

Abundant monsoon



Irumbai lake

Aurogreen (Auroville) 2020 Rainfall Update													
As on 31 December 2020	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
Rain Days	5	3	0	1	2	6	9	7	10	13	15	14	85
Total mm	20.0	6.0	0.0	19.0	16.9	59.2	68.0	43.2	148.0	236.6	499.7	541.7	1658.30
Trace Days	2	2	2	2	1	4	3	4	5	1	1	1	28
Deviation from Average in %	167.8%	-59.2%	-100.0%	105.9%	-63.4%	114.3%	-7.0%	-67.1%	106.9%	-6.4%	137.1%	264.7%	25.68%
2020 Seasonal Average	Dry Season Rainfall = 62 mm					S/W Monsoon Rainfall = 318 mm				N/E Monsoon = 1278 mm			
2020 Deviation from Average	-39.79% from Average					-19.35% from Average				+55.49% from Average			
Seasonal Average last 43 years	Dry Season Rainfall = 102.8 mm					S/W Monsoon Rainfall = 394.8 mm				N/E Monsoon = 821.9 mm			
Monthly Average last 43 years	11.9	14.7	12.0	17.9	46.2	51.8	73.1	131.4	138.4	252.9	364.4	204.7	1319
2020 Monthly Deviation in mm	8.08	-8.70	-11.99	1.06	-29.32	7.39	-5.10	-88.24	9.58	-16.26	135.35	335.02	338.85

The year 2020 has turned out to be a really good rainfall year. It didn't start well. In the first five months we received only 62 mm as compared to the average of 102.8 mm, or 39.79% less. During the next four months, June-September, we received 318 mm, which was 19.35% less than the average of 394.8 mm. Things improved in the last three months. On 31/12 we recorded 1,319 mm versus an average of 821.9 mm, a surplus of 55.49%. In the last 44 years, only three other December months (in 1996, 1998 and 2015) received more rainfall than this year's December, which recorded 264.70% over the average for the month. The total for the year 2020 is 1,658.30 mm versus the average of 1,319 mm, or 25.68% above average. The maximum yearly rainfall ever recorded was 2,088 mm, in 2015.

Charlie

AUROVILLE CHILDREN

Auroville Children – Generation 2.0

Everyone here knows the expression “Children of Auroville”, but they’ve grown up since, and some now have children themselves! As various waves of ‘children of Children of Auroville’ – i.e. youth that has grown up in Auroville to parents that have themselves grown up in Auroville (monikers: GenZ, iGen or even Zoomers) – are born and grow up here, the older ones now represent a category that is starting to be more vocal in the community.

In the search for a potential ‘X Factor’ that makes the second generation of Aurovilians different from the rest of us, here’s a compilation of thoughts from grandparents (Baby Boomers), parents (Generation X and Millennials) and children (iGen) from several different families in Auroville, as well as teachers.

Upbringing

Growing up in Auroville in the 1970s certainly wasn’t an easy feat. Life was tough, be it with regard to the weather, the environment, the food or the job at hand. As Jaya put it: “For the first generation, Mother said that it was hard for these new beings, but that their coming was very necessary. Some of them feel that many of the parents back then were too busy ‘adulting’ (i.e. planting trees, building houses and/or the Matrimandir,

creating communities, setting up units and systems to manage various aspects of this city being born) and forgot to balance that aspect out with ‘parenting’, leaving the first generation to grow up with what is now described as “without discipline, clear limits and structure”. As Lisbeth fondly remembered: “The children were very tribal and could move quite unimpeded through Auroville: they knew where all the fruits and wild berries could be found, the open wells for swimming, learning Tamil quite naturally; life was very simple. Moving around barefoot, they were happy little troopers and quite independent already.”

Though as a kid it’s great to be free and have no limits, they discovered that this excess of freedom could actually be damaging in the long run, as they were not given the same opportunities as youth elsewhere to develop a grounded sense of self-worth. One of those former ‘kids’, Grace, pointed out: “Whilst growing up there was no stable system of education. We were experimented on, books were burnt, schools were shut, and an anarchist movement swept through Auroville, destabilising whatever small foothold had been established.” Thus, maybe the first thing that was enhanced in the upbringing of the children of this first generation of children, something they felt was lacking in their own childhood, was structure and stability, favouring long-term over short-term thinking. Grace, like many others,

felt it was important to “create healthier boundaries that could support our youth to unfold more safely, with more confidence and joy.”

Along these lines, emphasis was put on this youth gaining “a concrete sense of themselves as individuals, with the responsibilities and consequences that come with that”, as Krishna and Island narrated about their daughter. For this first generation of children of Auroville, it was vital to not force things upon their children (unless for safety) and, as Kripa said, to be aware of not putting their own fears into their children’s subconscious. Qualities that are emphasised are respect, honesty and awareness, coupled with non-violence and communication skills. As Jitta put it: “It’s your life, what you do is for you. When you ‘mess up’, be compassionate with yourself: it’s ok, it’s part of life. Just take ownership for your (re)actions and use it to grow. Be the leader of your own life and try to see things from other points of view.” Grace also felt that it is important to “give them a sense of belonging to Earth as Earthlings, not to a specific nationality or culture in Auroville.”

Another important aspect revolved around education: access to information, knowledge and learning opportunities is at the forefront of this second generation’s upbringing.

continued on page 2

- Zozo, a young naturalist
- Succession and ageing: some challenges and solutions

pages 2–3

- Exhibition: Auroville from above
- The divine discovery from wasteland shrub

pages 4 – 7

- Seeds of a new culture: the Auroville herbarium
- Passing: Astad Deboo
- A profile of Savithri

pages 7 – 8

Auroville Children – Generation 2.0

continued from page 1

Parents of this new generation are intent on providing support so that they can appreciate whatever form of education is made available to them, like Luk who decided to help create the Centre for Further Learning in Auroville so that others would not have to struggle with his studies as he did.

In the mid-1970s, Auroville schools closed. Many students had a break in their formal education but some studied or took exams in Bangalore or Ooty. In contrast, present-day parents, such as Jitta, take a different approach to education for their children: “Learning is for you, not for anyone else, so be thirsty and curious for knowledge, and never be ashamed to express yourself or ask something you don’t know. People might laugh or shame you, but don’t let that shut you down, try to not let fear stop you.”

Education

In the beginning, people – including parents – started working in Auroville schools out of necessity, as there simply weren’t any teachers! Nevertheless, many of them then continued as they enjoyed working with children and kept growing, like the adage “To teach is to learn a thousand times.” These teachers recount that they were also lucky to have visiting experts generously pass on their experience and knowledge. Lisbeth remembers that “teaching was very much hands-on, learning on the spot, sharing content with simple instructions in mixed languages. Spontaneous field trips would happen to the Matrimandir, various workshops or communities as well as theoretical classes like reading, writing, mathematics and geography.”

Over the years, more students started attending school. The teachers grew with the school and students, they became more organised and developed a programme for the older children. “Although now we have timetables, specific hours and subject teachers, our schools still leave space for plenty of creativity and I still enjoy teaching”, said Lisbeth. By the time the students leave Transition School, most of them have a pretty solid base.

When senior teachers such as Jocelyne, Lisbeth or Mary started working in the schools, they didn’t have much teaching material. Over the years, they built it up and “the Internet has now made general knowledge easily accessible everywhere, it offers these young learners a richer choice of materials”, said Jocelyne. “However, in view of this wide range of available information, the youth needs to learn discrimination techniques.”

Experience suggests that this generation of students tends to thrive when they are offered holistic teaching, including a fully immersive educational experience, class or group discussions and interactive classroom environments, rather than traditional methods. “What is different today that was lacking when I grew up is that there is choice at nearly every level”, said Luk. From crèche to high school programmes, most pre-university needs are now

covered in Auroville, be it with exam-oriented studies or free progress education.

Jitta also mentioned that she has “started to notice the influence of the teachers and facilitators who themselves have grown up in Auroville and their importance in the education of these children; there is a natural respect and understanding.”

From children of Auroville to the next generation

There is clearly a shift between these two generations. The new generation seems to be able to live what they are to a larger extent, freer from the conditioning that comes from family and society, freer from the patterns, background and luggage passed down from their grandparents to their parents. Jaya further observed how the new generation can totally immerse itself in a phase or experience, and then completely let it go without hanging on.

The effect of technology and the way that this connects them to different places and experiences is also very obvious: some are less interested in face-to-face contact with others, preferring instead to connect via smartphones; they read less books, magazines or newspapers; they spend more time playing computer games or using social media. This often results in practicing less sports.

At the same time, they still have a spirit of freedom and are much more open to others, different races and cultures, sexual orientations, etc.

Despite having very different lives from their parents, Lisbeth noted that, like their parents, “they still like to play in the mud and enjoy dancing in the rain, they love the Auroville forests and the ocean, horse riding in the Greenbelt, music, circus, sports and are enthusiastic about discovering our wonderful paradise.”

An X factor to Gen 2.0?

On this point, there were as many opinions as interviewees! Krishna and Island, for example, think that there is no intrinsic X Factor but “a lot of it has to do with how you are raised, the environment in your home, and the educational environment you are in.” Luk and Shanthi agreed, adding that for them the key factor is the social environment: “The experience that Auroville children get today from the multi-cultural and multi-lingual environment makes them wholesome persons with a healthy and global outlook on the world. They don’t live in a bubble anymore: they are conscious of the global playing field and that gives them maturity and the confidence to face most situations in life, anywhere on the globe.”

In fact, compared to the West, children here are less cocooned, they are left to discover things at their own pace. However, compared to the first generation of Auroville children, this new generation is more supervised and protected while growing up; these youngsters tend to live more slowly, they are more cautious, abstemious and risk-averse. Many see this as a plus, because they get to remain children longer and not start to behave like adults too early on.

Like several other interviewees, Kripa believes that a notable characteristic of this generation is psychological maturity. Jitta concurred, adding that this new generation has a high level of awareness, responsibility and consciousness, both with regard to themselves and to the outside world. Isa and Roshan remarked that their generation is far more concerned with environmental degradation than other generations, for obvious reasons. As Aiyana boldly stated: “we fight for a better future, for better rights, more education, etc.”

Kalsang feels that “they are creative, open-minded and do not hesitate to talk to people”, while for Mary “they are more relaxed with adults and not afraid to debate or disagree.” However, they do so while remaining honest and respectful. “We are constantly hungry for more knowledge; we want to understand the reasons behind things,” Aiyana explained.

Nevertheless, Grace pointed out that some of them “display a sense of false vanity or arrogance due to the fact that they are not entirely sure of where they belong, so they mask their insecurity by cloaking themselves with this arrogance of already knowing everything. This sadly prevents them often from being grateful for the abundance that has been made available to them through a lot of effort.”

Having ‘been there done that’, I must admit that it was only after having spent some time away that I myself realised the richness of what we have here. Of course, generalisations are easy to make, and Aiyana simply showed that this is not true for all Auroville youth: “My generation can be distinguished by our incredible privilege: many of us have had the freedom to express ourselves, dream big and have little to no limitations.”

Nonetheless, in this generation and other generations that have really grown up in Auroville, Ribhu noticed “a commitment to Auroville, a love and close bond to the place and to this dream.” Jaya added that all children of Auroville – both Gen 1.0 and 2.0 – “embody the ideals and fundamental values of Auroville wherever they are.” In fact, the grandparents left a society to join Auroville, the parents grew up in a society-less Auroville and were there for its development, while the children are “Aurovilian by default, by socialisation, by birth and not as an alternative or a choice that one has to make as a ‘protest’ to the society that they grew up in”, as Roshan explained so clearly. Their reality is the Aurovilian dream.

For Isa, it is her generation’s knowledge and experience of Auroville, stretching all the way back into its history, that differentiates Gen 2.0 from others who have come later: “After all, your childhood home is always etched deeply into your memory and consciousness. Sharing that feeling of ‘home’ with a parent is special in such a young community. Indeed, it is the stories that I heard throughout my childhood that formed my complete picture of Auroville; not only my lived experience, but imagined ones too. Having access to that knowledge from such a personal source can definitely shift your imagination about this experiment.”

Oddly enough, it seems that Auroville itself is the X Factor! “The spiritual context of Auroville gives them yet another dimension of experience and growth”, said Luk and Shanthi, who have tried to impart this to their children. As Jitta put it, “I see an evolution in humankind; when I look at these children it gives me hope for Auroville.”

Future of Auroville

Younger ones think that Auroville is a super cool place and wouldn’t necessarily want to change anything about it.

However, older teens feel as though there is no longer a space for the youth to express themselves. Isa added that she would like “Auroville children and youth to feel welcomed and supported by the community.” This rift is creating escalating tensions within Auroville, without being addressed in an all-inclusive and holistic manner. Some people perceive that the feeling of family that was ubiquitous in the beginning of Auroville has been watered down and lost over the years.

As for its place in the bioregion, the separation between Auroville kids and their peers in the surrounding villages has become indubitably deeper compared to the first generation of children born here. One of the reasons for this is directly linked to language (and therefore communication): the youth don’t really feel the need to learn Tamil anymore, as their local peers speak English better and better.

On another level, many of the older ones (now young adults) feel that Auroville as a whole is too busy with the material priorities of development, housing, etc., that it is chasing quantity instead of quality. This is due to several factors, the primary one being all the attention – positive and negative – that Auroville has attracted from the global audience, fueled by social media ‘adventurers’ and catered to by the mainstream, as Matteo pointed out. This has led to a prevalent rise in consumerism, which is not only not conducive to individualism but also leading us astray from the goals and mission of this ‘City of the Future’.

Indeed, they feel that the community needs to focus again on the objectives revolving around self-development and spiritual progress on an individual level, to work towards a collaborative and selfless humanity on a communal level. Roshan pointed out: “It is only by being true to oneself that one is exercising sincerity and manifesting truth. Working more and working together is indispensable to the success of Auroville.” However, what Isa loves most about Auroville, despite the daily hurdles, is that “it forces my body, my mind, my soul into the centre of the change I want to see.”

As many of these children are still rather young, it may be a little premature to come to any concrete conclusion on the ‘X Factor’. However, it is undeniable that there is a lot of faith in this new generation, “a great assurance of what is to come,” according to Jaya.

Divya, child of Auroville

YOUNG AUROVILLE

A young naturalist

Zohar (17), known to most as Zozo, might be Auroville’s youngest full time forester. He lives and works in Evergreen, where he grew up among the trees and animals. He likes to go for walks and in the mornings he joins the community to do pruning, cutting, planting. “I do whatever needs doing. There is so much! One time a volunteer asked me ‘are we finished with the forest work?’ I had to laugh and said, ‘For today maybe, but we’re never really finished’”.

When deciding what to do in the forest, Zozo says “I look at the tree and what it needs. I see if they are happy or not, and how they want to grow. Also, according to local culture we should not cut certain trees on specific days.” About the relation with the village, he explains: “there is a sacred pooja place in Evergreen on the border between Edaiyanchavadi and Kuilapalayam village. Before the annual fire-walking ceremony large groups came here to worship.” Talking about pooja places, there is another one which marks the birthday of a part of Evergreen they call the New Land. I ask Zozo to show me this auspicious site and on the way we encounter a resident feral water buffalo. “She just decided to come and live here. We don’t know who she belongs to. It’s quite strange! We made a drinking spot for her, but had to lift it off the ground because otherwise the wild boar come and make a big mess.”

Besides the stray buffalo and two families of boar, he often sees porcupines, jackals, civet cats (“one used to live inside my neighbour’s house”) and very large owls that look



Sijmen and Zozo

like flying foxes, but are white. And, of course, plenty of snakes. Zozo has had a thing for animals since he was very young. “Before, I used to look after rescued birds. I had a cage full of them. One owl had lost an eye, perhaps due to poisoning. One kingfisher had a broken neck, probably after flying into a glass window. There were pond herons, babblers and many more. One time someone called from Pondy where a kite (bird) was caught in a kite (toy). I cut it loose and it was fine. Sometimes the people from BARK India who are rescuing dogs call me when they find a bird that needs help.”

He also worked with farm animals, first in the dairy next to SunFarm, and later grazing the owner’s goats. “I was walking full days with the goats along the side of the road, making sure they wouldn’t break any fences or get mixed up with other people’s goats. But I hardly got to see my family anymore, so I quit.”

Next Zozo plans to establish a patch of grassland inside the forest, because many animals (such as deer, but also reptiles who need sun) like to have a diverse landscape. And humans too. “The forest has become so dense that there’s hardly any place where we can see the moon.” So has Zozo found his own niche here in the forest? He says, “There is so much to learn. I don’t think we can ever really know it all. After the cyclone I saw so many indigenous trees bouncing back. They are very happy here. And so am I. It feels good to be looking after this piece of Auroville land.”

Gijs

Succession and ageing: some challenges and solutions

How does Auroville deal with ageing? Are there community retirement plans? Are Auroville units planning for succession? *Auroville Today* talked to two unit executives – one who is (slightly) stepping back, the other who is stepping forward – and lifts the veil on a Silver Fund which is being planned for the older members of the community.

The concept of 'old age' hasn't gained much traction in Auroville. Unlike life outside, Auroville has no age-specific norms. Auroville residents give their energy where they can as long as they can and there is no compulsory retirement age for people and there is no working groups. The situation is similar to that at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, where, recalls Alok Pandey, Mother even discouraged people from celebrating the usual 'milestones' in their life, such as reaching a certain age. Ageing, she said, has nothing to do with how long you have lived but with how you live. "As soon as you stop advancing, as soon as you stop progressing, as soon as you cease to better yourself, cease to gain and grow, cease to transform yourself, you truly become old, that is to say, you go downhill towards disintegration."

Yet, as one grows older, it is likely that one may need to work at a slower pace or stop work altogether. But 'succession', preparing others to take one's place, is a difficult topic for various reasons, including proprietorial feelings, the lack of competent successors, and the issue of how the needs of the elderly can be met. Some commercial units are finding a solution, while thoughts about a starting a retirement fund for the older members of the community are maturing.

One way of succession: calling on Mother

New Dawn Carpentry is run by Argentinian national Ricardo Cosarinsky, a former airline pilot who left Argentina during the Dirty War. "The military was everywhere and was very powerful. I didn't like facing their guns when meeting them. So I left for Spain, hoping I could find a job there as a pilot. But that didn't work out. After a few months I returned to Argentina as I had fallen in love. We settled in a very beautiful place in the countryside, far from the cities, living an idyllic lifestyle, milking our own cow and growing our own vegetables." But while this was fulfilling to some extent, it was not sufficient; and when his nephew invited him to join his carpentry workshop in Buenos Aires for a few months to year, Ricardo accepted. "I was going there every winter. He taught me the trade. After four years, I started my own carpentry workshop at our house in the countryside."

The isolated living brought something else as well. "I suddenly awoke to spirituality and started to read books on yoga, such as books about Ramana Maharshi and Paramahansa Yogananda. Many more spiritual books came to me, and I felt the urge to go to India. Now in my little village there was a tea shop where I used to buy snacks. The owner told me that one of his customers had a sister who was living in India, and would I like to meet her? And I said, yes, why not? So we met, and she asked me to carry a letter for her sister in Auroville, who was Prema who had founded the garment unit Auromode. I hadn't the faintest idea about Auroville."

"So I left for India and travelled around. My last stop was the Sathya Sai Baba Ashram in Puttaparthi, where I shared a room with another Argentinean. He had just come from Auroville, and convinced me to go there. I took the bus, came to Auroville, met Prema and gave her the letter. It clicked between us. I liked Auroville and got interested in its spiritual ideals. I went back to Argentina with the decision to come back to India and join Auroville."

When I returned I started to volunteer in different places. One day, Prema, who had a problem with the administration of the Surrender community project which she had started, asked if I would take over the carpentry team and finish the wood work of Surrender. I agreed. After finishing Surrender, Dhanasu, one of the carpenters, suggested we start our own carpentry unit. That was how New Dawn Carpentry got started. The year was 1998. Soon afterwards, Dhanasu joined Auroville as well and is now a co-executive of the unit."

Today, 22 years later, New Dawn is employing 12 people and is well-known within Auroville and outside for its quality carpentry work. "But I have grown older," reflects Ricardo. "I am 73 now, and I have been thinking about what will happen with the unit when I can no longer work. Knowing that all is in Mother's hands I started to ask for an answer. After some time She sent me the best guy in town. His name is Chaitanya. He is one of the Auroville kids who left Auroville to study abroad; he joined the Compagnons du Devoir in France and learned roof-making. Then he came back, and one day showed up in the workshop, stayed, and became co-executive. It was a gift. He was exactly the person I was hoping would join. Together, Dhanasu and Chaitanya are doing extremely well, and they will be able to successfully run the unit."

New Dawn, says Ricardo, will be able to continue paying him a half maintenance even when he starts working less. "I don't need much, and my monthly maintenance of Rs 20,000 will not be a burden on the unit. But I do not intend to stop, ever. I follow what Mother said, 'There is one thing that is always necessary, and it is: never to give up the game'. I will hammer the last nail in my own coffin!"

Planned succession

Auroville's fashion unit Miniature is run by Italian national Liliana Fassino, now 77 years old. She joined Auroville in 1995, after running a big fashion shop in Turin. Her daughter Ambra, who joined Miniature a few years ago, is primed to run the unit when Liliana steps back.

"Compared to my mother, I am at a disadvantage," admits Ambra candidly. "My mother was the daughter of a textile importer and got the sense of fabrics at a very young age. She is also artistically gifted, designing not only garments, but also shoes, accessories and jewellery. My background is completely different. Though I was always attracted to fashion, I became a Kindergarten teacher. I received my training in Indian textiles at a much later age, and it is still continuing." Liliana and Ambra regularly travel the whole of India to source textiles, with a preference for block-printed cotton from craftsmen of Rajasthan, and hand-woven khadi silks and cottons in traditional weavers patterns from Tamil Nadu, Bihar and Bengal. "We support small artisans who have incredible skills and so we help keeping those traditions alive. They produce only small quantities, which make our products unique."

Succession, says Ambra, is a painful topic. "My mother is one of the Auroville pioneers who started her unit from scratch and built it up to what it is today – a highly successful and well-known garment unit, which, before COVID came around, employed 45 people. The unit is built around her and her system of working. And now the daughter comes in with different ideas. My mother is adapting as she knows that change is the only way to survive, and she pushes me to find my own ways."

One of those changes, imposed by the pandemic, is turning to the internet market as a new sales outlet. It is an area where neither Liliana nor Ambra feel at home. "Our major outlets are the Mira boutique in Auroville and a few other clients in India. But all have been heavily hit by COVID. Some of our products are available online from Auroville.com; but we never pursued product sales through our own social media, such as Instagram or Facebook. Even Miniature's own website is not geared to online purchasing. We will need a person familiar with aggressive online marketing techniques."



Liliana and Ambra at the Miniature workshop

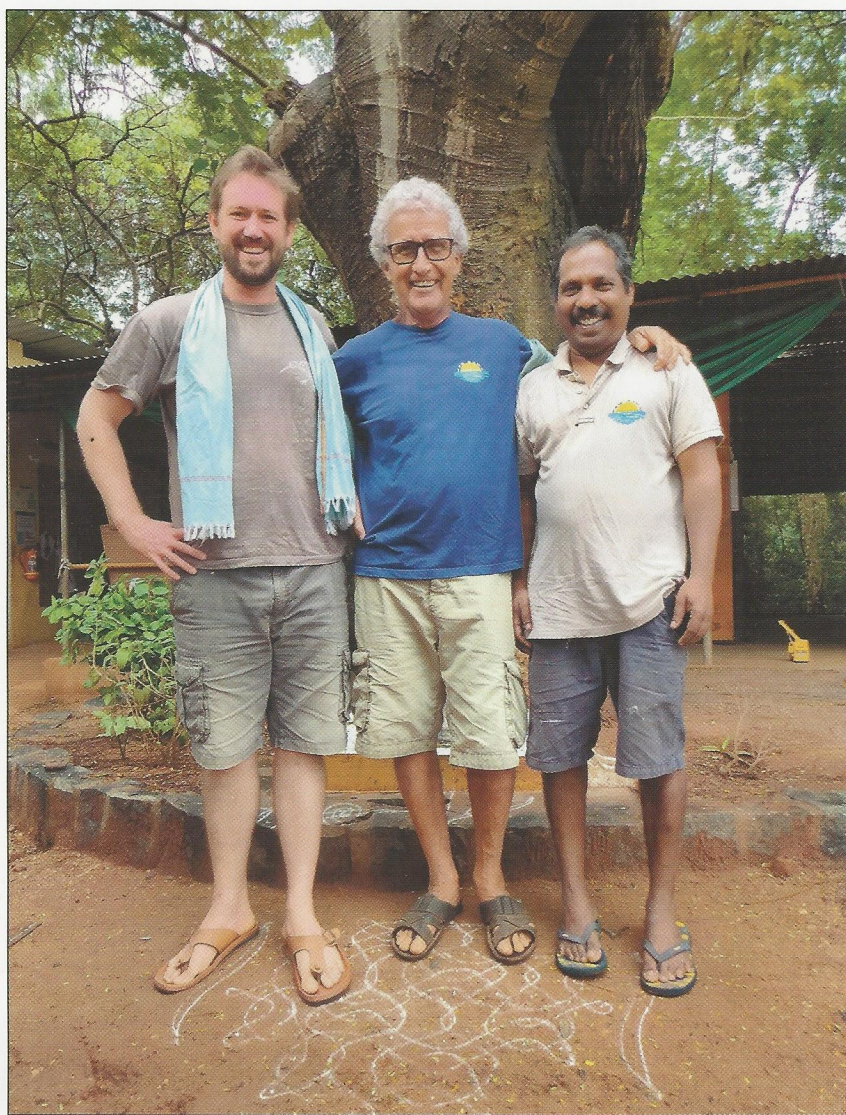
"The problem for Auroville units is that we are not able to create teams," reflects Ambra. "That's the power of big companies: they're able to create teams, so there are always professionals who can carry the unit forward."

Ambra does not see any difficulty in providing a maintenance to her mother when she will work less or stop working. "We have been discussing this, and some money has already been put aside for that purpose. But I think it is time to look deeply into the matter and agree on concrete guidelines for everyone for the future."

The Silver Fund

If some older Aurovilians who worked for commercial units may expect to receive a pension-maintenance from that unit – assuming the unit continues being in business – those who have been working for Auroville's services do not receive that benefit. Some may have savings or will receive a private or state pension. But an increasing number of Aurovilians do not have those advantages.

A subgroup constituted by the Funds and Assets Management Committee has been working on the modalities of a so-called Silver Fund, which is yet to be presented to the community. Stephan, one of the group's members, explains that the idea behind the fund is to guarantee a basic maintenance for any Aurovillian who has lived in and contributed to Auroville for a long period of time, say 25 or 30 years. "So, if you have reached a certain age – say 70 years – and you have lived in Auroville for



From left: Chaitanya, Ricardo and Dhanasu

let's say 25 years, you would be entitled to receive a maintenance from the community, regardless of where you worked or if you continue to work. We have debated if people who receive a pension from elsewhere are eligible and decided that the Silver Fund maintenance would be unconditional. It would be paid regardless of any other income or benefits. The Aurovillian just has to state once that s/he wants to receive it after fulfilling the criteria." He points to the obvious advantages: it would provide security for those who are now growing older and have no means; and it would create a sense of security for younger Aurovilians who would like to spend their life working and living in Auroville.

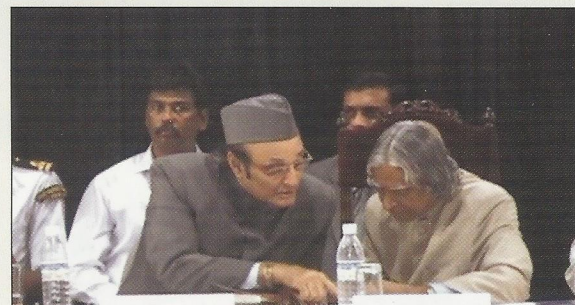
"We have been doing many calculations concerning how the community could pay for this," says Stephan. "We planned to present this to the community last year, but then the COVID-19 pandemic hit and the project was shelved. Now that quite a few of Auroville's commercial units are suffering due to COVID, our financial calculations will need to be adjusted. But the principles are sound." He expects that the financial situation in Auroville has to first stabilize and a sense of normalcy return before this project can be taken up again.

Assuming the community would eventually accept the proposal, it will allow the elderly Aurovilians to leave their workplace while having the security that they will continue to receive a maintenance. It is then up to them to decide

how they want to contribute to the community or focus more on their own yoga and spiritual work.

Carel

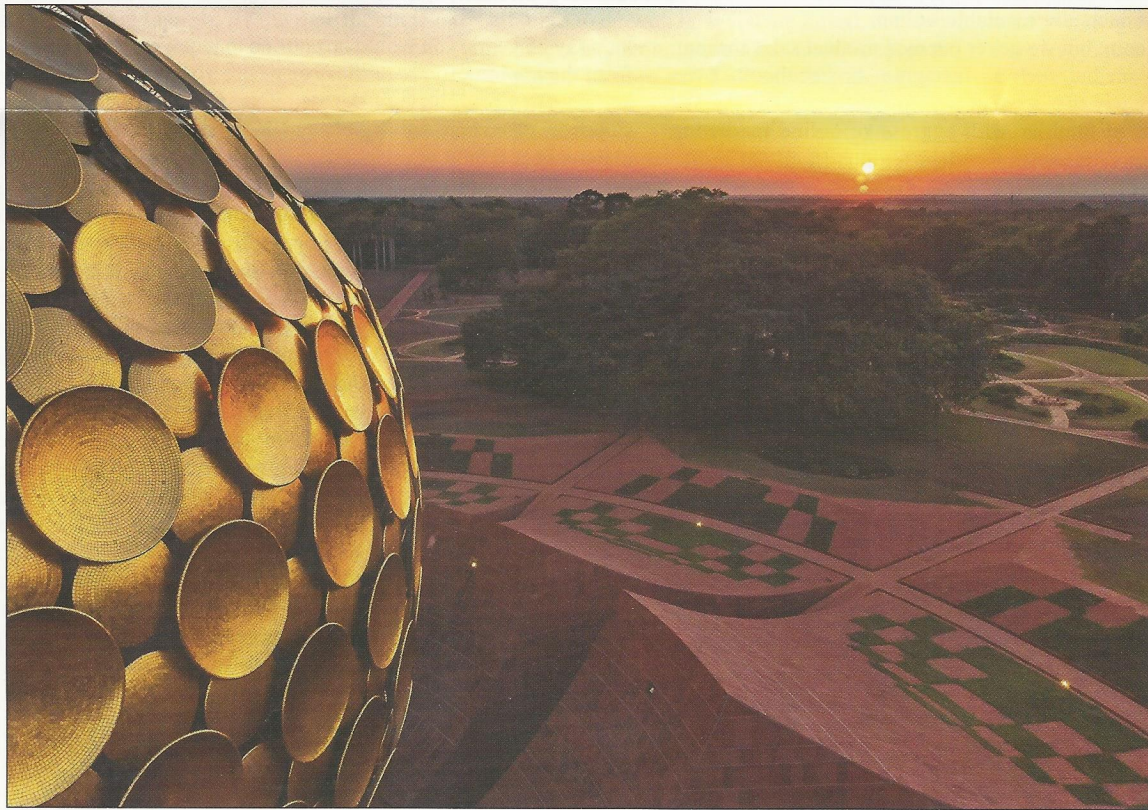
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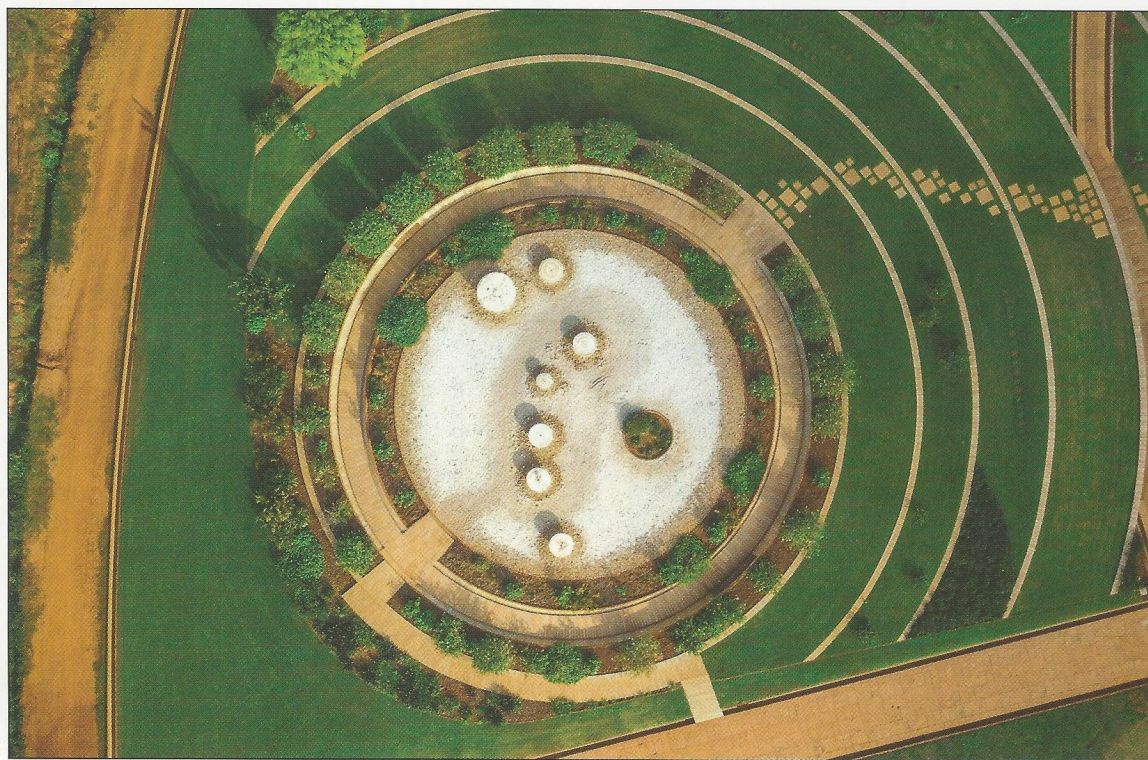
The caption below the photo of Dr. Karan Singh and Dr. Abdul Kalam on page 1 of the December 2020 issue of *Auroville Today* # 377 mentions mistakenly "With Prime Minister Abdul Kalam, at Auroville, November 2004". This should have been "With President Dr. Abdul Kalam, at Auroville, November 2004". We apologize for the mistake.



Auroville sunset



Above: Sunset over the Matrimandir. Below: The Matrimandir Bliss Garden



Auroville f

For three weeks in December the Centre d'Art, Citadines, hosted the ex
Auroville taken by Julie and Om. For many residents, seeing Auroville in

A change of perspective can result in a change of consciousness. Five hours after the launch of the Apollo 17 mission in 1972, astronaut Harrison Schmitt took a photo of the Earth from space which has become one of the most reproduced images anywhere. What made this image of the blue planet swimming in the black void of space so influential was that it emphasized both the beauty and precariousness of our existence, and the fact that we need to work together to preserve it.

Auroville from Above had a similar impact on some of the viewers. "What a change of perspective!" wrote one, "It feels like helping us to realize the amazing place/gift we are living in."

The project was conceived in 2018 as an idea to create a photo book of aerial pictures of Auroville, complemented with inspiring quotes from Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. This also became an exhibition. "We had a basic idea to create a book of photos all around Auroville of places we know very well but have never seen from the sky," says Julie. "We also had the initial idea of doing places less known. However, in the process we discovered so much more that the project became more and more refined," notes Om. "For example, even something as simple as the colours and textures of the soil, the lushness of the trees and the intensity of the sky change almost minute by minute, offering us a new canvas to work with each time."

"It really expanded our vision of Auroville," notes Julie. "When you go up a little bit higher, you realize how much you didn't know about this place, and you also realize there is more than one way to see things. For example, in the panorama photos you see how tiny we are in comparison to the trees."

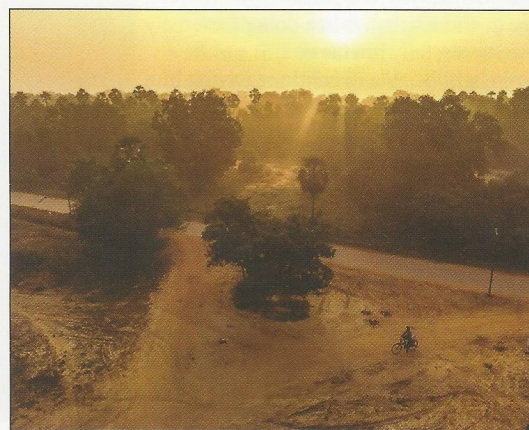


Om an

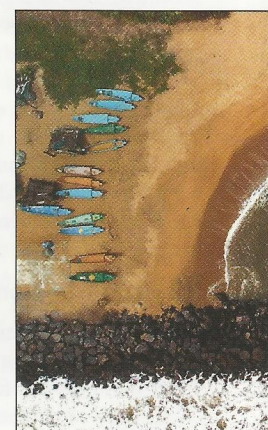
In fact, one of the revelations was how green Auroville looks from the sky. The city, the buildings poke a rolling waves of trees. "From this perspective," says Om, "you see a collective effort that was made."

Another discovery was Auroville's architecture. From the sweeping curves of Sri Aurobindo Park to the pattern of the Tibetan Pavilion, the Amphitheatre, and the unique Humanscapes. In fact, so much better from the air the revelation is the Garden of Elevation, suddenly acquiring a new meaning.

"You also see that some things are placed – like the way the Bhavan is exactly orientated towards the sea," notes Om. "Then again, I'd also seen the pathways around the Ur"



Gratitude



The Bay



From Above

Exhibition Auroville from Above, which featured striking drone images of this new way was a revelation.



Julie

relations of this exhibition is from the sky. Even in the almost apologetically above When you look from this you appreciate the tremendous made to plant this forest."

was the uniqueness of from above, one can admire Savitri Bhavan, the mandala tion, the sprung thrust of the usual geometry of places like some designs seem to work than from ground level. One Bliss which, from a higher s a new interest and beauty. e buildings are consciously at the main line of Savitri d to the Matrimandir," says ways assumed that the two were symmetrical – but

they're not! Also, you see immediately where architects have made an effort to incorporate nature into their designs, as in the kindergarten, and where, on the contrary, they have simply created a block without reference to the natural surroundings."

The narrative structure of the exhibition is a day in Auroville: it begins and ends with panoramas of the community spread out under wonderful morning and evening skies. An early morning photo, which is one of their favourites, is titled 'Gratitude'. It shows early morning light pouring down through the mist and forest, while a lone cyclist circles a tree. "Because of the mist we were actually considering whether we would shoot or not, but when we lifted the drone and saw this golden light pouring down, everything came together for a few seconds: it really was the City of Dawn," says Julie.

"For me, images like this are a reminder of the original Auroville," says Om. "Growing up here you hear a lot about the ideals of Auroville, but as you get older you start seeing we are not really there yet. This is also why we included the quotes, not only to complement the images but also to remind us of what we are supposed to be."

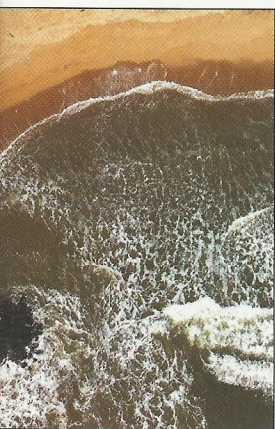
"We wanted to present the beauty of Auroville rather than the problems," says Julie. "For me, Auroville is beauty; this is the ideal Auroville for me. By diving into this project we re-centred ourselves. Seeing so much more of the beauty from this unique perspective brought us back to the vision, and made us feel so lucky and grateful to be part of this place."

Alan

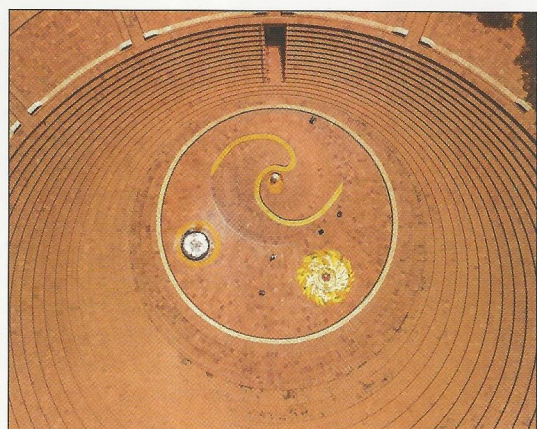
A 120-page book, *Aerial Auroville*, accompanies the exhibition. For further information contact thedrone-zone@auroville.org.in



Above: The Pavilion of Tibetan culture. Below: Savitri Bhavan



of Bengal



The amphitheatre on the Golden Day, 29-2-2020

The divine discovery from wasteland shrub

Over the decades, Auroville has been a fertile hatching ground for many experiments and visionary projects, and this incubatory spirit sometimes goes hand-in-hand with the spark of romance. When Elen Tsopp and Gowri Shankar each came to Auroville for the first time four years ago, their respective searches for ethical professional and life purposes happily collided with romantic destiny.

Elen was taking a break from her corporate work in USA, and trying to identify the next steps in creating a more purposeful life. Shankar had left his high-flying job in Chennai's "vicious" high fashion industry where he felt he had been a "paid accomplice" to harmful practices. He was searching for a way of using his talents for sustainable ends when he stumbled upon the *calotropis* plant growing wild in the Auroville region, and quickly realised its possibilities for creating sustainable fabrics and natural insect repellent. When he met Elen, he began enthusing her about his research and experiments with the plant.

One day, as the new couple walked along the path from Visitors' Centre to Matrimandir, they saw a sign by the path that cited the *calotropis* plant as 'bowstring hemp' along with Mother's name for it: *Courage*. Shankar perceived a symbolism connected to Elen's star sign: "Sagittarius is represented by a bow and arrow, so I realised she is the bow and arrow that pointed me to this place." They then came across Mother's writing about the *calotropis* plant, and felt that her reference to "the great adventure of divine meeting" and other conceptions captured much of the new life and project they were embarking upon together. "It's so beautifully written," says Elen, "and Shankar read it and said, 'Mother has summarized my life in one chapter'. So, Auroville has played a big role in our lives and our project."

The backstory

Soon after, Shankar and Elen married and established their company, Faborg, in their home near Kulapalayam village. The couple is working on three sustainable projects that are integrated with each other: they make vegan wool alternative and insecticide from the *calotropis* plant; and natural dyeing services through their associated company Natural Dye House (NDH) that operates in the textile hub, Tirupur.

Shankar sees the company's emphasis on sustainability as something of a "karma" for the practices he was part of, both in his traditional community and as an employee in Chennai's fashion industry. Born into a weaver village near Tiruvannamalai that is known for its mastery of silk fabric making, Shankar points out that his community played a big role in creating pollution. "When the business started growing in my village, the water canal in my village started becoming sludge from fabric dye. The animals were suffering and dying from drinking the toxic water."

Craving challenges outside his village, Shankar gained a job as a merchandiser in Chennai's high fashion and textile industry, where he says he saw "disgusting things". "I was working with high fashion brands; I've seen how unsustainable these are. They sell a jacket for five lakhs, and everything in the jacket is literally synthetic. It was shocking for me when I started to realise what's actually happening."

As part of his Chennai job, Shankar started to do merchandising for organic brands. "But I realised most of it is a scam," he says. "It's called organic, but it's completely a chemical process and a lot of the substances are not natural. I'd say 95-98% of the industry is not sustainable, since the CEOs all have a corporate mindset."

Shankar concluded that the industry "blindfolds you and makes you into a slave that walks the same vicious circle every day of your life." After witnessing the harmful industry practices, he felt that people had become numb to the damaging effects of textile production upon future generations. "My forefathers are part of this big mess. It's my responsibility to make sure this is corrected in some way."

When he met Elen, who originally hails from Estonia, she was looking for a change from corporate sales work in USA, which she had become disillusioned about. "I did really well in that job, but it didn't suit me," she says. "And I was more into finding out what I'm supposed to do on planet earth." So when the couple decided to establish Faborg as a company, she was not only aligned with its vision of sustainability; she also brought strong sales and administrative skills to the organisation.

Vegan wool

In his early experiments with the *calotropis* plant, Shankar found that the hollowness of the fibre imbues the yarn with some wool-like characteristics, and it could be transformed into very fine fabric. As a plant fibre, *calotropis* does not have the same carbon footprint as wool from sheep (which require grazing land and which are ultimately sent to slaughter). Shankar collaborated with two farmers near Tindivanam to plant 20 acres of the crop, so that he could do more research and create test fabric. He wanted to see if the yarn could grow well in arid conditions, rather than in Auroville's forest area. He developed a vegan wool alternative and named it WEGANOOL, and then experimented with natural dyeing of the fabric. "I feel good when fabric-making can remove the pesticides from the land," says Shankar. "We see that WEGANOOL can improve



Elen and Shankar

people's lives. When people choose it, they are choosing not to harm an animal, but to preserve life on earth."

Shankar also emphasises that a key part of his vision is to create good livelihoods for farmers. "We're trying to establish methods that work for farmers and are profitable for them. We get rid of the middle man, and deal directly with farmers. We want to create a good interaction, make them understand what we're doing, and create income for them."

Shankar points to good interest from "huge brands" in his sustainable yarn. Yet, some labels make tough demands about fabric quality, requesting Shankar to add chemicals to increase yarn strength or to fix the dye colours with chemicals. While Shankar says he understands the mindset of the industry, his technical knowledge enables him to convince brands of the value of his development process and his refusal to add chemicals. "We are firm with them. I have said 'no' to some well-known brands. I will not put a drop of chemical just because they're paying me bucks," he asserts.

Arka Insect repellent

Shankar and Elen have also used their research on the *calotropis* plant to develop a natural fertilizer and insect repellent named *Arka*. They have been actively promoting it to farmers in the region, and it is also popular with a growing number of hotels and restaurants. In contrast to many insecticides which kill other organisms that can be useful to plants, *Arka* merely repels insects by giving them indigestion. Shankar points to the increased yields that local farmers are experiencing from *Arka*. "They spray on rice, and the difference can be seen in 24 hours. The leaves are changing colour, and the new shoots are coming really fast."

During the lockdown, the couple decided to reduce the price of *Arka* and did a campaign offering it to farmers for Rs 60 per litre, which is half the previous price. "People said, how are you selling at this price?," recounts Shankar. "But we don't want to touch the pocket of the farmer. We want to touch their heart. Even farmers wondered why we were offering it at this price. I said, 'I'm working for you!' It's made a big impact." Even though the drop in price meant that the product became "an expensive hobby" for Faborg for some time, Shankar knows that the compensation will come when enough farmers realise the benefits and the company can scale up. "I wanted to make sure the farmers gain money by going organic," says Shankar, pointing out that the campaign had "good mileage" with 68 farmers outside Auroville, who had purchased 4 000 litres of *Arka* to use across 4 000 acres of land.

In the Auroville region, about 22 farmers are buying *Arka*, and Shankar aims to extend the area of local coverage from 138 acres of cashew crops to 1 000 acres next year. This will hopefully reduce the debilitating health effects that many Aurovilians experience each year during the cashew spraying season, when local farmers generally use toxic pesticides that are banned in other parts of the world. "My target is to make sure this country becomes organic in ten years. For Tamil Nadu the target is five years." The KVK in Pondicherry, part of the Ministry of Agriculture, has also been buying and using the *Arka* product.

Creating colour sustainably

Shankar has co-founded a natural dyeing unit, NDH, in order to ensure an environmentally-friendly process and to make it more affordable for more fashion labels. He points out that 99% of the textile industry uses chemical dyes, which have a negative environmental impact, and even some certified organic clothing still contains chemicals. The organic certification is problematic in another way, says Shankar, as the certification process ends at the factory and does not take into account the amount of toxic sludge created in some

organic dyeing processes. "This sludge is dumped in landfill that the government has given to the industry, or it's put into cement," he says. "So the ripple effect happens down the lane." The dyeing process at Natural Dye House uses colours from different plants, minerals, roots, berries, bark, leaves, seeds and wood, so that the sludge is able to be turned into manure. "Using natural dyes also helps the farmer who grows the plant. You're giving that value to that person's work."

Shankar estimates that about 50 brands are now exploring the different natural dyeing services offered at NDH which, he says, are scalable and can meet the demands of big brands. "Corona has brought a lot of introspection," he emphasises, linking this to increased consciousness about sustainability, which has led to a rapid increase in inquiries about NDH's natural dyeing process.

Interaction with Auroville

Given the visionary scope of Shankar and Elen's professional goals, the question remains, why did they decide not to join Auroville and set up Faborg outside Auroville, rather than inside?

"We love what Auroville stands for," says Shankar. "We want to be close to Auroville." "We have a lot of friends inside," says Elen. "The first trials of Arka were done with Auroville units and individuals – Auro Orchard, Nine Palms, Jasmin, Hervé, Bernard – all these people are so amazing. They all encouraged us to do this and motivated us to take this path. I love and respect them. All of them are doing their karma yoga. We are open to anyone who wants to work for the good of humanity."

However, like many of Auroville's neighbours who like to be nearby but not fully 'inside', the couple emphasises that being outside Auroville gives them more freedom to shape their project in their own way, without getting entangled in Auroville's bureaucracy. "If we had to convince people on a board or committee, that would slow our process," says Elen.

"In Auroville, there's politics," says Shankar. "There are good-hearted people doing good service, but they have to accept other people's opinions for their project to go further. Pleasing everyone would be difficult for us. I'd be tired from fighting. I'm here to do my karma yoga. Auroville plays a big role in the project. But it doesn't matter if I'm in Auroville or not. Mother doesn't mind." Elen agrees, chiming in: "I know Mother is watching over us. I have this connection with the Mother's writing. I don't need to know everything Mother said; I prefer to feel it. We have beautiful friends in Auroville and we feel so connected. We don't feel a difference at all."

While they both emphasise that they don't have all the answers, they suggest that Auroville could fund research for projects that are beneficial for the region. "If this is going to be the future city, research is needed," says Shankar. "So, encourage the new minds. The younger people should be allowed to be a bigger part of it. Allowing them to think in a different way is crucial."

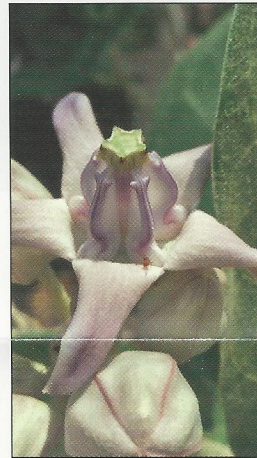
They also point to the prevalence of security guards, who are often the first persons encountered by visitors to Auroville. "The guards are the face of Auroville, and the contact does not always have compassion," says Elen. "It can be a push-off to people if they feel they are not welcomed." "When I go with Elen, I don't have a problem," points out Shankar. "If I'm alone, there is discrimination. People come from a long way to see this dream. If you push them off, they will go away. Compassionate engagement is the better way. No matter what, all human beings deserve respect."

"Maybe we are all here to show each other something," says Elen. "Everyone should have freedom to flourish."

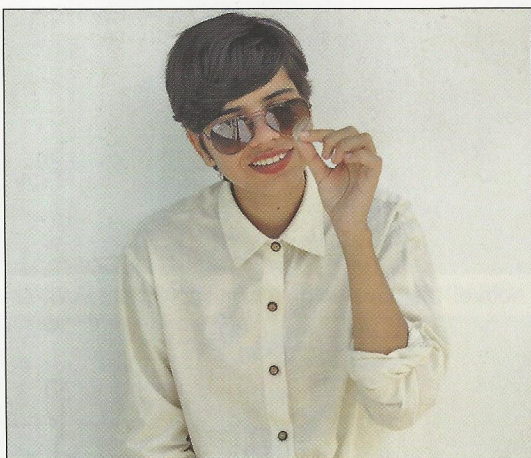
Shaping the Future

Shankar concludes by pointing out that he's now "in peace with my world as my thoughts and actions don't harm mother earth. Working on the land is a little tough, but I'm more connected to the world, and creating livelihood for farmers. I had a responsibility to work for change, to address the impact created by my people. I'm on the right path, and there will be a big impact."

Lesley



Calotropis, flower, which The Mother named Courage



Model wearing a Weganool shirt

The Mother on Courage

In reference to *Calotropis*

"This courage means having a taste for the supreme adventure. And this taste for supreme adventure is an aspiration – an aspiration which takes hold of you completely and flings you, without calculation and without reserve and without the possibility of withdrawal, into the great adventure of the divine discovery, the great adventure of divine meeting, the yet greater adventure of the divine realization; you throw yourself into the adventure without looking back and without asking for a single minute, 'what's going to happen?' For if you ask what is going to happen, you never start, you always remain stuck there, rooted to the spot, afraid to lose something, to lose your balance."

Seeds of a new culture

Last month the dried plant collection of the Auroville Herbarium moved to a new dedicated building in the Botanical Gardens. Funded by SAIIR, inaugurated this March, slowed down a bit by corona, its establishment marks a new phase in the work of preserving and classifying our indigenous flora. The new structure is also the base for the virtual herbarium, and for the Botanical Gardens' new Centre for Plant Conservation, working to protect endangered local species.

Collecting TDEF seeds

The Herbarium started in 1994 when Walter Gastmans from Shakti received funding from the Foundation for Revitalisation of Local Health Traditions for the original building, as well as seed-finding excursions. Walter had started collecting plants after his arrival in Auroville in 1978. Early on, he met Dr Meher-Homji from the French Institute, Pondicherry, who introduced him to the TDEF (Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest), and who pointed out that with hardly one percent of the TDEF left, "you can't go closer to extinction". Walter then started identifying plants everywhere he went, and Paul Blanchflower and Jaap den Hollander soon joined him in investigating the flora of the local area.

Walter recalls, "When we came here there was only one palm tree in Shakti community on 32 acres. We felt this should be remedied as soon as possible. Most of Auroville has red laterite soil, but here we have very good top soil, because it used to be fields and the land drains here". They started their own nursery raising TDEF species, and Shakti produced an 'Auroville Index Seminum' catalogue of seeds which they sent to other herbariums worldwide. Of all improbable places, they had a very busy seed exchange with the Hortus Botanicus Centralis Sibiricus, Novosibirsk.

"Strangely on our first ever collection excursion in Puttupet, on 5 April 1994, we found '*Derris ovalifolia*', mentioned in botanical literature as 'very rare, probably extinct'. It turns out this was an overstatement as it was more common," Walter remembers. After that they started the Herbarium. "We mainly collected from sacred groves, which are the only places you can see undisturbed forests".

They began with weekly outings but stopped when the Government of India banned foreigners doing so, and their seed collection slowed. Walter recalls that the initial idea was to "collect only



The new Herbarium building in the Auroville Botanical Gardens

TDEF, but we soon had to drop that as in Auroville there are many exotic species". Additionally, the botany students of Madras Christian College offered samples, and the French Institute, Pondicherry and Father Mathew from Tiruchapalli would give duplicates of their collections.

Most of the plant collection is from the Indian mainland, but a significant amount also comes from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as Walter was asked to survey the islands a couple of times by the ANET (Andaman and Nicobar Ecological Team).

In 2010 Walter's collection was officially accredited as a Herbarium by Kew Gardens, and named 'AURO'. Walter is currently busy checking with Kew regarding changes in species names, a constant problem as botanical families often split or are unified.

The Herbarium office is still located in Shakti with Walter as the curator, while the dried plant specimens and some of the library have moved to the Botanical Gardens. In time, everything will move to the Botanical Gardens to be part of the new Plant Conservation Centre. It will consist of the physical herbarium of dried plant species, a plant preparation laboratory, a library and office space, and a new digitisation facility to produce high-quality

images for the virtual herbarium website.

The dried plant collection is kept in a climate-controlled room to stop the growth of mould fungus, and to keep the specimens in optimum condition. Every three to six months the plants go through a freeze cycle to control insect infestations. When new plant specimens are accepted into the herbarium, they are pressed and dried, then mounted by stitching on to high quality paper, to both protect the samples and to make them easy to view for research purposes.

Holotypes

When a plant species is first described by science and classified, a dried plant specimen collected at that time must be lodged in a herbarium for future comparison and research. Called a 'holotype', the Auroville Herbarium has five in its collection: four from the Andamans and one from Gingee. Overall, there are 14,954 plant specimens in the Herbarium, including 3,500 unique species from over 298 families. Neil Meikleham, the resident plant scientist, says "the Auroville Herbarium is a valuable scientific collection of bioregional plants", and hopes that Masters, PhD students and botanists will come to study there.

This move reflects the latest phase of Auroville's ecological work. If the first phase of the early days was to plant whatever could grow, in the second phase the early greenworkers began planting what they had seen in the local sacred groves and forests where they obtained seeds. This new phase builds on this early work by developing an understanding of the complete forest ecosystem, introducing plants that are rare or endangered, and supporting plants that have struggled in recent years through replenishing genetic stock.

The Herbarium has four endangered and rare specimens from the local fort town of Gingee, whose inaccessible rocky hillocks have protected these species over the years. One of these trees, *Drypetes porteri*, originally collected in 2001 by Paul, is classified by the IUCN red list as an endangered species. The Botanical Gardens is working with Botanic Gardens Conservation International (BGCI) on an official Species Recovery Plan for this tree, which includes collecting seeds, surveying to find out how many trees are still growing in the wild, planting populations in the Auroville forests to create a genetic backup (ex situ), and, in partnership with the Tamil Nadu Forest Department, planting

reinforcement populations in local forest reserves where they originally grew.

This is part of a worldwide movement to protect plants identified as vulnerable or endangered. The day of our interview Neil and Paul had just spoken to the Global Tree Campaign, which is working to assess the conservation status of every tree in the world. The full report is expected in May 2021, but early results indicate that between 20% to 40% of all tree species are threatened or endangered. The Botanical Gardens conservation team, in partnership with BGCI and the Global Tree Campaign, is now planning comprehensive programmes to protect the endangered plant species of the Auroville bioregion. Neil notes that "without identifying what we already have, we can't save the trees". To support this work, the Auroville TDEF website has been recently updated. This site lists the sacred groves and reserve forests in the local area, and details most of the TDEF species found there.

The virtual Herbarium

The Herbarium also has an online presence. The Pitchandikulam Forest Virtual Herbarium was started in 2014, and in 2020 it was transferred to the Auroville Botanical Gardens, and renamed the Auroville Virtual Herbarium to reflect this broader collaboration. This online site is, in the words of Neil, "probably one of the best virtual herbariums in the world, which can be credited to the original work of Joss's team at Pitchandikulam Forest." The Auroville site documents all aspects of the plant cycle in full colour. Currently over 180 plants are comprehensively described, using various nomenclatures, plant descriptions, and details on reforestation and conservation status. The Botanical Gardens will continue to add new species to this site, with a particular focus on species that are endangered or rare.

The new dried plant specimen house is not just a new home for indigenous plant specimens, but a contemporary ark for the TDEF, establishing a culture of preservation, conserving locally endangered trees, and acting as a resource for our endemic flora to flourish anew.

Peter

For further information
visit: <https://www.aurovilleherbarium.org/>
<http://auroville-botanical-gardens.org/>
<https://www.auroville-tdef.info/>



Dried plant specimen sheets from the Herbarium



Astad Deboo

I first met Astad Deboo at an International Dance Competition in Paris. Impressed by his performance, I invited him to Auroville to perform at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium.

Astad became a regular guest and we were fortunate to see him often. His magnificent whirling piece set to Tagore's poem, his work with the martial arts dancers of Manipur, his fun-filled choreography with hearing impaired dancers from America, all these will be remembered by his appreciative Auroville audience. He also offered dance workshops and got the puppeteer, Padamjee, to show us his craft.

Astad left his body on December 10 at the age of 73. He will be remembered as an early

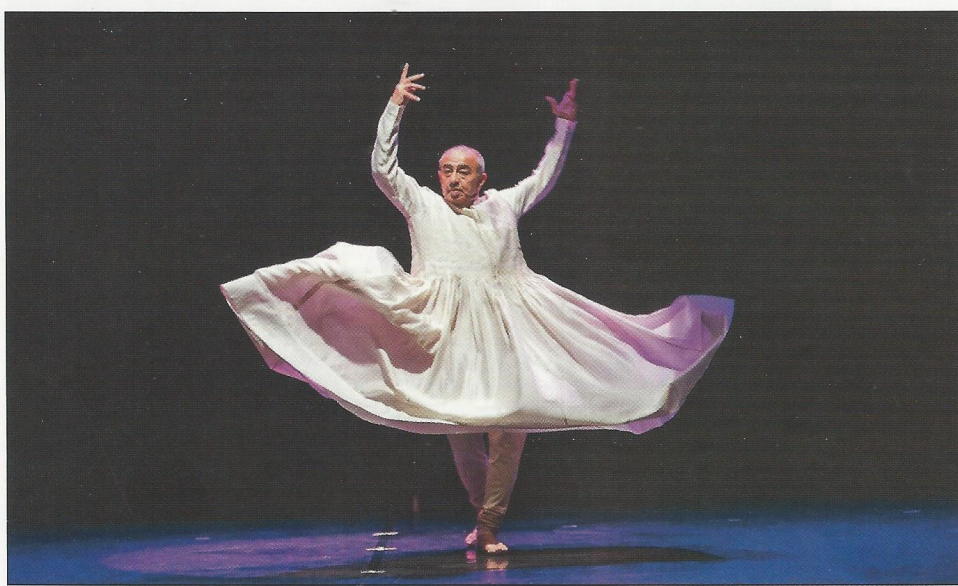


PHOTO: AMIT KUMAR

pioneer who broke ground for contemporary dancers in India. He developed a unique style, influenced by Martha Graham, Pina Bausch, choreographed for Maya Plisetskaya and later assimilated Kathak, Kathakali, Bharatanatyam, and various Indian martial art forms. Above all, he was fascinated by the whirling Sufi dancers and used it in almost all of his pieces. His attention to stage design, his play with costumes, the eclectic music he used, all melded into something now easily recognizable as the School of Astad. This was also evidenced in the choreography he created, long distance, for Anita R. Ratnam's lockdown initiative just a few months ago – simple, sparse, yet full of Astad's original complexity, rigour and grace – a delight to watch. His last works show a tendency to start deep, unfurl slowly and open wings to fly.

It was great knowing you, Astad. Thanks for passing by Auroville. Keep flying with the Light.

Tapas Bhattacharya

"Now I am aware I have choices": Savithri's journey

Savithri was born in Kottakarai. In 2016 she began working in the Housing Service and recently became an Aurovilian. Here she talks about her journey.

Auroville Today: How did you get to know Auroville?

Savithri: I knew about Auroville as I was born and brought up in Kottakarai, one of the local villages. Also my father has been working in Auroville as a potter for over 35 years, and when I was a child he took me with him to work from time to time. However, for many years I never thought of joining the community.

What changed your mind?

I heard about human unity before, but when I met a few Aurovilians with good hearts who were helping and supporting each other, I felt it is actually happening here, and this is a community which I want to be part of. I could also see that people were trying to live without competition, religion, caste and any kind of hierarchy. I loved that Auroville would give me the possibility to go beyond tradition, culture and family to the universal quality of humanity.

Is Auroville very different from the village?

Yes. For example, here I can talk, I can give my opinion, but in the village I am not allowed to say 'no' to people, mainly to elders; if they ask something, I have to do it.

Why is this? Does a man have more freedom than a woman in the village? Or is it a caste issue?

It is not a boy or girl thing. Maybe within some families the male holds the upper hand but it wasn't a challenge that I faced. The caste thing is there in the village. There are different castes in my village and some older people still won't let lower caste people into their houses, although this is changing now. But it hasn't affected me or my family because from childhood I have seen my father's friends, who are from a different caste, coming to our home without anything of that kind being on their mind. Even my close friends are of a different caste. However, I can't talk for others about this as I have heard stories of discrimination.

One thing that is very different from Auroville is that in the village there is a lack of consideration for other's opinions, people won't sit and listen to others, whereas here I see people taking the time to listen.

Still, I feel blessed that I was born in Kottakarai because it is completely different from more traditional villages elsewhere. On the whole, it is much less strict about such things because it is very close to Auroville, and many of the people work in Auroville and see that things are done differently here.

Yet some attitudes change more slowly. For example, I'm 30 now. According to my culture I'm quite old to get married and I see the pressure on my parents from the village. People ask them why they don't get me married. But my parents are exceptional. They never tell me that I have to do something. They just want me to be happy, and they trust me. They know I won't misuse this freedom and I just want to be a good daughter to them.

You went to college. What was that like?

When I went to college to study computer science engineering it was a completely different world. There I was meeting new people and I couldn't sense any caste distinctions. This was because the students came from all over, and they were educated enough to feel this is something that actually doesn't make sense.

Towards the end of my college studies I also got a placement in a company in Pondy. That was one of the happiest moments in my life as I felt that I had done something important in return for all the efforts that my father had made to help me study, paying all my fees without taking an education loan or borrowing.

I was happy taking this job because I was able to support some of the expenses of my family. I felt a little more responsible, too. But over time I didn't feel satisfied. There was pressure, and I was overloaded with work by the managers and senior people who dumped their work on to me. Also, I wasn't recognised or given credit for what I was doing, and a work-life balance wasn't there.

So you stopped?

Yes, I stayed home for some months. But then my father asked Anamika, one of the potters my father worked with, if she could find me work as a volunteer in Auroville. Anamika spoke to Sonja and she offered me a job in the Housing Service. To begin with, I was just feeding information into the housing database, but even on the first day I liked the work and the behaviour of the people. As a volunteer I had the opportunity to feel the joy of service, of helping others. Also, it was totally a different environment from my previous workplace.



Savithri

How?

Let me give some examples, they may look small or silly, but they mattered a lot to me.

For instance, one time in the Housing Service I was on a personal call and the office phone was ringing. I was about to cut my personal call and attend to the office one, but another person who holds higher responsibility asked me not to do it and picked up the phone herself. I was astounded this could happen in a workplace and to a new kid on the job. This is something which would never have happened in my previous workplace.

Later, there was another instance where in a meeting with the Foundation Secretary it was mentioned that I had put the housing database in order. So people here are recognised for what they are doing and they are respected. This sort of encouragement never happened to me before, except from my family. There were many other small happenings like this which pushed me to make an extra effort and put more love into whatever I was doing.

All this gave me the courage to try new things. I'm experiencing so many things here for the first time which are completely different from my culture.

Like what?

I never stayed away from home before coming here. Even during my college days I travelled back home every day. And at home I have never stayed alone – we are five in our family in a single house – and I even got scared when the power went off. So when I first stayed alone in Grace community, both I and my family were scared. But they encouraged me to do this, to get some space for myself and try it out. Eventually it started working. I think that was a very big step for me.

Another thing is that in Auroville, unlike in the village, you are allowed to call people by their names and express yourself freely.

I always found it difficult to express my opinions to a larger audience, but recently I did it. In one meeting in which I was representing

the Housing Service someone was complaining about the Service, but I was able to explain the actual facts, to let everyone know what actually happens there and to show that the complaint was not justified. It was difficult for me to speak up, but later I was happy that I did. I was proud of myself because I could see myself growing in confidence.

But I just don't just say things for the sake of saying them. I am learning to choose my words carefully. In fact, I'm becoming more aware of everything, not only about how to speak but also how to behave. Before coming to Auroville, I accepted that my life was already laid out. I would go to college, get married, have a family; that would be my life. But now I am aware that I have choices, so I need to be aware of everything and choose everything that I do.

In fact, I'm really happy that I'm here in Auroville because I'm learning and growing a lot. I have more confidence, I am more conscious in whatever I'm doing.

Working in the Housing Service must be challenging because housing is such a huge issue in people's lives that if they don't get what they want, they must sometimes bring their frustrations to your desk. How do you cope with this?

I meet people with very different characters. Since I'm taking care of youth housing now and most of the people I deal with are around my age, generally it goes well. But some older people get upset very quickly and shout if they don't get what they want, or think we have made a mistake. When it first happened, I didn't know what to do, but now I am learning to handle it by asking them to sit down. Then I explain how we are functioning, and if I have made a mistake I apologise and say it won't happen again. This calms them down.

I don't take it personally; I kind of understand that it is a situation that they couldn't handle, which is why they are shouting at me. They just want to know what is going on and how things work, and obviously it's my duty as a member of the Housing Service to explain this to them.

Do you have any sense of what you would like to do in Auroville in the future?

I realise that much of my time is spent in Housing at present. This is good, but in the future I want to do something else also. Now I started participating in some other projects / programmes with young people who don't know, for example, what is going on in the Town Hall and how groups like the TDC and FAMC work. I joined one meeting with TDC members who explained how they worked, and for many people who attended this was the first time they understood it. I also learned something from it.

I was also very happy when I got selected for the Citizens Assembly pilot experiment. The main topic, water, is such an important issue, and I'm learning so much about something which I didn't have much idea of before. I was a bit nervous at the first meeting because I wasn't sure what I could share and how useful it would be. But when I saw we were free to give our opinions, whatever they were, I started sharing mine and from the way people responded I could see they were valid. Sharing something useful once again brought me happiness and pleasure.

From an interview by Alan

2021



New Year's Eve was celebrated with a meditation under the Banyan Tree near the Matrimandir and a flute concert in the amphitheatre. We wish all our readers a good and prosperous 2021!

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