

Restoring the Siruseri Twin Lakes

In 2015 Chennai experienced one of the worst floods in its history with over four hundred fatalities, economic damage of over US \$3 billion and 1.8 million people displaced. In its wake, Tata Consultancy Service (TCS), one of the largest companies in India, approached IIT Madras (IITM) to carry out a detailed hydro-geological survey of the Siruseri watershed. TCS's offices are located on the 300-acre SIPCOT campus, home to prominent software companies on the outskirts of south-west Chennai. IIT conducted the hydro-geological survey and had two recommendations to prevent future floods and improve water management in the area. Firstly, the existing drainage channels needed to be cleared and encroachments around them removed, and secondly the storage capacity of Siruseri Twin Lakes needed to be improved.

TCS and IITM then approached Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants (PFC), an Auroville unit that specialises in carrying out eco-restoration, environment education and community development, to implement the second part of IIT's recommendation. This involved designing a Master Plan and becoming involved in the physical work of restoring (desilting, landscaping and reforesting) the Twin Lakes, 'Periya eri' (75 acres) and 'Sitteri' (25 acres). TCS funded the project through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) fund.



The Siruseri lakes before (below) and after (top) desilting and landscaping by PFC



We know from experience that it is possible to work with nature and restore habitats. Water tables will rise as we create more water retention landscapes. Perhaps a sense of humbleness will also return and an understanding that development has its limits and that Chennai can change to find a balance between people, buildings and the natural world.

Joss from PFC

were amazed that we live in a forest," Manjula narrates, "and remarked that their places used to be like this before SIPCO, when they were still farming."

PFC is now applying for additional funding and proposing to TCS to build an integrated community eco-knowledge centre. The centre's purpose would be to share the experiences and lessons learnt from the work of desilting and restoring the lakes and channel systems. PFC would also like to restore the degraded reserve forest above Periya eri and Sitteri lakes, which are presently populated with non-native species, into a vibrant native ecosystem by planting indigenous species. This would bring back topsoil, allowing rainwater to be absorbed and replenishing the aquifers below. As the forest area is heavily eroded, unless the problem is addressed the lakes will fill with silt again.

Poised to complete the replicable holistic model of eco-restoration of the Twin Lakes at Siruseri, PFC is one step closer to inspiring west Chennai on to a path of sustainable development and eco-restoration. Manjula concludes, "With the right care and maintenance, the Twin Lakes will thrive to become a healthy and lush environment for birds and local animals. It will also be a beautiful place for the residents of Siruseri and the surrounding areas to visit and experience nature first-hand."

Peter

After a post monsoon puja on 17 December 2018, physical work began. PFC carried out a biodiversity baseline survey in the project area and identified 326 species of indigenous plants, 77 species of birds, 18 species of fish, 36 species of amphibians and reptiles, including 11 snake varieties, 1 turtle, and 12 lizards. The Master Plan that PFC produced was a magisterial 300 pages, and includes reams of notes on varieties of fauna and flora. It articulated the reasons for restorative ecology, the need for native species and working with local villagers, accommodating Tamil monsoon rainfall, managing watersheds and spillways, restoring the ancient eri systems of lakes with accompanying reforestation to stop erosion and siltation, as well as the need for environmental education. It also addressed current in situ challenges of open defecation, illegal sand mining, and buildings that were built in a flood plain and ancient marsh.

Manjula Arumugan, a young Aurovilian ecologist who is managing the project under the guidance of Joss, explains, "PFC saw this as an opportunity to create a replicable model of eco-restoration for an expanding Chennai to redefine itself in a sustainable way. A replicable model that could be applied to the age-old system of hundreds of cascading lakes to the west of Chennai, thus reducing the impact of flooding and recharging the aquifers so that west Chennai could have water again in the summer months". The earth from desilting was used to strengthen the bunds around the lakes and to create earth viewing platforms, small hillocks accessible to visitors, as well as islands designed as nesting sites for migratory birds. Following the landscaping process,

all the structures were planted with native indigenous species (more than 6 000 trees and shrubs) that were raised in the nurseries of Pitchandikulam Forest and Auroville's Botanical Garden.

PFC's next step was local community engagement. Auroville and Pitchandikulam's long history of working within the bioregion and engaging local culture helped them realise the importance of local participation if projects are to succeed in the long run. Joss from Pitchandikulam explains, "PFC approached this project in a holistic manner that included both ecological as well as social factors. From the beginning, we were keen on orienting and involving the local people in the restoration process". By treating them as equal partners, valuing their input and concerns, PFC enables the project to be sustained by the villagers. PFC took the villagers to Adyar Poonga, the eco restoration and education centre in Adyar, [see AVT issue 232] to show them the type of work they wanted to do.

Then they brought the Panchayat village heads to Pitchandikulam Forest. "They



Community engagement at Pitchandikulam in Auroville

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# Auroville as a modern utopia?

**R**ecently, Suryamayi Clarence-Smith, who was born and brought up in Auroville, completed a Ph.D in International Development in the University of Sussex, the world-ranking institution in the field. Her thesis, *Towards a Spiritualised Society: Auroville, An Experiment in Prefigurative Utopianism*, examines Auroville as a site of contemporary utopian practice.

**Auroville Today: Why did you choose Auroville for your thesis?**

This takes me back to my undergraduate studies at UC Berkeley. My thesis mentor convinced me to focus on Auroville. I wasn't planning to, and my first reaction was that it might be academically illegitimate for me to study my own community. I also thought that Auroville might be too small and fringe an experiment to be considered relevant to research. He told me then it could be a Ph.D! I did my undergraduate thesis on Auroville, but felt I was just scratching the surface. I had gone deeper into understanding the why of Auroville, but I wanted to understand how the ideals were lived on a day-to-day basis: what was actually animating people to be part of this experiment, what were the challenges, and how were they addressing them? I thought this would be very relevant to understanding how a utopian vision could be put into practice, as well as being of relevance to similar experiments. So I decided to take this up as a Ph.D.

**What were your most important findings?**

I discovered that institutionalization could be pre-figurative, meaning that it remains experimental, open to change, and encourages evolution towards given ideals. For example, observing meetings of the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC), these were evidently very different from a typical bureaucratic exercise where you have a policy and just apply it. While the BCC have certain policies or guidelines, they never enforced them indiscriminately: they really brought care and attention to each situation, referring back to the core ideals.

Interestingly, Sri Aurobindo spoke about a subjective society, which, hopefully, Auroville is starting to be, as an intermediary stage between a society governed by ego to one governed by the divine, in which people would invent tools, means, frameworks that would contain elements of both – as pre-figurative of the gnostic society as possible, but still only approximating it. So the ways of organising would be temporary, open to being changed, because they would be receptive to a deeper understanding of what is needed to shift for the society at large. Overall, I think we've mastered the flexible part but now we need to start thinking about not just continually changing structures and policies but about how these can continue to evolve towards the ideal.

Another key insight concerned the role of spirituality in "activism", or active citizenship. A common critique of spiritual practice is that it is removed from the real world, and that it discourages people from being change-makers because they accept that nothing needs to change, as it is part of a

deeper purpose. What I found in my research on Auroville is that not only are the spiritual ideals at the heart of this community, but they really inspire people to act within it. After all, Mother said that Auroville is a place for practicing *karma yoga*. I also think spirituality has been key to sustaining this utopian experiment over so many years – it's challenging to work towards high ideals and feel as though one is falling short. The Mother's felt presence, vision, and charismatic authority is still very strong: it is one of the main 'glues' of this community.

My other key finding concerns the power of experimentation. The Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) started with conversations among a few friends but was able to scale up over time to become an institution. Similarly, recent changes to the Entry Policy started with a few concerned individuals who got together and then presented it to the larger community. I think one of the takeaways from this is that we need to keep experimenting in small groups because these are very important sites of exchange which can end up developing into something much bigger.

In Auroville anybody can suggest and implement a project or propose a policy, so there really is space for residents to be conscious and actively shape their society. I think this is rare; even in representative democracies this is not possible – only elected officials are able to design, present, and decide on new policies.

**Let's examine your thesis in a little more detail. Firstly, what exactly does pre-figurative utopianism mean?**

I use pre-figurative utopianism to describe what I see as the utopian praxis of Auroville. It is not based on a blueprint of a perfect world that is predetermined, like 19th century utopian experiments, but about figuring out as we go how to bring our ideals into present practice. It is about starting to engage with those ideals within the limitation of the present and our present consciousness.

To me this really links with the ideal in the Charter, of Auroville being a site of unending education. We are an experimental society that is constantly learning from our experiments and growing with these. In previous blueprint conceptions of utopia the ongoing transformative aspects were not at all taken into account. The assumption was if you just organise people differently, you will achieve an ideal society.

**But what about the Charter, and core texts like *A Dream* and *To Be an Aurovilian*? Aren't these blueprints?**

If you look at what The Mother said about the economy, for example, for which there were certain elements that were clearly expressed, these were nonetheless not detailed or determined as social systems to be applied – there remains the underlying understanding that one needs to experiment and work with these founding ideals.

**Why did you choose governance and economy as the topics for studying prefigurative utopianism in**

**Auroville? For many Aurovilians, these are far from being shining examples of a new future.**

I took these two areas because they are two of the biggest 'thorns' in our collective body and I thought there was a need to study and reflect upon them rather than upon our more obvious successes.

**You identify what you consider to be some of the pre-figurative aspects of our present governance system, like practices that encourage the embodiment of spiritually-centred states, and the opportunity for changing the structures and forms. But it could be argued that these do not necessarily lead us towards the ideal. For example, it is not clear that our highly participatory, horizontal form of governance will necessarily lead us towards what Mother defined as divine anarchy.**

I think our horizontal form of governance with its non-hierarchical, consensual modes of decision-making would be considered very progressive by the rest of the world. However, from the point of view of Auroville, I'm not so sure. I don't think that horizontal governance and what Mother wanted in terms of governance can be conflated, and I absolutely don't think that the participatory form of governance alone will make it a more conscious process, or that this is the only form through which divine anarchy can be attained. In fact, I think we may need to explore beyond this mode as it's definitely not working satisfactorily, even though it is much lauded elsewhere.

**PTDC is one of the examples you provide of pre-figurative utopianism in relationship to our economy. In its collective accounting and spirit of service, PTDC is clearly an attempt to advance us towards our ideals. Yet many of the participants use it as just another shop. Doesn't this suggest that even if you offer new forms, it is extremely difficult to change old ways?**

I think PTDC was more successful at the beginning because the people who signed up early really wanted to participate in the experiment; perhaps this became diluted over time. I think the challenge with these types of experiments is that we need to keep educating each other about the experiment, and to keep exchanging about how we are doing it and why we are doing it. We all have moments when it is difficult to stay inspired individually or to reflect individually on what we are doing with our lives, but we can be very inspired by each other.

**From your study, do you feel there are enough positive experiments happening in the present Auroville to move us beyond the inertia of the old ways, all the things that make people resist something new, like issues of personal insecurity?**

I do think there are many positives; even in our present governance system and economy there are more forward-looking than backward-looking



Suryamayi speaking at The Bridge, Auroville's 50th anniversary research conference

aspects. But I think we should be very concerned about resistance to change. Change is hardest when it starts touching questions of personal security, or when basic needs have not been met, because if people's basic needs aren't met they don't have the bandwidth to consider new ways. So we have to work hard as a society to ensure that those things are taken care of.

**Were there major surprises that resulted from your study?**

Yes. Before I undertook this research, I was not sure whether our ideals were being articulated and embodied in our community practice. The extent to which this is the case defied my expectations. I had not realised that the figures and work of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo continued to be so deeply influential.

Again, I did not think I would end up questioning the merit of horizontal forms of political organising, or suggesting that bureaucracy and institutionalisation might have pre-figurative potential when they facilitate desired alternative social relations and remain flexible and responsive to evolution.

My understanding of the relationship with the Indian government was also one of the big surprises for me. If one looks at the history of intentional communities around the world, one sees that a lot of them were disbanded because of government pressure: either they didn't conform to the law or were threatening the status quo. So then I realized that it is actually very unique for an alternative society like Auroville to have the support and recognition of a government. In fact, I think the Government of India has been uniquely facilitative of this project.

Finally, something that really surprised me happened during my in-depth interviews with people whose views and opinions I had not been able to relate to at all. I began to understand how their approach connected to our ideals. That, for me, was really powerful. It didn't mean that I could agree with them, but now I could understand and accept how we could still be in this together. So, once again, this points to the need for better forms of dialogue, understanding and sharing.

*From an interview with Alan*

## RE-PUBLICATION

**O**n 1st January, 2020, Auro e-Books (<https://www.auro-books.com/>) published *Auroville: Sun-Word Rising – A Trust for the Earth*. This seminal work on Auroville's early history was first published in 1979. It has been out of print since 1990, but is now available in this new republished digital format.

*Auroville Today* took the opportunity to interview Savitra about the continued relevance of the book as well as his life trajectory subsequent to his return to the U.S.

**Auroville Today: The book was published and recounts events that took place over 40 years ago. Is it relevant to the Auroville of 2020? If so, in what way?**

**Savitra:** "Those who forget their history are condemned to repeat it," Spanish philosopher-poet George Santayana noted more than a century ago. I believe this humble reminder still speaks to us today, especially to a collective experiment like Auroville that

aspires to consciously evolve.

After all, if Auroville residents fail to study their past, don't they risk unconsciously repeating old patterns? For how can we understand how we got where we are today if we don't research the roots of Auroville's emergence, especially that vulnerable period after the Mother's passing? And how can we build a more conscious future if we don't resolve our past, including events that may be unpleasant to revisit?

Another challenge is the courage to be honest with ourselves and our history. For there is a powerful default reflex in our species to cover up experiences we prefer to conceal or forget. Our deeper psychology today calls this cover-up reflex "denial". For who wants to look in the mirror and see our Shadow? Yet in Integral Yoga, how can we transform, not just transcend, if we don't let in the Light? So to the question if this book is still relevant to the Auroville of 2020, one can only find out if residents and Auroville

International representatives make the experiment to read it.

To be clear, I didn't write the book to glorify our past or vilify and blame old adversaries. It was simply an attempt to be honest about what happened then rather than sweep it under the rug. It was also an attempt to document a critical period in Auroville's collective development that revealed the "courage to face incredible challenges as well as the ingenuity to respond to them. After all, we began the Herculean labour of reforesting a barren plateau, creating schools, settlements, farms and a collective organization, at the same time as we were struggling to survive an escalating conflict with the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS) after the Mother's passing.

So without this book-length documentation, there is no in-depth context for the issues that led to the conflict with the SAS or the successive Indian Government interventions that followed, including the 1982 Supreme

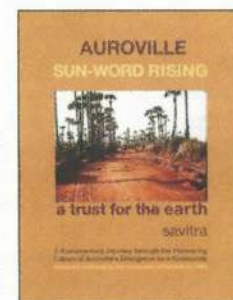
Court Case and the 1988 Auroville Act of Parliament. In this light, I was not only a direct witness to these events but a proactive participant. In fact, I spent a year in New Delhi working with our legal team, drafting the affidavit which our lawyer (the eminent jurist Fali Nariman) actually used to win our case against the SAS in 1982.

I left Auroville 2 years after the Foundation Act, returning in 1990 to America where I hoped to pick up the torch for Auroville and the liaison role the Mother entrusted to me in 1971. But that was not to be...

**Looking back on the events covered in the book, do you still see things in the same way? And how do you see some of Auroville's subsequent organizational developments?**

Though I haven't visited Auroville

## Auroville: Sun-Word Rising



since 2008, I still see the events of the 1970s through the lens of my experience then. But I could not foresee the Foundation Act which followed: an Act which de facto and de jure restructured some of the community's self-designed systems. For example, the

Auroville Cooperative (which focalized collective affairs through the 1980s) was replaced by the Working Committee, a statutory body created in the Act. As I recall, the Working Committee serves as an intermediary between the Auroville Community and Indian Government-appointed Governing Board (another statutory body created along with the International Advisory Council).

As a first-generation Auroville resident observing events from a distance, the challenge of growing Auroville's experiment within formal bureaucratic structures became apparent. After all, the community was still recovering

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# Auroville, cradle of the superman or city in conformity?

Nothing happens by chance and we are therefore entitled to wonder what is the meaning of the crisis which has been shaking Auroville for some time.

We are told that there is widespread corruption here and that, in particular, the funds received from the Central Government are not used according to the rules, resulting in waste or even worse, misappropriation and embezzlement. The administrative authorities of the Auroville Foundation have published a note which denies most of the allegations, but that is not enough for those in Auroville who have been waging a strident campaign for months on the basis of these accusations. Those Aurovilians insist that Auroville is not entitled to any exemption and must apply scrupulously each and every rule and regulation like any other department of the Indian Government. The concept of the ideal city of Mother, so essential for us to gradually find the way towards the real Auroville, should be buried under the usual mass of bureaucratic prescriptions which, we know, tend to stifle innovations and experiments.

So perhaps the deeper meaning of the crisis we are experiencing is to make us look at our own bureaucratic excesses in recent years.

## Bureaucracy abounds

Auroville today is perceived as a very bureaucratic organization by a large majority of Aurovilians. For those who knew the early Auroville, the contrast is striking. In the first years, a great deal of informality reigned in Auroville's life, much to the dismay of certain bureaucrats of the Sri Aurobindo Society in Pondicherry (SAS), who tried hard to put some order into the functioning of this nascent community of rather anarchic tendencies. As we know, after Mother's departure in November 1973, relations with the SAS deteriorated, leading to a de facto separation from 1976. There were years of conflict until an Auroville Emergency Provisions Act for taking temporary control of Auroville was promulgated by the Indian Government in November 1980, followed by the passing of the Auroville Foundation Act on September 5, 1988.

Many Aurovilians, initially satisfied with the eviction of the SAS, soon began to fear government control over Auroville's life. They thought it necessary to create an internal organization parallel to that established by the Foundation. Hence they created the Auroville Council for internal affairs as a counterpart to the Working Committee for external affairs. Gradually a parallel administration was set up, with departments and working groups whose role and functioning were defined by increasingly detailed "mandates". Moreover, these mandates, the text of which became more complex and longer as time went by, were regularly reviewed and then had to be approved and re-approved through the Residents' Assembly process. (In this process, a simple approach was missed out, e.g. to express a vision about the mission of each group in a few lines, collectively "meditated" as it were, and on the spirit necessary for the work to be carried out in the service of Auroville.)

If you have the impression that there is something absurd or bizarre about this, or, let's say, a little out of place in Auroville, you are probably not wrong. A remark by one of the recent Secretaries of the Foundation, a high official appointed by the government, comes to my mind: "The Auroville bureaucracy is even worse than the Indian bureaucracy," he famously declared one day. Quite a few Aurovilians share this point of view.

## The necessity of Rules

Of course, for the smooth functioning of any community, there must be some rules of the game. But Mother had warned us. On December 30, 1967, in reference to the future organization of Auroville, she said:

*No rules or laws are being framed. Things will get formulated as the underlying truth of the township emerges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate. What I mean to say is that usually, always until now, and more and more, men establish mental rules according to their conceptions and ideals, and then they apply them (Mother brings down her fist to show the world in the grip of mind), and that is absolutely false, it is arbitrary, unreal, and the result is that things revolt or wither or disappear ... it is the experience of LIFE ITSELF that should slowly work out rules AS SUPPLE and AS WIDE as possible, in such a way as to be always progressive. Nothing should be fixed.*

I am afraid that we have not been very successful in avoiding the mistakes She speaks about. There is, for example, a general rule in Auroville that business units must donate at least a third of their profits to the common pot. In practice, we find that many units give more, sometimes even much more. This is comforting and should reassure us. But there are also cases where it is suspected that profits are less than what they should be as a result of excessive and unjustifiable personal spending. Those in charge of regulating the system are therefore tempted to add new rules to control these abuses. Hence they recently concocted a detailed "Code of Conduct" to be followed by all units, including by those who are generous and who really do not need this bureaucratic memento (and who may even feel offended by this manifestation of distrust).

Experience tends to show that this kind of regulation often has no effect on the persons for whom it was intended; indeed they will likely persist in their supposed abuses, while everybody else has been saddled with a heavy piece of bureaucracy. Recently, a unit which, on a rare occasion, had made a profit but asked for a justified partial exemption, was told that to obtain it they had to apply for an exemption according to "appendix 2, para 3 of the Code of Conduct". Are we in Auroville?

In truth, Auroville can only work well with trust. However, this is the major difficulty we face: the present "official" organization of Auroville is viewed by many as not trustworthy as it is excessively bureaucratic.

It is important to add, however, that there is a good level of trust between many Aurovilians who know each other and work together; and this gives great vitality to the informal cooperation in Auroville's life. This is why, I think, most of the young people who come to Auroville and, in particular, the volunteers, generally have a positive view of Auroville, despite being aware of all the difficulties. Moreover, consciously or not they must feel the exceptional field of force that Mother has created on this land, further amplified by the massive presence of the Matrimandir.

## Breaking the deadlock

So what can we do to break this deadlock? Firstly, we should realise that Auroville was not created to "conform" to any existing model.

*Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will*

*boldly spring towards future realizations.*

*Auroville will be a site of material and spiritual research for a living embodiment of an actual human unity.*

What impetus, what audacity there is in this Auroville Charter, the inspiration for which came "from somewhere up there", according to Mother's own words.

*It is not me who wrote all that ... I noticed something so interesting: when it comes, it's imperative. There is no arguing; I write it, I am OBLIGED to write it regardless of what I am doing. And then, when it's not there, it's not there! Even if I try to remember, there's nothing, it's not there! ... Consequently, it's obvious that it doesn't come from here: it comes from somewhere up there. (Mother's Agenda, February 7, 1968)*

A programme like the one of Auroville cannot be carried out within the narrow limits of a ministerial department. There must be space, exceptions, and creative adjustments must be possible, all the while keeping within legality, of course. The surprising truth is that in India anything is possible because Indian people – and this applies equally to bureaucrats – are mostly spontaneously sensitive to spirituality and easily touched by sincerity.

I remember asking a very high-ranking official in charge of all the government accounting control, of his impression after his first visit to Auroville: "What divine work!" he exclaimed.

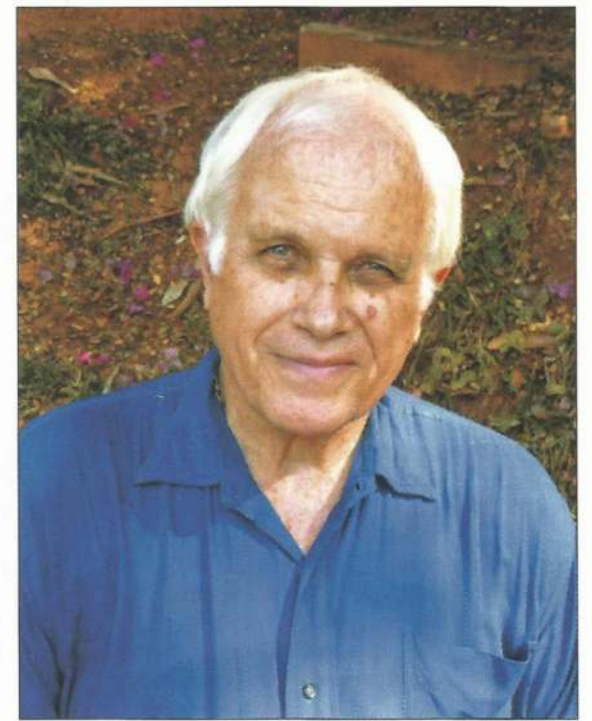
I also remember that Kireet Joshi often complained that Aurovilians tended to accept government regulations rather than making the effort to imagine, propose, and work to obtain solutions more consistent with the innovative spirit of Auroville.

A very significant anecdote comes to my mind. In 1984 or 1985, I went to New Delhi with the plans for the future Transition School educational site for which we had received or were going to receive a large subsidy. Kireet, who was then in charge of Auroville's government file and at the same time was Secretary of the department of higher education granting the subsidy, admired the plans of Piero and Gloria but thought that the bureaucrats in the Public Works Department would never accept such original architecture. What to do? Kireet was someone who always put everything in front of Mother and I think he must have prayed. The inspiration then came to him to go and see the Chief Architect of the government. Without losing a moment, we went to his office. When we arrived, he was not there so we waited for him. I remember the Chief Architect, Mr. Laroya's, incredulous surprise when he found a very high-ranking official – far above his level – waiting for him.

Mr. Laroya was clearly won over to the plans but told us that his department would never approve them as they did not accord with the norms. I remember the half-dubious, half-happy air he had when suddenly he said, "But what if I signed the plans directly? After all, I'm the Chief Architect. Who's going to question this?" And then he stamped all the plans with his signature.

Thanks to this, for several years all the plans of the SAIER buildings were approved in this way. All those papers were later checked by the government's agency in charge of controlling accounts and they did not object, nor did the CBI on a subsequent inspection of SAIER's files.

In other words, in India, everything is possible,



Alain Bernard

and that is why Auroville could only happen and develop in India.

## Towards simplicity

Transforming the present administrative drift of Auroville is a very difficult undertaking. It will take a strong awakening to generate a movement towards simplicity and clarity. And then, perhaps, begin to implement the recommendations of Mother who suggested an "intuitive" government:

*If there is no representative of the supreme Consciousness (that can happen, can't it?), if there is no one, then perhaps this could be replaced (it would be an experiment) by the government of a few – which should be decided between four and eight, something like that: four, seven or eight who have an INTUITIVE intelligence. "Intuitive" is more important than "intelligence": an intuition manifested intellectually. (Mother's Agenda, April 10, 1968)*

We have never even tried to figure out how to start implementing this suggestion from Mother. The most common comment is that there is no one in Auroville who meets these criteria. This is, of course, partly true, but doing nothing means we risk continuing to sink in the bureaucratic quagmire. Could we not start with the establishment of a reference group? Not a government, but a group of Aurovilians generally respected and recognized as rather intuitive, whose task would be to "meditate" together on a certain number of questions important for the future of Auroville, with the sole power to make suggestions or issue advice? It would be a first step on the way to another kind of governance.

The Auroville of the future – which is sure to come, it is Mother's promise – will be gnostic. The beings who will be part of it will be in contact with their psychic being and the harmony of their relationships will be established spontaneously because they will be truly united in the Universal Consciousness. The problem of governance will be transformed because there will be spontaneous reference to the highest consciousness, which Mother tells us can only be authentic. This future is undoubtedly still very distant but it already exists somewhere in a future to be embodied. It's a dream, no doubt. But the dreams of the Divine will come true and Auroville has the unique privilege of being one of those dreams.

Alain Bernard

*(This is a slightly edited version of an article that first appeared in La Revue d'Auroville)*

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from the shock of the previous decade while trying to reconcile pressing issues such as town planning, the integrity and acquisition of vast missing pieces of Auroville lands, etc. The Galaxy Plan itself continued to create challenges, setting its fixed-vision approach in contrast with those like the Dreamcatchers, a self-organized group of resident architects and engineers who sought to adapt the Plan more organically to earthly realities. In view of these realities (and present escalating crises such as climate change), even with the Act in place and the SAS no longer holding power over Auroville, the community still faced the challenges of conflicted or

competing sources of authority and decision-making.

*There are two stories in Sun-Word Rising which are obviously interrelated. One is the struggle of Auroville to assert its independence and remain true to its founding ideal, the other is the story of Savitra. You left Auroville in 1990. How has the Savitra story progressed since then? And how do you see your relationship with Auroville today?*

An interesting question that brings up a lot for me. When I returned to the States, I assumed I would continue to serve as Auroville Liaison Coordinator, a bridge-building role I had built up over two decades, creating exchange

programmes like Peace Trees, establishing valuable allies with foundations, environmental organizations, universities, research institutes and individuals such as anthropologist Margaret Mead, Esalen co-founder Michael Murphy, environmentalist Huey Johnson, town planner Christopher Alexander. So I approached AVI-USA for collaborative support. But they rejected my proposal.

This forced me to begin a new life from zero, letting go of 20 years of work and connections for Auroville. It was a sad and shocking re-entry to America. But I took heart from the Mother's 1971 message to me: "Remain in the true consciousness and return to America to do good work for me there, with my

love and blessings, Mirra". So I turned to my skills as a writer, authoring several books, including the well-respected *Evolutionary Agenda for the Third Millennium*; while the activist in me redirected energy into local social-environmental projects as well as working with at-risk youth. At this point, I had also become a parent, which is a sacred yoga in itself.

In 2008, another opportunity presented itself to serve Auroville. For Michael Murphy chose to resign from the International Advisory Council and suggested me to replace him. Here is an excerpt from his recommendation: "... Based on his experience as a pioneering Auroville resident and his extensive experience in America as a liaison representative appointed by the

Mother, he is certainly well qualified. As a personal friend for many years, I know he loves Auroville deeply. And I highly recommend him for the next IAC vacancy."

This gave me hope for a second chance to re-activate my relationship with Auroville as well as with former American allies and new ones I had developed in the interim (e.g., environmental pioneer David Brower and evolutionary thinkers Jean Houston, Barbara Marx Hubbard, Matthew Fox et al). But decision-makers chose a different choice. So once again, I had to surrender expectations. But perhaps this *Auroville Today* article opens up new directions and unforeseen possibilities...

Alain



## Sexual harassment ha

Like the rest of the world, Auroville has had to confront the challenge of sexual harassment and the devastating impact it can have on those who experience it. Despite Auroville's efforts to reduce sexual harassment through education, responsive security and internal justice systems, incidents of harassment still occur, and more can be done to ensure a safe environment for all. This collection of articles aims to shed light on what the problem looks like today in Auroville, and what the individuals and groups concerned are doing about this issue. Three victims of sexual harassment and domestic abuse share their stories to illustrate the diversity of experiences and the personal impact that harassment can have. We hope an open discussion of sexual harassment in Auroville will increase awareness of the issue, in order to bring support to those who have suffered from it and to those who seek to change the negative patterns that remain.

**A**cross the globe today, workplace sexual harassment is increasingly understood as a violation of women's rights and a form of violence against women. Indeed, the social construct of male privileges in society continues to be used to justify violence against women in the private and public sphere. 'In essence, sexual harassment is a mirror reflecting male power over women that sustains patriarchal relations', explains a handbook provided by the Ministry of Women and Child Development of India on the matter.

Auroville being part of India, and at the same time 'home' for a wide variety of people and cultures, we find a complex scenario when facing the realities of violence and harassment. So how is the community working towards its aspiration of transforming consciousness when it comes to addressing these kinds of situations?

The following three stories are examples of different kinds of harassment experienced in Auroville. They describe some of the individual and collective efforts to solve them.

Premshakti has been harassed two times by different elders in Auroville in the past years. One time she was unexpectedly kissed on the lips during a dance class, and the second time she received an inappropriate comment and unwanted touch while grocery shopping.

When the first episode happened, she wasn't Aurovilian yet, which made her feel more vulnerable about speaking out. "When you are a Newcomer you are in a very sensitive position. If you suddenly bring things out of the closet that are uncomfortable for society, you are challenging the authority and the status quo. I felt like my entire Newcomer process was at stake and that I may actually not be allowed to join the community just because I wanted to stand for the truth," she narrates.

She gained support from people when she shared her dance class harassment experience on the online community forum of Auroville, and discovered that many women had endured similar situations with the same man. A complaint to the ICC was made, but restraining measures were taken against the harasser only after an aggrieved visitor – who was also harassed by the same perpetrator – filed a FIR (First Information Report) at the local police station.

Premshakti also attended a restorative circle that she describes as powerful. "I feel grateful that some actions were taken, but I still felt very alone in the whole process. I know women that have been not only harassed but abused, and they are sitting with that trauma. As women our boundaries have been crossed so many times that we actually normalise it, but the truth is if we don't address these issues in the community, we

won't heal and progress as we should, and the wounds will remain open", she states.

While the second episode is still under investigation by the Auroville ICC, Premshakti stresses the need to provide more resources to deal with situations of sexual harassment: "I see a lot of confusion in Auroville about what law we apply for these cases. For example, it's not clear if we can go to the police or not and how to proceed if you are victimised. We don't really have rules that are advanced enough inside the community to protect the women in an effective way. So while we don't want to apply the outside laws, at the same time we haven't created anything substantial yet to replace that world."

In contrast to Premshakti's experience of harassment, Aurore, a long-term volunteer, experienced a very different episode on a forest road but with a faster resolution. Auroville Security was instrumental in her assistance. While she was driving back home on her moped after watching a movie at Cinema Paradiso, she was chased by a young man on a motorbike from a nearby village (a situation that is not uncommon for women). The man grabbed her breast, which caused her to fall down. Fortunately, she managed to get up and escape from the man before he could reach her on the ground. She was escorted by two friends to the Solar Kitchen roundabout, where they gave notice to a guard from Auroville Security. One hour later she received a call from them informing that they had caught the harasser, who had attacked another

violent episode at the hands of her former partner and work colleague. This article does not state her real name or describe the details of the episode. In tandem with her efforts to heal after the trauma, Samantha has had to deal with the stress of daily exposure to her ex-partner at their work place over the last months. She has also faced different levels of secondary victimisation: she has been discredited, rejected and blamed by others after narrating the episode.

Some of the reasons why this case hasn't been solved is because of its many complexities: she approached her work place administration with the issue after experiencing three months of continuous bullying at work by him, but as she and her assaulter were a romantic couple when he attacked her, their workplace considered it to be a private matter. On the other hand, both of her mentors told her that they didn't want to get involved. One couldn't handle the anxiety over the magnitude of the problem, and the other doubted that a Newcomer could do much to solve this kind of situation. The perpetrator himself, in an attempted act to invert the victim-aggressor roles, went to Koodam (Auroville's conflict resolution platform) to make a complaint of harassment against her. Koodam, following his request, asked her not to approach him or mention him in any conversation, which confused her more in her efforts to reach out for the help she needed.

Koodam also referred her to a psychologist. After attending one session, the psychologist diagnosed her as 'not traumatised', so it was up to her if she wished to follow with further treatments. Unsure of how to proceed, she was advised to talk with the Residents for Residents group, who offered to guide and 'represent' her in front of the community. The Entry Board was also contacted, and advised her to go to the ICC, but ICC didn't take up her case because the episode wasn't considered to be sexual harassment, but rather domestic violence, which ideally is supposed to be mediated by Koodam. The other option that she had was reporting him to the police, but she didn't feel confident to involve external law enforcement.

Residents for Residents suggested the coordination of a meeting between the accused and his mentors, to clarify what had happened and to find a solution together, but his mentors refused to attend. Today, the man who attacked her hasn't admitted his violence, and he has recently been confirmed as Aurovilian.

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girl the same night. Auroville Security went with her the next morning to Villupuram Police Station to file the complaint and to identify the harasser who was there. Shockingly, the police woman who was attending her case beat the harasser with a baton while Aurore was in the room filing the FIR. "For me it was surreal to see that; it was almost as painful as the aggression I suffered the previous night. In any case, giving notice to the police helped me to move from a victim mindset to recovering the feeling of inner power again," she explains.

Samantha is a Newcomer who suffered a

## Creating a safe environment for women

**W**hen imagining the problem of sexual harassment in the Auroville context, it can be easy to pin this on an exterior "other", with the perpetrators perceived as being ill-mannered day trippers or guests who are drawn to the unusual prospect of seeing multi-ethnic women moving about their daily lives in tropical South India. And while other forms of sexual harassment, whether in the work context or in the complex multicultural social fabric of Auroville, have certainly also been identified, stories of women of all ages and nationalities being harassed by unknown men along Auroville's roads and shaded bicycle paths continue to periodically surface on Auroville's intranet.

According to Samuel from the Auroville Safety and Security Team (AVSST), there were 19 cases of reported sexual harassment

within Auroville this past year. "Unfortunately, this number doesn't reflect the reality of the emotional impact sexual harassment has, nor the specific situations," he adds.

The good news is that this number has decreased in the last three years, and this can be attributed to the concerted efforts of AVSST to monitor the entrances into Auroville, patrol the roads, and offer escort for women travelling after dark.

### A whole team to keep the roads safe

With the increasing traffic of people wanting to enter Auroville and the more than 24 access points into the international township, ensuring a safe environment on the roads and paths is a major effort requiring a team of almost 40 individuals, including 26 guards as well as managers and office staff, emergency phone staff, and voluntary patrollers.

It is not an easy job for them. The guards

often face aggression from drivers who are stopped from entering Auroville, but it is a price that the team is willing to pay for better safety within the community. "We don't want to focus on catching people, we want to focus on prevention," Samuel explains.

When a case of sexual harassment is reported, the team rearranges security to make the area where it occurred more secure. But Samuel states that there is no part of Auroville that is less safe than the rest, because whenever an incident occurs, the team immediately reacts. Descriptions of repeated aggressors are circulated within the community and AVSST liaises with the police to support apprehension.

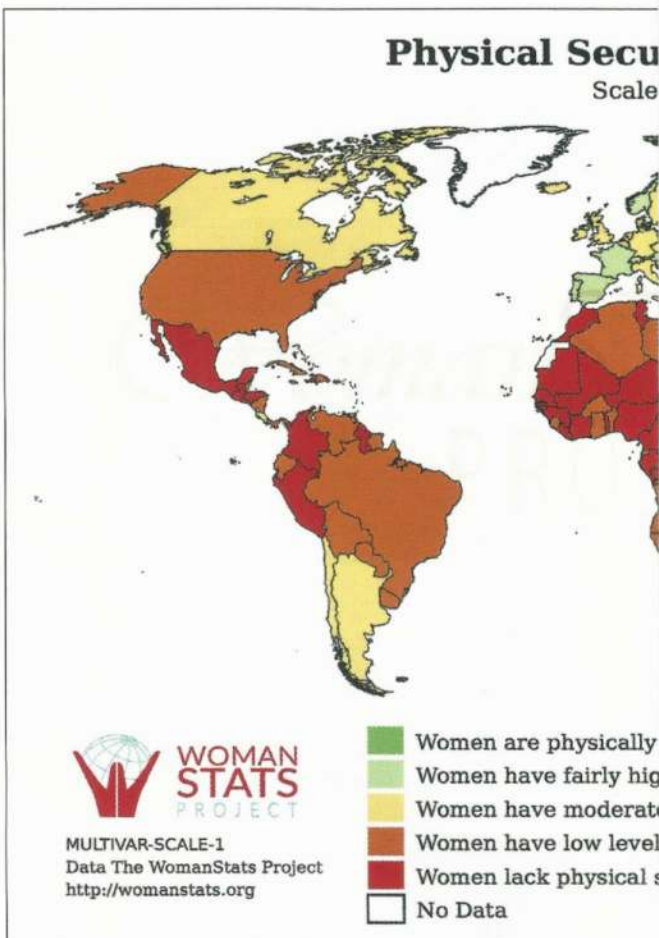
AVSST has also promoted a system of escorts, especially for women travelling around at night. However, they encourage individuals to first ask someone to accompany them from among their family and close friends before depending upon AVSST, so as

to reinforce their own personal support networks. "But don't bicycle alone at night," Samuel urges. "Women are more likely to be harassed while bicycling or walking than while driving a motorbike. And while a man may look to see where a woman is going on her motorbike or come close to speak to her, with a cycle there is more potential for him to physically attempt something."

### Involving local law enforcement

As the bulk of the incidents of sexual harassment reported to AVSST involve culprits who are not part of the Auroville community, the intercession of the Indian law enforcement is sometimes necessary. Going to the police can also be an option for victims of more severe forms of sexual harassment or sexual assault, regardless of who the aggressor is.

continued on page 5



Samantha says that the entire process has exhausted her and she is frustrated to hear how her assaulter is trying to discredit her by telling all sort of lies and making himself look like the victim: "Some of my colleagues even asked me 'Why am I trying to ruin this man's life?'. The only thing I wish is that he takes responsibility for his behavior, to promise that it won't happen again to me or to any other woman, and that ideally he receives treatment in order to face his problems".

This case is a good example of how difficult it can get for victims when violent situations are not addressed adequately from the beginning, and how burdened women can become by the bureaucracy and the community when they come forward with a complaint. On the other hand, leaving the assaulter free without facing consequences for his actions exposes not only the already affected person to more trauma, but also the community by allowing the possibility of the same man repeating the harmful behaviour towards more people.

Samantha's case is also an example of how certain cases of harassment fall into a gap of 'non-applicability' under the ICC's guidelines, as the violence and harassment she experienced were not sexual in nature. In that sense, it may also suggest the need for Auroville to develop resources and mechanisms to detect and deal with situations like this.

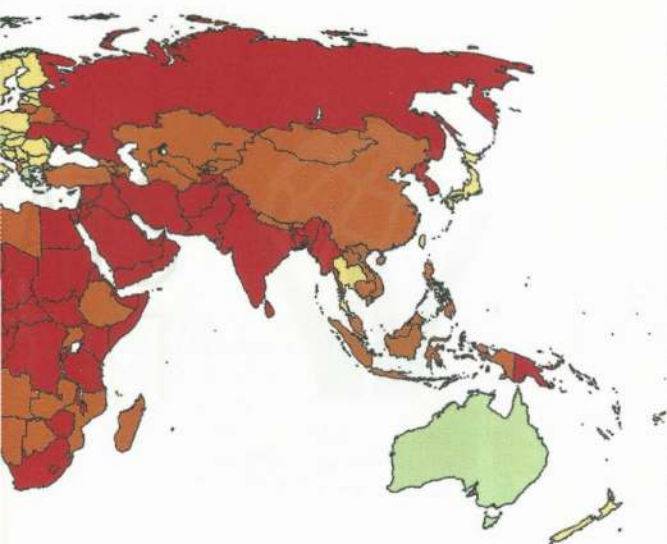
"Somebody close to me said that he (the perpetrator) 'must be here for a reason'. That may be the truth at some level, but what if the reason he is here is actually for Auroville to learn and put more effective limits and boundaries in place, for people who are not acting in accordance with Auroville's spirit?" she reflects.

Valentina



# ppens in Auroville too

Security of Women  
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"We work on an emergency basis, solving problems on the spot, then directing the person toward the correct entity. For most road harassments, we ask people to go to the police. Not everyone goes, but if it is a case of groping or more, we strongly encourage them to go," Samuel explains. The AVSST also tries to offer a safe space with female team members so that the victims can express themselves.

Few women ultimately go to the police station though, not wanting to go through the additional distress of having to relive their trauma by reporting the case to police officers who – for all their ability to intercede – may be the same gender as the aggressor and may not know how to sensitively investigate traumatic experiences. However, the AVSST still encourages women to file a police complaint whenever possible for cases of sexual harassment, as this can greatly expedite the apprehension of the culprit.

Auroville is fortunate to have an All-Women Police Station in close proximity, in Kottakuppam on the outskirts of Pondicherry. Staffed only by female police officers, India's All-Women Police Stations have been around since the first was inaugurated in Kozhikode in 1973 by Indira Gandhi. These stations provide a safe environment for women to report crimes, particularly those of sexual harassment and assault, dowry-related cases and domestic violence.

Inspector of Police Ms. Muthulakshmi is the current head of

the Kottakuppam station and has handled a complaint of sexual harassment in Auroville. "It is very important to have these All-Women Police Stations. Nowadays, there is an increased reporting of crimes against women," she explains. "We have a district training centre where we are taught how to handle the victim and how to lead the cases." She describes how, whenever they receive

a complaint of sexual harassment, they proceed with an enquiry to register the first information report (FIR), arrange a medical examination if needed, and track down the accused for arrest.

## What more can be done?

AVSST's tighter security has resulted in the number of reported cases of sexual harassment being on the decline, and relations with the local law enforcement have

allowed for better follow-up on the reported cases. But Samuel still sees more that could be improved.

In his capacity as a capoeira instructor for youth in Auroville, Samuel has a unique opportunity to hear the thoughts and concerns of the children of Auroville. He points to the role the parents need to play by making sure that their children are not in position where they need to go home alone at night or take lifts from strangers. But he also observes that the problem can come from within the community and says, "A lot of preventive education needs to be done in Auroville, particularly to talk with teenagers and to impart to them how to defend themselves and how to deal with pressure from those close to them."

Hilary



## The challenges of Auroville's Internal Complaints Committee

Auroville's composition of residents and visitors from a vast array of socio-cultural backgrounds presents a unique challenge for dealing with sexual harassment. How can the community best approach this sensitive topic in a legally effective way, ensuring that victims feel safe and understood? Far from a theoretical question, the cases of harassment are widespread and have marked the lives of many Aurovilian residents. Leela, an Aurovilian student who is working on her undergraduate thesis on the topic of rape and rape reporting in India, confirms this unfortunate reality, which motivated her to take up her particular thesis topic. She says, "Growing up here in Auroville, all the girls that I knew had been sexually harassed, and two were raped."

This situation has inspired an innovative application in Auroville of the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act*, enacted in 2013. This India-wide act stipulates that all establishments with ten or more employees must have an 'internal complaints committee', composed of members from the establishment and an ex-officio member, to investigate and arbitrate allegations of sexual harassment by work colleagues, among other formalities. When applying this legislation to the Auroville setting, it became clear that a large portion of Auroville's commercial units and even services employed fewer than ten people and would therefore not benefit from this important internal recourse and would instead have to approach a district-wide 'local complaints committee'. Additionally, these committees would only be able to assist those employed within Auroville, and only for situations of sexual harassment taking place in the workplace.

Legal counsel was sought upon the matter and an interpretation allowing an Auroville-specific sexual harassment policy was given in 2015. A community-wide Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) was established, with the Working Committee of Auroville designated as the 'employer'. This Auroville policy enlarged the scope of the 2013 Act to cover situations outside of the workplace and the ICC could deal with cases of sexual harassment anywhere within the township, expanding the protection to everyone staying in Auroville, regardless of gender or status.

### Confronting the problem

The first Auroville ICC was formed from community members – the majority of whom were female – who had experience of working in the fields of women's empowerment, women's health, and law. For every written complaint received, so long as it was deemed sexual in nature, the ICC would convene a hearing to

collect statements from both sides and from any witnesses, before conferring internally to make recommendations to the Working Committee regarding the consequences. Timelines are set by the policy itself, so that resolution for both sides can be expected in a timely manner.

The ability of the ICC to proceed with its work has not been without hurdles. The unique way in which the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act* has been applied to the Auroville community as a whole has provoked criticism, but the work continues and the membership is regularly renewed with individuals willing to combat sexual harassment around Auroville.

However, despite Auroville's ICC venturing into new territory with its customised policy, it has already begun to prove its worth. The ICC does not provide public statistics on how many complaints it receives in a year, but Paula, who has been a member of the ICC since 2018, says that the team has handled several cases under the Auroville policy.

The effectiveness of the Auroville policy and the ICC team in implementing it is particularly critical because of the emphasis Auroville has put on developing and using internal forms of conflict resolution and mediation to address problems arising between members of the community. While everyone, even Aurovilians and Newcomers, has the right to take a complaint of sexual harassment to the police, the current Entry Policy for becoming Aurovilian requires applicants to sign a document stating that, "Internal conflict resolution processes have been created to resolve conflicts arising between the members of the Auroville community with mutual respect and understanding. Residents agree only to involve an external agency after having exhausted the possibilities of conflict resolution based on Auroville internal processes."

### Developing programmes for prevention

Part of the ICC's mandate also included implementing awareness programmes around Auroville. Suriyagandhi, a member of the first ICC set up in 2015, took a prime role in the development of this preventive education for Auroville units. Along with the team, she created a chart in English and Tamil explaining what constitutes sexual harassment and what can be done about it. This was distributed to all the workplaces to be posted in prominent gathering places where staff could easily refer to it.

Their next step was to coordinate with all the unit executives to give staff training in dealing with sexual harassment in the workplace. Suriyagandhi and Vinodhini, a Tamil-speaking Aurovilian lawyer, developed a programme that could be given in the largely Tamil workforces in Auroville's units. "We had to teach them to speak

boldly, because often the threat of salary cuts or promotion manipulation would keep victims silent," Suriyagandhi explains. The programmes would be given to both the men and women together, so that awareness and prevention would occur on both sides of the gender divide.

These programmes have been well received. Suriyagandhi says, "At the beginning the participants were very shy, but they showed great interest to listen and even brought forward questions on how to address harassment in their villages."

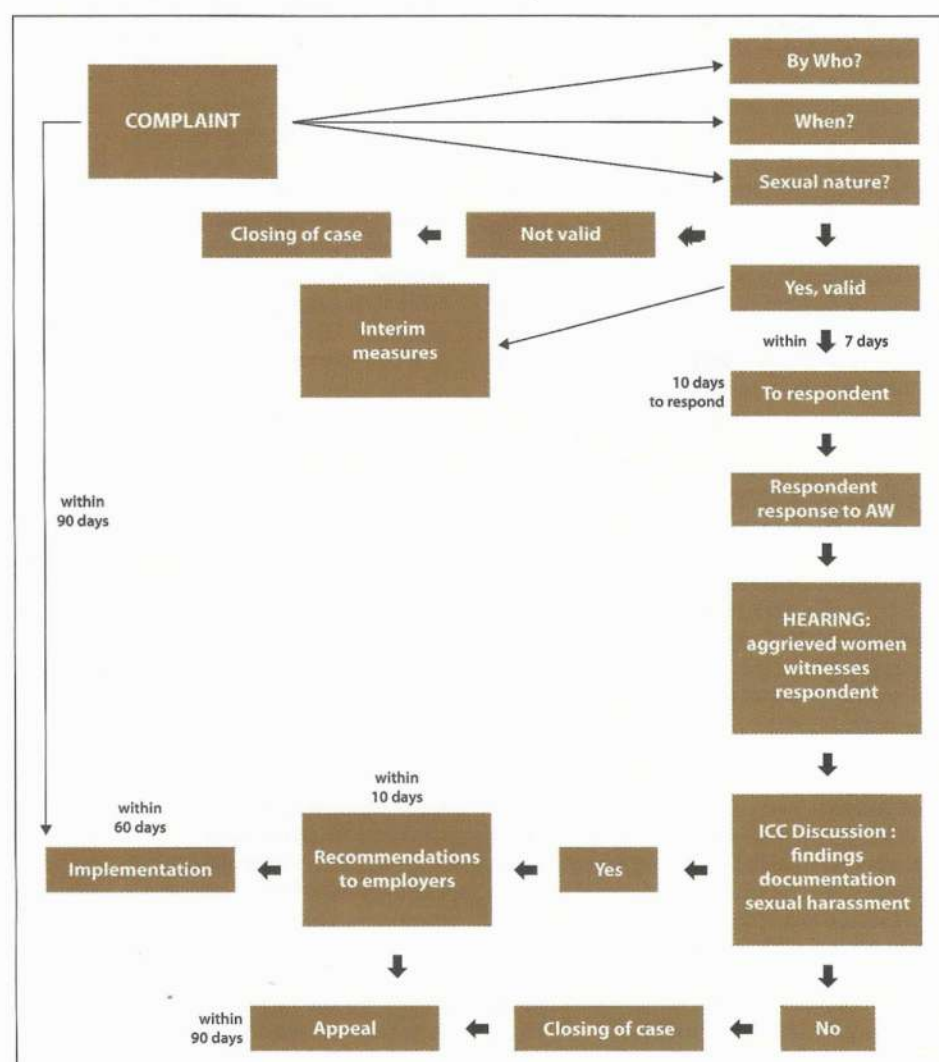
Now Suriyagandhi is no longer a part of the ICC, but she continues to work with the aim of preventing sexual harassment and abuse in her own capacity. As a member of the Auroville Dental Centre, Suriyagandhi is involved in educational outreach in the regional schools, teaching oral hygiene. She adds a component on child safety where, depending upon the age of the children, she shows a five-minute awareness video

made by the Indian Government, explains about "good touch, bad touch", and goes deeper into the subject of sexual harassment and abuse. This programme reaches around 2 000 to 2 500 children every year in the bioregion and larger Tamil Nadu, and she does regularly preventive dental programmes for Odisha and Uttarakhand children in private and government schools.

### An ever-changing team

Facing the realities of sexual harassment can take its toll on the psyche and the members of the ICC are changed every three years. It is a difficult work that requires sensitivity, discernment and confidentiality. There is still plenty of work ahead and new people continue to join the team, bringing their strength and vision to support and empower all victims, while striving to keep the justice process internal to Auroville.

Hilary



Infographic of the functioning of the Internal Complaints Committee



# Healing sexual trauma

Understanding sexual trauma and the resources available within the Auroville community is the first step toward its prevention. Two health professionals agreed to share their professional and personal ideas on how sexual trauma can be addressed in Auroville. Paula Murphy is an Aurovilian nurse-midwife with 30 years of experience. She works at Santé and is a member of Auroville's Internal Complaints Committee (ICC). In 2016, she conducted Auroville's first women's health survey, which was covered in Issue # 334 of *Auroville Today*. Naomi Shtilman is a mental health professional who joined Auroville in 2019. She has a Master's in Counselling Psychology and she's completing her PhD in Integral and Transpersonal Psychology. A sexual assault survivor who has also experienced harassment in Auroville, she is currently a facilitator of a discussion group in Auroville about love, relationships, and sexuality.

**How can we prevent sexual trauma in Auroville?**

**Paula:** For me education is essential, particularly to inform men how serious an issue sexual harassment is and what the laws are. Young men may not have been exposed to any feminist awakening. Without this awareness, you can possibly be a victim or perpetrator of sexual harassment without even knowing it.

**Naomi:** The first preventive measure would be decreasing stigma and shame by creating opportunities for open and honest conversations regarding sexual health. We need to increase our conversations and educational systems to include explorations of consent. It would also be important to have education and counselling for past perpetrators so that they can learn not to repeat the harm already done. Rather than saying 'You are bad', we need to say, 'This is your opportunity to learn and grow, are you going to take it?'

**There's a discussion happening worldwide about consent. How would you define it?**

**Paula:** Consent happens when the person is mature enough to decide for themselves about their actions and accept the consequences. They have to understand what's happening and what are the implications and risks of sexual acts, such as diseases, pregnancy, emotional trauma and physical trauma.

**Naomi:** Getting consent is about having the emotional intelligence and the communication skills to really check with somebody about their needs and desires regarding sexual activity. We need new conversations about what is consent to encourage mutual participation in the sexual experience. Rather than the stereotype of the man chasing the woman, it's possible for two beings to mutually co-create a sexual experience together.

**Can you tell us about the healing process for sexual trauma?**

**Naomi:** I have experienced abuse in the past, so I know first-hand the symptoms of trauma; I know how it affects your mind, body and soul. I also know there are numerous ways to support healing from trauma because I had to explore various paths for myself and I continue to deepen my knowledge of recovery.

There are two different levels to address: first, what you need to do practically for your well-being (what safety measures to take, which offices to go to, etc.) but then, second, is what you need to do for your mental health. Seeking support of a therapist who has an understanding of PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) is important. Unlike other mental health related challenges, it's incredibly essential to understand the impact of trauma on the body, especially your nervous system, and so, for example, massages and energy therapy can help a lot.

There are four stages of emotionally healing from trauma:

First, the victim has to develop coping skills. For example, you shouldn't talk about the trauma with someone who is not ready to navigate the emotions that could arise.

Second, she has to make sense of her story and process it. This involves navigating the feelings of what happened and incorporating the experience into her larger life story.

Third is integration. She asks herself, "What does that mean for me? I'm not the same person that I was before, so who am I now?"

And fourth involves giving back her experience to her community. Sexual trauma can be isolating because the victim is alone in her intense experience. She needs to develop connections and sisterhood for support.

**Paula:** In Auroville we have a wide, and maybe indirect, healing environment. Besides the people qualified to deal from the psychological point of view and those dedicated to healing to wellness in general, there are also women's circles. Many elements of human nature are rising up now to be transformed. In Auroville we have the Mother's Force for healing these deep, long repressed aspects.

**What about for more serious cases of sexual assault? What is the situation in India and do we have the necessary resources to deal with them in Auroville?**

**Paula:** India has a very different system. In other countries, the victim would have a forensic medical examination and physical evidence and specimens would be gathered. You can identify the perpetrator based on DNA. But this isn't practiced here in India. Men can deny their culpability because there's no evidence. And so, while the laws are strict, if you don't have any evidence you can't prosecute, and it turns into a battle of 'she said, he said'. Then the woman often loses the case, and this can jeopardise also her reputation, her job, her marriage and the support from her family, which is why most women don't report perpetrators of sexual assault.



Naomi Shtilman

I have investigated various testing options through the lab services at Santé. I've started to conduct more screenings, but I haven't found easy access to the resources needed. My dream support system for women would include physical, emotional and spiritual care. We would provide emergency contraception if indicated, basic STD screenings that provide rapid results, prophylactic HIV treatment if indicated and access to a full forensic exam carried out by a trained nurse, midwife or female doctor. Currently, this level of care is not available in our area nor in most places in India.

**What are the advantages and disadvantages of living in a small community when it comes to dealing with these issues?**

**Paula:** Auroville has all kinds. There are some men that are respectful and have a contained sexual energy; they don't engage with you from a perspective of male domination if you are a woman, but as a human soul. There is a big presence of this kind of person. But we also have people here that would ignore consent, violating the ethos here and causing sexual harassment without even recognising it.

**Naomi:** It's a big challenge to live in a small community, with the possibility of meeting your harasser at any time, and to deal with that fear. In my case, I started avoiding places because I didn't want that stress on my body.

At the same time, what surprised me in my experience of harassment here was that a group of people formed around me to provide support. They said, 'How are we going to deal with this situation as a community?' And that was quite a



Paula Murphy

relief because it was no longer me trying to deal with it alone, but a group of people saying "This is a problem for all of Auroville and we should address it to keep you and others safe". It was a beautiful healing moment for me to feel supported by the community.

**Do you see public awareness growing on the topic?**

**Naomi:** These incidents are so shameful that we keep them secret. People don't want to know about them. But when they remain in the shadows, the behaviours can easily continue. Only when things are brought into the light can they be addressed.

**Paula:** Talking about sexual trauma is very important. There are people who think that if we don't talk about it, these incidents will disappear. This is denial. But public awareness is growing in Auroville. There are people who are gathering information and giving it back to the community in an understandable way, which is really educational. Otherwise, there can be confusion even about the differences between sexual assault and sexual harassment, which are worlds apart.

We also need to communicate that the way to approach safety is not the same for men and for women, and the community at every level has to internalise the fact that we have gender-based inequality here. For example, 'Don't go out at night' is a common phrase for women but not for men.

**How can we do better and what is already working?**

**Paula:** Maybe some mother-daughter classes would be helpful, and to provide better sex education in the schools. We are missing other things from the male point of view as well, because we are still trying to wake up from women's suppression. How can we invite respectful men to engage in this process?

**Naomi:** One healing initiative that stands out to me is Auroville's Restorative Circles. I wonder how they could be utilized more to address the collective healing between the genders, not just individuals.

Something that could be improved would be to allow anonymous complaints. Currently, the complainant has to be named when approaching the Internal Complaints Committee, which puts her at risk of repercussions. This is common all over the world; the first thing that happens when a woman speaks up is that she is discredited. For that reason, I wonder how many more women would come forward if they knew that their names didn't have to be shown to the perpetrator.

**What would you like to see in a healthier future?**

**Naomi:** In Auroville, we are coming from different cultures and backgrounds, but the collective challenges we face between the genders is global. The problem of women's safety is so much bigger than individual episodes. I'd love for us in Auroville to continue exploring community options for preventive education and healing in collective.

**Paula:** I'd like people to understand that, excluding those who are celibate, anyone who is in a human body will most probably have a sex life at some point and that it should be a happy, healthy, safe, pleasurable, self-affirming and life-affirming part of them. It should not be a point of shame, disease or danger. That change of attitude could be a natural thing as we walk on this path called Auroville.

Valentina and Hilary

## Glossary of concepts

**Affirmative consent:** Verbal affirmation of the desire of engaging in any type of sexual activity.

**Age of consent:** Age at which one is considered legally competent to consent for sexual activity. It varies by country. In India, it is 18 years for both men and women.

**Work Harassment:** The UN defines it as any behaviour of an offensive nature, based on discrimination of any kind that causes humiliation to another person. It may take the form of words, gestures or actions which create an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.

**Sexual harassment:** As defined in the Indian Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, sexual harassment includes any one or more of the following unwelcome acts or behaviour (whether directly or by implication) namely:

- (i) physical contact and advances; or
- (ii) a demand or request for sexual favours; or
- (iii) making sexually coloured remarks; or
- (iv) showing pornography; or
- (v) any other unwelcome physical, verbal or non-verbal conduct of sexual nature;

**Sexual harassment complaint:** The Indian Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Rules, 2013, specify that a complaint can be made by the aggrieved woman, or if she is unable to do so on account of her physical incapacity, by her relative or friend, a co-worker, an officer of the National Commission for Women or State Women's Commission or any person who has knowledge of the incident with the written consent the aggrieved woman. The Rules also contain a provision on who can make a complaint in case the aggrieved woman is unable to do so on account of her mental incapacity.

**Rape:** The Indian Penal Code defines it as the act of sex by a man with a woman if it was done against her will or without her consent. The definition of rape also includes sex when her consent has been obtained by putting her or any person in fear of death or of hurt, or when she's unable to communicate consent.

Sexual intercourse by a man with his own wife, the wife not being under fifteen years of age, is not rape according to this law, even when there's no consent given. To have sex with a minor under the age of 18 is also considered rape, as there is no legal consent involved.

**Sexual assault:** Unwanted sexual physical contact. One of the most serious forms of it is rape.

**Sexual trauma:** A consequence of a sexual act that is imposed on another person without his or her consent.

**Sexual abuse:** Ongoing or long-term sexual trauma.

**Sexual consent:** Agreement between participants to engage in sexual activity. It can be verbal or non-verbal and it's still a matter of debate how to understand it and teach it.

**Secondary victimisation:** Human rights organisations define it as the re-traumatisation of the harassed and/or assaulted person through the responses of individuals, community and institutions after she/he speaks out. Included in this category are conceptions such as blaming the victim for external circumstances, 'gas lighting', verbal and physical attacks or threats to the victim, exposing the victim to reprisal from the harasser, undermining the mental health of the victim, being ostracised from the family, getting fired from the working place, isolation, shaming, punishments, among many others forms of victimisation.

*These concepts have been compiled from different national and global sources, including Indian legal definitions, studies from UN and Human Rights associations, digital media and English encyclopaedias.*



# February is art month

February was a busy month for artists and culture-vultures alike, with many exhibitions to choose from.

Transparence

Jyoti and Nathalie’s exhibition *Transparence* at Savitri Bhavan aimed to transport the viewer through time, light and transparencies. The artists were entrusted with fabric that had been used by The Mother, as impetus to create their artworks. The resulting collages emphasise the quality of Beauty – a quality the Mother esteemed. Nathalie’s artworks integrate Mother’s lace with handmade paper that Nathalie created in collaboration with Auroville Papers. She stresses that the works should not be seen as religious relics, but as works that “tell a simple story of love” for The Mother. Many of Jyoti’s highly colourful and densely-layered collages depict the natural world and its flora and fauna. The rich layering of fabric and other media draws the viewer deeply into a specific and lush rendition of nature, evoked through elegant and detailed composition. The two artists claim that the exhibition’s themes of time, light and transparencies capture the journey of pioneers – whose hearts were “wide open for the light to travel through”.

Bangla Time Travel

Birgitta’s exhibition *Bangla Time Travel* at European House built on her long-standing oeuvre of magical bark prints, but with a new twist. Her latest prints were made during her 2019 residency at Dubolhati Palace in Bangladesh, and utilised the ruined Palace’s highly-textured plaster walls. Birgitta takes the prints of these surfaces – tree bark, ruined walls – and then uses shading to uncover beings and faces in the shapes, to bring them into the foreground. In this way, the surfaces present her with different stories that stem from the local culture. Birgitta perceives these surfaces to hold history and myths – a consciousness that can manifest through an artist’s hands. “The world beyond our visible world turns out to be the biggest adventure of my life,” says Birgitta.

Icons

Meanwhile it has been a busy month at Kalakendra Gallery. It began with Julietta’s ceramic *ICONS* exhibition with its witty and whimsical representations of the famous. Julietta does not seek formal perfection because, as she puts it, “blurriness and cracks are part of the game, as in life”. She also created a multimedia art installation inspired by Tim Burton’s animated movie *The Corpse Bride*.

In Bloom

The exhibition space was shared with another ceramic potter, Puneet Brar, whose works were entitled *In Bloom*. Though inspired by real flowers they are based on fantasy. “I have created a garden,” she writes. “It is a tribute to the power of Mother Earth to flower in the most adverse conditions, to the people because of whom my life has flowered.”

Sculpted Wax Candles

Later in the month, Kalakendra hosted exhibitions by two Auroville units, Maroma and Auroville Papers. *Sculpted Wax Candles* displayed the inventiveness of Maroma founder, Paul Pinthon, in creating extraordinary art forms out of wax. They included representations of abstract paintings, flowers and machine-like images (with bolts inserted into the wax). But as he stressed in his introduction, “these candles are still intended to be burned, to bring light”.

Auroville Papers

Downstairs, Auroville Papers invited us to see their artistic works in progress, including not only their famous flowers and tall amphoras, but also new departures, like abstracts made of waste indigo cloth and papier maché bowls moulded from rocks and networks. Their sources of inspiration remain, as ever, very organic, “which is exactly how our unit has developed,” explains Louisa, one of the team. In their playfulness, imaginativeness and original use of materials both these exhibitions exhibited something that, as one visitor put it, “is truly Aurovilian”.

Notes on the Way

Art as spiritual exploration was perhaps best exemplified by two other events. In the Centre d’Art, Citadines, Pierre Legrand displayed his *Notes on the Way*, a retrospective of some of his work of the past years. His experiments with exploring and evoking a different form of consciousness through new forms and colour juxtapositions are remarkable testaments to his single-minded pursuit, through many years, of the underlying structure and dance of a new world. As he put it some years ago, “My workshop sometimes feels like a place of alchemy”.

Alchemy

‘Alchemy’ could also describe the fifteen Savitri paintings of Mayaura which she presented on two days in February, for they seek, through a striking semi-abstract language, to communicate and evoke the subtle resonances of passages from Canto One, Book One of *Savitri*. “It’s like everything I have done in my life enabled me to start doing this work,” Mayaura says. “*Savitri* is an initiation and now it is guiding my whole life.”

The intention is to make a boxed set of reproductions of the paintings as well as to exhibit them in a Paris gallery. “I feel it is important that Sri Aurobindo and *Savitri* are discovered by a French public, and the paintings are just a tool, a channel, for doing this.”

Lesley, Alan



Untitled by Jyoti Khare



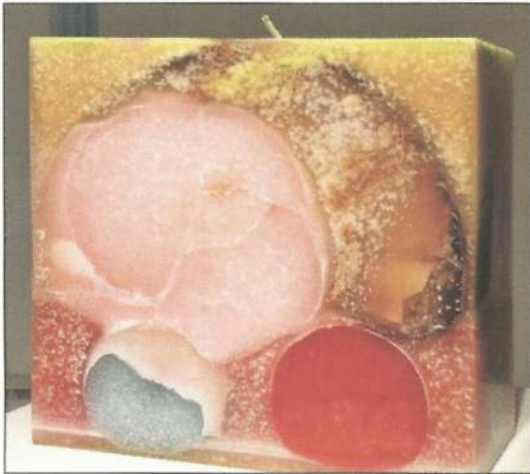
Zamindars Dream by Birgitta



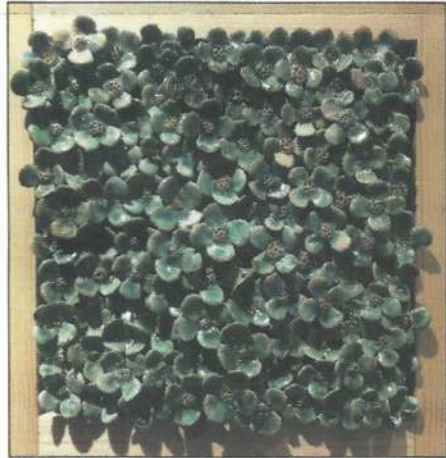
The Ganga River at the Foot of the Himalaya by Nathalie



ICONS by Julietta



Sculpted Wax Candle (recycled wax) by Paul Pinthon

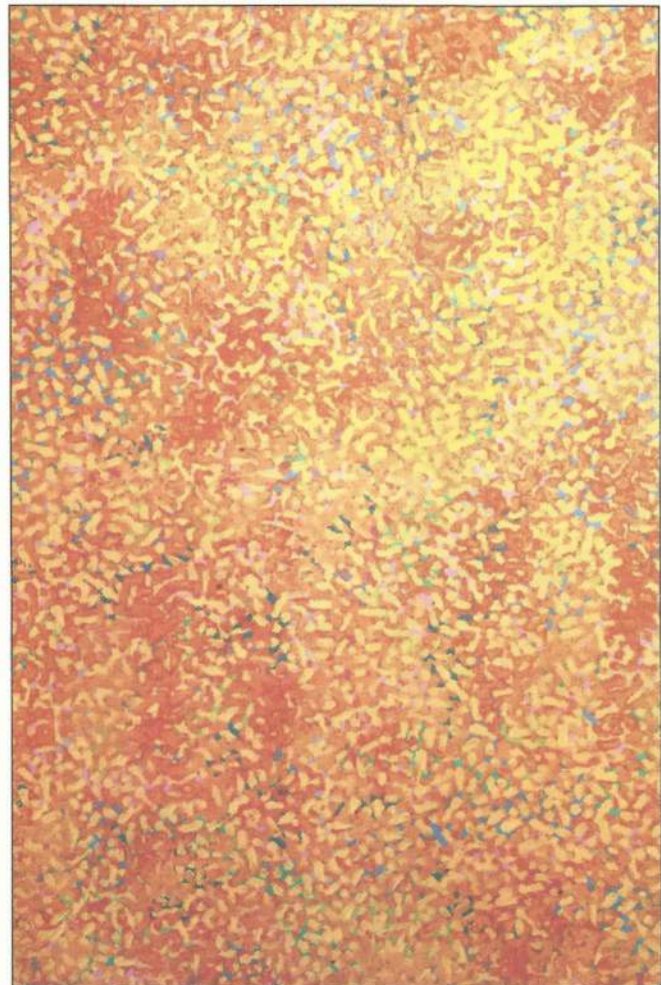


Left:  
“A flower does not think of competing with the flower next to it”  
Zen Proverb

Ceramic artwork by Puneet Brar



Right:  
A primeval night by Auroville papers



Notes on the way by Pierre Legrand



Dawn, one of the Savitri paintings, by Mayaura



## Navoditte

Navoditte (Norman Thomas) came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1967 with his wife, Alice, and in February, 1968 attended the inauguration of Auroville. He moved to Aspiration in 1971 where he was part of the group that met Mother a number of times, conversations subsequently recorded in 'Aspiration Talks'.

Later he moved to the Eco-House in Certitude where he was the weatherman, taking daily records of sun and wind. During the 1980s he worked for some time as the librarian at Aurelec.

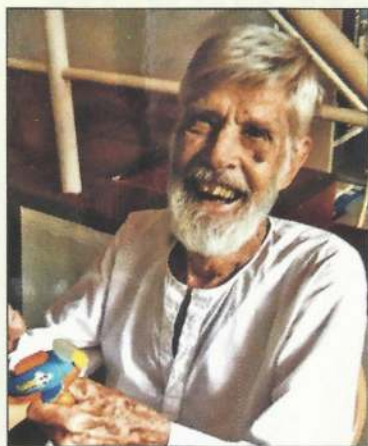
Above all, he was a fine writer. His best work navigates a delicate line between quicksilver humour and profundity, reflecting both his wry, self-deprecating take on life (he once wrote that the most marvelous phrase in the English language was "I don't know") as well as his deep philosophical introspection and quiet undogmatic devotion to The Mother.

What he wrote about the ancient Chinese poet, Tao Yuang-Ming, could well have been written about himself: "He was quiet, even taciturn, had no desire for riches or fame. He amused himself with books, but never to such an extent that he would trouble himself with exact interpretations... He amused himself by writing occasion poems, wherein his aspirations are revealed, having no interest in worldly success or failure. And so his life passed to its end."

Navoditte, like Yuang-Ming, loved laughter. Typically, he wrote his own funeral poem. It begins "You won't need a coffin/To carry me off in/But a sheet/Would be rather neat" and ends "No music. No heavy breathing. No words/Just - if you're lucky - the sound of birds/ And then, with the rising smoke/Let some-in-the-crowd bloke/Give a vote of thanks on my behalf,/And then you all can laugh and laugh and laugh and laugh".

Navoditte passed away on 1st February at the age of 93. He was buried in the Adventure cremation and burial grounds three days later.

His quiet, twinkle-eyed presence will be sorely missed.



## Subash Chandra

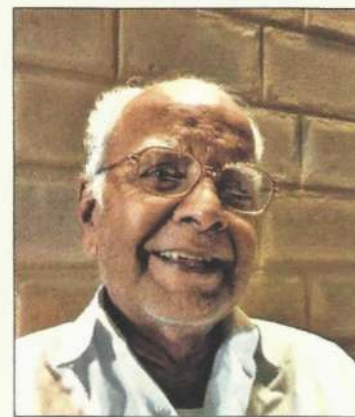
On February 1, 2020, Subash (M.S. Subash Chandra) passed away in the Mahalakshmi Home. He had just become 74 and had been battling Parkinson's disease since several years.

Born in Madurai, and wishing to practice the integral yoga of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, Subash joined Auroville in 1994 after obtaining a B.E. (Electrical) at Madras University. The year before that he had been conducting a 4-months experiment with 12 kindergarten children of New Creation Bilingual School, using the Glenn Doman Word Flash Cards method in order to verify the authenticity and usefulness of the system. This was one of the first such efforts in Auroville. It proved successful and from there he became a much appreciated teacher at the School's primary level, teaching math, social science, languages and story-telling for two years. There he came to know of many joyous and student-friendly educational approaches and used them for the students with impressive psychological and academic learning outcomes. At the same time he wrote a number of papers on these various systems, bringing them to the attention of many schools in Tamil Nadu. He also conducted 'Consecration' and other workshops, introducing young Aurovilians and residents in the bioregion to the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

In 1996 he became the coordinator of Isai Ambalam School, which became the love of his life. He continued studying and applying more alternative educational approaches, and trained the teachers to use them. Among them were the Glenn Doman Word Flash Cards Approach to impart reading skills to preschoolers, Primary Level Activity-Based Learning Cards Approach, Bilingual Audio with Language Games Approach for learning English, Education By Design Problem-Solving Approach, Thematic Projects Interdisciplinary Approach, Phonics Approach for Learning to Read English, and Basic Sentence Structure Approach using Regis' English Sentence-Writing Formula. Also, the Thalar Thiran Thittam of the Aparajitha Foundation of Madurai was added, a system for imparting values-based psychological life-skills to the students. When, several years ago, the STEM Land Project (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) started in the school, its educational direction somewhat changed, while still endeavouring to integrate the use of all these effective innovative approaches for maximizing the learning of the students.

Subash was determined in getting education to whomever needed it. He started out in a small house in New Creation, from where he moved to Isaiambalam, then Creativity, and recently moved to the Mahalakshmi Home. Many of his students, whose minds he has opened, will dearly miss him.

Subash's remains were buried on Sunday 2nd February at the Adventure cremation and burial grounds.



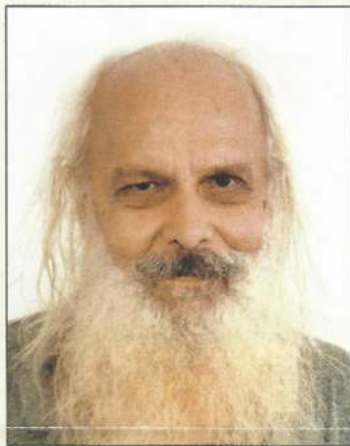
## Martin Sobieroj

On February 2, Martin Sobieroj passed away in his room at Arka. He was 76 and had been suffering from pancreatic cancer. Martin was ready to go and had opted to stay away from heavy treatment and follow the natural course of the disease, a choice which he admirably adhered to apart from accepting some pain plasters at the very end.

Being a searcher from a young age onwards, Martin first came to Auroville in 1977 but it became clear that for him it was not the right time, or possibly not the right motivation. When he returned 15 years later with the sincere intent to further his spiritual development here, he very soon got in contact with Gangalakshmi with whom he started working at *L'Agenda de Mère* in Aspiration and he became Aurovilian in '94. When the House of Mother's Agenda (HOMA) moved to Savitri Bhavan in 2006, he continued his non-stop research and information work such as answering questions from Aurovilians pertaining to Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's work, making indexes and compilations of their texts whenever needed, preparing with Gangalakshmi the HOMA pages for *News and Notes*, etc., always in a spirit of collaboration and giving.

Apart from writing several texts on Auroville's Integral Yoga and context, and regularly participating in discussions on AuroNet, Martin also wrote the published book *'Der Stern des Abgrundes: das Medium Adolf Hitler im Lichte Sri Aurobindo und Der Mutter'* ('The star of the abyss: the medium Adolf Hitler in the light of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother'), a collection of statements from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo on the mediumistic nature of Hitler for which Martin, by widely researching German literature of the time, documented convincing confirmations. The book gives a fine overview of the occult Hitler phenomenon which is largely ignored by historians.

Martin's remains were buried at Adventure cremation and burial grounds on February 5th. An overview of his life, in his own words, has been published on <https://youtu.be/taQYlowP6tY>.



## Auroculture

Auroculture (Helga Ahy – born Pirk) left her body on 10 February at Marika Home. She was 86 and had suffered a major stroke in November 2014 which left her partly paralysed, with a weakened heart and hardly able to swallow. After this, various other strokes occurred, each leaving her more peaceful and ready. She eventually passed away due to aspiration pneumonia.

Auroculture, born in Vienna, Austria, came to the Ashram in 1971, having left her husband Jahan Ahy in New York. Ahy, an Iranian diplomat, was no stranger to the Ashram. He had visited Mother in 1969 who mentioned to him "I really like your wife" and inspired him to become instrumental in the first set-up of Auroville International. Hence Auroculture's connection with AVI.

While living in the Ashram, she was in charge of the flowers on the Samadhi every morning and, during the years of turmoil, would bring some to the Aurovilians in order to support them in their struggle. This was not always appreciated by various parties, nor the fact that she kept planting trees in the Bharat Nivas area. Having a strong, independent and upbeat character, and totally devoted to Mother and Sri Aurobindo, Auroculture was used to do what she thought was right and was never bothered by criticism. It was M.P. Pandit who gave her the 'Auroculture' name.

During this time, Auroculture also started developing her educative 'Aurogames', puzzles and toy-like material designed to create mathematical understanding in youngsters. For some time she worked with them at Udavi School. Throughout the years the games have been refined in greater detail, and are presently being used and produced under the same name by TLC Maya and Paula of Transition through their Auroville 'Kalvi' unit.

In 1995, Auroculture made the step to come over to Auroville and became Aurovilian a year later. From then onwards she has been active as a green-finger worker and consultant in the Matrimandir gardens, endlessly picking up flowers there and elsewhere, to combine and blend them into a wonderful flower compost used for Matrimandir and many a other special occasions. Her meditative 'flower mandalas' became highly appreciated decorative entities in our ceremonies – a tradition that will live on in her name.

Auroculture started off in Aspiration, then moved to Inspiration, Arka and eventually Marika Home. Auroville will always associate her with greenery, flowers and gardens and an unwavering devotion to the Work. Her remains were buried at the Adventure cremation and burial grounds on February 14.



## Mani

Mani (G.Gnanamani) of FoodLink passed away on the morning of 20 February succumbing to injuries suffered by a car accident on ECR road the day before. His remains were cremated on 21st in Chinnamudali-yarchavadi. He was 38 years old.

Although he never officially joined Auroville, Mani was known to many who frequented FoodLink, where he was a steady and responsible presence since February 2012. Most of the FoodLink clients may know him from the FoodLink desk, registering their selected items in a friendly and totally concentrated way; his colleagues describe him as a very honest and straightforward person, always serious but also great fun to be with. He will be sorely missed.



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