

Kailash – a journey through time



PHOTO: MARCO SAROLDI

Caretakers and former and current residents of Kailash wave from the second floor balcony of Kailash. From left, Satyavan, Jean-François, Fabien, Mira, Aditya, Kripa, Zasha, Krishna, Quentin, Bhagira (up), Ayesha, Janani, Jean, Alice, Luca, Edgar, Inge, Camilla, Clara and Julian

Kailash, a youth community in the centre of Auroville which houses 14 teenagers between 16 and 21, celebrated 15 years of existence in September last year. Inge, one of the early residents, writes about the significance of this project.

To this day, one of my fondest memories is sitting on the *maddu vandi* (bullock cart) that carried my belongings the short distance from Surrender to Kailash. I'm smiling from ear to ear as I sat with the driver, my parents driving alongside on a scooter, down the red earth road which we now call the "Surrender stretch". It was August of 2005, I was 16 years old, and embarking on a new adventure. I can't describe the feeling. Maybe elation? Maybe excitement? The feeling of being ready for the next step in life and being thankful that the existence of Kailash made this possible. My parents are almost as enthusiastic as I am – they know that home is not far away. I know I'm ready. Every cell in my body is ready. The road ahead is inviting, and I can't wait to be challenged.

Before the big move, I had introduced myself to the residents of Kailash and to Jean-François and Kripa – the two Aurovilians who made Kailash a reality. I remember eagerly enquiring about my "acceptance" when I saw Jean-François in school the next day. And then, on the first night in my new home, I lit all the candles I had with me and made a small *pooja* offering to Ganesh, asking him to remove all obstacles. I can still recall that lightness of being at this time of new beginnings.

I imagine that's exactly how the original "Kailashians" must have felt when they approached Jean-François and Kripa in 1998. Initially, some of the youngsters had dreams about a community of young people, just as Ami had been years before. "They saw a need in Auroville and were ready to take on a project, even if it meant they themselves would not likely benefit from it. And that was also the beauty of it," says Kripa. "It was really driven by grace, it was something magical that needed to manifest. From the side of the youth, Ofa and Shandra were especially consistent and held a clear vision of the project."

As the project proceeded, it met with many obstacles, the foremost being its location. A

petition was circulated by local residents to have Kailash moved away from the residential zone; only land on the outskirts of Auroville was being offered instead. "This was not an option for us, not only for basic security reasons, but also for ethical and ideal reasons: we wanted the youth to be in the middle of the community's life," says Kripa. "Kireet Joshi, who was then Chairman of the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council, repeatedly expressed in his speeches that we should put the youth in the centre of Auroville. Alongside this, the spirit of the Auroville Charter and The Mother's words on Auroville youth were a constant inspiration and call to action. This greatly helped Kailash get its very central location."

While some forces challenged the dream, others in the community stood strong in support of the project. Gilles provided Kailash with a water connection from the Solar Kitchen during Kailash's construction, Ulli and colleagues from Gateway Trust funded the project, and Matthias from Altecs offered to build Kailash with a price guarantee and contract based on his recent experience of building Auroshilpam. "He even paid from his own pocket when it went over budget," says Kripa. Pierro, Gloria, Annupama and Aurosatprem also gave some inputs when the Development Group was reviewing the aesthetics of the building. Kripa continues, "And then, we laid the foundation stone and started the work. We dug our red earth and put our sweat and tears into the project, passing *chetties* full of cement under the summer sun. There was a group of us, Ofa, Ladina, Shandra, Kevin, Aryan, Ira, Jitta, Jean-François and I. We were all working on site every Saturday with the construction crew."

Through perseverance and hard work, the initial group of Auroville youth that shared the 'Kailash Dream', saw it begin to come to fruition three years after its conception and by September of 2001 the Kailash pioneers had set foot in their new homes.

The first years

It would take some time for the true spirit of Kailash to envelop the newly established youth community. Jean-François recalls: "The first two years were quite chaotic. It didn't help that the building wasn't fully finished – the youngsters were so eager to move in. In those days Kailash was often overwhelmed, especially during the school holidays. It took us some time to find a good balance and during those early days we talked a lot about guidelines. This was necessary because the kids were being given a level of freedom without being prepared for it. The guidelines we came up with are still valid today: each resident must be engaged in an educational activity, respect the neighbours, participate in collective life (attend the weekly internal meeting, cooking for all once a week, community clean up, taking care of the water pump), no drugs, being responsible for your guests, and no loud music after 10 pm. The first group that brought a community spirit was the second generation of Kailashians. They included Fabien, Edgar, Vania, Vika, Olga, Indra, Sven, Kumar, and Davy. There we felt the beginning of something real, and the guidelines implemented in the original project started to become meaningful."

The Kailash experience

Looking back over the last fifteen years, Jean-François explains, "Kailash is a place for social and communal life where young people have the opportunity to make mistakes, learn from them, and progress. Our weekly meetings serve this purpose also. When you learn from understanding the consequences of your actions, your consciousness grows. And it turns out that older youth can be the greatest guides and role models. Kailash is for everyone and not restricted to teenagers who are having problems at home. For example, some teenagers wish to come to Kailash in order to learn to live away from home before they go abroad for studies,

while others see it as a good place to get to know yourself while surrounded by friends. Also, Kailash accommodates young people who come without parents and provides a frame for them. It's so great to see that all the initial fears have been trumped by faith." And when it comes to faith, it's an integral part of the experience.

Kailash's proximity provided some ease of mind for the parents of many residents. "It helped a lot that Kailash was just around the corner," my mother, Gudula, comments. "When it comes to the role of being a mother of three children, I am very lucky to have been always able to let them go, and we have always supported the independence of our children and allowed them to make their own choices. As parents we also learn through our children's journeys. There is always trust."

A great number of teenagers have lived in Kailash. The number is close to 130, with some staying for as long as seven years of their teenage life. That's many generations of Aurovilians! Kripa shows me the A4 paper on which I had signed my name when moving in twelve years ago. I see that she has a meticulous record of each and every resident that lived in Kailash over the past 15 years.

Edgar, who is 34 today but was one of the first teenagers to move into Kailash in 2002, says: "It was good fun, but importantly also the first step towards independence. I learned a few good dishes like mustard and cream chicken, which I still cook today!"

Dylan, now 20, is a more recent Kailashian. "My time in Kailash gave me the chance to enjoy two years of my teens with a diverse group, and it exposed me to a host of personalities, which greatly broadened my horizon. It's a platform for the transition from 'life with mum and dad' to complete independence. It had the structure I needed to stay on track but it also offered the opportunity to better understand and apply my freedom and the responsibilities that come with it."

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Experiments in Alternative Education: The Learning Community

Manas discovers in Auroville the educational experiment he dreamed of years ago.

Years ago, lying in a hammock at a research centre in the Andaman Islands, I remember dreaming of a school that would use place-based education to its fullest potential. In place-based education, children learn through immersion in the specific culture and context of their community. It was not an accident that the thought came to me on that lazy afternoon. Island biogeography is very special and leads to unique cultures, endemic species and unusual ecological systems. It was easy to see how a school could use the sense of place to ground children's learning in everything from science to history and from language to mathematics. That thought lay dormant for a long time till I came to another island – an island called Auroville.

Auroville is unique because of the extreme diversity that it supports within a very small area. It's the perfect place for place-based education and one school, if you can call it a school, is making this happen. Started in 2009, The Learning Community (TLC), uses the whole flow of life in Auroville as the context for learning. It dips into the experiences of the entire community and tries to build in children an integral sense of self.

Creating a deep connect with nature is one of the most important aspects of learning at TLC. The children visit a forest every week and spend time immersing themselves in nature. It's not that there's an ecology curriculum to follow – merely being in nature and observing the cycle of life gives deep insights. And in any case, it would be hard to design a class around a lizard laying eggs, something that some of the children observed recently in Pitchandikulam Forest.

Johnny's place in Fertile adds some more dimensions to their forest visit. There's carpentry, basket weaving and metal forging. And there are 'forts, dens and bush houses', those special places for children.



Composting in Buddha Garden

It's interesting to see that although TLC strongly believes in learning beyond the classroom, it does not reject classroom learning entirely. The older children attend English Language, English Literature and

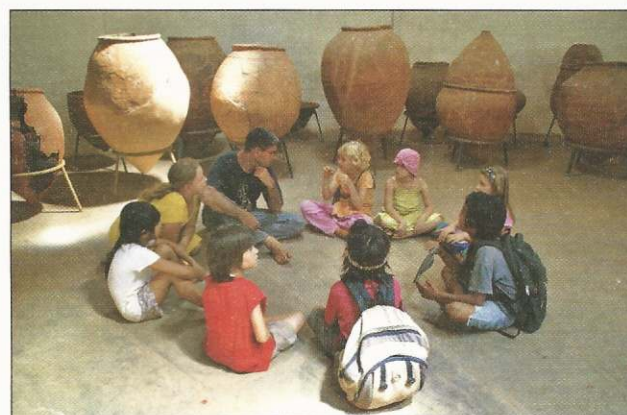


Comparative tasting of yogurt for Annapurna farm

Biology classes in Last School. TLC has also started formal Math classes for some students.

TLC students spend several hours a week, sometimes up to ten hours, playing a variety of sports. Swimming has become quite popular. Every student must swim a minimum of two hours a week and many of them participate in competitive swimming.

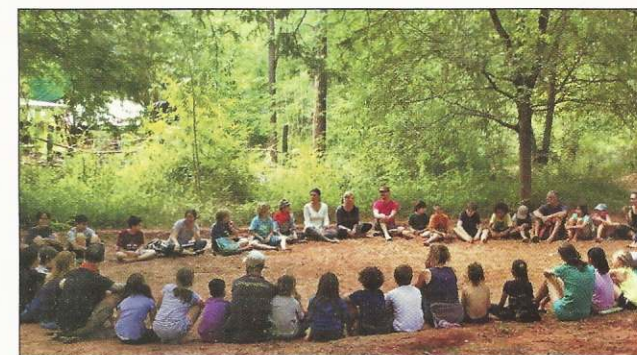
A little bit of entrepreneurship is thrown into the mix as well. The students operate and manage Dewdrop Café, which sells lemonade and cakes. Open on Thursdays and Fridays from 1:30 pm to 3:30 pm, the café is managed by the children. Currently, there are discussions



History class in Bharat Nivas

underway on business planning and strategies for expansion! The children do everything – cooking, serving and cleaning up. Speaking of cleaning up, TLC is one of the few places in Auroville where you won't see ammas or other paid workers. Children and their parents take the responsibility for every kind of work.

Learning is not restricted to the physical boundaries of Auroville. Last year, a group of TLC children joined students from other Auroville schools to spend a month at the Tibetan Children's Village in Dharamshala. There are field trips to Hampi and Panchgani. And at Varanashi Farms, the children combine wilderness experience with swimming practice. TLC considers Marudam Farm School in



Weekly community gathering

Tiruvannamalai as its sister school. Interestingly, when Marudam started it was called Tiruvannamalai Learning Centre, or TLC. Every year, students from Auroville's TLC immerse themselves in arts and crafts in the Craft Week at Marudam.

When TLC started eight years ago, the children and the parent-facilitators moved from location to location in Auroville. There was no focal point or a place to come back to. Now, TLC has Basecamp, a plot of land with a yard and three small buildings. The buildings are used for working on individual projects and for conducting some group classes. The children still move around Auroville for hands-on learning in the community, but they can come back to Basecamp. Also, building and managing their own community is itself an intensive learning experience for the children.



On the bullock cart

But there's a nagging feeling at the back of my mind. Is Basecamp the first innocuous step towards setting up a more formal school? As TLC grows and gains mass, will it be able to counter the increasing force of gravity that seems to affect most institutes of alternative education? Starting with great promise, these institutes often become victims of their own success. With increasingly enrolment often there comes increasing parental pressure for formal, classroom learning. Soon, the attention shifts to tests and demonstrable outcomes.

I can only hope that the wonderful people of The Learning Community will have the courage to stay true to the original promise of the experiment.

Manas



Johnny and a student working on the forge

The wilderness of the forests is balanced with the steady rhythm of the farms. The children have composted in Buddha Garden and raised chickens in Auro-Orchard. The relationship with Annapurna Farm is special. The cereals for the Friday open lunch come straight from the farm and the husk is used in the compost toilets. The children have even helped Annapurna conduct yogurt tasting for different strains of probiotics. Learning where our food comes from is critical and, if the thin attendance at the recent Farm Festival is anything to go by, we need a lot more of this awareness.

Once every term, children participate in Service Week, when they immerse themselves in the world of work. During Service Week, units such as Auroville Paper, PTDC, Shraddhanjali, Miniature and Naturellement become busy centres of learning. Mechanics is quite popular, with many children choosing to work with motorcycle maintenance.

Arts and aesthetics is an integral part of Auroville, and TLC has extensive connection with art centres such as White Peacock Clay Studio and Play of Painting. The children also visit Last School every week for art classes.

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It's a great stepping-stone for the youth of Auroville and I am grateful to have had the opportunity to be a part of this evolving project and to the people that made it possible."

Another aspect of Kailash community life is mentioned by Dasha, now 25, who lived in Kailash from 2006 till 2011. "When I lived in Kailash it felt like a big family. We all looked out for each other. It's funny how the dynamics changed as different people moved in. We had phases. For some time a lot of us were into sports; Anadi, Angelo and Yashasah especially, they were our sports junkies. Sometimes the table downstairs would be covered in books with people doing homework, while other times as different people moved in we were more into socialising."

"For me, Kailash was about experiencing boundaries and learning how to respect close neighbours. But, also, living in such a community allowed for a sort of collective growth, because we also learned from each other's experiences," says Fabien, one of the current caretakers of Kailash who lived in Kailash in his teens. "Because there was a certain structure, for example, of weekly meetings, mistakes were followed up by our mentors and this enabled all of us to learn. In fact, this means that Kailash acts as a platform and a place where you can grow faster than in any other system, where you simultaneously receive guidance but also learn to be responsible and independent. It's really a place of growth."

Kripa and Jean-François share some of their fondest memories with

me, and I identify with many of them. A lot of them involve a feeling of community spirit, whether it's early morning Sunday gardening, repairing the fence, cleaning the water tank, painting the staircase, training for the Auroville marathon, as well as marathon homework sessions, cooking and eating together, or enjoying a night of holiday celebration. The well-attended Kailash fundraiser and karaoke night on the 25th of November last year is one such example of community life. "Seeing how young people change and grow and transform is very gratifying. When people come back to Auroville and share their life stories with us, everything is worth it," says Kripa.

Challenges and opportunities

Financially, Kailash has often

struggled. I remember that while I was living there I had volunteered to do the accounting. Practically, it meant making sure that all the residents contributed monthly in a timely manner, collecting bills and paying wages. Kailash often ran into minus near the end – and regrettably sometimes the middle – of the month. Then, when we did grocery shopping in Pour Tous, I would approach Jean-Christophe (then Pour Tous executive), and kindly ask him to extend our credit line. It was never an issue but it really taught us to adjust our collective spending and take responsibility for our expenses as a community. This, of course, meant sacrifices from time to time, because while for the most part we ate well, we sometimes had *parotas* from Alankuppam for many days in a row.

Chuckling, Kripa recalls: "Without small gifts from friends in and outside of Auroville, Kailash wouldn't have been able to keep going. Once, while I was swimming in the ocean with Suzie, between strokes I shared with her that we could barely afford the wages for the construction crew. And the next day I received a generous cheque from her! And more recently, after Carlos agreed to do the painting work for us, he started even without knowing when he would receive payment."

As it stands, Kailash doesn't have a budget from City Services like the Youth Center does. The building needs regular maintenance, and as time passes, repairs become even more expensive. Furthermore, the team of 'adult caregivers' have

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Experiments in alternative education: a new initiative in extended learning networks

In his 1971 educational classic, *Deschooling Society*, Ivan Illich described the idea of Learning Webs. These are informal learning networks that connect learners with available learning resources. Illich specifically referred to open directories of educational resources and professional educators. There were attempts in the early days to set up such a network in the community but they failed because neither the students nor educators were ready. Now it looks like such a learning network is beginning to emerge again in Auroville, 'the place of an unending education'.



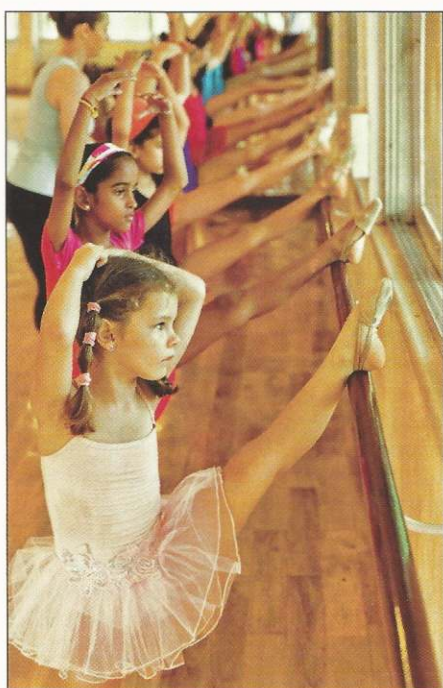
Arjuna Archery

From piano to pottery, Auroville Youth Activities (AVYA) is providing a platform for educators to offer their knowledge and skills. The AVYA Website currently lists 38 activities. More activities are being offered, but are in various stages of evaluation and use. The website itself is very comprehensive and has a simple design. Every activity has a description and practical information for potential participants.

About a third of AVYA's activities are performance or fine arts. These include dance, music, painting and pottery. The range of activities is quite impressive, with dances such as Bharat Natyam, Odissi, Jazz, Bollywood and Tango being offered to children. Apart from these, AVYA offers several interesting sports activities. Some are popular team sports, such as basketball and football, while others are more about inner

balance, such as yoga, gymnastics and archery. Horse riding is offered in three different approaches. A range of martial arts training is offered, and includes aikido, ninjutsu, capoeira, kick-boxing and mixed martial arts.

Although it started out as a platform for sports, AVYA clearly has moved beyond fixed categories of activities. This is perhaps a good idea, simply because some of the most interesting activities are hard to



Ballet



Bollywood Kollywood dance

categorise. Is rhythmic gymnastics a performing art or a sport? What about Eluciole Circus? And hatha yoga is impossible to put inside a box.

Auroville Youth Activities seem to be quite popular – the programmes currently host more than 500 places for children. The ages of these children range up to 18 years. Most of the activities are designed for primary school and older children, with six activities suitable for children below six years of age. One of the most attractive aspects of AVYA is the

opportunity for children to socialise across ages and different schools.

The activities run through the week, including some on Saturdays and Sundays. Most of the activities are run between 4 pm and 8 pm. "Doesn't this make the day really long for school children?" I ask the members of the AVYA core team.

They agree and say that AVYA is in discussion with Auroville schools to see if some of the activities can be run as a part of the school day to make the timetable more flexible and child-centred. Changing the school timetable will, of course, be a challenge. A school has many moving parts and every school runs with a certain rhythm to keep the parts from falling apart.



Contemporary and modern jazz dance

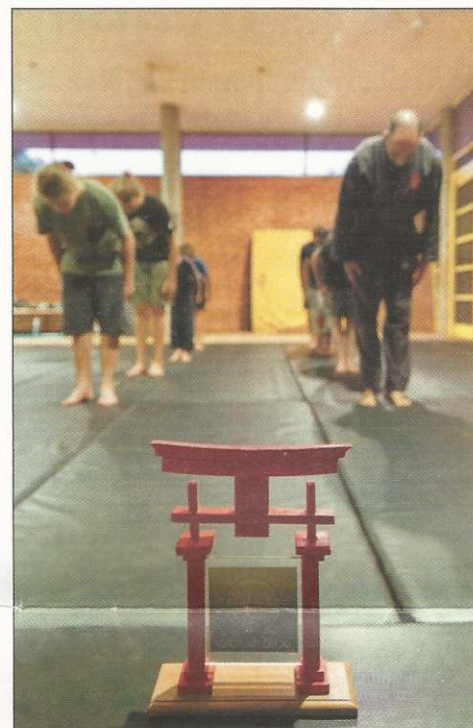
The concentration of activities in the evening also leads to some challenges in managing venues. While a few of the activities, such as

piano, are individual activities, most are large group activities. Often these activities need special flooring or equipment. Some venues are open to sharing among diverse activities, and others are quite specific about the kinds of activities they can accommodate. Often, the challenge seems to be the noise generated by a bunch of children having a very good time.

AVYA is managed by a group of seven Aurovilians who are dreaming of a future in which learning is not confined within narrow institutional walls. There will be challenges, but AVYA is moving forward, primarily with the energy of the children and families who appreciate the diversity of activities available.

Manas

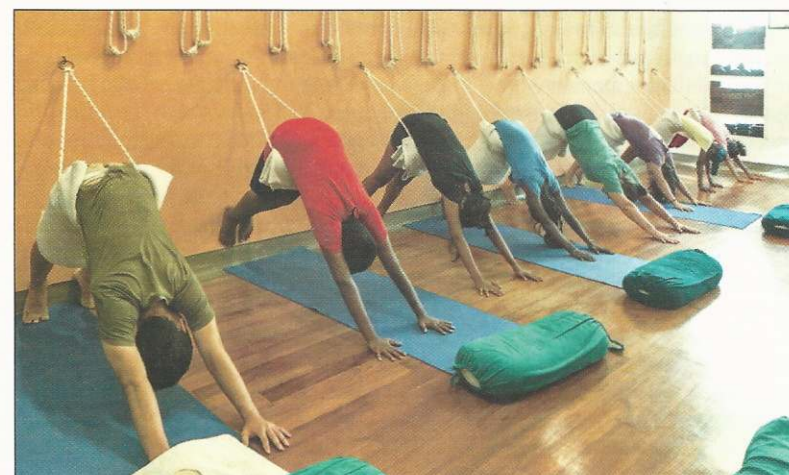
For more information visit youthactivities@auroville.org.in



Ninjutsu



Piano classes



Hatha Yoga

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expressed a willingness to pass on the mantle, calling for support. In this connection, Quentin (23) and Fabien (31), two of the ex-residents are now also caretakers. Being ex-residents, they identify with and value Kailash as no one else can. "I lived in Kailash for three years where I learned to live by myself," says Quentin. "Quite soon, I was one of the eldest there with the most responsibilities. It felt like a good step. Then I left Auroville but since I've been back I frequently passed by Kailash. I was aware that there was somehow a need of more caretakers so I offered to give a hand. I have a good connection with the youth, and so even though I was only 22, it was okay. I go every two or three days and to all the weekly meetings. I feel like the Kailashians are

happy to have a caretaker that they know a bit more; they are comfortable talking to me. It has been fun, but I do it really as a service, and I recommend all the youth to try the experience," says Quentin.

Fabien adds: "It has been five years since Jean-François and Kripa approached me and I agreed to take on the role of caretaker of Kailash, and the experience has taught me a lot about myself. At present, although we would like some more adult members, Quentin and I work as a team and we can rely on each other. We operate in such a way that the residents are encouraged to find solutions to problems themselves and follow up on any issues that there are." Looking back 15 years, he says: "What I've seen is that every generation that moves into Kailash starts at zero, that the same

topics come up over and over again. They are usually about respect for your neighbours and taking care of your guests. Overall, it's the same patterns. However, Kailash is much more structured and quiet than before. I really believe that the kids who grow through Kailash can make it anywhere in the world. There is nothing like collective living to explore and push yourself to find solutions. And sixteen is an amazing age to start having this experience because you already have an idea of what you want in life, and you can start working on it. In this aspect, Kailash has seen some very productive young people. And for those for whom Kailash was too challenging, the doors always remain open at a later stage. Auroville would benefit from having more places like this."

Jean-François explains that "Kailash doesn't work for everyone, but it's rare that youngsters don't find their place there. For most residents, there is tremendous personal growth. However, for some, the comfort of home is irreplaceable and Kailash then fills the role of being a great place to see your friends at the weekend."

"Kailash was my second home" says Sushant, an Auroville youth who has personally never lived in Kailash but has witnessed first-hand the changes it fostered in his friends. "I see it as paramount that the 'Kailash Dream' remains a reality for the future of Auroville's youth. If the history of Kailash and the personal experiences I had as a result have left me with anything, it is that Kailash offers a stepping stone in the sea of life and the journey we take as the youth of

Auroville in the transformation from teenager into adulthood. It provides priceless life lessons, invaluable experiences and an indispensable community for our youth. In the dictum so often expressed by parents, 'It builds character!' It is my belief that as Aurovilians the immeasurable value of such a place can only be linked to the purpose of Auroville, as a significant force that shapes and nourishes future generations of Aurovilians to the sense of community."

If living and growing up in Kailash in Auroville has taught me anything it's that mistakes are life lessons, and we are fortunate to be able to live in a supportive community where the mix of freedom and guidance is so attuned to our collective aspiration of constant progress.

Inge van Alphen

Caring for emotional and mental health in Auroville

The World Health Organization defines health not just as the absence of disease, but as a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being, where mental health also includes emotional and psychological well-being. Our health affects our daily lives. Not only do ailments prevent us from going about our day, but mental health also affects how we think, feel, and act. A state of mental health allows people to realise their potential, make meaningful contributions to society and also work productively.

Auroville's Institute for Integral Health (also known as Santé and the Integral Health Service) is a step forward towards true holistic care for Aurovilians. It has adopted the recently emerging health care model called the integrative practice of medicine and aims to create an effective health care system. To address the psychosocial elements of our community, and particularly mental health, additional strengthening is needed. Apart from the serious cases of mental health, there are also quite a number of community members in need of mental, emotional or psychological support who are not being cared for.

Today, the difficult decisions regarding concerns over fellow Aurovilians with detrimental mental and emotional health often fall on the table of the Auroville Council and the Working Committee. This is because there is not a coordinated and steady group of Aurovilians who dedicate themselves solely to this aspect of community service. These two working groups regularly hold joint meetings where difficult decisions are taken regarding the health of community members who are going through challenging times, emotionally, mentally, or psychologically. At the moment, there is no policy in place regarding how the Auroville health system deals with serious and less serious cases of mental health or psychological or emotional disturbance. This results in an ad hoc approach. Sometimes, psychiatric doctors from outside are consulted. Besides this, there is a resource pool of Aurovilians who are called upon for their expertise.

"The topic of mental health came to the table of the Auroville Council with an idea from Friederike," says Sandya, "after which she was invited to gather energy from the community on

this topic. This led to a presentation of the idea at a healer's meeting that I attended. At the same time, Inge from the Working Committee was also actively becoming engaged in the topic. So shortly after having met with her and joining our forces to develop a group dedicated to this, the idea took more shape. Jerry, a Dutch clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, started his Newcomer period and offered his help. As he also has experience as an organizational psychologist who was involved in organizing and developing healthcare in the Netherlands, it was obvious that we now have a good person to help carry on this project. The recently formed pilot group's envisioned approach towards integral mental health will be shared soon by the group."

Sandya and I sat together at Well Café for lunch a few months ago after finding out that mental health in Auroville was a topic on the agendas of both the Working Committee and the Auroville Council. Since then, both of us have been working on what a group dedicated to this aspect of health in Auroville could look like and how it could function. We thought about bringing our concerns to Santé or Auroville Health Centre,

but then decided to try and form something new. We developed a proposal and a draft policy which we shared with our two respective working groups. Soon after we invited concerned Aurovilians for a discussion about the topic, and the pilot group for Emotional and Mental Health was born.

What excites me about this initiative is that the pilot group is starting at the beginning and can shape the scope of the group and find the best people to be a part of it. I would like to see the group grow and figure out the priorities that our community faces in this regard. After all, the people who work in this field are the best qualified to make well-informed and experience-based decisions.

Siegrun, a long-time Auroville therapist, is part of the pilot group. She shares: "Emotional and mental health is a challenge for change, growth, integration, and transformation. Dr. Pandey will show us his spiritual approach in the light of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. I am grateful that he is willing to share his knowledge and insights with us."

Inge van Alphen

Treating mental disturbance

Dr. Alok Pandey from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Pondicherry, has been involved in treating people from Auroville who are experiencing mental problems. *Auroville Today* asked him to elaborate on mental disturbance in the light of Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's vision.

Alok: Mental disturbance, especially of a serious nature such as psychosis (insanity with loss of insight into one's condition) can be due to a number of factors such as heredity, physical lesion in the brain, or an influence of a being of the vital plane. The first two causes are well-known in modern psychiatry. The third cause is not acknowledged. Modern psychiatry, instead, recognizes that a part of a person's mind, which has been lying dormant, wakes up and starts taking hold of a person. But that theory does not explain why it happens. It does not recognise that worlds exist beyond our material universe, worlds that can influence ours, but which are normally hidden from us. It admits unconscious influences but restricts this unconscious to something personal within man.

The vital is one such world among many. Sri Aurobindo explains in one of his letters that "The forces and beings of the vital world have a great influence on human beings. The vital world is on one side a world of beauty – the poet, artist, musician are in close contact with it; it is also a world of powers and passions, lusts and desires, – our own lusts and desires, and passions and ambitions can put us into connection with the vital worlds and their forces and beings. It is again a world of things dark, dangerous and horrible. Its influences are also the source of much in men that is demoniac, dirty, cruel and base."

Sri Aurobindo has, on numerous occasions, spoken and written about the vital world influencing the earth and has explained that, whenever a new truth is emerging in humanity, the vital forces swoop down to engulf and divert it. The Mother too spoke about the influence of the hostile beings of the vital world, for example in connection to the First and Second World Wars. After the manifestation of the Supermind in 1956, she commented on the consequences of the New Force at work in the earth atmosphere which leads to the disruption of habits and rules and to the increase in the number of apparently 'mad' people. (*Mother's Agenda 7-10-1964*).

In this conversation, The Mother explains that the old norms of behaviour are broken down because they have become outdated. They are stifling to the new leap humanity is supposed to take. But the new normalcy has not yet come into place. We are going through a period of transition. Those who have repressed many things inside themselves because of social mores, ethics or religion, find that this imposition is no longer working. They have to discover new inner laws to guide them. It is at this point that other forces may come in, taking advantage of the loss of equilibrium and tilt it onto a dangerous side.

For, among the occult causes, one main cause for mental disturbance is possession or influence by an entity of the lower

vital world. Normally, our ego works as a shield and the influence of such forces is limited. For example, one normally will not get angry beyond a certain point because it is not acceptable to one's own ego-sense. But if for some reason that ego-sense ruptures, if it is fragile or if there is an excess of ambition or vanity, one opens the door to these forces. There is a cosmic dimension to all that we personally experience through our limited ego. Take fear and rage: the moment an individual loses himself in anger, a whole set of cosmic energies of a similar kind come out to support it, which makes matters worse.

Is the possibility of the ego-sense rupturing larger in places such as Auroville or the Sri Aurobindo Ashram than elsewhere?

These places attract all kinds of people. Some come for the higher Truth but there are a good number who are drawn to yoga for Power and that is dangerous. There are also some who feel that yoga will make them 'special' and feed their vanity. They have not quite fitted in the normal society and quite naturally look for groups that can offer more open-ended norms and possibly accept eccentric behavior. There are, of course, occult reasons too which we need not go into here. However, even well-intentioned people can break down due to the pressure of transformation and the unique 'stress of evolution' generated in the process of this Yoga.

For the Force at work in this yoga – especially in these places – is of a thorough going character and uncovers hidden resistances, so that they can be neutralized through offering them to the Divine. But if the sadhak is not careful, or if there is some fundamental defect in nature such as a strong ambition (spiritual) or excess of vanity and lack of humility or an excess and perverse form of sexuality, then it may be difficult to keep the balance when these hidden resistances come out into the open; then there is the possibility of the person being influenced by entities of the vital world. This creates abnormal behaviour, fantasies, which the person believes to be true. For example, I attend to people who tell me that they are guided by The Mother to paint the walls with graffiti, or indulge in drinking alcohol; or people who declare that they are the Supreme. In all these cases, reasoning doesn't work – they have their false perception which they trust to be true, they feel guided by something 'higher' and have no intention of changing because it gives them a sense of being 'special.' There is a true inner Guidance which is always full of Peace and Light, but this Guidance is then pushed to the back while the other takes over and makes the being restless and twisted, aggrandizing the ego-self.

How can these people be effectively treated?

It is not difficult if people are open and receptive to the Grace and accept proper treatment in the right spirit. Often though, it is not easy. Most of the time, those who have opened themselves to the influence of a force of the vital world do not want to let go of this influence. For this takes effort, it means accepting to become 'ordinary' once again, to lose the 'experience' and the feeling of having achieved something. Still, if it is just an influence, it can be helped; but if it is a clear possession, then it is much more difficult.

I prescribe allopathic medicines 'to plug the hole in the brain' through which these forces percolate and creep inside and move and act through the person's physical instrument'. It isolates the individual from the invasion. Someone who is psychically more awake may only need a little touch of medication, but others, in my experience, need long-term treatment – often a low-dose treatment for many years. And there the problem starts. The treatment usually falters after the initial acute phase is over. Then there is often no more cooperation from the

patient, who argues that 'my depression is over, why bother about taking medicines now' and opposes continued treatment. Another often-heard statement is that 'medicines are not required, the healing should proceed from within'. The net result is that the medicines are not taken, or thrown away, and the aberrant behaviour recurs sooner or later.

You have a reputation of giving medicines that are too strong ...

I am aware of this statement, but it is incorrect. I only prescribe strong medicines in emergencies, to calm down someone or prevent a person from harming themselves or others. In all other cases, on average my dosages are 1/3rd of what is being prescribed outside. But as people do not like medication, as this brings them back to feeling ordinary, they usually come up with a reason for refusing it. Complaints about 'a too heavy dosage' or 'the medicines creating side-effects' are common. Mostly they start complaining within a day, sometimes even within the hour, which shows that they are not sincere, for these type of drugs only take effect after 3 to 5 days.

We shouldn't forget the influence of those occult forces behind the person. These forces are aware that the medicines might take a person 'back to normal'; they try to prevent that by making suggestions that the medicines should not be taken. These suggestions are sometimes so strong that a person indeed starts experiencing side-effects. But this is often due to anticipation rather than actuality.

You mentioned that medicines only 'plug the holes'. Are there other systems of medicine which have shown better results, or are there other ways of treatment?

I am not aware of any other system of medicine – neither Ayurveda, nor Siddha, nor Tibetan medicine – that offers solutions for such cases. Some systems work well with some people, but not with others.

In one of his letters, Sri Aurobindo spoke about the power of hypnotic suggestion and of the use of psycho-spiritual means. The latter, he said is only possible if someone has the right knowledge. Evidently, neither in the Ashram nor in Auroville do we have such people. I am not speaking of those who have some vital powers but those who can do true spiritual healing. It is rare. Moreover, here too a continuous action will be required. Even Sri Aurobindo experienced that people refused to accept his action, that they called back the force that possessed them.

Do you feel that a special home for disturbed people should be created in the Ashram or Auroville?

I think that such a place will come up organically, as and when needed. Such a place would be helpful as it would get the patients out of their isolation, and provide them with an environment where not only the outer but also the inner being can be supported. This requires caretakers with a certain inner development which can influence the patients.

Is there a compilation of the writings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on this topic?

Sadly, no. Partial efforts are there but a proper book that takes into account all the possible abnormal manifestations with causes and cure from a yogic point of view is missing. There is a lot of material, and it should be brought out in book form. I do not have the time to make such a compilation, but I will be very happy to help someone from the Ashram or Auroville. For it is extremely important that Their views on these issues become easily accessible, not only to professionals, but also to lay people.

In conversation with Carel

Sri Aurobindo about Jyotish Ghose

The present condition of passivity and indifference is a reaction from a former abnormal state to which he was brought by an internal effort not properly guided from without or from within. The effort brought about a breaking of the veils which divide the physical from the psychic and vital worlds. But his mind was unprepared and unable to understand his experiences and judged them by the light of fancy and imagination and erroneous mental and vital suggestions. His vital being full of rajasic and egoistic energy rushed up violently to enjoy these new fields and use the force that was working for its own lower ends. This gave an opportunity for a hostile power from the vital world to break in and take partial possession and the result was disorganisation of the nervous and physical system and some of the brain centres.

Sri Aurobindo: Correspondence with his brother Barin about Jyotish Ghose as recorded in "Autobiographical works and other writings of historical interests", The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo vol. 36, page 336

Sri Aurobindo's letter to Rajani Pali about her son Rathin (excerpts)

My dear Rajani,

I am writing today about your son Rathin and his illness, if it can be called by that name. I shall state first in general terms the nature of the malady and its usual developments, that is to say, the normal course it takes when no psychic or spiritual force is brought in to remove it. Afterwards I shall indicate the two possible means of cure.

I think it is best for me to state the case in its worst and not only in its best possible terms because it is necessary that you should know the full truth and have the courage to face it.

These cases are not those of a truly physical malady but of an attempt at possession from the vital world; and the fits and other physical symptoms are signs, not of the malady itself, but of the struggle of the natural being against the pressure of the hostile influence. Such a case in a child of this age indicates some kind of accumulation in the physical heredity creating an opportunity or a predisposition of which the vital invasion takes advantage.

It is especially the physical consciousness and the physico-vital which contain the germs or materials of this predisposition. The physical being is always changing its constituents and in each period of seven years a complete change is effected. If the symptoms of this predisposition in the nature are detected and a wise influence and training used by the parents to eradicate them and this is done so effectively that in the first seven years no seeds of the malady appear, then usually there is no further danger. If on the contrary they manifest by the seventh year, then the next period of seven years is the critical period and, ordinarily, the case would be decided one way or the other by or before the fourteenth year.

There are normally three possible eventualities. The difficulty in dealing with the case of so young a child is that the mind is not developed and can give no help towards the cure. But as the mind develops in the second seven years it will, if it is not abnormally weak which I think is not the case here, react more and more against the influence. Aided by a good control and influence it may very well succeed in casting out the hostile intrusion and its pressure altogether. In that case the fits and other signs of the physical struggle pass away, the strange moral and vital tendencies fade out of the habits and the child becomes mentally, morally and physically a healthy normal being.

The second possibility is that the struggle between the natural being and the intruding being may not be decisive in the psychic sense, that is to say, the intruder cannot take full possession but also he cannot be thrown out entirely. In that case anything may happen, a shattered mind and health, the death of the body or a disturbed, divided and permanently abnormal nature.

The third and worst possibility is that the intruding being may succeed and take entire possession. In that case the fits and other violent symptoms will disappear, the child may seem to be physically cured and healthy, but he will be an abnormal and most dangerous being incarnating an evil vital force with all its terrible propensities and gifted with abnormal powers to satisfy them.

In Rathin's case there is not as yet possession in the full sense of the word, but a strong pressure and influence indicated by the strange habits of which you have written. These are suggested and dictated by the intruding being and not proper to the boy himself. The fearlessness and security with which he does these things is inspired from the same source. But the fits prove that there is as yet no possession. There is a struggle indicated by them and a temporary hold which passes out again. He is evidently in the earlier part of the critical period. I have indicated the course normally taken by the illness, but it is not necessary to pass through it and take its risks. There are other means which can come to his help and effect a complete cure.

The first and easiest is to cure by hypnotic suggestion. This if properly applied is an absolutely sure remedy. But in the first place, it must be applied by someone who is not himself under the influence of evil powers, as some hypnotists are. For that obviously will make matters worse. Moreover, it

must be done by someone who has the proper training and knows thoroughly what he is about, for a mistake might be disastrous. The best conditions would be if someone like yourself who has a natural relation and already an influence over the child could do it with the necessary training and knowledge.

The other means of cure is the use of spiritual power and influence. If certain psycho-spiritual means could be used, this would be as sure and effectual as the other. But this is not possible because there is no one there who has the right knowledge. The spiritual influence by itself can do it but the working is likely to be slow. It must ordinarily be conveyed through someone on the spot and you yourself are obviously the right instrument.

What you have to do is to keep the idea that I am sending to you power for this object, to make yourself receptive to it and at the same time make your own will and natural influence on the child a direct channel for it. The will must be a quiet will, calm and confident and intent on its object, but without attachment and unshaken by any amount

of resistance and unalarmed and undiscouraged by the manifestations of the illness. Your attitude to the child must be that of a calm and firm protecting affection free from emotional weakness and disturbance. The first thing is to repel the attack when it comes and if it takes any hold to diminish steadily its force and the violence of its manifestation. I understand from your letter that you have already been able to establish the beginning of such an influence. But it must be able to work at a distance as well as in his presence. Further you must acquire the power of leaving a protection around him when you are absent. Secondly, you must be able to convey to him a constant suggestion which will gradually inhibit the strange undesirable habits of which you speak in your letter. This, I may say, cannot be effectively done by any kind of external coercion. For that is likely to make these impulses more violent. It must be a will and suggestion and silent influence. If you find the control increasing and these habits diminishing, you can understand that the work of cure has begun.

Its completion may take some time because these vital beings are very sticky and persistent and are always returning to the attack. The one thing which can make the cure rapid is if the boy himself develops a will in his mind to change, for that will take away the ground of the hostile influence. It is because something in him is amused and takes pleasure in the force which comes with the influence that these things are able to recur and continue. This element in him calls the invading presence back even when it has been centrally rejected. I shall of course try to act directly on him as well as through you, but the instrumentality of one on the spot greatly enforces and is sometimes indispensable to the action.

Sri Aurobindo: Excerpt from his letter to Rajani Pali of 6th April, 1923 as recorded in "Autobiographical works and other writings of historical interests", The Complete Works of Sri Aurobindo vol. 36, page 373-375

Mental health care in India

Every day, thousands of health seekers of different faiths, the mentally ill and the spirit-possessed, travel from villages and cities to faith healing shrines dotted throughout Tamil Nadu that are reputed for their curative powers.

Some seekers are guided by the common belief that their mental illness is caused by possession of evil spirits or a curse placed upon them by a jealous neighbour or relative. Others visit shrines as a last resort after taking ineffective biomedical treatment.

The belief that one's mental illness is caused by possession of an evil spirit incurs little stigmatisation, and this culturally-accepted explanation does not portray the ill person as a victim. On the other hand, there is a social stigma associated with mental disorder and psychiatric treatment. For example, if it is common knowledge within a community that an unmarried girl has received psychiatric treatment, her marriage prospects are severely hindered. Therefore, seeking religious help for spirit-possession at shrines (which may be Hindu, Muslim or Catholic) is socially sanctioned. Some devotees stay at shrines for weeks in hopes of a permanent cure, and will use services offered by priests, local healers, astrologers and exorcists, as the sacred is often perceived as playing a crucial role in the healing process.

The situation in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry

The report places Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry near the top across most measurements, including the number of institutions: Tamil Nadu has one dedicated government psychiatric institution (the norm per state), provides psychiatric care in a high number (27) of district hospitals, has 80 private institutions, and has the highest number of NGOs working in mental healthcare (121). While Pondicherry does not have a government psychiatric hospital, it delivers substantial psychiatric care through its general hospitals, and the number of private centres is on the rise. This prevalence of services somewhat reflects the high rates of mental illness in Tamil Nadu and Pondicherry. Pondicherry reports the second highest annual suicide rate, after Delhi, and is closely followed by Tamil Nadu. In particular, Tamil Nadu has experienced a spate of farmer suicides in the last months, which has been linked to the recent failed monsoon.

Effect on healing shrines

The Erwadi fire and subsequent mental health reforms have not had much influence on the functioning of healing shrines. The vast majority simply ignored government attempts to make them interface with psychiatric services. Some shrines vehemently resisted state attempts at intervention – possibly due to the fundamental mismatch between the world-views of psychiatry and religion. Erwadi itself reportedly resisted all attempts at intervention for many years, but eventually agreed to implement some psychiatric services, and this is underway now.

A few shrines cooperated with attempted intervention programmes (which largely failed). One temple, the Gunaseelam temple near Trichy in Tamil Nadu, which has an enduring reputation for curing mental illness, established an attached rehabilitation centre in cooperation with a psychiatric hospital in Trichy. The centre's programme aims to treat patients affordably within a community setting in a way that synchronises with their religious beliefs. The healing regimen includes religious healing from the priests five times per day in the temple, and biomedical treatment from a psychiatrist who visits a few times a week. Patients express positive experiences, saying they believe more in the power of the god than biomedicine.

New Mental Health Care Bill

One of the most significant reforms post-Erwadi is the introduction of a new Mental Health Care Bill 2013 which seeks to replace the outdated Mental Health Act of 1987. The new bill was approved in the Rajya Sabha in 2016, and is now awaiting ratification by the Lok Sabha.

The bill has certain progressive features and lays down clear responsibilities for states, and aims to fulfill India's stated mandate to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CPRD), which India signed in 2007. The bill aims to protect the rights of people with mental illness and ensure they are not discriminated against. It makes mental health treatment a right, focuses on making positive changes to the mental health care infrastructure, and aims to provide expanded access to treatment. It reduces doctors' power to commit patients to psychiatric treatment centers without their consent, and forbids electroshock therapy without anaesthesia and muscle relaxants. It also decriminalizes suicide, stressing the need to rehabilitate such individuals. It aims to uphold patient confidentiality and obligates the government to create shelters and halfway houses for the mentally ill. State governments will be compelled to establish their own mental health authority, and integrate mental health services into primary, secondary and tertiary health care.

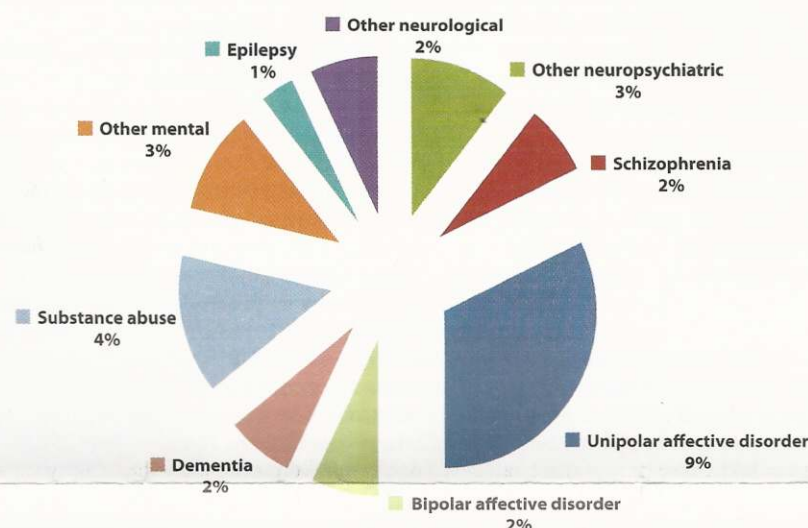
A notable feature of the bill is the introduction of advance directives: this gives people suffering from a mental illness the right to choose their mode of treatment, and to nominate representatives who will ensure that their choices are carried out. This ensures that mental illness does not rob an individual of decision-making capacities, and instills the idea that they are entitled to a life of dignity.

The new bill has also drawn a fair share of criticism. It largely adopts a biomedical model to treat mental illness, and does not acknowledge other healing modalities. It only recognises the role of psychiatrists in the treatment of a mental illness, and it focuses on the requirements of people in mental healthcare facilities, which is only a small proportion of the mentally-ill.

While the new legislation is directed at the formal mental health sector, thousands of people continue each day to visit faith healing shrines. These liminal spaces between the everyday and sacred spheres of life are often the first and last port of call for mental health seekers. A stay in a shrine is not merely the last hope for recovery or a cheap refuge. It allows the mentally ill person to act upon their faith, because the first and last hope of recovery is often based on faith.

Lesley

Globally, 28% of all non-communicable disabilities are caused by mental disorders. The chart shows the distribution of these various mental illnesses.



The fire at Erwadi

In 2001, a fire occurred at the Erwadi dargah, a Sufi Muslim shrine in Tamil Nadu that is highly popular for its reputed miraculous powers to heal the mentally ill. The fire killed 28 people with mental illness who had been chained up in the surrounding boarding houses used to confine residents. Sensational media reports portrayed the Erwadi tragedy as a result of 'backward' traditions that needed to be overcome by enlightened modernity. The media also revealed that psychiatric services were in a poor state across most of the country, and psychiatrists generally conceded the shortcomings, citing poor government commitment. There were widespread calls for the modernisation of the mental health sector. At the time, Tamil Nadu's formal mental health care system was in a better condition than most other Indian states.

Since the Erwadi fire, governmental attempts to reform the formal mental health sector have gained force. A 2016 report of the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) identifies the progress made, as well as the "glaring gaps" that still exist in mental health care in the country – where mental illness is estimated to affect seven per cent of the current population. The report found that there are only 47 public psychiatric institutions throughout the country, and the number of inpatient beds in India is well below the global average. An estimated 6,000 psychiatrists are active (one per 2,000,000 per head of population of 1.2 billion), which is below the global average, and many of them are in private practice or emigrate overseas. The numbers of trained clinical psychologists, psychiatric social workers and psychiatric nurses are far lower. Overall, the NHRC deems there are significant human resource shortages, inadequate rehabilitation and recreation facilities, "closed ward" structures still in existence in some hospitals, and variability in monitoring and a lack of systematic planning.

On the positive side, today there is a reduction in involuntary admissions and better living conditions for patients. There have been significant transformations in psychiatric hospitals, with improved facilities, infrastructure, food and drugs. Outpatient services have improved, and institutions are making efforts to engage more with the community. There are more than 325 NGOs working in the mental health field, which is an improvement over the last decade, but still deemed grossly insufficient for a country of 1.2 billion people.

"We have to focus on the big Auroville"

Louis Cohen, who first came to Auroville in 1971, is one of the original pioneers. He continues to be very active in the development of the town.

Auroville Today: How did you come to Auroville?

I was 22 years old and planning to leave France to go to Brazil on the first part of a world tour. Then I saw a magazine with people doing yoga on a beach in Goa and I decided to go to India instead. Before I left, I was asked to bring some car parts for someone who lived in a community in south India. His name was Vincenzo.

I reached Pondicherry at 6 o'clock in the morning and went to Aspiration where I met Vincenzo. I had a very direct, deep contact with him and we spent half a day together, during which he talked about Auroville.

I hadn't come for Auroville and I was expecting to leave very soon to continue my travels. But, little by little, something happened and I ended up staying four years.

What held me here was an inner appeal: this was how Mother arranged for me to remain. I began working with Vincenzo, cutting steel at night for the construction of Auropress. Meanwhile I was asking everybody questions about this old lady in Pondicherry: I didn't know anything about spirituality.

At this time in Aspiration there were two groups: the 'vital' group and a more 'sattwic' group that used to meditate together. I remember asking one of them in the latter group, "So you have no more ego?" and he laughed. For the first month, I was in the vital group. In the evening we would go for a swim, then drink beer in Pondicherry. But after one month I joined the sattwic group!

When did you first meet Mother?

I met Mother for the first time for my birthday on 1st November 1971. I gave her different flowers, like 'protection', 'psychological perfection' and 'transformation'. She gave me a rose and then she gave me back the transformation flowers! That was it.

I can't say I have had any spiritual experience with Mother; it is through matter that I worked for her. Vincenzo was the same. He smoked when cutting marble for the Urn, and the Ashramites complained to Mother that this kind of behaviour was impossible. But Mother said, "leave him be, let him work". She was very practical.

When I first met Mother, it was a difficult time for me. I had a girlfriend in France who wanted to join me. At that time, we had to show a photograph to Mother of anybody who wanted to come to Auroville. 99% of the time she said 'yes', but this time she said 'no'. Eventually, my girlfriend came and we spent the week in Pondicherry but then she left because she said I had been hypnotised by Mother. It was very tough for me because she was a nice person and I could not understand why Mother had not accepted her. Later, I understood. Mother had intervened so that I could stay in Auroville. If she had not done this, it would have represented a return to my old ways. Mother saved me many lifetimes of yoga.

I met Mother many times. I had begun working in Auropolyester [a polyester workshop that made housing units etc. eds.], and at one point Mother asked us to come once a week to show her new products. I also went sometimes for the Aspiration talks, when a small group from Aspiration community would go and ask Mother questions. But at one point I decided to stop seeing her. I had been waiting on the stairs outside her room when I heard an Ashramite speaking to her about his chickens. "I have so many chickens, should I take more?" It was terrible. I thought, 'This is the universal Mother. Why are you are trying to bring her down to this?'

I thought, 'How can I take another minute of Mother's time?', and I stopped going.

In 1972, I went back briefly to France. I brought back a letter with a message from Andre Malraux. Mother had asked him if he wanted to be a sponsor for the centenary of Sri Aurobindo and he had agreed.

I had been told to give the letter to Satprem so that he could give it to Mother. When I reached Satprem's house, I could hear music. I started climbing the steps but then he came out and said, very aggressively, 'Why are you here?'

One month later I wrote to him, thanking him for his 'kind' welcome, and asking him if he could help me take away my 'old skin'. He replied that he didn't any longer see people but that he would be willing to meet me. I spent one



Louis Cohen

and a half hours with him and it was great. His essential message was that I had to find Mother inside myself.

How did you feel when Mother left her body?

I couldn't believe it at first because every few months the *Bulletin* from the Ashram was coming out where she spoke in detail of the supramental body and its functioning. So I was 100% sure that Mother was going to have this body.

So at first there was disbelief, then pain and I was angry with Mother for leaving us. I was also revolted by the way that the Ashram had allowed everybody to see Mother's body. It was terrible because Mother had said that if anything happened to her, her body must be kept quiet, undisturbed.

Were you tempted to leave Auroville then?

No, I accepted that we would have to carry on the work for her. But one year after Mother's passing I left to try to commercialise Auroville products in France. I would surely not have left if Mother had still been in her body.

I stayed in France for some years. I began working in real estate with my brother, renovating apartments and big buildings. But I retained a close contact with Auroville and was coming here every year for two or three months.

Some people who have been here from the beginning look back and say those early years were the golden age of Auroville. Do you share this view?

No, I have no nostalgia for those times. I believe in the future of Auroville, not in the past. And Mother is alive, she is here, she's completely with us. Even Roger, Kireet, Satprem, they are all here. We are just ignorant; we cannot push aside the veil.

You were very close to Roger Anger.

I first met Roger in 1971 when he was working in the Auroville architecture office in Pondicherry but did not have a close contact with him then. He left India in 1975 mainly because of the problems with the Sri Aurobindo Society – he felt they were preventing him doing his work – but also he was frustrated with the Aurovilians. He was doing the plans for the steel town of Salem to bring money into Auroville but some people were telling him he should only work for Auroville.

I had a much closer contact when he came back to Auroville in 1987. He arrived with the second model of the Matrimandir and I went to meet him at the airport. I told him that it was time for him to live in Auroville rather than Pondicherry and he agreed.

My house in Auromodèle had just been finished so I shared it with him and Jacqueline. From that moment, we became close. We shared so much work, including the planning of the town and the coordination of Matrimandir. I have always searched for beauty, and Roger had a wonderful talent for this. Mother gave me

a big gift by letting me share part of Roger's life.

Why was Roger so insistent that the city should be built as soon as possible?

Mother asked him to build it. Roger said Mother had told him that she went within and showed Sri Aurobindo the model of the town and he found it wonderful, so beautiful, creative. So when she came out of the trance she told Roger, "Build my city". This is one of the reasons why he felt it was so important for the city to be built.

However, as this is the first divine town that wants to manifest in the world, there is much resistance from certain forces, and these forces take people hostage. It makes them say that we don't want the city, we only want a village. Roger suffered very much from this.

But we should understand that to materialise this town is the most wonderful opportunity. And it is already here in the subtle physical: we just have to bring it down.

I am sure that I have received, first from Mother and then from Roger, the energy to participate in the building of the city. If I take the case of Citadines [two apartment blocks in the centre of Auroville eds.], while I was the main project-holder and raised much of the funding, I can say I have not done anything; Mother has done it. It was a challenge to have constructed these two buildings in two years but at the end there were 50 Aurovilians working joyfully together on it: it was a wonderful experience. This is the joy of building her city.

What was the inspiration behind Citadines?

I saw it as a kind of utopia in the larger utopia of Auroville. I wanted to offer a decent living place to those people dedicated to Auroville who have been here a long time but cannot afford a place of their own; 80% of the apartments are given as a gift. It is also for Newcomers who want to work for Auroville and to experiment with living a fraternal life in a residential area where we share much in common (restaurant, laundry, service workshop, art centre etc.), but who have limited financial means.

In the next project we are doing, Sunship, we will also be giving 50% of the apartments as a gift: it will be in exactly the same spirit as Citadines.

Meanwhile, we have constructed some temporary structures near Citadines to provide accommodation for young volunteers who could not afford to stay in the guesthouses. I feel we have a responsibility to shelter them if they want to participate in the experiment of Auroville. We are planning to reproduce this experiment elsewhere in Auroville.

After Sunship is completed, I would like to be part of a team constructing a Line of Force [one of a series of mega-structures that help define the shape of the Galaxy plan eds.] for 2,000 people and to give 90% of them free. We need to have at least 2,000 people more in Auroville because the real solution to accelerating Auroville's development lies in increasing our population.

We have to find big money to do this, but

Auroville is a big project. Some of us have never thought big, which is one reason why the development of the city is going so slowly, but now I feel there is a change in the wind. The architect has started to work on the architecture of the first Line of Force. Meanwhile, there is a team working on a proposal to start to construct a big viewing point near the Visitors Center that would be the end of another Line of Force. This Line of Force would accommodate 10,000 people.

We have to demonstrate that the Lines of Force will be the most collective and ecological way of living in Auroville. In the first Line of Force, the first three levels will be collective spaces – for restaurants, a library, shops and services – and all the other floors will be the apartments. We will use natural ventilation and ecological materials and the building will be integrated into nature. We also want to maintain a certain level of consciousness in the way people live there.

How will you achieve this?

Through guidelines. In Citadines we have guidelines, like no air-conditioners, no personal ammas, pets or personal washing machines, which everybody observes. We have shown it is possible to live like this in fraternal solidarity, and that individuality can be preserved in the context of collective living.

Auromodèle was meant to be an early model for the city but it turned into a community of independent homes. Have we learnt from that experience?

I think Auromodèle failed because of human nature. Everybody wanted their privacy. They put up fences and had their own ammas and gardeners. Perhaps this experiment was too advanced for us at that time. Or perhaps it would have been better to have started the town right away...

You are part of a group that is putting a lot of energy into the International Zone at the moment. Why?

The International Zone is the main focus for Auroville's relationship with the world, so it is very important. It is also the biggest project in Auroville. In Roger's final layout, there will be around 70,000 square metres of constructed space, including the Centre of International Research in Human Unity (CIRHU). This will have auditoria, laboratories, exhibition spaces and accommodation for researchers. There will also be accommodation prioritised for those working in the Zone (I am constructing 'Terra Amata', one of these residential complexes).

Of course, there will also be the pavilions of different cultures. Mother said that the International Zone is primarily for the Aurovilians, and that each pavilion has to express the soul of its country, so that each person who lives here can also identify with the soul of his or her country.

We have to bring life to the International Zone. The priority now is to lay down the infrastructure and to get people living on the land to prevent encroachment. I hope that soon the governments of different countries will be able to finance the pavilions of their countries. Meanwhile, we will have temporary structures, like the Pavilion of France.

Has your idealism in any way become diluted over the years?

I am frustrated because I see a very slow development of the city and I am aware that many of the problems we are facing are created by ourselves. For example, we have an extreme of bureaucracy: we have far too many working groups even for a town of 50,000!

At the same time, I never stopped believing in the ideal. Roger told me that I am a 'pathological optimist', but I am one hundred percent optimistic about the development of the International Zone and the rest of the city.

Collectively, we can choose to focus on the small Auroville or the big Auroville. I have faith that it is the big one coming down.

I have always kept the smile, the joy. Auroville is a unique experiment: every day is Mother's miracle. It is a huge privilege to participate in the Dream and to help manifest Her vision. I am very grateful to Her.

From an interview by Alan

The Kaza Eco-Community Centre

The Auroville Earth Institute (AVEI) managed by Satprem (founder), Lara, and Iyappan is internationally known as a centre for excellence in earthen architecture. It works in 36 countries, particularly in emerging economies, to promote and transfer knowledge in earth architecture. Recently, AVEI shot to prominence when it received the International Low Carbon Award (Construction 21's Green Building & City Solutions) Awards at COP22 in Marrakesh for building the Kaza Eco-Community Centre in Spiti Valley in north India.

Spiti Valley is a desert mountain valley located at an altitude of 3800 metres on the Indo-Tibetan border that for decades had been closed to outsiders. "Spiti" in the vernacular language means "The Middle Land" or the land between Tibet and India. The name is testimony to the unique culture of this place where people practice Vajrayana Buddhism and speak a language that is a cross between Hindi and Tibetan. The small town of Kaza, where the project located, is the administrative headquarters for the Spiti area.

Auroville Today spoke to Lara and Satprem about this unique project.

How did you happen to take up this project?

Satprem: I have a long-standing relationship with Spiti Projects Charity, a UK-based NGO with local partners who funded the project. Spiti Projects headed by Joan Pollock has been working for the past 23 years to meet the basic health needs of the



The completed building ready for inauguration

local people and preserve their culture of the place. They were asked by the local people to build a community center. As AVEI has done small building projects in the valley since 2004 using Compressed Stabilized Earth Blocks (CSEB) in the Spiti Valley, Joan invited us to build the Kaza Eco-Community Center. The project was in complete alignment with AVEI's operating mission of linking "vernacular traditions of raw earth construction with the modern technology of stabilised earth."

Spiti Projects wanted us to revitalize the local culture by using traditional building techniques, such as the rammed earth technique called "Gyang," earthquake resistant features, namely embedding bamboo or branches into the earth walls for resistance, use of lime plaster etc. We were, of course, happy to do this. Essentially, AVEI introduced modest innovations and quality control into traditional building practices to reinvigorate acceptance of these methods, which these days are easily discarded because of the onslaught of the concrete industry.

What was the most challenging moment for you?

Lara: There were so many, but when you are solving problems moment to moment, it is hard to pinpoint the most challenging one! To begin with, there is the harsh climatic conditions of the region. Summer temperatures are as high as +35 °C and winters go down to -35 °C. So you have only 4 months to work from June-September. And during this short period, our local workers leave for a month to harvest peas!

In mid-July, before the monsoon rolled in, we had to ensure that the half-constructed building of rammed earth was covered and capped properly, otherwise the rains would wash it away. And then again, the same in September, to protect it from the



Earthquake-resistant features: buttress walls, ring beams and CSEB U-blocs allow for lateral stability

snows of winter.

The sun is harsh. It really hurts the eyes. And being outside in high heat to oversee the project is not easy. Then you are shivering at nights, unable to sleep because of the cold. While we analyzed the soil before making the CSEBs, we had to rely on local knowledge to decide on where to excavate, for in this mountainous, seismic region, one can create landslides if one starts to dig in the wrong place. The valley has been deforested for many years, and many resources like wood and glass had to be brought all the way from Chandigarh, through hairpin bends and treacherous mountain passes on overloaded trucks!

Electricity was scarce and unreliable. So you had to really plan and phase your work – pumping the water, getting the carpenters to plane the wood and using other power tools – to make the most of it when it was there.

Perhaps my most challenging moment was when I was getting ready to leave in the first season and one of AVEI's head masons was supposed to replace me as the site supervisor. But the poor guy had high-altitude sickness, so he could not stay. He came back with me, and we had to leave a young, relatively inexperienced, architect, Swati, in-charge, but she did a

fantastic job!

Satprem: For me, it was the shock that I had got the design of formwork wrong. I had not fully researched the details of the Gyang technology. The earth they use in this technology is much wetter than what is used in modern rammed-earth techniques. There were changes that we had to make in the process of the building.

Lara: We understood much better the details of the local building techniques during the process of the construction.

Then there were personally challenging moments. I got a lung infection from the construction dust and was really sick and miserable. Satprem was in Auroville, and he was going through one of the most difficult times of his life, embroiled in a conflict with Kottakarai villagers. And up at Kaza, I did not have any cell phone network for 5 days, so we could not even reach out to each other for support.

Also, another sad thing. After the project was over, we had this skilled Nepali mason who went back to Nepal right before the massive earthquake. We heard that while he and his family survived the quake, all but two houses in his village were destroyed. We wanted to reach out with some funds to help him, but it was too complex to get the money to him. I have not been able to connect with him.

What was the most inspiring moment for you?

Lara: Working with the local masons. These people are really practicing Buddhists. There was always so much to do, and I could get quite stressed and frantic trying to ensure that the building was relatively completed and secured before winter set in. But these people were always so calm. They would do what needed to be done with such peace and grace. It was really learning to balance deadlines while just being in the moment.

Do you feel you have influenced local building practices in the area?

Lara: Some people there now know how to make CSEBs. But honestly, given the trend towards building in concrete, our influence is marginal. We deliberately did not plaster some inside walls of the building so that people could see that this impressive modern-looking building was basically made of rammed earth. It is a modern exhibition which will hopefully get people to rethink their own traditions.

My impression is that the local population gradually got to accept us, a team of foreign architects, and to understand that we were re-packaging their traditional knowledge into a modern form. I felt that they took pride in that.

What are the ways in which you think this community centre will serve the local people?

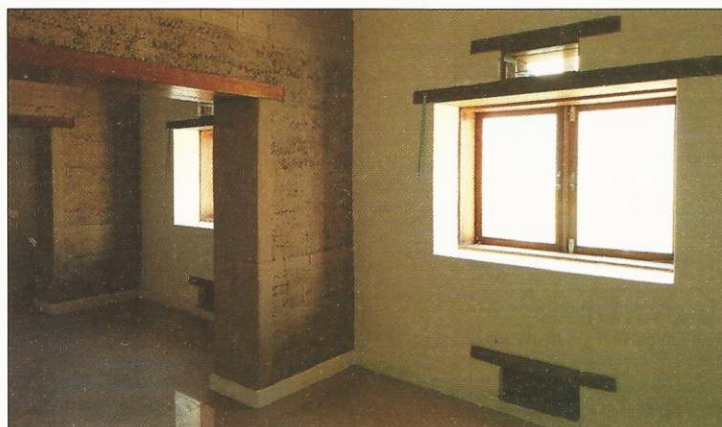
Lara: It remains to be seen how the community uses the building. Maybe in a year from now, I can better answer that. But yes, even before it was completed, local people, monks, builders, would pass by and ask us questions. At the inauguration ceremony, local Buddhist monks blessed the building with a ritualistic dance. I was touched.

I find it heartening that the building will offer lodging to people from outlying villages who travel over 50 km to Kaza for health care. We stayed at the local hospital during the construction of the building. Doctors would visit only for a few days each month, but would go around, and the hospital courtyard would then fill with over a hundred people waiting to see the doctor. Not all of them had a place to stay in Kaza. So this community centre is for them to use.

Why do you think this building won the low carbon award? What were the criteria?

Lara: Actually, if it weren't for the insistence of the Auroville Green Practices group, we would not even have applied for this award. I think Construction 21 was looking for a wide range of sustainability criteria, including social sustainability criteria such as engaging local stakeholders. Many awards that go to green buildings, which have long-term operational sustainability, actually have a high carbon footprint and embodied energy. And awards go to modern techniques and contemporary architecture rather than honouring fundamental principles and traditional techniques. We were doing something different.

In conversation with Bindu



Trombe walls allow for passive solar heating of the building during the winter so that wood is not burnt for heating. Traditionally, a glass wall was used in front of the building to trap heat. The innovation was to allow for circulation of air through a vent that can be opened and closed. The vent allows hot air to circulate in the building in the winter. In the summer closing the vents prevents the hot air from coming in.

Brief News

Failed monsoon

Auroville's last monsoon season (Oct-Dec 2016) witnessed the lowest rainfall for over 100 years. Over the previous 12 months, less than half the average amount of rain has fallen in and around Auroville. As a result, several wells are under stress and falling water tables increase the risk of salinization. Residents are advised to avoid wasting water and to be on the alert for forest fires.

Land protection workshops

A series of workshops were held to explore possibilities in regards to protecting Auroville land. The first two mornings focused on ground realities and provided the outlines of four proposals. After a core group had worked together for a month, four alternative proposals were presented in a third workshop in more detail: creation of a unique statutory land regulation framework; amendment to the Town and Country Planning Act; formation of a New Town Development Authority; remaining under the existing statutory regulations. The participants agreed to recommend the formation of a land protection team that will go further into exploring the merits of each of the proposals.

Auroville and Puducherry PV collaboration

A 45kW rooftop solar PV system was designed and installed by Auroville's unit Sunlit Future on the French Consulate in Pondicherry. Auroville has collaborated with Pondicherry previously providing rooftop grid-connected solar PV systems for two residences, as well as some buildings of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. Auroville Consulting also contributed to the design of the Puducherry Solar Energy Policy and the related regulatory framework and implementation guidelines.

Auroville Farm Festival

Aurovilians, guests, volunteers and children of all ages enjoyed three days of the Auroville Farm Festival held 21-22 January. The first day was a celebration on the plot of the upcoming Foodlink site near the Certitude corner and included games and activities for children. It was followed by a visit to nearby Sustenance Farm, and ended with presentations of different farms and some of their new projects. The second day's events were held at the Unity Pavilion and included a film, followed by small group participatory discussions, an organic lunch, another film viewing in the afternoon and two more talks on "Our Farms, Our Future" and the "Challenges of Organic Farming in India". On the afternoon of the third day, participants visited Annapurna Farm where there was a tour and yoghurt tasting. The events ended with a closing celebration at the Foodlink site.

Auroville Appeal Process

By a majority vote of 214 'yes' against 23 'no', the Residents Assembly has approved an appeal process. Individuals can now ask an Appeal Body to review and possibly change a working group's decision. The first year trial period is limited to decisions of the Auroville Council, L'avenir d'Auroville (the Town Development Council), the Funds and Assets Management Committee and the Working Committee.

Bharata Natyam with a difference

Recently, the brothers Ramdjiet and Suresh Kishna performed Bharata Natyam in the Tanjore Quartet tradition for an Auroville audience. They also conducted a four day workshop to introduce people to this rarely-performed dance form.

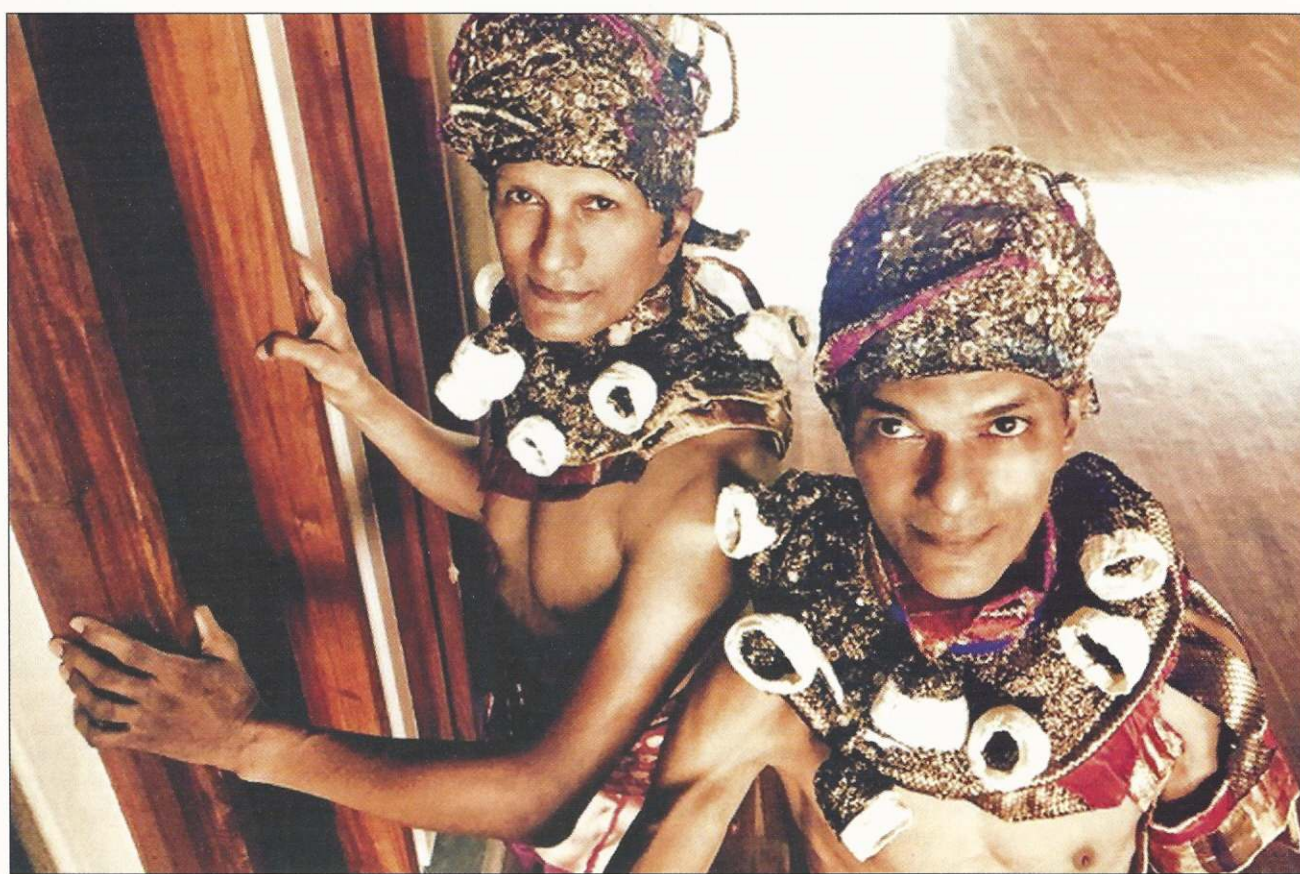
Flanked by four giant Auroville Papers pots emanating fragrant incense, and illuminated by moody elegant lighting, two dance artists strode on stage and commanded the audience's attention for their performance of Cosmic Creatrix, synthesis of creativity. The brothers not only highlighted the intricate body movements, footwork and stylised *hasta mudras* (hand gestures) of the Tanjore Quartet Bharata Natyam tradition. They expressed different aspects of the creative power of the Goddess throughout five choreographed dances, with explanations given to the audience in brief oral introductions. The duo also sported spectacular costumes, styled by Suresh and Ramdjiet, that innovate on traditional costume forms. Their guru's lineage may stretch directly back to 1638, yet as Ram asserts: "We carry an ancient tradition, but we are contemporary artists."

In conversation, the brothers are a force of high energy and passion for their craft. They finish each other's sentences, spark each other into tangents and backstories, and articulate each other's feelings. Their connection is palpable, and listeners are compelled to keep up with the rich conversational ebb and flow. The brothers perform in the Tanjore Quartet tradition of Bharata Natyam, a school of south Indian classical dance and music that is the source of mainstream Bharata Natyam, yet is now almost invisible in India.

"Personally, when I perform this distinctive school of Bharata Natyam, I feel that it connects me to other spheres, a bigger world we have no notion about," says Ram. "Our aim as multi-faceted artists is to take the audience into another amazing reality, where they experience the essence of their own consciousness."

The brothers emphasise their many different artistic and cultural influences, drawn from their heritage and lived experiences across the broad span of Surinam, Holland and India. "I don't put myself in one box, or say, 'I'm Indian or I'm Dutch'. I'm a world citizen," says Ram. Growing up in Surinam (a former Dutch colony in South America) as the youngest of 11 children in an Indian family that originally hailed from Rajasthan, the brothers were drawn to the arts at an early age. "Dance and music was always part of our life," Ram asserts. "A Nataraja statue came into our home in Surinam. I was intrigued. We knew it was from Bharata Natyam. We used to try to stand on one leg [imitating the statue], and we thought, 'Only a god can stand like that!' We decided to embrace him as our god. We were drawn to the beauty of Bharata Natyam, as it revealed endless potentials of humanity."

After some of their older siblings went to Holland to study, the whole family moved there in pursuit of superior schooling. "It was a privilege," says Ram, "because Dutch society welcomed us very nicely. We already spoke Dutch." Suresh took classes in Bharata Natyam and after a few years did his debut performance in 1993 (*Arangetrām*) at the former Royal Tropical Institute in Amsterdam – the first male in Holland to accomplish this. The brothers absorbed many artistic influences in Europe, from the great masters such as Van Gogh, to modern art and haute couture fashion designers such as Chanel, YSL and Christian Dior. "We get inspired by them and their rich artistic life, but we don't want to be a copy of anyone! Bharata Natyam gives us the possibility to incorporate other ideas and the mindsets of other cultures."



Ramdjiet and Suresh Kishna

By the time the brothers reached adulthood, Suresh felt he had outgrown his teacher in Amsterdam. They were also exploring other forms of dancing such as contemporary North and South American and rhythmic styles that they grew up with. They went to India for the first time in 1993, and spent an "eye-opening" six weeks with late Bharata Natyam Guru Ms Padmini Rao in Bangalore. "I was surprised when I first came to India and saw how complex the society was!," says Suresh. Then they decided to go to the source and meet with Rao's guru, Guru Kittappa Pillai. "When we came to India, we wanted to study with the best of the best," says Ram. "We thought we must meet the master, he was the last visionary of the Tanjore Quartet lineage."

They journeyed to meet Guru Kittappa Pillai at his private school, which was formerly the royal art centre in the princely state of Tanjore (Thanjavur), Tamil Nadu. "He was the real thing, such a diamond. Working with him did not force me into a narrow-minded world, compared to other mentors I met," says Suresh.

Guru Kittappa Pillai (1913-1999) was a direct descendant of one of the Tanjore Quartet – four 19th century brothers who were *nattuvannars* (choreographers and composers) who flourished under the patronage of Tanjore king Serfoji II. "The four brothers are important and crucial for this field," says Ram, "because they developed the whole syllabus for teaching and structures for repertoire. They composed music for Bharata Natyam, and introduced the western violin into the South Indian Carnatic music style. They documented a lot of dance and art from previous eras. They blended the ritual temple presentation of the elegant *devadasis* (temple dancers) and the royal court presentations into a modern stage art. The Tanjore Quartet is the source of authentic traditional Bharata Natyam, and we love to be part of this rich artistic history."

After their guru's death in October 1999, Ram and Suresh continued studying under his son, master Tanjore K. Chandrasekaran, for some time. "The first year, I missed my guru a lot," says Suresh. After Ramdjiet performed his *Arangetrām* in 2003 under Chandrasekaran's guidance, the brothers decided to follow their own vision.

They based themselves in Amsterdam, and performed and taught in Europe and India. As custodians of the Tanjore Quartet tradition of Bharata Natyam, they felt that this "original art that is the source of all forms of Bharata Natyam" was slowly fading away from international scene, to be largely superseded by other forms that now constitute the popular mainstream in Chennai. "When I hear mainstream music, I hear an Indian party," says Suresh. "Our music is totally different, and the singer is a specially trained singer for Bharata Natyam, not a usual Carnatic singer."

They started a non-profit art foundation to maintain the original Tanjore Quartet tradition (it functions in India as Arangart® a Tanjore Quartet United Art Foundation). While they are dedicated to upholding tradition, they permit themselves the liberty of adapting choreography and introducing their own set designs – a flexible approach that deviates from mainstream Bharata Natyam forms. "I can easily adapt my guru's choreography," says Ram, "like people do with Mozart or Bach. If you have mastered it, you can easily move in and out of established structures, without disturbing the artistic and emotional content." And the duo often performs without the typical Nataraja statue on stage. "We have Lord Nataraja constantly in our heart," says Ram.

The brothers also flout convention by changing costumes regularly during a performance, as well as by making costumes that introduce unexpected elements of nature and art, often in the form of spectacular trimmings and headdresses. "You just add something to the headdress, and voila!," says Ram. "For one of the dances performed in Auroville we added a tassel inspired by the Maratha king of Tanjore Serfoji II, who used to wear that kind of headdress. We try to bring an overall aesthetic experience to our performances, and to expand our audiences' horizons."

The brothers' connection to Auroville stems back to the Sri Aurobindo books that were in their childhood house. While they have been based near Auroville for two years, they have no plans to join. "I believe you can carry Auroville in your heart and have it anywhere in the world," says Ram.

In addition to their Auroville performance, the brothers held a four-day workshop at CRIPA's request for participants to learn a choreographed dance piece. "According to Auroville guidelines, professional guest artists are not paid for their work," says Ram. "The art is our profession. At the bakery you cannot get free bread! When artists perform in other places, they get paid. If you don't pay the artists, you don't get the best of the best. We did compromise in Auroville, mainly for the love of our art and to create awareness of our original tradition. The audience and workshop participants appreciated that we offer innovation and creativity, and something of high quality."

As for the future, the brothers express their hope to establish an atelier, but they are uncertain about which country they will do this in. However, they are sure about their creative future directions. "We want to make more creative cultural crossings," says Ram. "We want to keep this beautiful amazing art, and around that, we want to innovate. We'd like to work with people doing hybrid form performances. We also think, 'Let the future come'." Suresh adds: "This art of dance and music is our way of life, our yoga of dance. Unlike other forms of dance, it's not performed merely to please the audience but to share our spiritual journey, our imagination, and our inner love."

Lesley



The Tanjore Quartet

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