

Auroville Today

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Towards an integral approach to health

Auroville is not short of doctors and therapists. They work not only with the body but some work also with subtler levels of the being. A number of therapists work independently from home, others practise in one or more of the five major health and healing centres.

The origins of the Auroville Health Centre in Kulilpalayam date back to the very beginnings of Auroville, and though it has always focussed upon the health of the local villagers, as was Mother's wish, quite a number of Aurovilians benefit from its services. Quiet Healing Center has been functioning since the 1980s. It has developed into a popular health spa and wellness center, offering a wide variety of natural healing therapies. Meanwhile Vérité community has been focussing for many years on health and wellness in addition to ecological concerns, collective process and spiritual 'practice-in-action'.

The 'Wellness Centre' at Arka offers various body and massage treatments, as well as acupuncture and physiotherapy, while Pitanga Cultural Centre offers activities in the fields of physical education and culture.

The newest kid on the health block is Santé, the first phase of Auroville's Institute for Integral Health, which was inaugurated on 15th August, 2015. Its mission is to create an effective, low-cost healthcare system for Auroville based on the integrative practice of medicine, which includes not just western allopathic but also many other healing modalities.

Given the number of healing facilities and therapists one might suppose that we are an extremely unhealthy community. However, the plethora of healers and healing facilities is more a reflection of the fact that Aurovilians are very conscious of the need for a healthy body, as well as mind and spirit, to support and collaborate in the yoga of transformation pioneered by Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

In this issue we do not attempt an overview of such a vast and complex topic. Rather, we attempt to gauge the health and scope of our present healthcare system by talking to some of our doctors and therapists. We also cast a glance at what is being done to introduce 'wellness' to our younger children.



The new Santé Clinic

On 15th August, 2015, the Santé Clinic was opened. It is an experiment in integrative medicine as an approach to integral health. But what is integral health? And what are the challenges involved in such an experiment? Auroville Today spoke to three of the core management team – Jocelyn, Dr. Ruslan and Dr. Sumeet – to find out more.

What is your definition of integral health?

Jocelyn: Most allopaths tend to define health as an absence of disease, and that is also the dictionary definition. But ours is a positive definition which includes the whole being.

Ruslan: It's a balance and harmony between the different planes and levels of the being.

Why is there a need for a new integral healing centre in Auroville?

Ruslan: It was a response to a need. I worked at the Auroville Health Centre for six years. It served both the village and the Aurovilians and it was always very busy: sometimes I was seeing 40 patients in a morning. These are terrible conditions for a doctor to work in because you cannot give enough time and

attention to each patient.

Some, of course, just wanted a quick fix to get back to their normal lives. But others were more conscious and wanted to know what was happening and to take responsibility for their healing, and these people needed much more time than the six or seven minutes I was able to give them.

In addition, the Health Centre was largely allopathic and even though some alternative treatments were offered, there was no communication between the practitioners of the different modalities. We did not exchange files or anything like this. We were simply sitting in different rooms doing our consultations.

Perhaps the main thing, though, was I came to work for Auroville, and in Santé we can focus on the Auroville population. In this new environment I can give 20 minutes rather than five minutes per person and we can eliminate the whole issue of queueing because, unlike at the Health Centre, here people can make appointments.

Jocelyn: Actually, the idea of an integral healing centre has been around since 1981 when Maggie, Ursula and myself sat together and dreamed of a such a place. This was the original idea behind Quiet, but now this has turned into a spa.

I came back to Auroville in 1999, having worked in one of the

first experiments in integral medicine in America. It had allopathic doctors, homeopaths, acupuncturists, chiropractors, psychotherapists, and three or four modalities of bodywork collaborating as a team.

Unfortunately, that fell apart due to the American insurance system, under which some therapies were covered but others were not. But the idea remained in my head. So when I came back I wanted to immediately start to do something like that.

Kailash Clinic, which opened in 2008, was the first big step because here there was an aspiration to go towards a more comprehensive approach to health and healing through using different approaches to address more than just one aspect of the being.

Sumeet: Kailash was definitely a step towards integral healing because there we had a multidisciplinary set-up and we gave patients a choice of healing modalities. The practitioners working there talked together, there was cross-referencing, and patient records were accessible to everyone. This is very important from the point of view of integrating different approaches.

Also, we wanted to bring quality and organization from the start, so patients were treated well, dressings were done professionally and we were very scrupulous about hygiene.

However, the space was limited in Kailash. Only one person could give a consultation at a time. And, as we had allopathic doctors working in the morning and other treatments in the afternoon, this again separated the healing modalities.

In Santé we have far more space: now we have the potential to have five practitioners from different healing modalities working at the same time. To integrate the different modalities we have to meet regularly, so we have a common tea-room and a meeting room where we can meet and discuss common and chronic cases, and watch educational videos together.

But isn't getting people from different healing approaches to work together a difficult challenge as many doctors and therapists have been trained to believe that their modality is the only 'right' one?

Sumeet: It is true that while we have always had many different health practitioners in Auroville, often they have not been able to work together. Partly this was because the space wasn't there, partly because of other factors. But I feel that now there is a certain mass of people who are looking for a more integrated approach.

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The Auroville Health Centre

In 1969, the Mother allocated Rs. 5,000 to start a dispensary in a thatched hut in Douceur, mainly to serve the villagers from nearby Kuilapalayam. In 1972, the Auroville Health Centre was established in Kuilapalayam as a primary health care unit for people from the surrounding villages. One year later, a permanent structure, designed by Piero and funded with donations from donors, the Government of India and Auroville, was constructed.

Many people have helped in developing the Health Centre, but four doctors deserve special mention: the late Dr. Satyabratha B. Sen, Dr. Kamla Tewari, Dr. Assumpta and Dr. Lucas. While Dr. Sen, at The Mother's request, started the Centre, the latter three raised funds to expand its activities and extend the building. In the eighties, when besides Dr. Kamla no qualified doctor could be recruited from amongst the Aurovilians, various alternative or complementary therapies were introduced to the Auroville Health Centre, including osteopathy and acupuncture. In 1999, Albert joined the team, taking charge of administration, nursing care and the village programmes. In 2012, he had a severe accident to which he subsequently succumbed.

Over the years, the Health Centre extended its facilities to include, among other things, an X-ray unit, a medical laboratory, a ward for in-patients, a 24-hour ambulance service, and an enlarged pharmacy to provide allopathic, homeopathic, ayurvedic and veterinary medicines. It also extended its activities into the larger bioregion, establishing sub-centres in local villages.

Auroville Today spoke to Dr. Uma, who is presently in charge of the Health Centre, to assess the health of the Centre today.



Dr. Uma

Are the activities of the Health Centre contracting?

The Health Centre treats about 20,000 patients a year. Its activities are not contracting, but there is an alteration in them. For instance, it is true that less patients visit the Health Centre today and we have reduced our outreach activities. This is because now there are so many private clinics and hospitals in the area to which the villagers can go instead of coming here. It is also true that we have stopped the child growth monitoring programme.

We have also closed two of our sub-centres and stopped the Health Workers in these villages. This is, firstly, because the Dental Rural programme is now being dealt with entirely by Jacques and the Auroville Dental Centre. Secondly, we do not have the financial means to



Inside the Auroville Health Centre, Aspiration

keep these activities running. Our main donor, a German organization, has severely cut back on our funding. We still have a buffer from previous years, but I am hesitant about unnecessary expenditure which we will require for final settlements of all staff. Only three of our Aurovilian staff are on maintenances. The Health Centre itself is not supported by Auroville or the Government.

Despite the difficulties, our activities are not contracting. In fact, new activities have emerged. The Aravind Eye Hospital opened a Vision Centre, or eye clinic, at the Health Centre last year. This is a great help in screening and treating eye diseases at an early stage.

Now we have an ENT specialist from Pondicherry providing monthly consultations at reduced rates and we hold periodic bone density and orthopaedic camps. We have held annual cardiac camps in the village centres and occasionally a special camp like the recent diabetic camp.

We are also happy that the Health Fund is operating. It is a good service for Aurovilians and a financial help for their treatment.

Do you think anybody in the bioregion has fallen through the cracks as a result of the closing of sub-centres?

A few villages are more disadvantaged now as the government bus service has been stopped. However, we still run six sub-centres in local villages. Our Health Workers are there daily to provide First Aid, and once a week a doctor and a lab technician from the Health Centre visit each sub-centre to give consultations and test for diabetes, typhoid, etc. The villagers pay Rs 30 for registration and a small amount for blood tests, but everything else, including the medicines, is provided free. For the very poor, everything is free. I am very happy about this.

Is the treatment provided at the Health Centre essentially allopathic?

No, we always had allopathy and homeopathy consultations. Now we have allopathy and

ayurveda consultations, and the medicines are easily available in the pharmacy.

Do Aurovilians still use the Health Centre?

Yes, of course, they have always come here.

But don't most Aurovilians prefer alternative healing modalities to allopathy?

Aurovilians use both alternative and allopathic treatment as needed, unlike the villagers who prefer allopathy.

Do you ever refer your patients to other Auroville therapists?

Very occasionally, for certain chronic injuries, where a follow-up is needed, I have referred patients to Quiet Healing Centre.

What about the health education aspect, the preventive part of your work? Is that still happening in Auroville and the bioregion?

Yes. We are still running the Child-to-Child programme that we started in 1996. At present, our doctors and nurses conduct yearly medical examinations in 22 government schools in this bioregion. Trained health workers give classes in these government schools, teaching the children the basis of good nutrition and proper hygiene. The health workers make it fun – they do skits and puppet shows – and the children love it.

We are also doing reproductive health programmes in our sub-centres for adolescent girls, because there are a lot of cases of teenage pregnancy and abuse. We talk to them about things like contraceptive methods, menstrual hygiene and healthy food.

In the Auroville Technical School in Irumbai, we provide health education classes for 17-20-year old boys and girls, including some information about anatomy, physiology and reproductive health.

We also do medical examinations for some Auroville schools and yearly medical examinations for food-handlers in all Auroville units.

Is there any health education for the parents?

We have done programmes which are more food-related for older women since there is so much diabetes. We want to urge them to go back to cooking and eating the old grains – millets, varagu etc. – because these are much healthier than eating white rice.

Do the children pass on to their parents what they have learned in the health education classes at school?

It happens. But in rural Tamil households it is not generally accepted that the child educates the parents. This is why we started talking to the older women.

Is there any evidence that health in the local area has generally improved over the years?

Yes. Generally health in the area has improved, partially because of the care and treatment we provide them with regularly, and partially because of an increase in general awareness about things like diet. There is a lot about diet on television these days, although not many follow it because a better diet is often more costly.

An important change has occurred: earlier, when we did the child monitoring programme in the villages, girls of the same age as the boys would be grossly malnourished, severely anaemic and underweight. Now this is uncommon.

The challenges you are facing in your work at the Health Centre appear to be huge. What keeps you going? What motivates you?

My parents as well as my grandparents have either served in the army or as doctors and are prime examples of energy and courage. So I have a family history of service to others. It's in my genes!

Other than that, there is always the hope that things will change, improve; there is always the aspiration for something greater that keeps you going. The Health Centre was tasked by The Mother to maintain the health of the population in the Auroville bioregion, and that is what we must continue to do.

Then again, I am not doing this work alone. I have a wonderful team at the Auroville Health Centre; it would not be possible without them.

Does the Auroville Health Centre have a future?

Yes, definitely, we will continue because we are fulfilling a great purpose. When we ask patients who have come from distant places why they come here when our facilities are limited and rather old, they tell us that here they feel they are treated as "people". Here, in the Health Centre and the Pharmacy, we take the time to explain things to them, and everybody needs answers. This is why we must continue.

The visiting consultant doctors also enjoy coming here because there is a different atmosphere. Here they feel they want to give something back rather than just wanting to charge people for their services.

Recently we organized a diabetes camp at the Health Centre. Many people from the surrounding villages came. We were able to provide them with free blood tests. And many also got free medicines because the suppliers donated them free.

In the end, it is all about how you relate to people, whether or not they feel that you care.

From an interview by Alan

Keeping the Health Fund healthy

The Auroville Health Fund ran into its first ever deficit in the financial year 2013-2014 with expenses exceeding the income by more than Rs 12 lakhs. It is a worrying development. Private hospitals in Pondicherry have increased their prices exponentially, while the Fund's income hasn't kept up. The only reason why the deficit hasn't been charged to the Health Fund members is that there were sufficient reserves. But they won't last.

The Auroville Health Fund was set up in 2002 as an internal cooperative fund. All income is used to cover the health costs of the members. A positive balance increases the Fund's

reserves, but a deficit has to be covered by all the members. Until 2012-2013, the balance had been positive. But in recent years, the reserves hardly increased.

A Health Fund Advisory Group setup by the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) is looking into ways to keep the Fund healthy and to advise on the extent of its coverage. There is a strong pressure to cover more treatments of alternative health care providers – the Fund already covers homeopathy, shiatsu, acupuncture, treatments by the Tibetan doctor and ayurvedic treatments – as well as the costs of preventive medical care, but as the Fund is already in minus, the Group

is unlikely to recommend such extensions soon.

One way to meet the deficit is to substantially increase the monthly contribution of the members, a move which the BCC is hesitant to take. The BCC pays all maintenances for Aurovilians working for Auroville Services and covers their Health Fund contribution. The BCC's income is already stressed by its recent decision to increase the maintenance, and it would be hard put to increase the Health Fund contribution as well.

Another way would be to limit the coverage which the Health Fund provides. But, clearly, this is not an option as too many Aurovilians have no assets or additional sources of

income and would not be able to meet any not-covered expenses. Moreover, it would go against one of the basic tenets of Auroville, as mentioned in *A Dream*, that the community "would provide for each individual's subsistence and sphere of action."

A better way is reducing expenditure, for example by 'empanelling' private hospitals (making specific price agreements), which is how many health insurance companies keep the costs down. Lastly, it has been suggested to only cover treatments done at JIPMER, the Jawaharlal Institute of Postgraduate Medical Education and Research, a government hospital in Pondicherry that ranks among the top five medical

institutes in the country and which provides, within certain limits, healthcare free of cost. But admission is notoriously difficult, as JIPMER treats hundreds of patients a day. There was a case of an Aurovilian who went to JIPMER for an emergency, but left after waiting for hours as he was not being attended to. Also, in some cases, better specialists can be found in other hospitals.

A combination of all the proposals is being worked out. Some increase of the monthly contribution will be inevitable, as is the need to reduce costs by empanelling hospitals and increasingly referring patients to JIPMER.

Carel

Towards an integral approach to health

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Getting practitioners to widen their perspective can take time. I was trained as an allopath. The Western medical training is very restrictive. It says that the body is the only reality and the doctor is the one who does everything while the patient is basically passive. My faith in this system was shaken when I started reading Sri Aurobindo because what he wrote did not fit with what I was doing as a surgeon.

Actually, the boss of my surgical unit was a practising homeopath. He always used to say, 'Let nature take its course', and everyone used to laugh at him, but he also opened my mind to another approach.

Ruslan: If there was one approach that was all-powerful, there would not be a need for different healing modalities to collaborate. It is because more and more of us in the healing sector understand that our different approaches have limitations as well as strengths, and that we need to complement each other to address healing in a wider and deeper way, that we want to sit together now and try to understand our different approaches. But this takes time and patience.

Jocelyn: Everybody in the team has agreed to collaborate in this way. Otherwise they would not have joined the team.

Sumeet: On a practical level, this collaborative approach means that every practitioner working here has access to the same patient records. And we will have regular patient care conferences where the practitioners discuss complex cases, and hear about exceptional results or discoveries.

The next step will be to create individually-tailored plans for patients. One of the important things is that the patient must become part of the healing process. It's no longer the doctor who is God and the patient merely the passive recipient. Fortunately, in Auroville we already have an environment where the person who is seeking health is ready to take responsibility for themselves, and cooperate, learn and change.

Jocelyn: In Santé, the patient will be able to choose which primary discipline they want because here we will have all the major primary disciplines – allopathy, homeopathy, ayurveda, acupuncture, bodywork – under one roof.

But how can the patient make an informed choice?

Jocelyn: In the U.S. centre I worked in, the patient chose the primary caregiver, and this person referred them to whoever they felt was the most appropriate practitioner. In Santé we will have this



Sumeet, Jocelyn and Ruslan

approach, but we also want to develop a new concept of the 'health navigator'.

Sumeet: To be a navigator you have to be able to evaluate the whole being in front of you, as well as know about the different therapies. This is a specialised job. However, it is important that everybody in the team, from the receptionist onwards, is able to provide some degree of navigation for the patient.

Jocelyn: It's the chronic cases, those who have not found the healing that they need, who are most in need of a specialised navigator. These are the patients who try one thing and then another; they go shopping around. We are not going to allow this because each practitioner needs to see the results of the treatment, and this takes time.

What is being done on the level of preventive health in Auroville?

Sumeet: There are two levels of preventive health: one is individual prevention and the other is public prevention. At the individual level, whenever somebody goes to see a practitioner, the practitioner should not simply work on curing the immediate problem. He or she should also seek to prevent future problems by giving the patient advice about diet, lifestyle, exercise, yoga etc.

Public prevention has to do with health policies

as well as things like the quality of food being served in restaurants, the cleanliness of public places etc. Some work is being done in this area by the Auroville Health Services, but we are still very much at an embryonic stage in terms of having a public health programme for Auroville.

Ruslan: The preventive approach is meant to be the first priority of medicine, but we practitioners are always caught up in addressing day-to-day issues, so we hardly ever have the time for this. We have to give much more importance to this element.

But there are different approaches. One way is to view prevention as simply preventing disease in someone who is seen as a static entity. However, if we see the individual as somebody who is constantly changing throughout life including, perhaps, at the consciousness level, and we recognise that these changes can create disequilibrium and illness, the challenge is to help someone navigate their way through this. Maintaining the equilibrium of a dynamic being is a huge challenge.

Some of the alternative therapists feel they are not getting sufficient support from Auroville. For example, they say that the Health Fund is prioritising allopathic treatment over alternative healing modalities. Do you agree?

Sumeet: The Health Fund is not against alternative therapists. It pays for treatment by the Tibetan doctor, by homeopaths, and for acupuncture and ayurvedic treatment. But the Health Fund pays only for those therapists who work within a known system with a therapeutic focus, and where the method of treatment and records are transparent.

Ruslan: If a therapist doesn't keep patient records, is not aware of certain medical risks and works totally in isolation, it is very hard for the Health Fund to decide whether or not they should pay for this treatment. So we have worked out certain guidelines for therapists to follow and work as a team and support each other.

Sumeet: But we do need to look at how the Health Fund functions. The Health Fund was set up primarily to pay people's hospital and medical bills. It was not structured with deep thought to serve the health of Auroville. For example, the Health Fund doesn't pay for prevention, an area where alternative treatments often work better than allopathy. So it is not biased towards allopathy, it is just that there is a distrust of the effectiveness of prevention.

What do you think will be the healing modality of the future?

Ruslan: Integral health is, of course, the goal. At this point in time, we have limited means and limited understanding of what this means. Today, we have to use the tools that have evolved over millennia. But as our consciousness grows, so will the way we use the existing tools, and new and better tools will evolve. As our understanding becomes subtler, so will the way we practise healing.

Eventually, the ideal treatment one should provide would be like that practised by Mother and Sri Aurobindo. They thoroughly understood what was happening at the consciousness level so they were able to intervene in the most effective way.

Sumeet: The whole point is to have humility. Who knows what integral health will look like? If you asked me in the context of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, I would say that only the new body will possess integral health. But what will the new body will look like?

This is why we do not call what we are doing 'integral health'. We call it 'integrative medicine' because, while integral health is the goal, the approach at the moment is integrative. We do this in the hope of getting closer to delivering integral health, but we are not fooling ourselves that we are anywhere near reaching it yet.

From an interview by Alan

Welcome to Linea

"For us, the human being comes first," reads the website of Linea. "We offer a friendly environment where people can walk in, have a consultation, be well-treated and get detailed aftercare. That is the key," explains Italian Nicola Porro, who, together with Russian dentist Tatiana Melnichenko, runs Linea, Auroville's second dental clinic-cum-laboratory, in the former Aurelec premises.

Linea has a long history. In 1991 Nicola, then a fledgling Newcomer from Italy with a degree as a dental technician, started Auroville's first dental laboratory as part of the Auroville Dental Centre. In 1998 it became a separate unit, Linea. Nicola's work widened. Apart from lab work for the Auroville Dental Centre and for dentists in Pondicherry, Chennai and Bangalore, he started giving training to dental technicians, travelling the length and breadth of India.

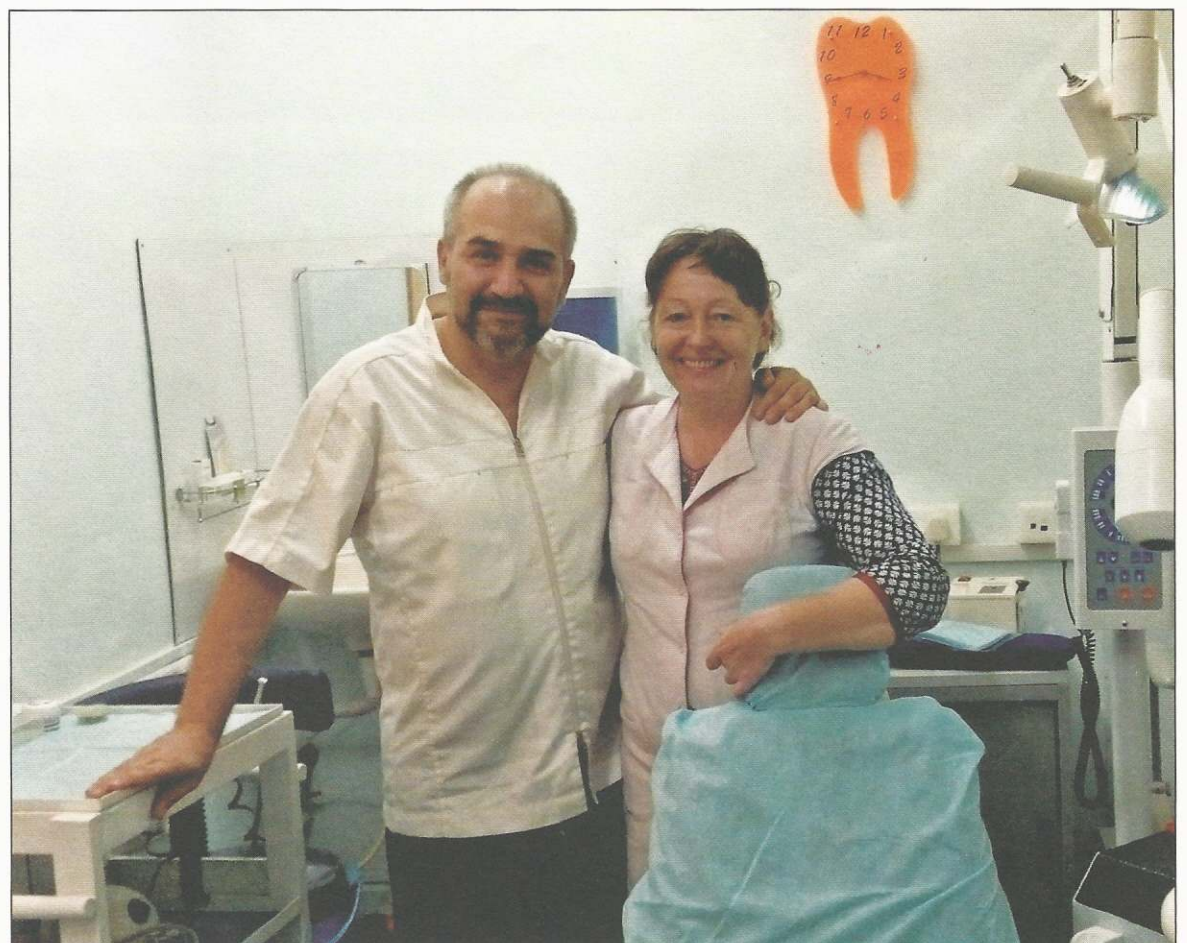
But over the years, travelling around grew less satisfactory. When the Auroville Dental Centre increasingly started focusing on working in the villages, employing non-Aurovilian dentists for its work for Aurovilians, Nicola felt that an all-Auroville Dental Clinic should be set-up where "people are treated as family members". The opportunity arose when Tatiana, a dentist from St. Petersburg with more than 20 years experience, became an Aurovilian. They joined hands. In February 2014,

Linea's laboratory was extended with a dental clinic. In April, it was running full steam. Linea broke even during its first financial year, having treated over 300 Aurovilian patients.

Linea offers not only basic services but also specialist treatments. "Tatiana is an angel with golden hands and can do all normal dental treatments, and I can do all the prosthetic work, but we can't cover the entire spectrum," says Nicola. The solution is a close cooperation with specialists from Pondicherry such as implantologist Dr. Jothikumar Kamalakkannan, endodontist Dr. Shivaprasad and dental surgeon Dr. Yuvraj. They come on request, mostly in the evenings and on Saturdays.

Dentistry in India has taken big strides and today there is much competition. Many Aurovilians are going to dental clinics in Pondicherry and Chennai. "They provide good services," says Nicola. "But why go outside if the same quality can now be offered inside Auroville?" Linea's rates are competitive, on average 70% of those charged in high-end dentistry clinics, particularly on implants treatments.

Starting a second dental clinic hasn't gone smoothly, says Nicola. There was a lot of resistance from the Auroville Dental Centre and from community members who initially didn't understand the need for a second clinic. The Dental Centre stopped giving Linea its lab work, and community support for Linea is still under discussion. The Budget Coordination Committee, which pays for dental



Nicola and Tatiana

treatments at the Auroville Dental Centre for Aurovilians without means, hasn't yet agreed to refer patients to Linea.

Linea's rates are a bit higher than that of the Auroville Dental Centre. "Linea is a commercial unit that provides a service to the community; it is

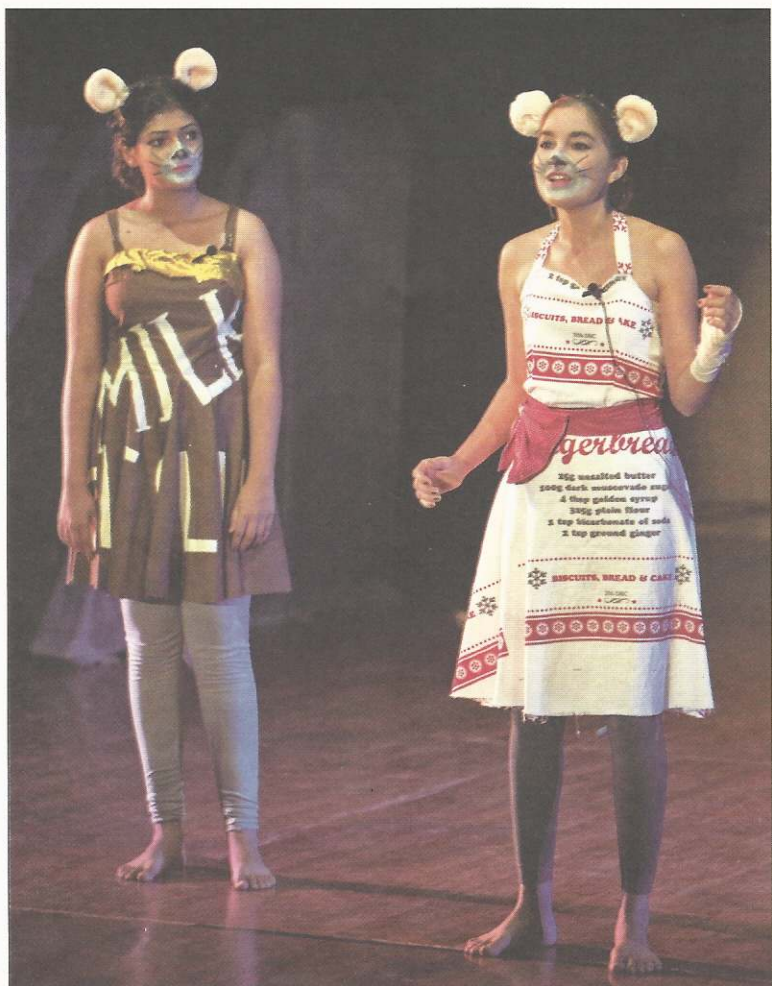
not an Auroville Service," explains Nicola. "But quite a few Aurovilians prefer being treated by us." An additional advantage, he says, is that Linea also does treatments in the evenings and on weekends, which suits people who have a full-time job.

Asked for his vision of Linea's

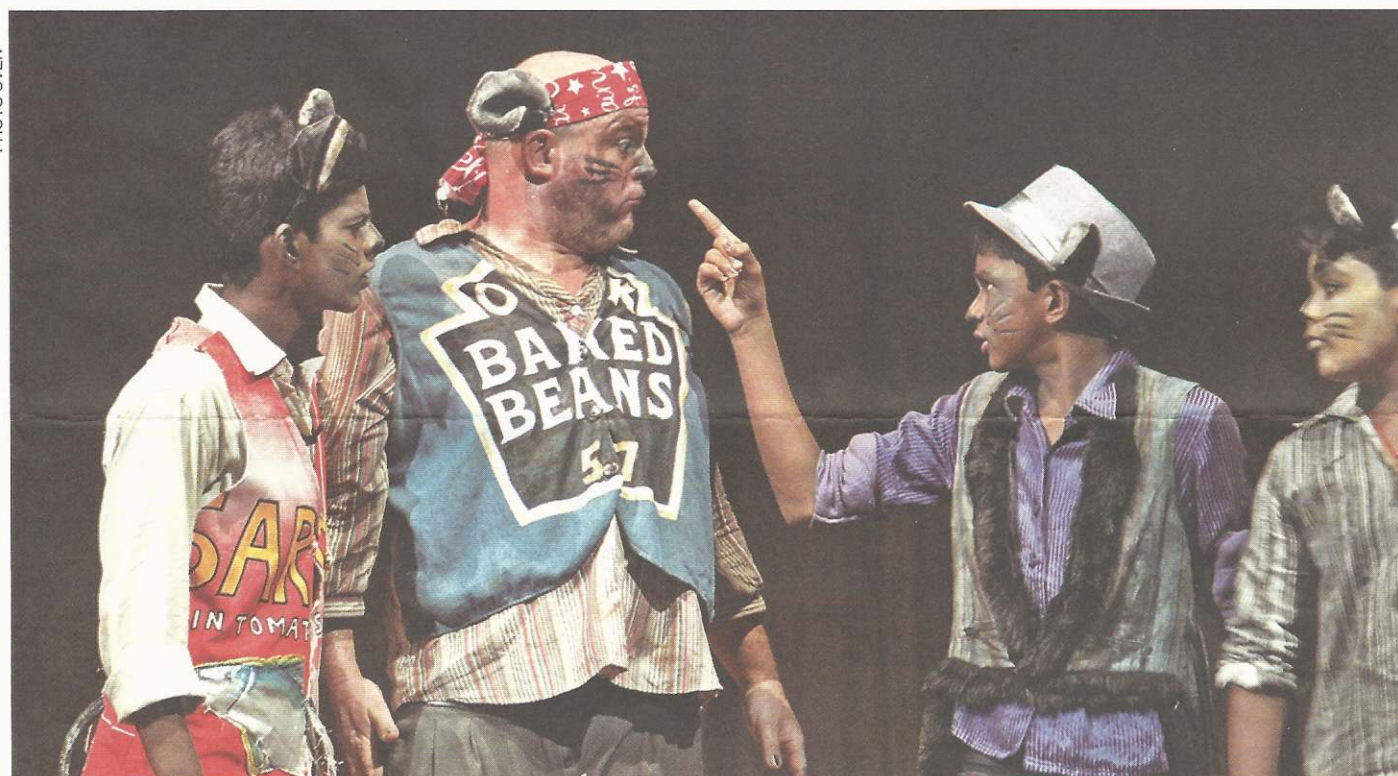
future, Nicola mentions moving to the new Santé Integral Health Centre and expanding the Clinic with another dentist. "I'm looking for a trained dentist who wishes to join Auroville and Linea," he says. The Entry Service has been informed...

In conversation with Carel

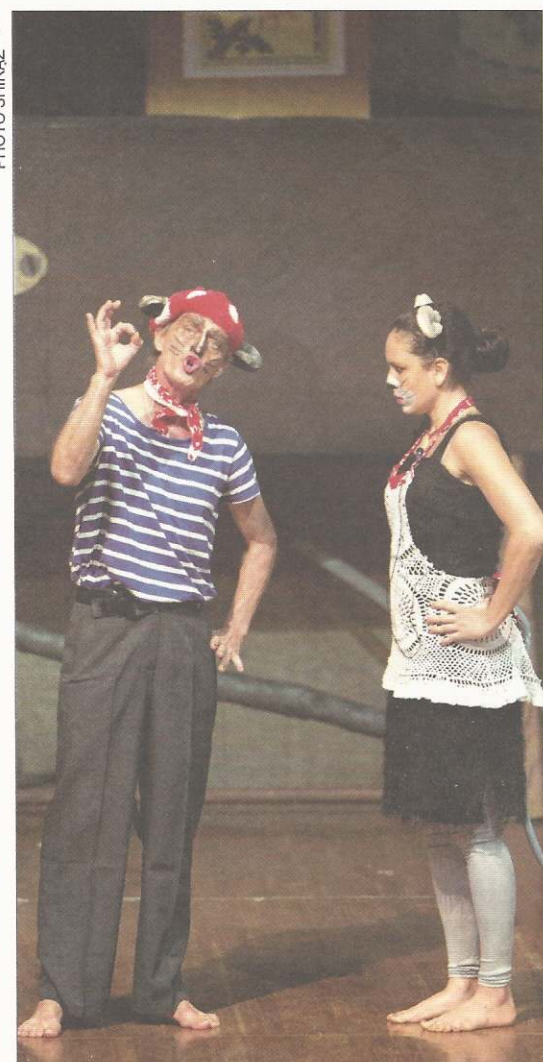
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Ahliya and Aloe as the mouse sisters, Milli and Alli



Top: Heavy-weights city rats warning the country rat visitors.



Rat Pierre (Wazo) with mama mouse (Anandamayil)



City rats Ratrani (Veronique) and Septus (Otto)



Mama rat (Kripa) dances with joy



Show time for t

For three nights in late September, the venerable premises of the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium were invaded by assorted mice, rats and cats who gambolled, strutted, cartwheeled, yawned, danced, insinuated and sang their way across the boards. Yup, it was musical time again. The last time Paul Blanchflower brought us one of his no-holds-barred productions it was all about pirates, sorcery and derring-do on the high seas. This year it was the turn of mice and rats to discover solidarity in their efforts to survive the vicious city cats, for long-separated lovers to be reunited, and for one mouse in particular, the audacious Milli, to discover her true self.

There were many memorable moments: Ting and Tang (Clare and Jana), the horribly-spoiled house cats, encountering an empty food bowl for the first time in their lives; Felicious (Jesse) introducing the reluctant Tin and Tang to the sadhana of pure cathood; Septus (Otto), the blind city sewer rat, sniffing the country rats and discovering, to his amazement, they were "pollution-free"; and the delicious Ratrani (Veronique), slinking her way across the footlights of The Blue Rat as she croons to her entranced clientele, "The only way to go up/is to keep on digging down/You'll find whatever you need deep inside".

Yes, folks, this was Sri Aurobindo with a difference.

It was the kids who really carried the show. Whether they were flinging themselves round the stage as the Rocking Rats (choreography: Elodie), or scurrying for life as the city cats created mayhem, or whether it was the tiny Cutecus (Sita) terrorising Tin and Tang, they brought an energy and a commitment that swept everything before it.

PHOTO SHIRAZ

PHOTO SVEN

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PHOTO SHIRAZ

The Rocking Rats

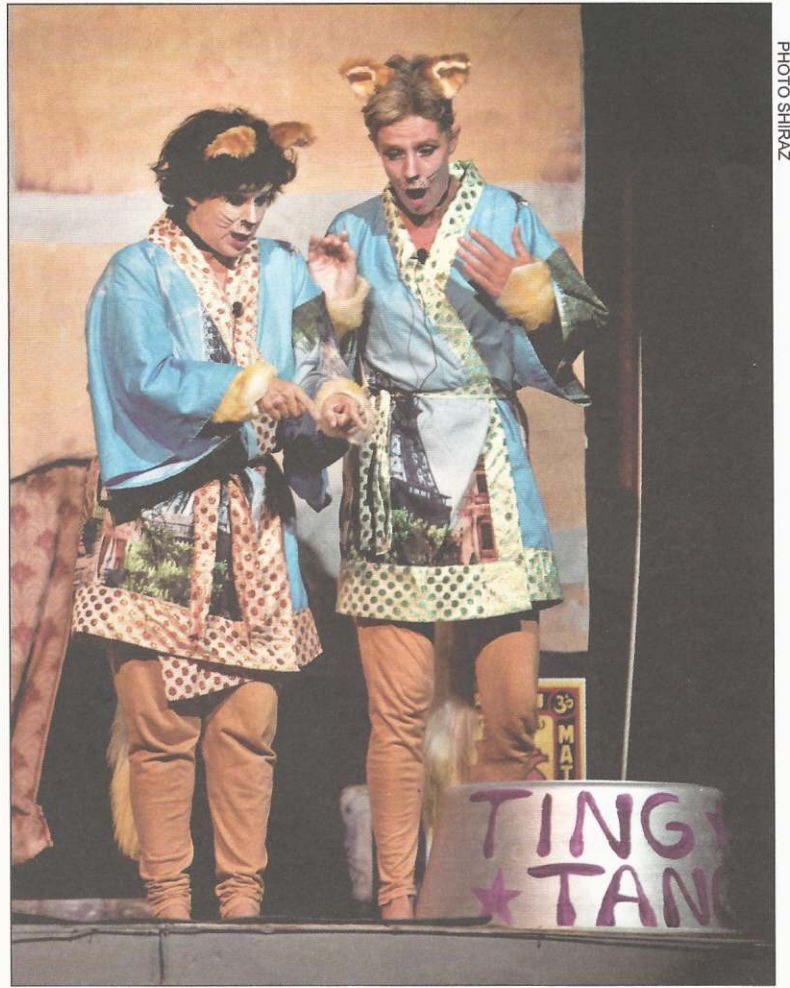


PHOTO SHIRAZ

Ting and Tang (Jana and Clare), the horribly-spoiled house cats

For these kids are at home on the stage. Ahilya and Aloe, in particular, were superb as the mouse sisters, Milli and Alli, trying to break free from an over-possessive Mama ("Oh, why can't you give us the space to be?") to find their true place in the world. Their beautifully-sung duet, 'Milli's Song', ("you may be different/ but that's all right/you're one of a kind") was one of the highlights of the show.

In fact, as in all the best musicals, the music (composed by Paul and Matt) was much more than an add-on. Whether it was the hard-driving 'Rocking Rats', the languidly feline 'What's the Point?', the lyricism of 'Milli's Song' or the dark menace of 'You Ain't See Nothing Yet', the music established, deepened character and atmosphere.

Ultimately, this show was much more about teamwork than individuals. At the end it was astonishing to see the size of the cast; they filled the entire stage. And this was only part of a much bigger team - maybe 200 people in all - of all ages and nationalities that worked, sweated, laughed together for many months to pull it off.

I dropped in at one of the earlier rehearsals. Of course, there were glitches: the sound system was not working properly, people forgot their lines, not all the props were ready. But permeating everything and everybody was an extraordinary spirit of togetherness, mutual support, good humour and, yes, love.

This doesn't happen by chance. It requires vision, great organization and the inspiration to work together towards something bigger than our individual selves.

Hey, come to think of it, isn't this why we're here?

Alan



PHOTO SHIRAZ

The city cats, a mean bunch



PHOTO SHIRAZ

he country rats



PHOTO SVEN

Ting and Tang, newly recruited by the city cats, but not really liking it

"The alternative therapists do not feel adequately supported"

Sigrd is a qualified classical homeopath and regression therapist who has been giving consultations in Auroville for the past 18 years. Here she gives her view of the present health and healing scene in the community.

What do you consider are the most important indications regarding health and healing given by Sri Aurobindo and Mother?

One of the key things The Mother said was that wherever health is absent it means a part of the being is not ready for progress. She also spoke about the importance of consciousness and self-healing. This is why it is very important that whatever healing method is used it is understood that it is only a catalyst for self-healing; that the person activates the self-healing for him or herself.

This implies that all healing methods practised in Auroville are to be based upon the self-empowerment of the patient/client. And that the role of the therapist is more of a facilitator for inner growth, including health, than someone who knows it all and who will tell you what to do. The therapist may give information and offer his or her professional insights. After that everybody has to sail their own boat.

Do people in the alternative healing sector in Auroville generally practise this approach?

Yes. They are aware of what The Mother and Sri Aurobindo said about healing. Moreover, their personal growth is considerably accelerated by their experiential learning as they practise their healing modality in the light of Sri Aurobindo's yoga.

Is there much interchange between the therapists on these topics?

A few years back each month we had a full day together and there were a lot of exchanges between us. There was also a professional training in hypnotherapy between 2009 - 2011 in



Sigrid and Malar

which 25 therapists participated, and a lot of spiritual insights and deeply personal questions emerged. We chose a long path of knowledge to become therapists, and most of us work very intensively, so when we meet with each other it is in a very good spirit based on mutual appreciation.

Why do we have so many therapists in Auroville?

Because we came here for a growth in consciousness, and this is one of the ways we can develop this. Actually there are many more therapists in Auroville than are on the 'official' list. Some don't want to be listed because they already have far too many clients. And the clients are not just Aurovilians. We have many guests coming to Auroville specially to be treated by our therapists.

What are the main issues in the alternative healing sector of Auroville?

We do not feel adequately supported by the Auroville organization. A recent study showed that far more healing happens in Auroville with alternative therapists than with allopathic doctors, yet the Auroville Health Fund, with a few exceptions, only provides financial support to allopathic treatment, and the Budget Coordination

Committee (BCC) gives us virtually no financial support. For 18 years I funded a free service in my homeopathic clinic for Aurovilians. Only now has the Health Fund decided to provide Rs 100 for every patient that is treated here. The lack of financial support means that many of our alternative therapists have to go regularly to the West to work in order to afford to live and practice in Auroville! Just now I have set up my own commercial unit so I can go out and work in India, but this means I have less energy available for Aurovilians.

The other alternative is for us to charge Aurovilians, which I am very much against because we came here to be part of a moneyless economy. Healing always comes from the heart and in a spirit of service.

Why do you think the Health Fund and the BCC should support alternative therapies?

Alternative treatments are free or far less costly than India's allopathic health system, which is now one of the fastest growing in the world. In an ageing community like ours, allopathic treatment is certain to be much more costly than alternative treatment, especially for chronic diseases. I don't see how our Health Fund will cope if it continues to follow the allopathic path.

Perhaps the Health Fund and BCC managers are concerned about the proficiency of the alternative health practitioners and the quality of the alternative treatment offered?

A lot of our alternative therapists are highly qualified as therapists, although not all are medically qualified. For example, I and six other Germans have the healing practitioner qualification which allows us to practice in Germany. I'm not saying that all our therapists are good, and that just because you can do a massage you are a good therapist. If the BCC is concerned about this, they could provide maintenances only to those who are medically-qualified or qualified in the field of psychology.

As to the quality of alternative therapies, if you have sciatic pain, acupuncture is great. If a woman has issues after menopause, the Aviva method is very successful. We have a non-allopathic blood pressure medication that is very effective and has no side effects, but our allopathic doctors don't want to hear about it. In fact, there is little collaboration between us. I send people to the allopathic doctors for tests, but they do not refer patients to me. They only collaborate with three or four of the alternative therapists.

What would be your ideal healthcare system for Auroville?

Firstly, The Health Fund should support those qualified therapists who request a maintenance. Aurovilians should get free treatment from Auroville doctors and therapists, and the Health Fund should cover the costs of basic treatment, both allopathic and non-allopathic. Those who insist on going to outside doctors when qualified Aurovilians are available should pay for it themselves.

There should be a good referral system between the therapists and the allopathic doctors. When someone has a health issue, they could first have a consultation with a General Practitioner who can give a diagnosis. After that, a doctor or 'health navigator' could inform them about the different therapies and healing modalities available for

their issues. Whenever possible, they should be referred to an appropriate alternative therapist.

But for patients to accept such a system requires a lot of health education. In India allopathy is very big at present because many people want a quick remedy, something that will immediately make the symptoms go away and make them feel better, even though it doesn't heal the cause and creates complications later. That's why I am very happy that Malar, who is certified in homeopathy and who has been working with me for four years, is working with people from Village Action, Thamarai and other local groups. Since 2014 she has been promoting well-documented homeopathic remedies for diabetes and high blood pressure in Village Action and in Thamarai and has received a good response. She has just released a first-aid homeopathic kit in Tamil.

As a next step, we will start providing training for alternative therapists in India. There is a huge demand for this, we have a lot of expertise in Auroville, and it could be a good source of income for our therapists and for Auroville. In fact, it is intended that the next phase of Santé, the new integral health facility, will be a centre of excellence for health education.

What role do you see Santé playing in your vision of health and healing in Auroville?

Santé is a great idea to integrate our healing modalities, and people like Jocelyn have done a wonderful job in materialising it and in attempting to get the different doctors and therapists to collaborate.

But, on a larger level, Auroville is very unwelcoming for therapists and doctors who would like to join the community. I know of a number of very good doctors and healers who would love to come and practice in Auroville. They would probably get no maintenance, they would have to find a place to stay and then they would have to pay for everything. So how will we ever get these good doctors and therapists to come and work here?

From an interview by Alan

HEALTH EDUCATION

The Wellness Programme

In Transition School, one class of 8 - 9 year olds have been taking part in a wellness programme. Paula, their teacher, explains that it begins with a brainstorming during which the kids are asked to come up with ideas about how they can stay well. "They come up with things like exercise, relaxation, inner work, and eating the right food."

Paula then designs a course that will expose them to some of these things and make them more aware of the benefits. "Getting enough exercise is not a problem as they all have sports. But going to a hatha yoga class was very new to them. They loved it."

Food gets a lot of attention in the wellness programme. When Paula announced they were going to visit and help prepare food in Anandi's raw food restaurant, initially the kids were less than enthusiastic. "But then they really got into it. We were cutting up organic cucumber and tomatoes, and making a dressing with cashews, banana and lemons. At the end they all ate a whole mound of what we had prepared and really loved it. One of the kids was so excited that he said he wanted to have his next birthday party there."

Another day they did a food survey. The children wrote down everything that they ate and drank on that day. Paula entered all the data into a computer and each kid got a read-out of what he or she had consumed, broken down into percentages of carbohydrates, proteins etc. Then Paula explained what the different foods do for the body, the importance of getting daily minimum servings of the different food groups, and she asked them to look at their food record for that day. What did they get a lot of? How did this make them feel? What did they lack? How did this make them feel?

"It is all about making them more aware of what food does to the body. For example, some kids had twelve servings of sugar on that particular day. We talked about how sugar affects the body,

how if you are having difficulty concentrating at school, the sugar in your body may contribute to that, and how eating dates may be a healthier way of consuming carbohydrates than sugary drinks."

How much difference does this programme make? Is it changing their food habits?

"I know what they choose for lunch now and what they chose before, and there is definitely a difference," says Paula. "At lunch every day they get Solar Kitchen food and before I had to really encourage the kids to eat the salad, but at the raw food restaurant even the kids who would not eat salad ate it, and now even the boy who hated Solar Kitchen food really makes an effort to eat everything."

And the food at Transition School is also changing. The Solar Kitchen staple is now augmented twice a week with sprouts and a health drink prepared at the school.

Of course, what happens at home may be different. Paula is amazed how many parents regularly buy big bottles of sugary, soft drinks. And, she admits, the children still love bringing sweets to school when it is somebody's birthday. "Nevertheless, somehow, they are beginning to associate 'healthy' with 'celebration'. When we prepare food together, eat together and then reflect in class upon how it makes us feel, it starts helping to make a change. And I tell them they can offer to help their parents prepare food, and to make sure there are always fresh



Paula



Food preparation in Anandi's raw food restaurant - it tastes good!

vegetables and fruit in the house.

"I also have little books about nutrition that the kids can consult. So once the seed is there, if I can keep nurturing it I am hoping that something stays. It's not a matter of making them fanatical about food. I myself like cake, I like biscuits, but when I'm eating them I enjoy them with the awareness that they are a treat, and that I am not going to have another serving of them today."

"In the end it is all about awareness. Now they understand the necessity for getting enough sleep, they understand food and how it affects the body. Even in our morning concentrations, we try to bring more awareness inside the body. And every child in Transition School gets two hours of the Awareness through the Body programme every week. So, actually, these children have a very good foundation for wellness in later life."

From an interview by Alan

Caked with mud and happy about it

Bridget, currently the only Irish Aurovilian, has been involved in many activities. These range from town planning to village work to helping to take care of Pitanga Cultural Centre. What made her come to Auroville and what challenges has she had to face?

There are defining experiences in our lives that help shape us. Being an aid worker just after the genocide in Rwanda was one of those for me as it gave me the gift of being completely shaken up. I found I was not as strong inside as I would have liked to be and my perceptions of world order cracked. I was at a point in my life where I had left a career in marketing and communications and moved back to the west of Ireland, where I had grown up. I had just begun to renovate an old house and run a guest house with one of my sisters. It was a fertile, supportive ground on which to start an inner journey and after Rwanda it was clear to me that I needed to work on myself. So I spent seven happy years exploring my inner reality through psychotherapy, yoga, Ayurveda, dance, shamanic journeying, pranic healing and holotropic breath work. At the same time, I got involved in local community initiatives with people my age, trying to create change in our small corner of the world.

My first contact with Auroville was when I toured South India with a group of pranic healers in 2000. We had a brief stop in Auroville to have lunch at the Centre Guesthouse and I saw the Matrimandir from a distance. Auroville didn't feature in my active consciousness for the rest of the trip.

But as soon as I got back to Ireland it happened, in an invitation to come to Auroville the following year on a yoga intensive with Sama; a week later I received an invitation to attend an Ayurvedic massage course with Umberto in the west of Ireland. I jumped at both.

As preparation for our trip, Sama showed us a film about Auroville and I heard the words from *A Dream* for the first time. I had a 'wow!' moment and wondered what such a place could look like. The possibility of Auroville being something totally new touched me in that moment.

Arriving in Auroville I felt the potential of the place but I also reacted. The villages around seemed so meagre compared to the big houses and leafy gardens of Auroville and I had the distinct feeling of one class of people who served and another that were served. As Ireland was a British colony and I come from a family who were very active in the freedom movement, I was

super-sensitive to this. I had loads of questions and I was lucky to have chance encounters with three Aurovilians who spent time with me.

The first was Kathy who shared her journey of personal growth and pointed to Auroville's role in providing such a ripe field for personal transformation. The second was Dhanya who cautioned me to leave space for emergence to happen in my life. And the third was Subash who shared his journey to Auroville and his connection with The Mother. These conversations made me curious enough to take the three-day Auroville Experience tour to dig a bit deeper, beyond the surface reality that I was experiencing.

Ross was leading our tour. They were three great days. It gave me an insight into the wider intention of Auroville. I saw work that seem to me transformative and a defining moment was when David led us around Adventure. He spoke of their attempt to build an intentional community and then uttered the words "evolution of consciousness". Something resonated deep inside, like when I first heard *A Dream*. We were standing in the space under Abbey's hut, her easel was in the middle of the floor and looking out on her stone circle I thought, "I could really grow and be challenged here."

I then wandered into one of Aster's conferences. It was way over my head but I loved just sitting in the back row and listening. I had come to a point in my life where I had, from an inner point of view, gone as far as I could in my life in Ireland. Something new was now strongly calling and I had the thought to come back for six months and just study. But another voice in my head said "You can't do that". So I came for a number of years for short periods that eventually got longer and finally, in the middle of a vipassana course when my mind was still and I was touching something deep inside, I was clear it was time to move fully. This was hard for me on another level as the west coast of Ireland is very beautiful, and I have very strong family connections and good friends there.

I was rewarded with a wonderful first year in Auroville. I was naturally drawn to village development work. I joined the Auroville Health Services team and worked on outreach health education, including ecosan toilet projects. The year after I connected again



Bridget

with Kathy who, with Thulasi, was starting Thamarai in an effort to bridge Edaiyanchavady and Auroville and, in particular, work on well-being and empowerment for women and children. So we started a play group and an after school service and two years later the Edaiyanchavady Healing Centre and lately an environmental programme at the Edaiyanchavady Government school. Now, nine years later, the projects are doing well. The Thamarai children from the early days have grown into university students doing their masters or even Ph.D's and are now the Thamarai teachers guiding the next generation. There is an emerging educated youth in the villages that give me hope.

I worked in L'Avenir d'Auroville for two years, which was a fantastic learning experience even though it was, at times, very challenging. It gave me a good insight into our system of governance and also a wider lens on the bioregion. I left to join the team at Pitanga which I see as a beautiful space to support us on our journey of inner and outer development. As it has well being and growth at its core, it also fits very nicely with the work I am

involved in at Thamarai and, in particular, at the Healing Centre

Ever since I joined Auroville, I have had my ups and downs. I went through a very intense period of questioning in my 2nd or 3rd year. On an inner level, it was fear; on an outer level it manifested in my reflections on all the things that I perceived as not right in Auroville and I questioned my choice to live here. Had I made a mistake?

I prepared to go back to Ireland but then went through a period where I couldn't see myself back there, even though I would have been very welcomed. I felt I did not fit in there any more. But here I did not feel right, I would wake up crying, feeling totally lost. Some people saw that happening, and I remember supportive conversations with Andrea and Loretta. This was another defining time for me, as it forced me to surrender and ask for help.

I was going to regular classes trying to understand the works of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. In one of these classes, the topic was how Grace works. I was feeling very vulnerable and had a fever. I turned to Her

photograph and asked for help. Something beautiful happened in that moment that lasted 4 or 5 days. I knew instantly that underneath the surface messy layer something else was at work and being worked out here. It was intense and I felt renewed. There was no longer any doubt. I had been house-sitting for four years, moving from one house to another, but there was now no longer any fear and I contributed to a flat and moved on with my life here.

I still find it challenging at times but I have no regrets. I know this is my field of growth. So much happens in a day and I think the diversity that we are and the instability of life here is such a fertile field for self-reflection and a tool for stretching us. In everyday life I meet the bits of me that need refining. They are being mirrored back, often the same old patterns that I started out on my journey of growth, but now at a deeper level. No doubt it is a journey of a lifetime, but what a blessed journey it is!

A Dream is very close to my heart. Today, instead of being critical, I try to ask what is missing and take steps towards minimising the gaps. It is a long stretch, but together we can make it.

I once woke up at three o'clock in the morning with a crystal clear dream that came after a heated discussion I had with a friend about Auroville. I had felt hurt by his criticism and I had got into reaction and defence. In this dream, I was in one of the mud pools in Sadhana Forest community. I was caked with mud, the ground underneath my feet was very unstable, there were many people like me with mud all over them, our bodies were very close and the heat between us was intense. There were other people on the edge of the pool looking in, genuinely very interested and feeling connected but clean, without the mud. For a moment I became aware of the muddy water on my skin and knowing it was doing something to me, as was the intensity of the bodies and instability in the pool. I looked again at the people on the edge and realised that the jumping-in had made the experience different. I woke with the realisation that I was very glad I had joined Auroville, even if I still cry when I leave Ireland. It's a grace to be here and sharing this journey.

Bridget Horkan

REFLECTION

Finding the intermediate path

Over the years, many Auroville projects and initiatives have been stillborn or have failed to fulfil their promise. These include early attempts at an 'all from one pot' economy and a more recent attempt to improve our decision-making through the Integral Sustainability Platform. There may be many reasons for these failures. Lack of resources (human, financial), wrong timing, an unwillingness to embrace change, are just a few of them. But there is one reason I seldom see mentioned. And that is the Aurovilian propensity to aim very high while neglecting the intermediate steps.

Perhaps a falling Icarus would be the appropriate logo for such failed attempts. Icarus, in Greek myth, was the boy who, along with his father, Daedalus, attempted to escape from Crete using wings made of feathers and wax. When he disregarded his father's instructions and flew too close to the sun, the sun melted the wax and he plummeted into the sea.

In some ways, of course, to aim high is admirable. At times, we need to build a Matrimandir to escape the gravitational pull of the known, of our comfort zones. We need even our extravagant failures if they serve to pull us forward. At the same time, we need to remember that the price of failure can be high: not just a waste of ener-

gy and resources, but also disillusionment and a reluctance to make further experiments.

But there is another reason I'm concerned about our failure to consider intermediate steps. And that is that if you do not provide intermediate steps you make it harder for people to behave in a certain way, to make the 'right' choices for the community as a whole.

Take water, which is very much in the news at present. We know, or should know by now, that water is an endangered resource in both Auroville and the bioregion, yet there continues to be a great deal of water wasted through leaky taps and pipes, poor irrigation practices and wasteful consumption.

Simply telling people to be more efficient in their water use is unlikely to lead to significant change. The gap between what should happen and what could happen is just too big for most individuals to bridge. However, an intermediate intervention could bridge that gap. For example, what if there was a group that would come to your place to do a water audit, make recommendations about how water could be saved, and then, rather than disappearing back into the wilderness, actually went out and bought the necessary appliances and fitted them, all at cost price. Wouldn't this make it more likely that more Aurovilians would be motivated to save water?

What you are doing, in fact, is not only providing help in practical terms. You are also providing an environment in which it is easier for the individual to make wise choices. At present, we lack enough such 'environments' and individuals have to battle against a host of material and psychological roadblocks if they want to make the smallest personal or collective advance.

Actually, I am somewhat overstating the case, for we now have more people willing to work on intermediate solutions. This is mainly because a young generation of Aurovilians has returned to the community and an influx of new people have joined the community who, while being no less idealistic than the pioneers, are much more practical and focussed upon creating supportive steps and environments for change.

So we have the home gardens initiative in which experienced gardeners and farmers offer to come and start vegetable gardens in people's communities; we have the Integral Entrepreneurial Lab which provides support for the first baby steps of starting one's own unit; and, of course, the Pour Tous Distribution Centre is an inspiring first step towards a cashless and non-consumeristic economy.

So why are we not creating more such stepping-stones? Some people, perhaps, do not see the necessity. Either they believe that we must always

aim high to avoid being dragged down into mediocrity. Or they feel that the community will advance only when enough individuals have reached a certain level of consciousness through their individual efforts, and that the environment has only a very limited influence upon personal sadhana. (In fact, some may argue that an adverse environment may actually accelerate individual progress in the yoga. This, as told in many myths and legends, is the 'hero's route' to salvation.)

Others remember how concerned Mother was about creating a favourable environment for spiritual progress but believe we lack the resources. However, the real problem is not lack of resources: it is that the intermediate zone requires a different kind of imagination, a different kind of mind-set. It is easier to find imaginative ways to fly straight at the sun than to skim the waves, because sun-seeking is so big, so glamorous. No doubt, a balance of the two flightpaths is necessary, and we must always have something to aim at. But, in many ways, taking the lower trajectory, finding the small steps, is a much more difficult, because more humble, work. And this is why it often gets neglected.

The author of the *Tao Te Ching*, Lao Tzu, was not exactly a 'small' thinker. But it was he who reminded us that "a journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step".

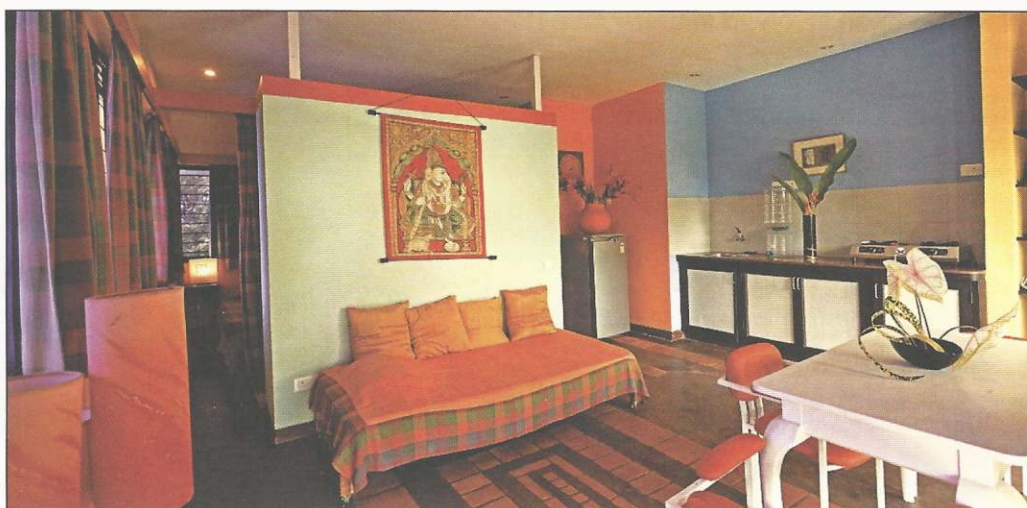
Alan

Auromode – from Atelier to Apartments

In 1982, in a small hut in Auromodèle community, a new garment unit was born, Auromodèle, employing three tailors and two helpers. In later years it was renamed Auromode Atelier and in 1985 moved to Auroshilpam in Auroville's Industrial Zone. Over the years, it specialised in hand-painted silk garments and became one of Auroville's most successful commercial units, employing over 240 people and ranking amongst the largest contributors to the Auroville community.

But the global recession affected Auromode. The order portfolio went down, the profits shrunk and downsizing and layoffs became unavoidable. Some employees had been with Auromode for more than 30 years. "The decision wasn't easy as we knew that we were dramatically changing their lives," says André, one of Auromode's executives. Also, high amounts of severance pay would be due and Auromode's financial reserves were insufficient. "We carefully planned a gradual cut in the number of employees and started looking for ways to make more money," he says.

Auromode's premises in the Industrial Zone are extensive. A three-storey main building dominates the compound, surrounded by a small kitchen and other buildings. The top floor houses four staff quarters, multi-room apartments with a kitchen and a bathroom. "They were no longer in use, and to help us meet our financial obligations



One of the Auromode apartments

we decided to rent them out," says André. This logically led to the next step, to also turn the now empty factory and office spaces on the second and third floor into apartments and guestrooms. Very recently, a conference room was added, which can double for physical exercises and multipurpose activities. "It wasn't expensive as only partition walls and sanitation had to be installed. Being very economic and concerned about cost saving, we dismantled Auromode's painting-rooms and used the wood for furniture, and likewise many items were recycled and re-used."

Today, Auromode is one of the largest Auroville guesthouses, with 31 different-sized apartments, employing 10 Aurovilians. The apartments are booked for short visits as well as for extended periods, such as by volunteers and prospective Newcomers. "The beautiful ambience, the two small roof gardens and the presence of the restaurant are much appreciated," says André. Prices range from Rs 1,200 for a small two-bedroom apartment in low season to Rs 4,200 a night for a fully furnished five-bed, 2 bathrooms and terrace apartment during peak time. Auromode offers

WIFI and generator back-up.

Auromode's ground floor continues to be used by industrial and commercial units. The main one is *To Be Two*; it makes garments for the *Kalki* boutiques in Auroville and Pondicherry and for a few clients in India. Smaller units such as *Matrigold*, *Coffee Ideas*, *Earth and Us* and the *Lilith Fashion School* have also found a place in the compound. "SEA, a unit under Auroville Village Action Trust, is expected to join soon," says André.

Asked if the change of an industrial unit into Auromode Apartments is in consonance with the Industrial Zone concept, André responds that it was the best way to use the space. "Today, there are large empty spaces on the ground floor, ready for commercial units to move in. But we are still waiting for proposals from Aurovilians," he says.

By the end of 2014 Auromode Atelier's financial obligations had been met and the unit closed. "We went through a nightmare," says André, recalling that on top of the layoffs and settlements, Prema, Auromode's founder and driving force, passed away in December that year. "But now all that is over."

Auromode Apartments has started making contributions to the community but these are still far below the levels of Auromode Atelier at its peak. But, says André, "we are confident that this will change soon."

In conversation with Carel

CELEBRATIONS

Botanical Gardens turn 15

On a steamy Saturday afternoon in August, Auroville's Botanical Gardens threw open its gates to the public to come and celebrate its 15th birthday. Crowds from Auroville and further afield poured in and participated in the activities – a spirited treasure hunt, a short comedy programme by the Genius Brothers, a wander around the gardens or a ramble through the maze. Many snapped up the beautiful reduced-price orchid pots, and set off home with pots wedged between knees on motorbikes – in the typical Auroville transport mode.

The Gardens were established 15 years ago to promote the conservation and biodiversity of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest – the traditional vegetation of the area. Paul Blanchflower, the Gardens' co-founder, was inspired to open the Gardens after collecting seeds in the area with Walter Gastmans and others for many years. He also saw the Gardens as a way to welcome people into Auroville's greenbelt (much of it inaccessible to the general public), so they could see the conservation efforts Auroville was making. Paul, Walter and Auronevi proposed the idea to the community after Auroville purchased a large plot of land outside Edaiyanchavady village, and the project began.

Paul describes the evolution of the Gardens as a "synthesis of different people's ideas", where the "plants and the community are a living being" and the people are the Gardens' biggest success. "It's important to realise the Botanical Gardens are very much a collection of people and their own different aspirations, and everyone brings something to the Gardens," he says. "For example, Adhi has been here since the beginning. It's very much his energy and my energy that's carried the material development of the garden. Many others have come. There are a lot of people who put a lot of energy into creating that sense of community and the space. You always have memories of 'Oh, that guy planted that tree.' So when you talk about vision, it's always been to celebrate biodiversity, and the more people we have, the more diverse the biodiversity."

Over 60 people now work at the Gardens,

including about 20 Aurovilians (a mix of full-time, part-time and volunteers), 20 local employees and about 20-30 long-stay volunteers each year.

Some of these people come with a particular vision to develop a specific garden within the space. Volker created the impressive cactus garden, and the orchid garden was started by Auronevi and developed further by Nathalie and Francois. The Botanical Garden team also plans to further develop the butterfly garden.

The requirements of the specialised gardens need to be balanced with the Gardens' rather intensive overall maintenance. Over the past 15 years, the team has established a water infrastructure and acquired necessary tools, such as two tractors and grass-cutting machines.

The Gardens achieved its first goal of "having something to show" by the seven-year mark, when it opened its education centre in 2007. Its next goal – to "create an atmosphere" by the 15-year mark – was somewhat marred by the cyclone in 2011. "We lost some of the atmosphere," says Paul, "but it pushed us in a nice direction. We had let the *Work Trees* grow as a first canopy and were going to remove them after 20 years. They blew over in the cyclone as they were widely spaced, and that left big gaps in the arboretum. Those gaps are filling nicely. The cyclone was a case of two steps back, one step forward, and you can see how the Gardens will be in the next stage. If you imagine that mature trees are 150 years old, we're only one-tenth of the way there."

Auroville's Botanical Gardens differ from other botanical gardens around the world in one major way: funding. The ongoing maintenance costs are high and new projects can only be implemented when there's extra funding. Paul says that much of his work these days requires him to be in the office, "keeping the money coming in."

Such behind-the-scenes practicalities seem worlds away when visitors abandon themselves to laughter as they get lost in the maze and labyrinth. The education centre has no shortage of good educational materials, but visitors primarily respond to fun activities. In the maze,



The Genius Brothers entertain the crowd

for example, there are 12 hidden paintings of the animals of the forest, so the children are encouraged to run around and find the animals and then connect them to the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest. The idea is that by engaging children in this way, the memory carries into adulthood. And later on in life, they may connect the sense of fun or joy to the environment, and this may allow them to make a decision in favour of the environment.

The team at the Gardens also responds to requests from outside organisations to create gardens. It has worked for resorts, hotels, schools, private homes and businesses in other parts of India, always using native species. They take their methods of using native vegetation into the landscaping, creating spaces of biodiversity. They have extended their expertise from the coast to the hills, learning more about the latter's different ecosystem in the process. They advise rural factory owners to create a shelter belt of tropical dry evergreen forest around their factories, which provides a safe haven for pollinators,

which can then fly five kilometres and pollinate the fruit trees and the crops of local farmers. In this way, factory owners can support the local agriculture system.

"And they're happy to do it," says Paul. "India has extraordinary people running these businesses, they're very connected to nature."

Given that many of the mature Botanical Gardens around the world were started 150 years ago, what is the future of Auroville's Botanical Gardens?

The team would like to offer more activities at the Gardens, although funds are lacking to do this at present. They would like to double the number of school programmes, to work with colleges on more tertiary programmes, and offer three-month courses. To achieve these goals, more people are needed.

But the Botanical Gardens door is always open to new energy, new ideas. As Paul puts it, "This is a venue where people can come and do stuff."

Lesley

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