection, we will see traffic of 50,000 hits by the end of this year. The web-book platform is evolving, and in the future we will have the possibility to offer audio books, and also to make them accessible for special-needs users.

I would also like PRISMA to have its own server in PRISMA so it can be fully independent.

You say that you don't need to be obsessed with making profit. But PRISMA cannot completely neglect the financial aspect, and putting books on Amazon is a good way of getting publicity and sales. So what is your alternative financial strategy?

Pranav: As an author, if you are publishing a web-book you have the choice to make it free, or to make it available on the gift economy, or to have people pay a set price for it. This choice remains with the author and publisher.

Franz: We can still put books on Amazon, we can do both. But right now we like offering our web books free or on the gift economy.

Why?

Pranav: Nobody has the money to pay for books!

Franz: Due to the lockdown I've been spending much longer on the internet, taking online classes and workshops. Many of these are free or work on the gift economy. I like that. Janet agreed that her book could be on the gift economy and 'pay-what-feels-right' basis. The print version of the book will be available for purchase later in the year.

Our next web book will be on the aims and ideals of Auroville, and I don't want to charge money for that because I want it freely available to every Aurovilian and everybody in the world. Of course, if you want to support PRISMA you can make a donation, but if you have no money, that's no problem, you can read it.

This is completely different from the conventional book-selling model, but I think it fits perfectly with the Auroville ideal.

Pranav: This is how the World Wide Web started, there was the ideal perspective that all information would be free and everybody would benefit. But it got hijacked. Isn't it surprising that after so many decades of development that so many things like e-books are still so expensive? Publishing in the manner we have adopted is an experiment in abundance – we trust that when we give, we will also receive.

Loretta: There's also a larger picture here. I guess if we are in Auroville, we know there has to be a collective revolution, otherwise we are doomed. I'm from Hong Kong and I've seen people evolving spontaneously before my eyes, and I think that is what Mother and Sri Aurobindo had been talking about all this time.

I think now is the time that every one of us has been waiting for, the change that we know is coming. Auroville is part of this larger world movement, and I guess this is why we acted in the way we did without even knowing it, and that is how the whole PRISMA thing has evolved. In other words, we are trying to the use positive technology that is available to make this dream of a different future happen.

Pranav: On the world level, we don't know what will happen. The reality we have been used to has suddenly gone, and there are many variables. We are using this technology to share Auroville stories and the words of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo with the world collective, and who knows what effect this will have? Maybe now, because of the immense suffering, more people are ready to receive and to respond to it.

You have had to reinvent PRISMA so many times, Franz, don't you ever long for a little more stability?

Franz: Not at all, it's a great adventure. This work brings a lot of joy because you see the wonderful opportunities, and you are not stuck. When we started with the website work, they had all kinds of ideas and I was always saying, 'Yes, let's try it'.

Pranav: I really admire this in Franz. This is the creative spirit in tune with the times.

Loretta: All that we have done is due to Franz.

From an interview by Alan

The PRISMA websites:
www.prisma.haus
books.prisma.haus
design.prisma.haus
dreams.prisma.haus
arts.prisma.haus

I don't know

Every day I am dumbstruck by how knowledgeable my fellow Aurovilians are. Take COVID. At a time when there is so much conflicting information available, and when even those who have worked for many years in the epidemiological field are still trying to figure out where it came from and what it means for the modern world, many Aurovilians can tell you the solution, or can direct you unerringly to a website or a statement of Mother or Sri Aurobindo, which makes sense of it all.

How on earth do they do it?

Whatever the explanation, one would expect that with so many knowledgeable people around, Auroville would run like a well-oiled machine. But this doesn't seem to be the case.

Why?

One possibility is that the knowledgeable ones disagree among themselves. And this could be because many of their beliefs and certainties reflect personal predispositions and biases rather than any objective 'Truth".

As long as we are aware of this, we may be more open to other ways of seeing. However, this requires us to acknowledge the limitation of our own vision and beliefs.

Ah, there's the rub. For many people don't like to stand up and admit they don't know the answer. At a time when electorates around the world are voting for strong leaders because they seem so assured in their beliefs, admitting to not knowing looks like a weakness, a pitiful lack of moral and intellectual fibre.

But is it? Perhaps, after all, there is some advantage to being an "I Don't Know'. For as long as you know that you don't know, a little bit of new and unexpected information may seep through the cracks and enlarge your understanding.

In fact, in addition to our specialized working groups, perhaps we also need a "We Don't Know" group. The WDK group would be made up of people aware of the complexity of many of the issues facing us today, and willing to rest not only in unknowing but also in mental silence – for as Mother pointed out, the mind has to be silent and attentive to receive knowledge from above – until something more integral emerges than the facile, catch-all solutions we are often tempted to snatch at.

As for the rest of us WDKs, we can be heartened by the fact that dear old Socrates, once described as wisest man in ancient Athens, was reported by Plato to have said, "I know that I know nothing". Which, as a modern commentator explained, meant that Socrates believed the beginning of wisdom lay in knowing that you knew nothing; for much of what passed for knowledge among "wise" men was no more than their own unexamined assumptions.

Alan

Life in Kottakarai: reflections on an early Aur

The following is a selection of reminiscences about Kottakarai community in the 1970s by its members. These were first published in the 2020 Fall-

How Auroville Kottakarai began

by Daniel Brewer

Daniel Brewer, born in Southern California in 1938, traveled overland, arriving in India in 1969. He made Auroville his home for the next 10 years. He has lived in Mexico for the last 22 years.

Before the move to Kottakarai, those of us living at Silence community were informed that we were living on the future site of the Indian Cultural Center, Bharat Nivas, and we would soon have to relocate. With an open heart, and a number of AV property maps, a small group of us set out to find a home for our community.

Since Auroville had many plans for the future, we realized that if we located near a village, we might not get moved again.

We wrote to the Mother asking for permission to live in or near a village, specifically Kottakarai. We felt that locating right next to the village was a good idea. This was an unusual request, a unique request, coming from *velekaras* (white people).

When the Mother did give us her blessing, as members of Auroville, she encouraged us to be humble. She said that villagers were innately more spiritual than us, and that we as Westerners shouldn't think we knew more than them, and we shouldn't be egotistical in our thoughts or activities, feeling proud that we were doing so much to "help" the villagers. I remember feeling very moved by this.



An early hut in Kottakarai community

The community was situated just across a canyon from Kottakarai village, which consisted of simple homes made of mud walls and palm leaf roofs, haphazardly placed around a village square. The grandfather of Radhakrishna, one of our friends in the village, had planted a tree there many years ago which now offered a huge canopy of shade for all to enjoy. Walls and floors of their huts were regularly rubbed with a paste of fresh cow dung mixed with water to disinfect and clean the simple dwellings. It smelled delicious. The village had a temple but was so poor there was no Brahmin priest to tend to it. Auroville at large employed quite a number of the villagers, the men mostly for labour, the girls and women for housework, child care and handicrafts.

When you came to live in Auroville, you let yourself be guided by what was true within you. Nobody told you what to do or where to go. You found your work by expressing your natural inclinations and allowing yourself to be led to wherever you happened to be drawn. In that surrendered state, things just seemed to flow. Small miracles became everyday fare.

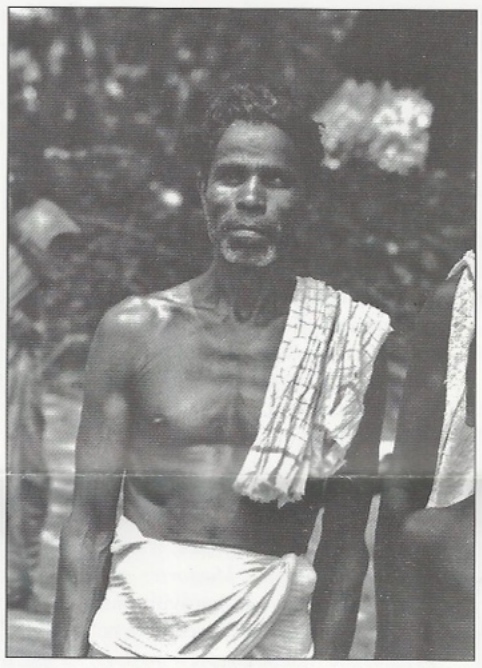
I started by going out into the fields to weed around the newly planted trees. After the bustle of the Matrimandir workers' camp kitchen, I worked in blissful solitude, enjoying the quiet, the heat, the critters. Lisbeth and I took care of the food distribution from a small storage room, where we would receive the foods which came by bullock cart from Pour Tous, Auroville's distribution centre in Aspiration. We would divide the foods into baskets for each individual or family amongst us.

Andai Amma, the old lady who lived in a hut next to the Banyan Tree when the construction of the Matrimandir began, had moved back to the village. We all felt that she was in touch with the occult. She lived like a shamaness on the outskirts of Kottakarai. She had three sons. Rajili and Vijayrangam were hired as watchmen. Both brothers clearly felt a spiritual connection with Mother and were aware that Auroville was Her creation. Vijayrangam would often go around and mark our foreheads with ashes and red paste from the temple, all the while murmuring sacred mantras. Then, there was Murugesan. Such a fine and kind man. It reminds me how Mother said that the Tamil villagers were the first Aurovilians.

Together with them, hundreds of holes were dug, trees planted and bunds built up around the fields to keep the monsoon rains from running off and eroding the soil. Once a week a large green water tank mounted on a bullock cart was drawn by Morris, our bull, through the arid fields. We would fill bucket after bucket and carry these to the young trees to water them.

We had a rather primitive community kitchen in the palmyra grove. One day a boy from the village came limping in, crying. His knee was bleeding. Using a small first aid kit, I cleaned and bandaged his wound. I got a big smile in return and off he went. The next day he came back with a few of his friends, some of them with infected sores, others with scabies. I treated them all from my little box. This eventually led me to open a small first aid clinic in the house Constance had built in the village, where he no longer lived. Radhakrishnan came to help me, and over the years we treated over 4,000 villagers coming in on foot from far and wide. I would like to write a separate story about the clinic!

I was impressed by Daniel's gracious relation with the villagers. Tamil is one of the oldest living languages on the planet and exceedingly complicated. Daniel spoke Tamil with surprising fluency, even able to make jokes. Besides being involved



Murugesan

with planting trees and care of the land, he had become the local cobbler. He was making handsome leather sandals for any and all who needed them, including the villagers who were quite amazed that this *velekaran* would stoop to a work that was normally only done by Harijans, the outcastes. Small wonder that the villagers adored Daniel. We couldn't have had a better ambassador for Auroville in the village of Kottakarai.

Kottakarai 1977-80

by Gordon Korstange

Gordon Korstange lived in Auroville during the 1970's. He is the editor of Connect and lives in Saxtons River, VT.

We came to Kottakarai from the fury and flux of Aspiration that had brought about the closing of Auroville's first school where we had worked. What we found was a quiet greenbelt community, close to the land, which had taken the name of the village nearby as a gesture of unity...

At first we were somewhat disconcerted, staying in one room of a cleared out workshop, a hastily built open air bathroom next to it with thatched walls. It was the greenbelt after all, not the town, but in those days almost all Aurovilians lived similar lives cloistered under thatched roofs. So we adjusted, we stayed.

When we arrived there were almost 30 members of Auroville Kottakarai, most of them Dutch and American with some Kottakarai Tamilians.

While Jeanne worked in the Matrimandir nursery, I attempted to help Jaap and Daniel with tree planting and other agricultural activities. There were fields of red rice and local grains, cows, a tree nursery. Both of them spoke fluent Tamil, which meant that it had become the main language of communication among community members. It was here that I finally became confident in speaking Tamil.

I also learned to milk cows and plough a few furrows in a field, to use an *alangu* (long crowbar) to break open the hard red earth in order to create a huge open hole, to be filled with enough compost to nourish a single spindly sapling, a lone splash of green rising above the red earth. It often had to be replaced, the victim of voracious goats. Like other greenbelt communities, a *wadai* (gully) ran through it, carrying monsoon rainwater and red dirt. The trees helped to hold soil from being washed away.

I wrote a lot of poetry.

We lived closely with the Tamil villagers. Twice a week I walked to the road and took the afternoon village bus into Pondy for a lesson in Carnatic music. The bus was always jammed with villagers going to market, often to bring things to sell, like chickens or vegetables. It would stop just outside Kottakarai and the abrasive conductor would take ten minutes to sell tickets, constantly trading insults with the passengers.

One evening, Kuppusami the watchman turned up with some friends to borrow an oil lamp so they could go out into the fields at night to hunt bandicoots ("pig-rat"), large ugly rats that provided protein.

Whenever we came back to our workshop home we would pause at the door to allow time for scorpions to scatter from the open floor. We learned to proceed with caution before reaching into any confined space in that dwelling…

It was a small world unto itself. Roy was building a Japanese-style pottery; Larry, Sundaram and others were baking bread early in the morning; and occasionally the motorcycles of Aspiration would swarm down the road, engines roaring, on their way to some meeting, leaving behind dust and uneasy quiet.

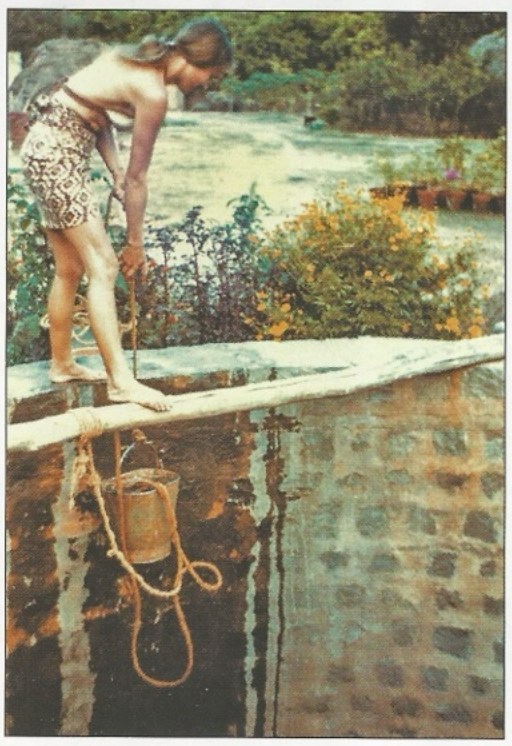
At Pongal we all gathered in the cow shed to sit on the floor and eat off of banana leaves while the animals looked on…

The days were scorching. The nights were enchanting. The Milky Way arced above our paltry oil lamps. It was so dark that the Southern Cross constellation could be seen hovering above the lackluster lights of Pondicherry. The sea breeze roamed over the barren lands of Auroville all the way to our hut, bringing the cries of jackals from the *wadai*. Above us rustled our silk-cotton trees.

Kottakarai 1973-1978

by Andrea van de Loo

Andrea arrived as Angela in Pondicherry in 1972. She lived in Auroville, first at Matrimandir Worker's Camp then in Kottakarai till February 1978. For several years she ran a small first-aid clinic in the village of Kottakarai. In Santa Cruz, California, she became a certified practitioner of polarity, acupressure, Reiki and hypnotherapy.



Angela drawing water from the open well

From Kottakarai, you could, in those early days, look over the vast plains of barren red earth all the way to the Matrimandir. Halfway between Kottakarai and the Matrimandir, along the dusty path, were two small jungle groves which had been saved from the general devastation of villagers cutting firewood, their goats and the torrential monsoon rains, because these were temple lands. In the one closest to the Matrimandir, the Kali temple was located, a low rectangular structure with a black iron gate, no windows and a statue of the goddess in the back. The grove nearer to us was considered Kali's house, home to a gigantic cobra. It was in the shade of the tall cottonwood trees of Kali's house that Daniel had built a hut for himself.

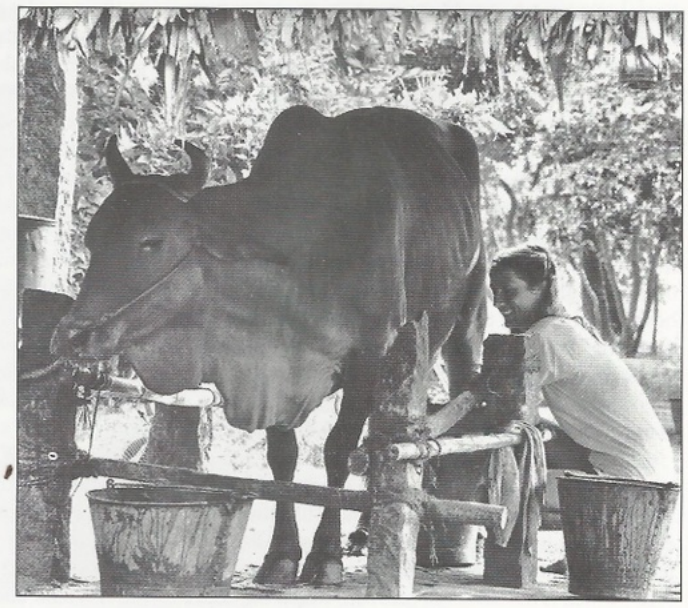
Into this community, I was warmly welcomed. A simple octagonal bamboo hut out in the fields was available for me. It had a dirt floor with a few mats, a small dresser and a simple cot with mosquito netting. It provided me a peaceful space to make myself a temporary home.

Dosai Amma

by Binah Thillairaja Binah

Binah Thillairajah grew up in Auroville and moved to the U.S. to pursue a B.A. and M.A. in International Development. She currently serves on the board of AVI USA and lives in Denver, CO with her husband and kids.

I was a child in Kottakarai with the same birth year as Auroville, running barefooted down the dusty dirt paths. The wind whistled through the



Lisbeth milking a cow

oville community

Winter issue of AVI-USA Connect magazine.

casuarina trees of the forest and Dosai Amma's one room watchman mud hut perched at the edge of the trees.

Dosai Amma? She must have had a different name once, but if she did, I never heard it. To my young eyes her wrinkly chapped skin was older than the trees. Her eyes twinkled under a sparse head of hair and her ear lobes hung low with bolts of gold, her life's savings right where she could touch them. She always seemed to wear the same brown sari in the style of a widow with no blouse.

Dosai Amma shouting out to me in Tamil in greeting… 'come eat." Dosaiamma who made *meenkorumbu*, vegetable sambar and rice in mud pots on her small wood stove fed by sticks from the forest.

Dosai Amma who would pick the best pieces of fish out for me and set them on my plate with a toothless grin.

In front of her one room hut was a tiny porch and fire place fashioned of mud and *sani* (cow dung) where we sat some evenings talking and eating. Perumal and I would perch on the edge of the porch and laugh as she complained about her aches and pains. We would eat, throwing the fish bones to the village dogs that patiently waited all around the hut; strays or guard dogs?

In the pitch dark of the night in the forest the only light came from a single kerosene lantern hung from the roof over us. It was quiet on her porch, with the smoky fire and her cackling voice for there was nothing else but the company, the food, the sound of the casuarinas and the dark night.

She seemed to be older than the trees and the land we stood on, and on nights when she cried drunkenly after drinking some local arrack, I wondered about who she had been before she was Dosai Amma – old lady of the forest?



A reunion of former and present Kottakarai community residents. n the staircase from left: Amudha, Lisa Brewer, Jeanne Korstange, eryl Winifred. Bottom: Larry Nagel, Sundaram, Gordon Korstange, and Daniel Brewer.

Early Days 1970-1985

by Lisbeth

Lisbeth was an original member of the AV Kottakarai community. She continues to live in Auroville.

For those who came in the early seventies, the focus, the work laid out, was clear: starting new settlements, saving the severely eroded land by planting trees, bunding, making dams and other earthworks; starting vegetable gardens for the community; keeping livestock; trying our hand at dry agriculture, planting fields with millets, rice, groundnuts and cow fodder; learning from our close village neighbors the amazing survival skills to live in this unfamiliar dry, hot and barren tropical corner of the world.

Life was so different from today, concentrated in small settlements, simple, innocent, more intimate and related to the land where we found ourselves. Distances and life styles between Aspiration and Kottakarai, then a continuous large, vibrant community where we lived, seemed vast.

We walked and cycled, worked together with the first Tamil people who joined Auroville. There were no servants or workers; we were all working hard alongside each other (while daylight lasted.) Water from open wells was pulled out by the bucket which, through a chain of helping hands, was stored in barrels fixed on a small bullock cart to water the tree saplings we planted all the way to the Center.

The Mother was still with us and this was a great blessing, She received Aurovilians with their questions and we went for blissful *darshans*. She named the children born here, the names always having an Auro in it as the 'family name'. A peaceful time it seemed - before all the strife that followed, the globalization of India, the accelerated pace which the internet brought and the chaotic world events that took place began to trickle into our awareness.

We did not move far afield, visiting close neighbors, exchanging ideas and experiments. Children were often born at home in small huts with a flickering storm lantern. They were always coming along, tough, barefoot little troopers playing with whatever was available in nature.

Memories of Auroville

Janet Fearn was one of the very first people to settle in Auroville. In 1997, along with her friend, Philip Melville, she decided to create a programme for Newcomers which would tell them about the early history of Auroville. The plan was to divide Auroville's history into different eras and then interview Aurovilians according to their area of knowledge.

The first section would cover the years from 1968 till 1973, when the Mother was still in her physical body. Ten group conversations were held for this section, all of which were videoed by Vladimir Yatsenko and transcribed by Janet. However, for various reasons, the project was not resumed.

By 2017 the tapes of the interviews had badly degraded, but Janet and Kati Hotger decided to make the transcriptions of those stories into a book. *Memories of Auroville* was recently published as a web book by PRISMA.

"There are obviously far more people who could have been interviewed and were not, so the accounts presented offer their insight into the full story," cautions Janet. "Nevertheless, I hope this narrative of the life of Auroville's pioneers will touch and inspire many of the readers."

It's a promise which is very largely fulfilled. While many of the stories may be familiar to those who have read similar anthologies, there are many fascinating details which evoke, as if for the first time, the challenges as well as the extraordinary high moments experienced by those early pioneers. For example, we have all read that Auroville began on a degraded plateau, but when Janet remarks, "At that time Auroville was a blank slate, and so full of promise. We had such an opportunity that we felt we couldn't go anywhere but forward", it becomes a gateway to a new world.

Simplicity

Because there was so little of anything, choices were simple. "We had no time to think about it, there was always something to do the next day, and the next moment. I was working and that is all," says Jean-Claude. "We worked," says Lisbeth, "That was what we were here for. People didn't go out every year to Europe or America."

The lack of everything threw people back on themselves, and created a new culture of honesty and directness. "It had something to do with there being no artificial props," says Shraddhavan of her first teaching experience. "You really only had your personal relationship between you and the kids. And that had to be absolutely honest with the surrounding circumstances. That gave us an experience, a growing experience, and a certain trust was built up among all of us."

People discovered a satisfaction, even a new identity in the simplest tasks. "Basically, we would be digging earth, and putting it in little pans on our head, and moving it from one place to the other," remembers Larry of the first Matrimandir excavation. "For the first time I felt I was doing something that I was actually supposed to be doing, even though I really wasn't sure what it was all about. I feel somehow that the communal involvement, that everybody throughout Auroville, with all our differences, was somehow involved in, and that was going on every day right at the physical level, was what was needed at the time to get Auroville spiritually off the ground. I just know that for me it was a very, very powerful experience."

"None of us realized what we were doing, because it was a day-to-day thing. There was never any question of why, or we're not qualified to do that," says Michael, another of those early Matrimandir workers.

In fact, none of those early settlers had ever experienced anything like this before. "Nobody knew anything about afforestation, we just learned by trial and error, and by doing it," says Jaap.

Relation with the villages

The developing relationship with the villages is a fascinating story in itself. At first, many of the villagers were suspicious of the predominantly white-skinned newcomers. Poonga recalls, "We were afraid that these velakaras, I mean Westerners, might do some harm. They might lift (kidnap) the children or they may convert them to some other religion or take them to their country".

"We were coming here out of a somewhat middle class 60's background, with no need to farm for our livelihood. We were two opposing cultures, totally, on the economic level, as well as the cultural level," remembers Francis. Not surprisingly, this sometimes led to confrontations.

"At that time, there were no fences between the fields," remembers Joss. But goats would eat the young saplings, so the Aurovilians began to put up fences. "We'd say, hey, we'd like to conduct our experiment on this side of the fence, and you go on with yours on that side, your goats and cows and whatever. And there's a certain quite dynamic edge there that leads to kattis (large choppers) at your throats, and all sorts of stuff."

At the same time, Aurovilians earned respect from the locals because they were doing dry-land farming like them, learning from them in the process. "There was a lot of relationship with the village, because there was just the village, and we all had accounts in the village teashop," remembers Joss.

In those days, recalls Lisbeth, "we wanted to live close to villages, for protection".

Mother's influence

If there is one disappointment with this anthology, perhaps it can be found in the section which deals with the Aurovilians' meetings with Mother. In some ways, of course, it is unsurprising that such an overwhelming experience cannot be captured in words, or that people may be reticent about verbalising it. But for those who never met Her, the few glimpses afforded of Her in this section are tantalisingly brief. Gloria, perhaps, gives the strongest sense of Her influence. "The contact with Her was so overwhelming, and so full of hope, and so full of marvellous things, that all the rest was just an adventure."

But what does come through well is Her all-pervasive influence upon those early settlers, even those who hardly ever met her. "In those days people actually were walking around saying, 'Did you hear that Mother said that nature has confirmed that the supramental transformation can happen?' People were really excited about the spiritual objectives of Sri Aurobindo's yoga. It was an incredible place. This was the new world," enthuses Jocelyn S.

Lisbeth remembers that it was a joyful time because "Mother was always there to give us guidance. It was hard, physically hard, to live and work here, but the people were happy, open. It was just a very wonderful time."

Piero remembers that whenever there was a major concreting at Matrimandir, Mother would send things to be put in the construction. "That was the sort of thread there was. Actually I always felt like the Mother was following the construction much more than the chief architect."

Lessons for today

So is *Memories of Auroville* merely a trip down memory lane, an indulgence in nostalgia, or does it have something to say to us in the very different Auroville of today?



Janet

I think it does.

One lesson seems to be that having a practical, common objective can be a great unifier. "The crews would change completely from one day to the next," says Larry of the early Matrimandir construction, "And that was a very beautiful thing, because we would be all sorts of people, and it always seemed to work."

Another thing we could consider emulating is the willingness of those early settlers to open their arms to whoever wanted to participate in the work, irrespective of their means. "In those days one could live in Auroville with no money. Those who had, took care of you. You just showed up in the kitchen and ate. There was no difficulty," remembers Charlie.

Piero, the only Aurovilian qualified to supervise the Matrimandir construction in the early days, also has some thoughts about guiding people which are still very valuable today. "I don't think that you have to teach anyone. I think actually the best is not to teach anybody, because if we start teaching, people pretend to know, and then it's even worse. It's better to let things happen, and then, slowly guiding, watching, and being there the whole time, to explain exactly the small steps that have to be done. It's more effective, and then later people start to grasp the whole of the work."

And he notes the "early heroism" of those Matrimandir excavators who worked simply on trust and faith, "digging, digging this earth which would be moved to somewhere, but not knowing exactly where".

Perhaps the most valuable lesson of all, however, is described by Aster when she talks about the differing effect upon people of Mother's passing. Some people found it very hard to deal with, she said, because they had lost their bearings. But for others who had already made the inner contact, "their growth was greatly accelerated. The inner movement was much faster, much stronger, and the help much greater".

Janet, with the assistance of Kati and Pranav Kumar, has done a great service in providing us with these inspiring memories of a few of Auroville's pioneers, which she hopes will touch and inspire others. And PRISMA is to be complimented for finally bringing them to a much larger public.

Alan

The book is available online on a gift economy basis at https://www.memoriesofauroville.com/en/
A hard copy will be available for sale later in the year.

Renu – an Auroville pioneer



That's me - the baby sitting on the edge of the windowsill – one of the first children to live in Auroville. I was born in Kampala, Uganda, and I came to Pondicherry with Shyama, my mother, and my two brothers in 1965 when I was one and a half years old.

We lived in Pondy with Frederick, Shyama's partner, because even if Auroville land had been bought, nothing was constructed yet. Vincenzo had fixed up a car and we used to have to push it through the sandy canyon road on visits. We had a hut with a sand floor where we used to spend the weekends.

After a while, The Mother made it quite clear that it was essential to protect the land by having people live on it and she wanted to begin development of the City of Dawn.

Frederick had given all of his money to the Mother, which she gave back to him to use for looking after us children – but also to build a solid house, so that people would know that Auroville was here to stay.

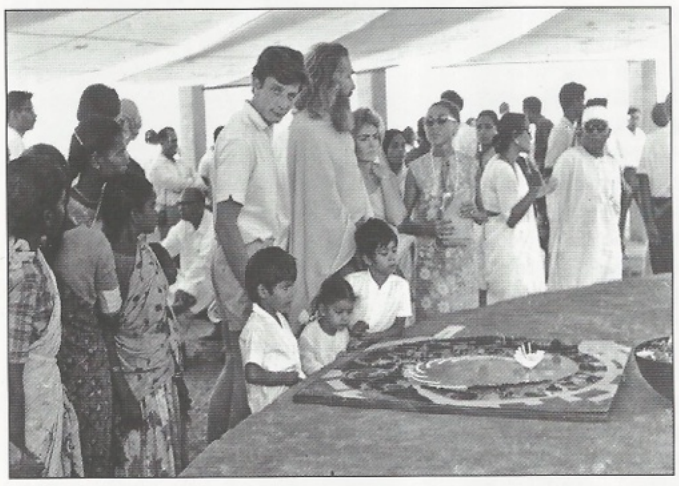
It was the first permanent house built for Auroville – Auroson's Home in Certitude.

I grew up with the exciting idea that there was going to be this place here called Auroville, and that people from all over the world were going to come.

And so it was all very real and exciting in my imagination, and imagination is very important … even if the reality was that there were only big fields, no roads, no water, no phones!

Some of my memories of those early days are of the times when Auroville land was bought. I remember us painting "AV" on the marker stones or visiting fields that had been purchased. For me, every bit of land was like a promise of the incredible future that was going to come!

The Inauguration of Auroville took place when I was four years old and it was really a special moment because I can still remember it very clearly.



Renu and her family at Auroville's inauguration

I'm there in the photo just between my brothers. I also remember wondering if the people at the inauguration were going to stay … but the next day they were all gone and it was just the few of us again.

In those days there was a lot of poverty. I remember feeling like a "doctor" because I knew how to clean and bandage wounds for the grateful adult workers. There were no health facilities nearby except JIPMER hospital for emergencies.

There wasn't much vegetation either – just the tamarind trees by the bakery. With the heat, the interest for us kids was to try to find a waterhole you could swim in. And so I know most of the wells in and around Auroville because those were the places we kids would go to swim. The water level then was just a bit below ground level at Solitude, and sadly now, the water table has dropped so much!

The work for building the Matrimandir started in the early 70s and then went on for decades. The Matrimandir was the central place where everyone – all the kids, all the adults, all the new people, everybody – came to work and it was fantastic. All the differences between people melted when you were building the Matrimandir – everyone came together, and we came together for that!

In 1973 the inauguration of the Matrimandir was held in the early morning. We all carried one stone and walked down into the crater of the Matrimandir and dropped our stone into the cement mixer. The people employed from the village were incredibly adept at digging and had dug the majority of the foundation, leaving these little stairways to go down into the bottom of the crater. It was really beautiful and had an ancient feel.

In the Auroville of that time, there were lots of long quiet meditations when we inaugurated new buildings and at the start of school. Even if these were sometimes boring for me as a kid I am grateful today that it was a normal part of our life.

A lot of births in Auroville happened in our house because it was the only proper house. My room was the birthing place so I always had to move out!! The upside was that I could attend those births and they were always such an amazing experience. You were welcoming a new soul to Auroville – it was so very special!



Renu and her sister Aurosylle in 1983

The result was that I wanted to be a midwife. Later I went to work in the Health Centre for a while with Janna, who was running it. But it wasn't the same. I did a lot of different types of work growing up in Auroville, including growing seedlings for forestation and working in the bakery.

I left Auroville in '87 for the US. In a way, I was relieved to be a "nobody" there after so many years in a small community and a small village. What I loved about America is that it's very open about information and about celebrating people's successes. Nobody is envious of your success and people congratulate each other for their achievements saying "You're doing well, good for you!" Also making money is not in itself a bad thing. So I appreciated that type of attitude for the dynamism it brings.

When I returned from the US after 14 years, I worked with the Working Committee (that was a shock because Auroville wasn't the same place I had left). Later I also worked at L'Avenir for town planning. It was interesting because I saw why there is a need to organize but I also saw how you have to adapt to people's enthusiasm. Basically, enthusiasm is what is driving everything here, and everything that exists has been driven by people's enthusiasm!

But not everybody has good ideas answering to the needs of the moment. So I think we should have been more proactive in illustrating what was needed in order to channel the enthusiasm and to make things happen – to help people adapt their plan to what's really needed. I feel it's important to work locally within the communities so they can take part in the decision-making for what's happening, and so the decisions are owned by everybody.

I later worked at the Auroville Radio and I am an executive of Auroville Art Service, which is an umbrella to support the activities of artists. We hope to encourage the discussion of culture and to bring more art and artists into the building of the city. We publish an art and culture magazine called MagzAV that occasionally comes out, and a weekly newsletter.



Renu with her daughter Isa (left) and son Roshan (right)

Krishna, along with a dedicated team, are working very actively, and we collaborate with Acres for Auroville and the Unity Pavilion for the "Art for Land" action.

Along the way, I met my then husband and we had two children, Isa, my daughter and my son Roshan, who are both at present in Auroville. So my parents, myself and my children make three Auroville generations!

Now the Land Board takes up most of my time, with me having gone full circle from painting marker stones as a kid to working to completing the puzzle of the still-missing land. The Land Board mandate is theoretically three years. But because it's so complex, and you're dealing with so much history, it takes you fully one year to really understand the work. There's a lot of backlog from the past too – we're still dealing with outstanding paperwork from 1969 and court cases that have been going on for 14 years. There's the complexity and the history of the transfer of deeds of property. And you need to understand the background to respond to the people who come in with issues. Luckily, I can still make phone calls to previous Land Board members who were there, or involved at the time, to find out the history from them.

The Land Board also stewards many acres of landholdings and protects them for future projects. And we work on all the many little "fires" to put them out. The work needs to be coordinated with the FAMC and the Working Committee, and the Auroville Foundation. I can understand why people wouldn't want to take it on full-time because it's so exhausting.

The work is enormous!

I have to say that I really enjoy my team and we have a really great staff! We bought 30 acres in the year of COVID! And we succeeded in instituting weekly meetings with the Working Committee and the FAMC, which is really helpful in speeding up purchases and making decisions. We needed to have those processes set up to move more efficiently.

After 53 years, we can say the Auroville Experiment has worked! There has been a massive amount of millions and millions of dollars worth of investment and energy and time. So one of the things that I constantly bring up to our neighboring people who are being approached by speculators but who also come to the Land Board, is that you have to think of the bigger picture. You're here and we're here and we're in this together, working for the benefit of all (health centres, dental clinics, schools, training, etc). Everything isn't perfect, but we're here living this adventure together!

During the years of Auroville's development, no one would have believed what we have succeeded in doing. So, it is very hurtful to see a new element of people intervening in Auroville who are interested in just poaching off of the resources and work we've all done.

I think The Mother was very aware of this and really foresaw what we're facing now when she said "You have no idea of the power of human greed", and that is why she said that the first thing to do is to secure the land.

With fewer people in the early days, it was easier to have a shared culture about the values that are important. The invisible values had great meaning. Also I think we were more dynamic because we were much freer: we weren't experts, we just were trying things out.

When I was young, people were excited and happy to build or give money and make stuff happen! Life was harsh, but there was a sense of adventure.

With Auroville's growth, there came the need for more organization, and certain rules. But every situation is unique and so you need to have a bit of wisdom about decisions because sometimes committees or blanket rules are too rigid and do not build goodwill.

The only thing we can count on is goodwill and we have to do whatever we can to protect that goodwill. Our biggest asset is people – their goodwill and, as I said before, their enthusiasm.

My parent's generation wanted to see the materialization of the dream, to get the material city built. They were like "Let's get this thing on the road!" But material growth alone is not going to build the new society we aim for.

All my life I have been involved with the Auroville experiment, deploying my life into a place and a belief. I continue to work to build Auroville and hold it as close as possible to the imagination I had as a kid of something new and great.

Renu, April 2021

Originally published in the 'Land for Auroville' newsletter.



Consecration ceremony of new land purchase by tree planting with the previous owner and the Land Board team

EcoService Fairies

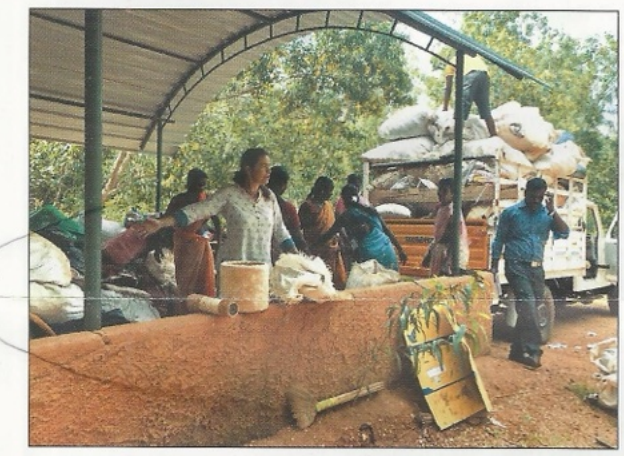
Rena and Agnes are a bustling duo raising our consciousness about waste in Auroville. They focus on promoting good segregation and organising a clean waste centre.

Their project started at the end of 2019 when Rena shot a documentary about EcoService, and then felt compelled to support their work. One of the things Eco-Service discovered was that too many community recycling areas were dirty with overflowing bins. After New Creation received a warning regarding this, Agnes took over responsibility for the new waste disposal site there. With the help of an amma, and after restricting opening times to one and a half hours daily, they managed to transform the situation. This experience sparked Rena and Agnes to band together to facilitate the waste disposal work elsewhere in Auroville.



Agnes and Rena

Rena and Agnes have since visited more than half of the communities in Auroville, and most of their work highlights the need to keep recycling areas clean and well organised. They distribute attractive EcoService posters that outline which items can and can't go into each bin. They also arrange trainings for all people about waste separation, including the cleaning ammas. Kali from the EcoService has dubbed Rena and Agnes 'fairies' in appreciation of their supportive work, and perhaps as a nod to their collaboration with the spirit of nature, as fairies are believed to do. While Rena and Agnes operate independently from EcoService, they are in regular communication. For example, EcoService will inform them of a particular problem area with messy bins, and invite them to work their magic.



The waste arrives at EcoService

Work of EcoService

Currently in Auroville, most communities have several bins collecting different goods: paper, plastic, glass, metal, sanitary, hazardous and mixed waste. These items are picked up by the EcoService jeep. When they reach headquarters, they are then further separated into eighty-three categories. The items are sorted by hand by the workers, which is why the goods need to be clean.

The two 'fairies' see it as their task to remind residents of basic recycling information saving work for the EcoService. For example, the need to separate paper and plastic when the paper is sealed inside the plastic, and to strip all the cellotape from cardboard packages, otherwise it results in recyclable cardboard either needing to be manually separated at the EcoService, or needlessly thrown into the landfill.

Guests are often unaware of the need to clean the food remnants off packaging waste before placing it in recycling bins. Once you have lived in Auroville a few months, you soon realise that any food or crumbs left out will attract hordes of ants. A regular battle for the duo is reminding people only to drop off items that are clean and dry, to prevent ant infestations. They have found whole bins full of ants, some with worms, and even once, a rat. They encourage regular sweeping and cleaning of the recycling sites and bins, which they both do in their respective communities.

Un-recyclables

Another feature of Agnes and Rena's work is promoting awareness and information about non-recyclable products. Here in Auroville this includes tetrapaks and biscuit packing with different layers. They ask us to reconsider our needs for these items, given that Auroville offers its own biscuit brands with recyclable packaging. 28 % of all waste in Auroville goes to the Auroville landfill, and that is something that the duo is determined to reduce.



Reminding us to be good citizens of Auroville

Rena notes that she feels helpless when faced with the behaviour of Aurovilians who don't take care of their waste. For instance, they recently found waste thrown away in Auroville which included packaging with a name and address on it. When they approached the individual, he was apologetic and said he had sold his waste to local villagers, who in turn took the re-saleable items and then dumped the rest. Rena and Agnes ask Aurovilians not to sell recyclable waste, as EcoService can earn some critical income from selling it themselves. Their ultimate aim is that Aurovilians take care of their own waste, but till that happens, they will help remind us to clean up.



Before and after Agnes and Rena's intervention



> *'Everybody wants to save the planet but nobody wants to put the waste bin out'.*
> *Jean Yanne*

No 'away'

It's all too easy today to buy a glossily packaged product and never think about where it ends up. As the film *The Story of Stuff* pointed out years ago, there is no such place as 'away'. In Auroville there is a heightened immediacy to this realisation as we see, and at times feel engulfed by, increasing waste in the local villages, beaches and neighbourhoods. It's easy to not think about what happens to waste or what goes into the landfill. Yet, in Auroville it's possible to live a lifestyle of minimal waste, and a few even manage to live closer to a zero waste lifestyle.

Garbage is an ever-visible reminder of unconscious consumption and disposal. The EcoService 'fairies' remind us that – with relatively little extra awareness and work – we can create a tidy recycling area, can make sure our waste is clean, and we can buy fewer non-recyclable products. These efforts alone can significantly reduce our impact on Auroville land and its landfill, and show that it's possible to have an abundant life with less trash in greater harmony with nature.

Peter

See Rena's video on the work of EcoService at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=INN0jSCtIxs
Contact: ecoservicefairies@auroville.org.in

Tube Thambi

Tube Thambi brings Auroville-made videos together on one YouTube site.

One year ago, people searching YouTube for videos about Auroville would have noticed that many of the items that first showed up were produced by people who had visited Auroville for only a few days. Some of these were positive; some superficial and a few even perpetrated falsehoods. But where were the videos made by Auroville itself?

"They were difficult to find and few and far between," says Ruben, a communications specialist from Mexico City, who has been working as a YouTube channel manager for the past three years. He noticed that Auroville wasn't collectively doing Search Engine Optimisation (SEO) or applying 'best practices'in order to get Auroville's videos ranked higher on Google and YouTube. "SEO is absolutely necessary to get an increase in visibility and traffic," he says. "Auroville needed to improve its visibility by creating more content that ranks. It's different from a posting on Facebook or Instagram which will be up briefly and is only visited by one's own social circle. Auroville's presence on YouTube and Google is a long-term investment with a more powerful and further reach."

Ruben pointed out that the top slots in Google and YouTube search results are conventionally taken by bloggers, vloggers, advertisers and tourism companies paying or being paid for placements. To meet that challenge, Ruben and his wife, Aurotaranti, launched Tube Thambi to bring together the majority of Auroville-produced videos on one YouTube site. It started in March 2020, on the cusp of the first COVID-19 lockdown.

The name was inspired by a short-lived service unit, 'AuroThambi', created by then Auroville youths Muni and Sanjay. In Tamil 'thambi' means 'younger brother'.



Currently Tube Thambi has combined the videos of 125 Auroville units and individuals on one site. Working with units, activities and events to improve their social media presence, Tube Thambi has managed to organically increase subscribers at auroville.com (Auroville's online shop), Auroville Radio and, more specifically, Krishna Mackenzie's Solitude Farm channel from 8,000 to 15,000.

Ruben explains that by helping to improve the SEO and applying best practices, Auroville-produced videos will be organically promoted by YouTube and can eventually help support Auroville projects financially, unlike outsiders' videos which aim at making money from the Auroville name.

At present, Tube Thambi uploads and publishes between seven to ten videos a week. They not only include the Auroville Radio outputs and the presentations given at Savitri Bhavan, but also virtual reality videos with 360 degrees viewing. The Auroville Bakery can now have a mouth-watering view of its tempting breads and pastries. Also on view are exhibitions at the Centre d'Art at Citadines, the beach at Sri Ma, the Archeological Park, the Unity Pavilion and views of the Matrimandir.

At any given time, there will be a varied offering of ecological talks, Integral Yoga, musical concerts, upcycling demonstrations, health tips, farm talks and many other portrayals of the diverse life of Auroville. To improve international understanding, Tube Thambi has the capability of creating voice-overs in multiple languages, and subtitles in more than sixty languages. Part of the SEO process is to publish Auroville's video content on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, Vimeo, Linkedin and Pinterest.

When asked for their deeper motivation for the project, Aurotaranti simply replies "human unity". "We are like a directory for Auroville, united online," she says. Tube Thambi's next step is to increase the Tamil language content to further Auroville's unity and local relevance. To have Auroville's online content under one banner is a symbolic and practical step of communal togetherness.

Peter

Every dog has its day in this shelter

Integrated Animal Care Centre (IACC) was started in 2005. It is a legacy of Ann Plummer. She was known as "Animal Care Ann" as she used to give food and look after the stray dogs and cats. IACC is located behind Buddha Garden but access is via Edayanchavadi to Koot Road. There is a core team of six members today, consisting of Kannan, Peter Clarence-Smith, Rita, Manas, Tineke and Ratna.

Auroville Today spoke to Kannan to get more information about the work.



Kannan surrounded by some of the 150 dogs at the Integrated Animal Care Centre

AV Today: What kind of work does Integrated Animal Care do?

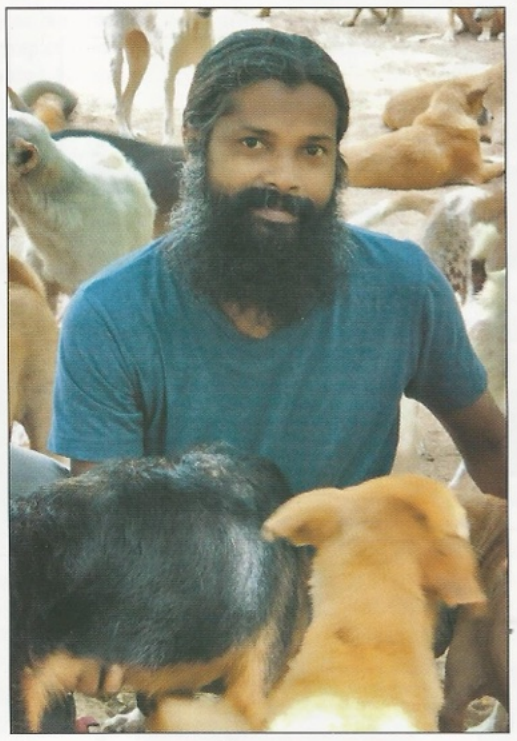
Kannan: Mainly, we rescue and look after the stray dog population within Auroville. We give anti-rabies and multi-antigen vaccination and sterilize the dogs that frequent Solar Kitchen, Visitor's Centre, Matrimandir, Town Hall and surrounding areas. We have a rescue team and people call us when a dog is sick or injured and needs medical treatment or safety.

Due to the Covid lockdown, restaurants only offer takeaway meals, so there is no left-over food for dogs where they normally get food. Consequently, currently, we are also feeding some dogs at the Visitors Centre. We cook 25 to 30 kgs of rice every day for the dogs in the shelter, hence cooking a little extra food does not make much difference, and we are happy to do it.

How many dogs do you have in the shelter, and how did they come there?

We have almost 150 dogs here: we cannot accommodate any more. Actually, the shelter is intended for dogs who are sick or handicapped. There are many dogs here who have only two or three legs, or are blind or are very old. We give them food and allow them to live here peacefully till they die. And they get a dignified burial place. Healthy dogs can manage outside. But sometimes we rescue a dog which is very weak, and later, even after it regains its health, we allow it to stay. This is because the shelter has become its home and he/she is integrated in the group life and gained its confidence, has made friends, developed feelings. And if we take it outside, it will come back like a boomerang! It would be like uprooting it again, so we let it stay.

Sometimes people from outside dump dogs in Auroville. These dogs don't know how to get food and get weak and sick, or get into fights with the existing 'residents', and get bitten or bleed and then people call us to rescue them. We have to gain their trust to catch them and bring them to the shelter, give them medical care, then vaccinate and sterilize them. Sometimes people dump dogs right outside the shelter. Sometimes they are tied or put in a bag or box, or are in a very sorry state. If they are a good or foreign breed, we try to get them adopted as people like to adopt dogs of those breeds. Also pedigree dogs have different needs of food and living conditions. They suffer in the raw conditions of the Indian weather and our local food. Every dog is equal for us and we do the best we can for them. Also, as a policy, we do not euthanise a dog unless it is very sick or suffering from incurable pain. It is the rarest of the most painful decisions I have to take, to let a life go, keeping its dignity.



Kannan

Tell me more about sterilization of stray dogs.

We need to sterilize the stray dogs in Auroville, otherwise every year too many puppies will be born. Dr. Kavitha, our visiting veterinary doctor, comes here every Saturday to do the sterilization and treat other sick dogs. Auroville Stray Relief and Animal Welfare (AV Straw) helps us pay for a few sterilizations every month. After we sterilize a stray dog, we take it back to its territory. When a dog is taken away from its territory, other dogs may move in to occupy the space, cause territorial fights, disturb the balance of the place, and these dogs will breed since they are not sterilized. Hence, it always better to put a dog back in the same area, and care for its healthy life. Also it is illegal to relocate a stray dog from its place of living.

What are your monthly expenses and how do you fund them?

Our monthly expenses are between Rs.70,000 to 80,000. Auroville Maintenance gives almost half of that. We have to raise the other half through donations.

When a person wants to donate, we send them the link to the Auroville donation gateway. We have made a WhatsApp group of donors from all over the world. We keep them informed about how we are using their donation and update them on the progress of shelter projects. We keep very meticulous and detailed accounts. If a worker buys bread from the Auroville Bakery for the dogs, it is noted. Our accounts are very transparent.

Do you get volunteers?

We had a very good volunteer in Dany Foureau who passed away a few months back from cardiac arrest. She came in the mornings and I came in the afternoons to the shelter.

We need the right kind of volunteers and helpers as this is really hard and difficult work. Not everyone can do it. When a volunteer applies, we interview the volunteer and tell them about the shelter and the kind of work we do here. Some shelters in Europe are very luxurious, but here it is very different.

We have another WhatsApp group for people living within Auroville who want to help the shelter in some way. We keep sharing ideas about the shelter and giving updates about the work here. Sometimes, if I am not well, another person from this group will come and help in the shelter. So, these groups are helping us continue the work. So the work is shared and no one is exclusive here.

Do you have kennel facilities for someone who has to leave their dog while they are travelling?

We can provide kennel facility but only for Aurovilians and for a maximum of one month. If it's an Indian dog, it has immunity and it can survive here. But if it's a breed dog, after one month it may get a disease. This is a shelter and there are sick dogs here. Also we need more space for a kennel/boarding facility to keep some buffer space.

Why is there no signboard with the IACC name outside? It was difficult to find the shelter.

There is a good reason why we do not have a signboard outside. Many people come and dump their dogs outside the shelter. Also, we don't want to put up a sign till we have a proper gate. Earlier, we had more problems before the high fence was built. Some of the more acrobatic dogs would escape into the neighbouring poultry farm and kill their chickens. Rita, who was managing the shelter at the time, had to pay a lot of money every month to the poultry farm as compensation. The high fence has solved that problem.

What are some of the challenges faced by the shelter?

The work of the shelter is a community work. We are happy to get helping hands.

Many Aurovilians don't know anything about the shelter even though it is 15 years old. They go to other organizations like *Bark India* in Puducherry and volunteer there or give donations there. Even if they give Rs 100 a month to us (which is just the cost of a coffee at La Terrace), it will help us so much. Only 15 to 25 Aurovilians (out of 3,000) are donating regularly. Some give Rs 100, some Rs 500 and a few Rs 1,000 every month. If we can get support from at least 10% of Aurovilians, we can do so much more at the shelter. We can have more equipment, better infrastructure and more facilities for the dogs. People can also donate things like food, clothes, old mattresses, bed sheets, towels, brushes, fencing and construction materials, medical supplies, old newspapers or big cardboard boxes.

Another problem is that several Auroville communities do not allow pets. Hence, it's difficult to find homes for dogs, and particularly puppies.

What are your future plans?

We have 2.5 acres of land. The front portion is not enclosed and we plan to enclose it so that we can accommodate more enclosures for treatment and care of more dogs. We also want to make three partitions in the shelter. We need a quarantine area to separate the sick dogs and to provide space to dogs in the last days of their lives who need a quiet place. We also want to make a separate building for a cat shelter.

Can you have a cat and dog shelter in the same place?

There will be no physical contact between the dogs and the cats: we already have one cat here and it has adjusted well. But there is a need for a shelter as many cats also get dumped in Auroville. It will be a place to house and treat them until they find homes.

Are there territorial fights between dogs in the shelter?

Sometimes there will be fights because there are some alpha dogs here. But generally, they live together quite harmoniously as a big, happy and boisterous family. All the dogs in the shelter have a name and have their own stories. Sometimes after months or years of abuse or neglect somehow, they have ended up here. Some need more time and distance to come out of their trauma or past situations. After a couple of months they start feeling comfortable, and this becomes their home. They have their own community here and they are happy here. It's an Auroville within Auroville for the dogs.



Volunteer Sabrina, caring for a puppy

They all get the same food and treatment, although if there is a sick dog we may give extra care for some time. If there is a packet of biscuits, I will break them into small pieces and see that each dog gets a piece. So, every dog knows that they will get some and waits patiently.

When I reach the shelter every morning, my first hour is spent touching and greeting each and every dog. As I open the gate, I hear a special noise – it sounds like music to my ears – the noise means they are really happy to see me. They all jump on me and make my clothes dirty.

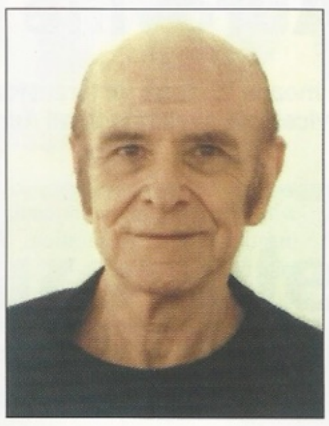
If one sees an injured dog who does one contact?

They can call my number (8637638925). People can call for dog rescue at any time, even in the night. I always keep some medicines in my room and we can at least provide first aid in the night. And next morning we can do further treatment.

Archana

For more information contact: integratedanimalcare@auroville.org.in or visit Facebook: Integrated Animal Care Centre.

Werner Stoff



On May 3rd, German Aurovilian Werner Stoff left his body in his house in Prayatna, at the age of 81, after a struggle with cancer.

Werner was an architect and a Freemason. He lived for a while in Bali and married a Balinese woman before the couple moved to Germany. He became a renowned architect of residential villas and office buildings 'without corners'. He was also the designer of the iconic Stoff Nagel candlestick holder in the 1960s.

After the death of his wife, in 2001 Werner came to Auroville and became an Aurovilian three years later. In Auroville he was known for his daring project of transforming the community of Prayatna into one of the most densely populated communities of the city, with plans agreed on by Roger Anger for up to 250 people. It would be a 'Gesammtkunstwerk' or 'total art concept', where the inhabitants agreed to live in the architectural art work "in exchange for interactions with the designer in order to fashion their living space according to their needs, but always in line with the overall design language and style of the total project".

As it was not easy to find people who were willing to adhere to the concept, eventually only the main building consisting of an office-cum-demo space, as well as two spaces for the homeopathic clinic and twelve living spaces were built in his design language.

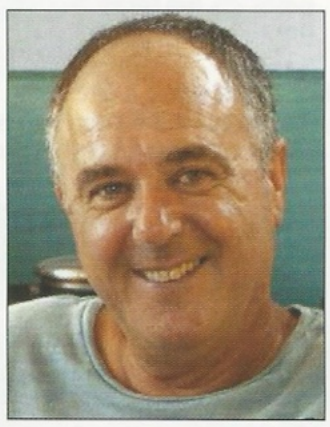
At the same time, Werner also designed abstract sculptures, and many new objects for his AuroDesign unit as well as various structures around Auroville, such as housing in Aranya, a temple in Jawadhi hills and Kallallipattu, a design for the new Svaram campus and the cremation space at Auroville's cremation grounds near Adventure. His remains were cremated there on the afternoon of May 6th.



Interior of a house at Prayatna by Werner

To celebrate Werner Stoff's legacy, a retrospective exhibition will be organised in the expo space at Prayatna.

Renzo Pezzato



On Sunday, May 16th, Italian Aurovilian Renzo Pezzato left his body at the age of 67 at JIPMER hospital where he had been brought because of serious COVID symptoms. He had been in JIPMER's intensive care unit since May 12th, where he received oxygen and medication. However, his condition worsened and he passed away a few days later.

Renzo came from Treviso, Italy, where he worked for years as Head of one of Italy's Electrical Departments, after which he became quite proficient in glassblowing. In 2019 he came to Auroville and was accepted as an Aurovilian the year after. Initially he worked in the Matrimandir gardens, but being a very technical person, he gravitated towards AuroService, where he took up the drip irrigation arrangement for the city center.

He lived in Vikas and people who worked with him knew him as a gentle, kind person with a strong sense of service, particularly for people in need.

In accordance with government protocols for Covid-related deaths, Renzo's remains were cremated at the Karuvadikupam crematorium, Pondichery, on May 24th.

A. Jothi



Aurovilian A. Jothi passed away at JIPMER hospital on May 28th due to COVID.

Jothi joined Auroville in 2005 after marrying Ganesh. A happy spirit, she worked at Farm Fresh for five years, then at PTDC for five years, where she was known as "one of the sweetest people we have ever met," and for the past one and a half years at Sunship. Since 2018 she had been suffering from an auto-immune disease. She contracted COVID-19 and was admitted to JIPMER. Her body was cremated on the 29th in Karuvadikuppam.

Nolly Senden



During the afternoon of May 17th, long-term Dutch Aurovilian Nolly Senden passed away at the JIPMER hospital due to a stroke. She was 85.

Nolly was temporarily residing at the Mahalakshmi Home to recover from a leg injury when she became unwell and started experiencing COVID symptoms. After testing positive for COVID-19, she was brought back to her house in Samasti, where she was supported by a medical team and volunteers. On May 15th, when her condition worsened, she was taken to JIPMER hospital where she received oxygen and medication. However, two days later she expired. Nolly had not taken any vaccination.

At the end of the eighties, Nolly frequently came to Pune, India, to be trained as a qualified Iyengar hatha yoga teacher, and started visiting Auroville at the same time. Having completed the study, in 1992 she came for good, and financed a Yoga Hall for the the new Pitanga building. She also built a Pitanga caretaker house where she lived for several years.

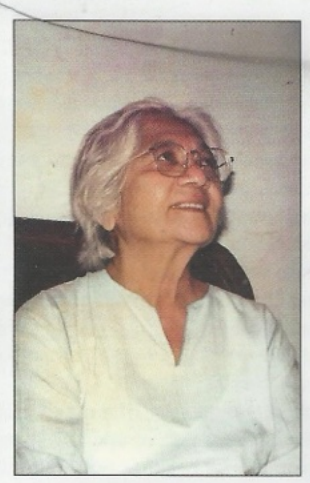


The Yoga Hall at Pitanga

From the moment the hall was ready, she taught hatha yoga to increasingly large groups of eager residents, at times gaining the nickname of 'General' for her no-nonsense, commanding approach. Also, in her work as executive of Auroville's Small Employees Welfare Association, SEWA, as well as in her dealing with the many workers who worked with her during the years, she would show her sternness, dedication and, at the same time, empathy and compassion. After suffering a mild stroke, Nolly stopped teaching yoga and moved to Sri Ma for five years and then built another house on the outskirts of Samasti.

In accordance with government protocols for deaths due to COVID, Nolly's remains were cremated at the Karuvadikupam crematorium in Pondicherry on June 21st.

Kailas Jhavery



Kailas Jhavery passed away on May 10th, 2021 at the age of 94. Kailash had become a member of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1964, after studying and working for more than ten years in New York, USA. In 1966 the Mother appointed her as "Secretary-in-charge, UNESCO section" of the Sri Aurobindo Society, a post for which she was eminently suitable having interacted for two years with the United Nations. In that period Kailas wrote several compilations, the most notable of which were *The Reshaping of Humanity*, *The Aim and Action of a True Spiritual Culture* and *Culture and International Co-operation and Peace*. Some other noteworthy compilations made by her on Auroville were: *Religion and Spirituality*, *Auroville and the Ideal of Human Unity*, *The Aim of Auroville*, *Matrimandir: The Sanctuary of Truth*, *Auroville and Education*, *Cultural Pavilions* and *Sri Aurobindo and the Future*.

Kailas shared a special bond of friendship with Dr. Adiseshiah, the former Deputy Director-General of UNESCO. On the basis of the conversation she had with him, she had told the Mother that since Auroville was to be an international township, it was necessary to work for this project through UNESCO and that the Sri Aurobindo Society should be affiliated with UNESCO as a non-governmental organization. The Mother appreciated Kailas's idea. Kailas prepared a paper on *Religion and Spirituality,* pointing out the differences between the two in the light of Sri Aurobindo's vision and emphasized how Auroville, whose objective was to realize human unity, covered life in entirety as well as its activities and relationships on the basis of spirituality. On the basis of this paper, the Sri Aurobindo Society was admitted to the 'C' category of relationship of UNESCO, meaning an exchange of information of their mutual activities. In 1966, Kailas also went to New Delhi and contacted a few embassies representing the six continents. Together with Salah-El-Din Tewfik, UNESCO's representative in New Delhi, she worked out a resolution for Auroville to be proposed by the Indian Government for UNESCO's General Conference in Paris. This resolution was unanimously passed in November 1966 by the General Conference of UNESCO.

When Kailas came to know of the rift between Auroville and Sri Aurobindo Society, she volunteered to help in resolving it. Though she tried her best, she failed to persuade both the parties to reconcile. When the matter went to court, she stopped her work for Auroville as she felt that such an action was against the declared objective of Auroville which was to realize unity through progressive universal harmony.

Unreservedly surrendering to the Mother, accepting no intimidation, Kailas had a fiery personality. Her autobiography in two volumes, *I am with you* (a message she received from the Mother in support of her UNESCO battle) is a most exalted text of guru-bhakti. Kailas was the symbol of unquestionable faith in the Mother and in the true Auroville.

An extensive obituary by Anurag Bannerjee has been published at the website of the Overman Foundation, http://overmanfoundation.org/.

Entry issues

The Entry Service reported that during the entire lockdown period it was fully engaged in discharging its duties. Since June 2020, 111 Newcomers have been confirmed as Aurovilians and 49 new applicants were processed to start their Newcomer process. Altogether there are presently 116 Newcomers in the process. Since February 2021, the Entry Service has been reviewing the situation of about 150 people who approached the Entry Service after June 2020. Meanwhile, the Entry Service is facing issues of Newcomers not being able to find a place of work, or who are not able to sustain themselves financially, or who can't find an adequate long-term housing solution. The Entry Service is meeting with other working groups to see how to move forward to resolve these roadblocks.

Improving relationships with neighbouring villages

Though Auroville has done a lot of welfare work for the villages, more attention is needed in building healthy and collaborative relationships with the village leaders and elders. This is in order to reduce the instances of misunderstandings that can flare into conflict and to create an atmosphere where Auroville and the villages work together harmoniously. The Working Committee has called on Aurovilians who are in a position to contribute to this endeavour to collaborate.

Celebrating Sri Aurobindo's 150th birth anniversary

The Working Committee has appointed a core team of five Aurovilians to prepare the celebrations of Sri Aurobindo's 150th birth anniversary on 15-08-2022.

The Matrimandir Gardens

Work on the Garden of the Unexpected, on the western edge of the Matrimandir gardens oval, has picked up speed again with a tree platform having been built. The intention of this garden, as expressed by Roger Anger, the architect of Matrimandir, is to offer a space where children can wander, marvel, explore the unexpected and begin to enter into the deeper atmosphere of the Matrimandir.

The Garden of Existence, the first of the 12 main Matrimandir gardens which was built 11 years ago, is receiving a major upgrade. The large granite stone that was the central focus of the garden has been removed. It will be replaced by 50 natural quartz crystals of different sizes: the largest is over one meter tall and weighs more than one ton. The work is still underway.

More than 100 design teams responded to the open international design call for the next four main gardens: Light, Life, Power and Wealth. In March 2021, the two leading teams of designers were invited to Auroville to go through a two-week integration process, attempting to synthesize a final design from the best elements of their respective concepts. By June they will share their fully integrated designs.

Residents' Assembly decision making policy

In February this year, the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) announced its wish to pause all Residents' Assembly Decision-making (RAD) processes until a review is made of the existing decision-making policy and the RAS mandate. A sub-group composed of members of the Auroville Council and Working Committee have started to review the present RAD process in order to restart all pending RAD processes soon, while also initiating an overall study of how to find better ways of arriving at community decisions. To harvest feedback and ideas on an entirely new RAD process and on the reformulation of the RAS mandate, an open invitation to bring ideas and feedback was issued, and about 20 emails with varying and diverse inputs have so far been received.

Temporary Emergency Maintenance

A year ago, in May 2020, the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) and the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) jointly created "Temporary Emergency Maintenances" for those Aurovilians working in activities, units or services who were no longer able to receive a maintenance from their unit or service due to the Covid-19 emergency, and were in need. The BCC and FAMC have now agreed to increase the availability of this temporary support. As of June 2021, Temporary Emergency Maintenances will now also be available to any Aurovilian who chooses to volunteer at an existing activity, unit or service that has insufficient funds to support them with a maintenance, and who is in financial difficulty.

Dismissing an Aurovilian

In the last three years, the Auroville Council has had to deal with many situations where a unit, a service, an Auroville activity or a school had to ask an Aurovilian to discontinue his or her work. This prompted the Auroville Council to formulate a set of guidelines to be followed by work places before the final dismissal of an Aurovilian. The document has been sent to a few groups for feedback.

Nurturing mental health in Auroville

Psychologist Jerry Beusen implemented Mattram, Auroville's first mental health unit, three years ago. Mattram means 'change' or 'transformation' in Tamil, and the unit is served by a team of professional psychologists, psychotherapists, a psychiatrist and counsellors. The services are available to all Aurovilians and Newcomers. Jerry recently published his booklet *Eyes of Evolution: A Self-Discovery with the perspective of "Seven Eyes".*

AVToday: What is your background as a psychologist?

Jerry: Before I started psychology, I was educated as a teacher in primary school. I saw educators who were not developing anymore because they were busy with their work, so I started school psychology. I studied more and more psychology – I couldn't stop at one path. I'm a developmental, social, organisational and clinical psychologist. My professors were not happy with that at all! They felt I should restrict myself to one path. But my interests in the world and my affinities are broad, because I think we need it all in order to understand. We need to look from all sides, and take a big perspective to really understand what is happening. So that was the seed of the later, more integrated approach I took.

What made you shift to Auroville?

I don't know what made me shift here! Eight years ago, I presented my Seven Eyes framework at an international congress in Budapest. An Aurovilian approached me and said 'You have to come to Auroville'. A year later I went, and I was shocked to see what was happening here, on an organisational level. After six weeks, I went home and promised myself never to return to Auroville, because I thought it would be too challenging for me to live there. Then I realised my conclusions were very mental, and that it's better to open my heart to understand what people are doing there. So I opened my heart, and I went back two more times in the next two years. And everything was telling me that I should join. I couldn't get rid of the feeling of being part of that experiment – until I gave in.

So then I decided to come to Auroville five years ago. I was 68 then. I sold my house, gave away my belongings. It was a big step.

What happened when you joined Auroville?

When I joined Auroville, I didn't want to be a psychologist or therapist. I joined the Teachers' Centre in Auroville, because I wanted to help children to grow up in a balanced, harmonious way. Then the Council and Working Committee asked me to create an organisation for mental health care. At first I said 'no', but I gave in when the Teachers' Centre also asked me to do therapy with families and children. I had experience in reforming mental health organisations in the Netherlands, but starting a mental health centre in Auroville was difficult. No one wanted to give me space, and many were afraid of getting trouble from people with psychiatric problems. I started at home. Eventually, Sanjeev from SAIIER arranged the dining room of the Mitra youth hostel near Town Hall, and I changed it into a little office with three rooms. That was three years ago now.

I wanted to give Mattram a deeper foundation than the traditional one that is based on the Diagnostic Statistical Manual [commonly used in The West to diagnose mental illnesses], which identifies sicknesses. This diagnostic system does not look at the causes of disorders and tries to cure them by getting rid of its symptoms. The real problem is mostly a developmental disorder when people are losing clarity about their values and how to deal with that. They can be in a transient state when they, for instance, start to question their old convictions when their heart is opening, because then there is a more direct, deeper reality showing up. So I help people understand their transient state when this is the cause, and help them to go through this transition much more easily.



Gerard (Jerry) Beusen

What is your Seven Eyes approach?

When I reached my age of retirement about 10 years ago, I went through a contemplative exploration about what was the essence of my life, and *Seven Eyes* developed from this.

The insights I got were so overwhelming and precious that I wanted to share them to support other people in their development. I was lacking a structure to present these insights, so I extensively studied all kinds of models, brought together by the integral philosopher Ken Wilber. These were all too complicated to be of real practical help, so I stayed with the simple established chakra approach. I wasn't happy with its formulations, so I contemplated what could be their origin, and developed *Seven Eyes* from there.

In *Seven Eyes* everything we can develop is already present in our inner being and we have only to awaken to them for our realisation. The path to this awakening is the structure of my approach. I start with looking at our impulses, and show that by discovering their origin, we create a connection or bridge to the divine. So this possibility of connection repeats at every of the seven levels which are respectively: impulses, images, conviction, connection, inspiration, wisdom, attunement and surrender.

Studying them is discovering that we are more than our bodies, our feelings, our convictions. But it's not the approach of peeling back an onion until nothing is left anymore; it's not the Buddhist approach of "emptiness". Rather, it's really opening up to the whole. And by doing that, we become who we are in essence.

Is your framework related to Sri Aurobindo?

In a way, yes. But, in my reading, Sri Aurobindo's approach is more focussed on surrendering to the descendant or to the influence and creations of a higher divine level. My focus is more to develop what is already in us, and that – at a certain level – will also organically open up to more divine inspiration. That is the ascendant approach. Opening up too early to the descendent has mostly not the right motivation and has created religions and belief systems that are more of a hindrance on our paths. This is also what great teachers as Ramana Maharshi, Krishnamurti and Socrates advise us. The real transformation will take place at the moment when our own essence is meeting that higher inspiration. There the mystical experiences take place.

So, are you saying that the mystical can still be intrinsic in your system, depending on one's tendencies?

The message of *Seven Eyes* is that we acknowledge that there is a part of ourselves that we still have to discover and is beyond the mental. It is not dependent on our tendencies but on the discovery where our tendencies are originating from, before they were conditioned by our culture in ways that are totally alienating us from who we are in essence.

Now you're planning to leave Auroville. Why?

I have suffered migraine headaches my whole life, and these have worsened during my five years in Auroville. At a certain moment I had to go to Apollo Hospital in Chennai because I had three attacks a week. The medicine at the hospital prevented the heavy attacks but made my headache chronic. I stopped the medicine and went for an Ayurvedic treatment that, together with a *pranayama* technique, brought relief. I have to avoid stress as much as possible but the hot climate contributes to my migraines. I am also leaving because I need rest after all these years of hard volunteer work for Auroville. But I will not be totally out of Auroville. I carry this experiment with me in my heart and will contribute to it when there is a real opportunity.

Are there other reasons?

My criticisms of Auroville are still there, and they were only growing in these five years. I recently went to Auroville's elections for membership of the working groups. I was shocked by people's reasons for wanting to join a committee, without any knowledge or experience and education. I was shocked by how Aurovilians reacted to that. They were applauding because the applicant was so spontaneous or authentic. I thought, 'My goodness, when we're not taking being here seriously, what am I doing here?' But I know that changes in culture are not so easy. And I was happy that I didn't have to change a culture; that I could create a new culture with Mattram. And I realised that changing the culture in Auroville would be a long term project. Maybe my book *Eyes of Evolution* could be a contribution to this change, but then it has to be taken seriously. When I visit Auroville, I could give courses if there's interest, and work with groups of people who deeply care.

The *Eyes* framework is really about connection. That is why the subtitle of Mattram is "sharing for connection". With COVID, mental health is really in danger, not only in Auroville but all over the world. Sharing is becoming more and more important to keep a healthy connection. This is what the booklet *Eyes of Evolution* is about, to support people in keeping a healthy connection with themselves and each other.

Mattram just started. The team will continue after my departure because the team appreciates this foundation and the organisational structure that is based on this.

Any final thoughts?

Eyes of Evolution is about awakening to our true nature, that is also the nature of what we consider outside or apart from us. But the real work starts after awakening, because only then we know what it is really about.

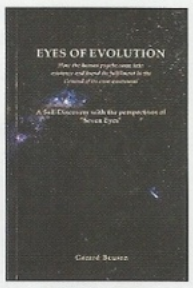
For me, this is the way to realise the beautiful dream that Mother had of Auroville.

In conversation with Lesley



The office of Mattram in the Auromitra building

Eyes of Evolution



In *Eyes of Evolution* Aurovilian psychologist Gerard Beusen (Jerry) presents a brief manual for self-discovery and transformation.; It is based upon the '*Seven Eyes*' approach which he has developed over many years through inner work and the contributions of people who participated in his workshops.

As he puts it, "Eyes of Evolution gives a psychological explanation of how the process of transformation works and tries, as much as possible, to avoid beliefs and belief-systems."

Each chapter focuses upon one 'Eye' or stage of evolution, and the book as a whole describes how each successive stage integrates yet builds upon the previous one in an integral manner.

It provides a new and interesting perspective upon the inner work required for a new future to manifest.

Eyes of Evolution: How the human psyche came into existence and found its fulfillment in the Ground of its own awareness. Designed and printed by PRISMA, 2021. Available from books.prisma.haus. Price Rs 390.

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