Auroville Today

Rain, rain, and yet more rain

PHOTO: PAUL VINCENT

The Alankuppam kolam spilled over

It seemed that the skies would never relent. One woke up to the sound of the heavy, steady rain. One went to bed with that sound reverberating in one's mind. And in between, one spent one's days, huddled at home, or if your work required you to, flitting in and out of the gray walls of water that simply poured down, without fuss, without the drama of wind and thunder.

At first, we were delighted. After an unusually hot summer, and erratic monsoons for over a decade, Aurovilians were relieved to see the clouds once again deliver the seasonal promise of the North-East monsoon. One celebrated the raucous bellows of bull-frogs that hopped out of their holes from where they are aestivating and croaked out to their mates to join them for well, mating. One watched out when traveling for snakes that had slithered out of their holes for these were now flooded, and there was a feast of frogs to be had!

But as the hours of heavy rain turned into days, and the days turned into weeks, the mood of Aurovilians noticeably dampened. Events were cancelled, turn-outs for meetings and for classes were poor, and work in offices slowed down as the telephone and internet lines became dysfunctional. Cyclists and motorcyclists cursed the taxis that multiplied on the roads. And the roads, already rutted into pot-holes or rendered slippery mud-traps by the rain, in some places became impassable. Even old-timers and hard-core greenbelters who had learnt to cope with the harsh extremities of our hot and wet tropical weather could only manage thin, wan smiles as we all converged at our community grocery store to stock up on supplies.

We lived for days without seeing the sun. We worked daily trying to stem the mold from spreading into our clothes, bed-sheets, furniture, and yes, creeping in between our constantly damp toes. One of the catchment ponds in Forecomers behind my house filled up and gushed down into the canyon as a steady waterfall that subsequently meandered as a mud-river. The sound of the water was constant. It no longer seemed like the beneficent life-giving rain that we needed to recharge our aquifers. It seemed like a deluge that threatened to engulf life, and seemed all the more apocalyptic, happening as it did during the Climate Change Convention, COP-21, in Paris. In the month of November, there were only three days when it did not rain at all in Auroville. And 150 kms north, Chennai recorded the second-wettest November and beat the record for maximum rainfall in 24 hours in the past 100 years.

As sodden November slid into a damp December, my family started calling and texting me to check how we were doing, for by then national newspapers were splashing headlines about the disastrous floods in our state, Tamil Nadu. At first, I was not aware of it. I had not even seen the papers for a while. The biggest regional daily, *The Hindu*, published in Chennai had anyway closed its office for a day as it was flooded. But as the news leaked through, one was confronted by the unfolding disaster in Chennai. At first, we thought that it was only the low-lying areas of Chennai (a city that in the past decades has been increasingly built on reclaimed marshy wetlands) that were flooded. We heard reports of people being marooned in their homes and offices, unable to cross the roads, which had turned into rivers. In Auroville, we cheered each other up, when depressed by the damp grayness, by saying, "at least, we are not in Chennai." And we were all the more grateful for our check-dams, catchment ponds, and the dense vegetation with their network of roots burrowing deep into the ground, creating channels for the rainwater to percolate. Soil and water erosion from our plateau, as far as I could judge, were held in check. Thanks to the work of pioneering greenbelters, the Auroville plateau absorbed the excessive rain, with almost zero run-off into the sea. In Chennai, it seemed to be the exact opposite. There, human beings instead of finding their balance with nature, had pitted themselves against nature.

Consider these facts: Just a few decades ago, in the eighties, Chennai had 600 water bodies. But a master plan published in 2008 counted only 27 lakes that were in a healthy condition. According to official records by the state's Water Resources Department, the storage capacity of 19 big lakes had reduced from a total of 1,130 hectares (ha) to 645 ha in a span of few years. In my visits to Chennai over the years, I had noticed how the wetlands of Chennai were increasingly being built on: I saw migratory birds escaping from the harsh winters of Europe struggle to find healthy habitats, failing which, they settled down on concrete poles jutting over the marshes of half-constructed buildings. The problem, as Sunita Narain, the Director of the Centre for Science and Environment, a premier research institute points out, lies in the fact that "wetlands are rarely recorded under municipal land laws . . . Planners see only land, not water and greedy builders take over." And land admittedly is in short supply in India's ever-expanding cities with its burgeoning population. A national newspaper warns, "Chennai today, your city tomorrow" and lists all the Indian metropolises where shoddy planning and indifference to the natural environment mark them out as potential sites for disasters in extreme weather conditions.

And mind you, as we were constantly reminded by the Paris climate talks, the weather is bound to get more extreme. Climate change science predicts more precipitation in intense bursts in tropical countries, and a national meteorological institute confirms this prediction. Worldwide, it seems that as a species, we no longer know how to live in harmony with nature. We seem, even in Auroville, to have forgotten that we were meant to co-evolve with nature . . . The modern human being's disrupted relationship to nature – where nature instead of being respected as a teacher is pitted as an adversary – is clearly revealed by the media tag "Chennai Fights Back" that was used for reporting on relief operations in the metropolis.

The papers were full of horrendous stories of human suffering and occasionally uplifting accounts of courage and sacrifice by those who went beyond their duty to help others in need.

Accounts of flooding of other coastal areas closer to Auroville – Nadukuppam, Pondicherry, the Cuddalore district – where people had been beggared with no homes, food or drinking water, also filtered in. But Chennai continued to grab the headlines, for undoubtedly it was the worst national disaster of the year with an estimated loss of US $3 billion. And yes, one did feel a sense of helplessness when subject to the planetary might of nature, which in one fell stroke could cripple the lives of human beings and crumble their artifacts.

But, in the 2nd week of Dec as the rains lessened, the flood waters subsided, the Chennai airport (which by the way got flooded for a runway was literally built over the Adyar river) cautiously opened part-time operations, and life limped back to some semblance of normalcy, devastating news of human errors that partially caused the flooding leaked out. One reason why Chennai got inundated was because of the delayed and unannounced release of water from a key reservoir, the Chembarambakkam reservoir. Instead of letting water out in a timely fashion with adequate warning for evacuation measures, the sluice gates were opened only after the reservoir had overflowed at midnight on Dec 1. According to a public interest case filed in the Chennai High Court, this single human error allegedly resulted in the loss of 280 lives. Editorials in prominent newspapers argued that the prevalent socio-political culture does not empower individuals to take independent decisions, even in the face of emergencies like this one.

As I absorbed the news yesterday, I could not sleep, wracked by emotions. In the spell of one monsoon, my mood shifted from joy to helplessness to despair to anger. Now, even though the sun is out and the skies once again resound with the ubiquitous melody of birds, I cannot quite drive away that anger in my heart. But anger does not heal, it does not bring back that which has been lost . . . and in the meantime, there is work to be done. There are survivors of this disastrous flood, who could do with a helping hand.

Bindu

Selecting new members for the Working Committee and Auroville Council

A three-day selection process for new members for the Working Committee and Auroville Council took place from December 4-6th.

A three-day selection process for new members for the Working Committee and Auroville Council took place from December 4-6th. It wasn't to everybody's liking. "Once again, do we have to sit for three days to select the new members of the Working Committee and Auroville Council?" was the question often heard. But the Study Group on organisation stood its ground. In conformity with the community-approved selection process, it organized the selection process to replace the outgoing members.

The work started as early as mid September, when the Study Group issued an open call to the community for nomination or self-nomination of two members for the Working Committee and three for the Auroville Council to replace outgoing members. The names proposed were published and community feedback was invited. Subsequently, over a period of four weeks, a "Temporary Feedback Review Committee" of seven people studied the feedback received regarding some of the candidates, and discussed the feedback with them. This led in one case to the nominee being refused; all the others decided to withdraw.

By the end of November, the final list of nominees who had accepted to serve was published, together with the list of people who had agreed to participate in the three-day selection process. Their names too had been scrutinized by the Review Committee, as according to the rules of the game, any participant could decide at the last minute to be a candidate for the Working Committee or Council.

The attendance at the three-day process was limited. In all, only 34 Aurovilians participated, of which six were Working Committee members, four Council members and 24 members of the Residents' Assembly. Inge from the Residents Assembly Service facilitated the first two days while Dave and Niva guided the selection process on the third day.

On the first day Mother's text "To Be a True Aurovilian" was read out. All participants were then asked to introduce themselves and share what they stood for, what quality truly represented their soul and what fear blocked soulful expression. This set the tone of trust and respect that permeated the coming days.

This was followed by groupwork around current community issues, such as: What to do when someone illegally occupies an Auroville house or encroaches Auroville land? What to do to prevent development of privately owned lands within the city area? How best to organize volunteers coming to Auroville? Participants were asked to consider the topic from the perspective of "Myself as an individual in Auroville", describing the values and principles they must embody and how these values can support necessary action.

Then a brief presentation of their work and challenges was given by the Working Committee and Auroville Council.

In the afternoon, after reading "The Auroville Charter", groupwork resumed. This time issues were discussed from the perspective of "Myself as part of Auroville – The City the Earth Needs." The questions discussed were how Auroville's values relate to this topic and how this topic affects life in Auroville.

The second day began with a reading of some points from "Mother on Organization." This introduced the third round of groupwork. This time various topics were explored from the perspective of "Myself as a part of the present organizational systems in Auroville." The questions guiding the discussion were "When faced with this topic what qualities must be fostered?" "What needs to be in place to move forward?" and "What needs to change and be left behind?" The result of the groups' work was collated and jointly discussed.

Then individual presentations were given by

New members of the Working Committee and Auroville Council join the present members in the inner circle

the nominees and an open discussion with them took place. The RAS afterwards observed that "there was an impressive degree of deep listening". The facilitator made it clear that the process of making oneself available for one or the other working group was totally open to anyone present and that participants were free to do so at the last minute.

The actual selection of the new members took place on the third day. It was not limited to the nominees, as some new candidates stepped forward. They were given time to describe their interest in the work, what they would bring to the working group and what might be their limitations.

Then the first round of selecting took place, a "democratic" session, where each individual gave the names of their preferred candidates. The outcome was collated and shared.

A second round then took place. Six small groups were formed – randomly created by tokens – and each group was asked to select the best candidates for the Working Committee and Council through a process of agreement on each table. This led to full consensus of all six tables on the new members for the Working Committee, and large agreement (a majority of the tables) on the new members of the Council. This ended the selection process.

At the closing of the session, the participants were asked if they felt the three-day process was too lengthy. Should it be reduced to two days? There was an unanimous feeling that the three days had been extremely valuable and that the process should be continued in future.

The new members joined the groups on December 15th, 2015.

An interview with the organizers

Auroville Today: This is the third three-day selection process for members of important working groups. Has the Study Group evolved its methodologies?

Jaya: The Study Group has been working now for three years, building on the first failed and second successful experience. Our work is not over and we will continue to improve.

Uma: Since last year, each and every feedback on the selection process has been very carefully listened to by the team. We have been working to transform the system and integrate all comments into a new model. We are not yet 'there', we are still on the way to something we have not yet discovered.

Jaya: Also a major shift in the community perception has taken place. The community has become used to the new system, and to the Temporary Feedback Review Committee. The fact that both the present Working Committee and Auroville Council, whose members have been selected through this process, are seen to have been doing a good job, is in itself a confirmation that the system works.

This time the selection process had a rather limited attendance. Do you feel it mattered?

Isha: Last year, for the selection of the entirely new Working Committee and Auroville Council, 100 people had signed up and 80 finally participated. But it contained many people with a hidden agenda. This time there were less people, but those who attended came only to make sure that the best possible new members were selected. There was a qualitative difference.

Uma: It made a difference that we were not selecting a totally new Working Committee and Council, and for that we don't need a big mass of people. But we could see that the quality of those who attended was higher than before.

Jaya: Of course, we would like to have had larger participation, for there is clearly a part of the community that is missing. We would like them to participate. But there is also another important aspect, that people should trust the process; that we can with the help of our values step out of preferences and together aspire to manifest what is best for Auroville. The quality of work and the skills

needed have come much more into focus now. Those selected have the required skills, or the ability to acquire the skills needed. And now we have two of our major working groups with age, gender and nationality/cultural balance – something which has not emerged with previous systems. This process gives also space for the unexpected to emerge, for new people to come forward, something which is really precious.

Last time, the members of the Temporary Feedback Review Committee were rather heavily criticised by some of those they 'reviewed'. How did the Review Committee this time work?

Jaya: The previous Feedback Review Committee had made its decisions based on so-called 'negotiable' and 'non-negotiable' feedback. For this they had the guidance of the Laws of India and the Material Conditions for Living in Auroville. Non-negotiable feedback disqualified a nominee from participating in the selection process.

Inge: This time too, the Feedback Review Committee had interviews with the people against whom objections were made. One person was refused, the others voluntarily stepped back. They arrived at a common understanding that this was not the correct time for the person to join.

Do you believe this process could also be used to select the members of other community working groups, such as the Entry Service and the Funds and Assets Management Committee?

Dominique: Definitely, but we will need to carefully study the necessary skills required for each group and to take this into account in preparation.

Jaya: We have to tailor the process for each of these groups. Then, afterwards, in a similar way to the Working Committee and Council, there can be yearly processes to add new members to the groups to replace those whose term of office has come to an end.

The Governing Board recently constituted a committee to select the new Town Development Committee members. What are your views on this?

Jaya: I deeply believe in community participation and would always avoid moving decisions outside the Auroville forums. Mother has clearly stated that decisions about Auroville can only be taken by those who have committed to be here. It is a question of trust. Do we trust Auroville, our processes and each other, or do we involve outside authorities?

This selection process can be adapted to the very specific needs of the Town Development Council. After three years of this work, I can definitely say that we can trust the process. We can't claim that this participatory system, based on working with our values, is the only way to work, and some groups might not even need a formal way to select members. But we do need to find agreement and move forward, to together build the city and society we aspire for and have committed to serve, not only for us but for the world. We are trying to shift something here; that cannot be bypassed. It's more a matter of supporting that than of one system against another.

The participatory system, approved by the community, included so-called 'resource persons' and 'silent listeners'. Both the Council and Working Committee have been using resource persons in the specialised fields of their competence, such as conflict resolution, or issues of income tax or land sales policy. But the system of the 'silent listener' hasn't taken off.

Inge: The full potential of this participatory system hasn't yet materialised. For example, neither the Working Committee nor the Council has made use of the competence of new people who have joined Auroville – most probably because they are not even aware of what these people can contribute. It would be good if this could change.

Uma: Regarding the silent listener concept, I believe this is evolving. It is not a question of a curious person listening to the conversation without making comments. It is rather a person who, because of his or her presence, can change the dynamic in a room. These people can keep silent and keep the correct atmosphere when others go on 'automatic pilot'. Then something changes very subtly in the room, helping to bring in another dimension.

Hélène: What we are talking about is a 'spiritual atmosphere' holder, a 'space holder', someone whose silent and inner presence helps create a sacred space. Then, automatically, unwarranted talk and gossip drop out. Senior citizens, in particular, could be such space holders.

Jaya: For the members of the study group, this 'holding space' is not an academic concept. For last year's selection process, we were expecting some turmoil, a bit of an emotional outburst. We were prepared for that: we'd asked a number of people to help hold the atmosphere. The six members of the study group had organized the three days, but the support team is always much larger. This helps to create that 'safe space' where something else had the possibility to come down and where all participants could feel free to express themselves.

What was your experience of these three days?

Hélène: Many people felt that the Grace was present, that there was something or someone guiding the process, something much bigger than us, which wanted to manifest – it grew stronger each day. One of the participants even said that he felt that Sri Aurobindo was present.

Inge: Everybody was very humble. They stepped back from their preferences, and let come what could. This I have not seen before in Auroville.

Isha: I was full of gratitude to be present during these days.

Uma: 'Collective intelligence' is a kind of buzz word these days. But if any community can be said to manifest that, it is Auroville. That's a humbling realization – that it is there and that we are part of it, that we are being prepared for something. I do not think that anyone was prepared for that – but it did manifest and nobody resisted what came down. Now the question is if this can be widened. We were only with 40, including the organizers. Will it be able to manifest when there are 400 of us together? And more? I believe we can.

Jaya: This yoga is not an individual yoga, it is a collective one. The building of the city and its organization is the field of its expression. This power of collective aspiration has come to the forefront these days. It is a major step for our community and with it we can work magic.

In conversation with Carel

What has been happening since the Retreat?

The Retreat, held over two days in March, was undoubtedly a significant event in the life of our community. Over one hundred and sixty Aurovilians, along with members of the Governing Board and International Advisory Council, focussed upon finding ways of moving Auroville forward in key areas like governance, the economy, land protection and education. At the same time, it was seen that integral progress towards fulfilling our ideals and potential could not be made without including the voices of our youth and of others in the bioregion, and space was also given to these. [see Auroville Today # 309, April 2015, pages 4-5]

The Retreat had its limitations. Some people felt the discussions were too rushed and didn't allow sufficient space for deeper introspection, and it was clear that significant fault-lines regarding certain issues that had solidified over many years could not be dissolved in the space of two days. But, uniquely, it was an occasion when young and old Aurovilians, as well as Governing Board and International Advisory Council members, came together in a dynamic working environment to reaffirm Auroville's ideals, and to explore practical ways in which they could be manifested. By end of the second day, this had created an immense will and enthusiasm for moving us forward as a collective. As one of the organizers put it, "The main accomplishment of the Retreat was the rekindling of hope in the community".

What has happened since?

One of the main challenges was to retain the energy and idealism of the Retreat and define viable strategies to materialise the goals and milestones that had emerged. The plan was to create Action Groups in each area – governance, land and town planning, growth, economy, education, youth and the bioregion – to work further on materialising these goals and insights. The Working Committee was given the responsibility by the Vision Task Force (VTF) to set up these groups, and to help each group come up with an action plan based upon the outcome of the Retreat.

Unfortunately, there was a hiatus of about two months before some of these groups were formed (the Economy, Governance and Youth Groups did not wait: they formed themselves and went ahead with their work), and this led to a certain loss of the energy that had been created by the Retreat. This was accentuated by the fact that by this time it was high summer and a number of key people were out of station.

Nevertheless, most of the Action Groups had formed by June, and in that month five of them made their first reports. The reports mostly related to restating their goals and milestones and setting out their action plans. The Governance Action Group had gone further and had already worked out a proposal for an Active Residents Assembly and received feedback on it from the larger community. Also sub-groups of the Economy Action Group had developed a detailed action plan for the Integral Entrepreneurship Lab, had started finding locations for a number of small enterprises, and begun work on planning an Auroville statistics office.

The Youth Groups was the most active of all the Action Groups in this period. By July the youth had built up a team, YouthLink, and acquired a temporary office in Bharat Nivas. Their first goal was to find ways of empowering and including the youth in community activities and, in relationship to this, two youth were participating, on a temporary basis, in two major working groups – the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) and the Housing Service. Meanwhile, YouthLink had begun exploring the possibility of youth apprenticeship programmes with the Auroville Campus Initiative group.

In other words, in these first few months the output of the Action Groups differed widely, depending upon the presence, energy and commitment of the members, as well as upon their ability to work with the goals and milestones allocated to them. By July, for example, the Growth Action Group proposed to dissolve itself as it felt its goals and milestones were already included in those of the other Action Groups. The members were also very busy with other work and felt they couldn't commit more time to this task.

The work in the last six months

In the last six months, much more has been achieved in terms of materialising the goals and milestones emanating from the Retreat. Sometimes, this has happened independently of the Action Groups as part of a larger community movement. For example, while the restructuring of existing working groups is one of the milestones of the Governance Action Group, a new entry process and a new mandate for the FAMC had already been taken up by the Auroville Council, which is mandated to do this work. Work upon securing the land in the city and greenbelt (one of the Land and Planning Action Group's goals) had also been ongoing for some time. For example, the Town Development Council had been exploring the possibility of Auroville acquiring New Town Development Authority status, and there was an increased fund-raising drive that led to the purchase of some essential pieces of land.

The aim of providing higher education possibilities in Auroville was one of the milestones of the Education Action Group and work on this, in the form of the Auroville Campus Initiative, had already begun before the Retreat, although it substantially gained momentum after that event.

On the other hand, some of the Action Groups have been very active in promoting certain initiatives. For example, the Economy Action Group's focus on an in-kind economy may have been one of the factors that persuaded the BCC to allocate 45 lakhs to promote the in-kind economy, and an economy sub-group has set up the Integral Entrepreneurial Lab (see Auroville Today no.313-14). Meanwhile, the Bioregion Action Group, with assistance from Village Action and YouthLink, has just held the first bioregional meeting of their "Paalam" project ('paalam' means 'bridge' in Tamil), the object of which is to establish links with youth in neighbouring villages to get them to work actively with Auroville for the co-development of the region.

The Governance Action Group, in conjunction with the Residents Assembly Service, has organized two preliminary meetings of the Active Residents Assembly, while the YouthLink group organized a community event on International Youth Day to introduce the community to their work and to showcase youth and their talents. They are also working to stimulate local village youth groups (interestingly, in YouthLink the majority of the active members are not Aurovilians but local youth) and have drawn up an ambitious project for a youth centre campus in Auroville called the YouthLink Hub [see Auroville Today no.313-314]. At the invitation of the youth, a number of Aurovilians have signed up to be mentors for them.

The need for youth apprenticeship programmes was one of the key findings of the Retreat. The Auroville Campus Initiative began working on an apprenticeship programme for youth in forestry and invited the youth to participate in the planning of this. The Education Action Group is still trying to get some clarity, but one possible outcome is that further learning will now be prioritised in the community.

Could more have been achieved?

So, much has been started. But could more have been achieved, given the huge tide of energy and goodwill that flowed out of the Retreat? Perhaps. There may be a number of factors here. One is that it took time for the new groups to get to know each other and evolve a way of working upon their goals and milestones. Then, as always in Auroville, the concrete manifestation of ideas is very dependent upon the energy and inspiration of the individuals concerned, and this differed from one Action Group to the next. But even when the energy and inspiration were there, sometimes there were not enough qualified people to take up an initiative, or there remained major differences of approach, either within the Action Group or within the larger community, which blocked action.

For example, most members of the Land and Planning Action Group are also part of the official planning group and the Land Board. This should make coordination easier. However, the fact that the community is still polarised on planning issues means that blockages that affect the work of the planning group also affect the Land and Planning Action Group.

Another factor has been the lack of financial support to realize certain milestones. At one point, the Action Groups were asked to present the initial budgets they needed to do their work. Almost all of them did this but, with one or two exceptions (YouthLink, for example, has received two maintenances for the coordinators), the funds have not been forthcoming or have not been made available immediately. For example, at a recent Vision Task Force meeting, the Economy Action Group presented to the Vision Task Force a budget for an Auroville statistics office ('Aurostat'). There was unclarity about how to allocate funding for this, so the VTF said that the proposal should be presented to the Governing Board during their next meeting in March.

There may be reasons for the lack of funding. The obvious one is that Auroville does not have sufficient funds available to meet all the requests. In fact, large funding is not available immediately because it was not planned in Auroville's 2015-16 budget. There may also be a feeling among those making the financial decisions that certain proposals are either too expensive, not well thought through, pet projects being pushed by a few individuals, or are not projects that are the outcome of the Retreat. There may even be unvoiced doubts, for example in relation to some of the youth projects, of the staying power of the individuals involved or of how far they are representative of their larger constituency.

Whatever the reasons, some Action Groups feel dispirited by the lack of funding, which, they feel, has called into question the community's commitment to materialising certain key goals and milestones.

Post-Retreat organisation issues

Another major factor why more has not been achieved may be the way in which the post-Retreat organization of the work has been handled. It's safe to say that nobody fully understood how big a challenge it would be to translate some of the goals and milestones into reality: the immediate post-Retreat euphoria may have been partially responsible for this.

However, when the goals and milestones were examined in the cold light of day it became obvious that some could be manifested fairly easily by the Action Groups themselves, some, at this point, were mere wish-lists (like the need for psychic education in the villages), and others, like the radical reorganization of our governance structure, would require a long and complex process involving many existing working groups as well as the larger community.

In this connection, some of the timelines identified in the Retreat for the achievement of certain milestones were wildly unrealistic. Clearly, the Action Groups would need to spend time reworking some of these timelines. However, one of the first communications received by the Action Groups from the Working Committee, which, at that time, had been appointed by the Vision Task Force to drive the process of drawing up action plans, was a form asking the Action Groups to give accurate predictions, on a week by week basis, of how and when their goals and milestones would be achieved.

Many members of the Action Groups were nonplussed by this. They felt the form was too complicated, too 'bureaucratic', and did not reflect the way they wished to work.

This marked the birth of a certain tension between the Action Groups and the oversight group (the Vision Task Force) which has still not been fully resolved.

In brief, the Action Groups felt that the oversight group did not fully understand or give enough space to the way they were working. For example, a line of command structure had been set up that required the Action groups to get permission from the VTF for every new initiative they engaged in. In fairness, when a concerned Action Group representative brought this up at an early Skype conference with Vision Task Force members, the meeting agreed that this kind of micro-management was unnecessary.

The oversight group, on the other hand, was concerned that the identified goals and milestones from the Retreat should be manifested rather than disappear into the sand, something that had happened many times before after high-energy seminars in Auroville. This is why they emphasised the need for structured work with clear timetables. They were also concerned that Action Groups might be pushing projects that were not specifically the outcome of the

Retreat. Also, perceiving overlaps in different groups' milestones and goals, they were keen to promote communication and collaboration between the Action Groups, something which not all the Action Groups were ready for or even felt necessary.

Early in the process, two meetings were organized with all the Action Groups, but these only succeeded in frustrating and draining the energy of everybody involved. Each blamed the other for this. The Action Groups felt the meetings, particularly the first one, were over-structured and did not give them ample opportunity to share their work. The Working Committee, who organized the meetings on behalf of the VTF, felt the Action Groups were averse to attempts to organize their work more rationally.

VAct

Recently, the Vision Task Force members decided they needed to have a full-time team in place to coordinate the work of the Action Groups, and to improve communication between them and the community. The Auroville Campus Initiative team, most of whom had been part of the organizing team for the Retreat, was asked by the Governing Board to take it on and from this emerged the Vision and Action Coordination Group (VAct).

Among the tasks allocated to VAct was to assist the Action Groups to come up with overarching priorities, to focus on manifesting the small price tag, 'low-hanging fruits' of each Action Group without losing sight of the goals and milestones identified during the Retreat, and to coordinate the work between the Action Groups and the existing Working Groups. The latter is crucial as many of the Retreat goals and milestones require changes in the policies or ways of working of the existing Working Groups.

VAct have not had a comfortable introduction to the work. They discovered there were many loose ends and a certain lack of coordination between the Action Groups. They also felt a need to find ways of elevating the energy levels of the Groups as they perceived that some of the original spirit and inspiration of the Retreat had drained away.

Recently, in a new attempt to re-energise them and coordinate their work, VAct invited the Action Groups to come together for a joint update meeting. This included a collective brainstorming session to identify common requirements and to create a unifying vision for all the Action Groups. Specifically, they asked attendees to envisage how to inspire a 'Second Wave' of aspiring youth from all over the world to come here and help us accelerate the manifestion of our ideals.

While the meeting was not particularly well-attended, partly due to the awful weather, the idea generated enthusiasm among the participants and they came up with various ideas about how to rekindle the true spirit of Auroville. Now Vact would like to take this forward by involving the community as a whole.

Where are we now?

When considering the post-Retreat achievements and disappointments, we should not forget that Auroville has never before taken on a challenge of this magnitude. If all the goals and milestones that emerged from the Retreat were manifested, it would radically transform our lives here. It would be a revolution, and, like all revolutions, it would have had to overcome the huge inertia of the status quo.

At the same time, those who are committed to change post-Retreat are having to feel their way in unknown territory. Inevitably, they will make mistakes, inevitably the changes they would like to see sometimes won't happen, or won't take the form they expect. Some will feel we should be moving faster, others will want longer to bring all the community on board. And, as ever, they will have to deal with issues relating to personal histories, dogma, and to how authority is perceived and exercised in this community.

The Retreat was a profound and timely 'wake-up call'. It reminded us of the ideals and values that brought us here, and of the importance of anchoring them, materialising them, in our everyday lives.

A beginning, a solid beginning, has been made in achieving this. Our success in achieving more will depend upon our faith, patience, flexibility and our immutable aspiration for a profound transformation both of ourselves and of the present Auroville.

Alan

Solar pumping in remote villages: the 100 – 100 project

In 1992 Auroville's renewable energy unit, AuroRE, began providing renewable energy applications and solutions within Auroville and to rural and urban India. One of AuroRE's biggest projects was installing solar water pumping systems under a government subsidy programme. Between 1997 – 2003 they installed almost 1,000 solar pumps in six Indian States, with Punjab alone accounting for 700 of these. A significant number were also installed in Auroville, giving a big boost to solar applications in the community.

However, in 2003 the government subsidy was removed and it was not clear how the government wanted to promote solar energy. AuroRE, deciding they did not see a future in government subsidy schemes, began to focus more on providing renewable energy solutions in Auroville. This included designing integrated solar systems for houses and offices using the most efficient technology, like vacuum tube water heaters and imported charge controllers and inverters.

Sunlit Future

The Auroville renewable energy unit, Sunlit Future, evolved out of AuroRE and began operating in 2010. In this year, they began developing grid-connected systems as a better way of utilising solar. These systems allow surplus energy generated by one's panels to be fed into the grid. Bi-directional meters keep track of how much is fed in and taken out of the grid and one's monthly bills are adjusted accordingly. These systems also obviate the need for batteries, which are about 40% of the cost of a stand-alone solar system and have a high environmental footprint (see Auroville Today no... for more information on grid-connected systems).

Today, buildings like the Matrimandir, the Town Hall, the Foundation and SAIIER offices and Future School are already solar grid-connected. The potential is huge. As Rishi Kapoor, executive of Sunlit Future explains, "In Auroville we can utilise vast unused rooftops in places like Bharat Nivas instead of putting power plants in the ground where you lose valuable land. So there is an idea that by the 50th anniversary of Auroville we should have 50 rooftops with 500 kW of solar capacity. This would be green power. Also, because the electricity is generated and used here, the transmission losses will be much lower and the voltage more stable."

However, the possibility of Auroville being totally self-sufficient in its energy supply and off the TNEB grid remains a dream until the storage problem is solved.

AuroRE's decision not to be involved in government subsidy schemes after 2003 did not mean it stopped working in the larger India. Many Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) working in remote rural locations where there was no electricity supply came to know of the solar pumping installations AuroRE had done in the Punjab and other states, and began asking AuroRE to design projects for them. Between 2003 – 2012 AuroRE and, later, Sunlit Future installed about 100 solar pumps for various NGOs in about a hundred villages.

"We had unconsciously created a demand in a sector where no other solution was possible," says Rishi. "Initially we thought we were just providing a technical solution; we were not thinking of the impact upon the people. But when these people started treating us as gods, we began to realize that bringing reliable clean water to a village where no adequate water supply had existed before brings about a whole cascade of other benefits."

The benefits include vastly reducing the time and energy spent, largely by women, on bringing water from remote sources and a reduction in water-related diseases. These, in turn, generate other benefits like more time for childcare and livelihood activities, decreased infant mortality (water-borne diseases being one of the main causes), more disposable income as health improves, and better attendance of children, particularly girls, at school.

When the provision of a clean, reliable water supply is coupled with improved sanitation, which is often the case with these projects, the impact upon health and general wellbeing is even more pronounced and the risk of sexual violence against women due to open defecation is eliminated.

"So by one small technical intervention you handle many big issues," says Rishi. "This experience was the inspiration for the 100-100 project. I thought if we could install 100 pumps in 100 remote, underdeveloped villages of India, we could

Installing a solar pumping system in Gobada village, Orissa

make a huge impact on these people's lives."

The 100 – 100 project

The 100 – 100 project is a collaboration between Sunlit Future, a number of NGOs and Grundfos, the Danish solar pump manufacturer. AuroRE and Sunlit Future have a long association with Grundfos: because of their reliability they have been installing Grundfos pumps in Auroville and elsewhere for many years.

A few years ago, a couple from Denmark approached Sunlit Future to do an energy-conservation project in a Tamil Nadu hospital to be funded by the Grundfos Foundation. Sunlit Future installed a 30 kW grid-connected plant, ten solar pumps, and replaced hundreds of fans and tube lights with energy-efficient ones. It was a success; there was a big saving in energy consumption and costs. But Rishi was dissatisfied. Having seen the impact of installing solar pumps in remote locations, he felt that the Grundfos money could be put to more productive use in areas where there is no electricity and the people are struggling to survive.

He wrote a proposal to install 100 solar pumps in 100 remote villages in one year and Grundfos agreed to back it. It was agreed that Sunlit Future would provide the technical expertise while Grundfos would provide the panels and the pumps. But it would be the local NGOs who would finance the drilling of the bore well and the infrastructure to store and supply the water to the villagers.

"So, financially, it's an equal partnership," says Rishi.

In fact, the NGOs are the key to the success of the scheme. As Rishi points out, raising the money, providing the technical expertise and installing the system is the easy part. It is in the implementation that the challenge lies. And here the NGOs play a key role because they do the crucial groundwork in the villages.

"If the local people's wishes are not taken into account, what we are providing will not be utilised well or will be wasted," says Rishi. "We are outsiders, foreigners there. We don't speak the language, we don't know the local culture, we don't know the local dynamics or the caste scenario. This is why we rely so heavily on our local NGO partners, all of whom I had worked with previously so I knew they would command the respect of the villagers."

It is the local NGO that, once the project has been advertised, receives requests from villages in the region and, after considering various factors, makes a selection. Rishi visits those villages to work out the optimal technical solution for the siting of the well, panels, water tank etc. Then Rishi designs the pump and water delivery systems in such a way they not only fulfil the present demand but can also cope with increased water consumption in the future due to population growth or the addition of sanitation systems.

Meanwhile the NGO negotiates with the villagers for the release of private land for the project, if necessary, and ensures that everybody in the village is on board. This is often a condition for the project going ahead.

The NGO forms a village committee that, under the guidance of the NGO representative, will hold the project. It is the village committee and the NGO that is responsible for ensuring that the system once installed is well maintained. They open a local bank account and ensure that each household in the village pays an initial deposit and then makes a monthly contribution – usually of between Rs 30 -50 – towards the maintenance of the system. "This makes everybody feel responsible for the upkeep of the asset," explains Rishi. "It also pays for one person in the village to clean the solar panels and to operate and service the pump: we provide the training for this. Also, if something happens to the system, they have the capacity to repair it or to buy a new pump or panel without being dependent on further grants to keep the system running."

The story so far

In the first phase, beginning in December last year, 28 pumps and water delivery systems were installed in 28 remote villages in Maharashtra, Orissa, and Madhya Pradesh. In the next phase, which is now being completed, 32 systems are being installed. In 2016, 40 more sites will be identified and systems installed.

The impact so far

The first phase resulted in more than 10,000 people in 1500 households having, for the first time, access to safe drinking water and improved hygiene and sanitation facilities. Moreover, the systems are being maintained well and most of the beneficiaries are making monthly contributions.

These are impressive statistics. But there is an even larger objective to this project, and that is to arrest the migration from rural areas to the cities by providing the means for people in those rural areas to remain there and be productive. How successful has the project been in achieving this?

Rishi says the 100 – 100 project is still too new to be able to be able to assess this. But he mentions a village in Madhya Pradesh where they did similar work in 2012. "It was in a desperate situation. The village had no electricity supply, it was on top of a hill and for two months every summer there was no water in the village. The only source was a parched open well at the bottom of the hill, into which they would lower children on ropes to scoop a few precious drops into buckets. The whole village was doing this for two months every year. The situation was so bad that women from other villages refused to marry the men from this village because they knew their only task would be to collect water.

"That village was a perfect place for migration: nobody wanted to stay there. But, with the help of a local NGO and with funding and expertise from the international mining company, Rio Tinto, a new well was blasted out of the rock two kilometres away, and, using a solar pump, we transported the water up to the village. This changed their lives.

"What you have to understand is that the needs of an ordinary person living in a village like this are minimal. They don't want to drive a big car. They are very happy if they have food, clean water and good healthcare, and if they see a future for their children. If these things are provided, they are very happy to stay where they are.

"Our focus is water. Obviously other components include health and education, and whether or not this is included in the project depends on who your NGO partner is. About 50% of the villages in the 100 – 100 project will have sanitation included. In Orissa we are working with Gram Vikas, a very

dynamic NGO. They have big schools in the rural areas so the education component is also taken care of locally."

Is it sustainable?

Yet, India still has thousands of remote villages that are not connected to the grid: Rishi mentions Maharashtra where, in an area of one thousand square kilometres, not one village is electrified. And even in villages where there is a connection, there is frequently no reliable supply.

How to meet this huge challenge? Is this model where NGOs are financed by individuals or companies to do the work a sustainable one? Shouldn't the State Governments be playing a bigger role in providing clean drinking water to remote villages?

Rishi agrees that the government has the resources and the administrative machinery to do this. Every village in the country has a panchayat committee and every region has a Block Development Officer who is responsible for overseeing development. The Government of India even has a solar-supplied drinking water policy in place, and any village can apply for the grant.

"But the reality," says Rishi, "is that nothing is moving. Most people are not even aware of the scheme. And even if they are aware, by the time the money that is coming from the Central Government trickles down to where it is needed, it is only one tenth of what was allocated. So even if there is a will in the Government to change things, the implementation model is lacking."

Some State Governments have taken up the work, but with mixed results. Rishi mentions a Maharashtra Government project that was inspired by a successful project of Sunlit Future in a remote village of the State. "They came up with a scheme to implement 200 solar water pumping projects. However, when I visited those areas a few years later, I found that most of the 200 pumps had stopped working.

"The problem is the government used different criteria from ours. The electrical cables were too thin and the whole pipeline structure was designed for a city rather than a village, so it was unworkable. In addition to that, often the panels were installed next to a remote borewell, so many of them were stolen.

"Failures like this give a bad name to the whole solar industry."

At the same time, Rishi acknowledges that NGOs cannot keep relying upon grants or donations from industry to do the work. But he believes there is another option. He points out that the cost of implementing these kinds of projects is comparatively low. For about six lakh rupees, it is possible to install a solar pump and water distribution network for a village of between 150 – 200 households. "So another option would be if a funding agency would advance the money and the NGO holding the project took responsibility for seeing that the beneficiaries repaid this over a period of time. It wouldn't have to be a huge monthly contribution – perhaps between Rs 50 – 100 a household – and I'm sure that the people, once they see the reliability of the project, would be willing to participate.

"In this way we could sustain the momentum of this crucial work."

From an interview by Alan

A project on community participation

During the first two weeks of December, and for the third time, a group of ten students from Queen's University (Kingston, Canada) and their professor Dr. Ajay Agarwal, stayed in Auroville. As part of their Masters in Urban and Regional Planning, the students designed a community participation framework for Auroville to be used for planning community projects. In collaboration with the Auroville Sustainability Institute and L'Avenir d'Auroville, they chose to focus their research on community participation in the planning and development of sectors one and two of the Residential Zone in Auroville (between Grace and Prarthana). The specific topic they tackled was to identify the need of "community features/supporting facilities" in these sectors. The goal was to design a clear guide for incorporating people's views and opinions into the planning process in order to make it more inclusive and more informed.

How they designed the community participation framework

After doing extensive research in Canada on Auroville's planning and development projects as well as on participation frameworks around the world, the students had to understand Auroville as well as possible to adapt their framework to the context. Therefore, before coming to Auroville, they sent a survey to Aurovilians about "perceptions about Community Participation" and conducted interviews on skype with Aurovilians in order to get a sense of how Auroville functioned and how participation was already happening. While in Auroville, they refined their community participation framework based on their new understanding of Auroville and the results of their pilot study on the need of "community feature/supporting facilities".

They realized there was a wide spectrum of possibilities, called "levels of engagement", in which the community could be involved. The higher the level of engagement, the more power the people have. At the highest level, the people have the decision-making power, at the lowest they are just informed.

The level of participation depends on the project and on the community. For example, in

The Canadian students from Kingston University with professor Ajay Agarwal

Auroville, the whole community does not need to have decision-making power each time the roads have to be fixed. Therefore, the students concluded that in Auroville, the planning and development should include a variety of levels of engagement. The community participation framework they proposed tried to reflect this understanding.

Pilot Study

The students designed their community participation framework while still in Canada. When they arrived in Auroville they conducted a pilot study by implementing a small portion of their framework. For this pilot study, they conducted more interviews with groups such as youth and individual Aurovilians, made site visits, sent another, more specific survey about community features/supporting facilities and organized several participatory activities with Aurovilians.

Their first activity was to conduct information kiosks and sound boards in PTDC, Solar Kitchen and the Creativity community to get ideas from Aurovilians on what they wanted as community features in the Residential Zone (more specifically in sectors one and two). Thanks to the information gathered in the kiosks, the group of students categorized the ideas in thirteen different themes. These themes

were then presented in the Visioning Workshop the students organized. During the workshop, the Aurovilian participants) chose the most important themes among the thirteen, using the Dot Democracy method, and discussed each of the chosen themes in depth, using the Open Spaces method. The Dot Democracy method consists of giving the same number of dots to each participant who will then put one dot on each topic they think is one of the most important to talk about. The Open Spaces method allows participants to discuss topics in depth. To achieve this, several tables are set up and at each table a topic is discussed. When participants feel that they cannot contribute or learn more from the discussion, they go to another table and talk about another topic. Each table has a facilitator who tries to guide participants into choosing which projects would be the most important and the most feasible, how to implement them and in what time frame it would be possible to implement them.

Proposed framework

As they explained during their final presentation, the students designed a framework that would typically take from six months to one year and is composed of seven main steps:

The first step is to set intentions: define the purpose and the outcome of the participation

process by clarifying the reason(s) to engage the community, the information wanted from this participation and the roles of the key players (decision makers, project team, community participants).

The second stage is a SWOC analysis. It consists of identifying the Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Challenges (SWOC) of participation processes in relation to the project, in order to identify the most suitable engagement technique for that project.

Step three is to identify the interested and impacted groups: their level of interest, how they are impacted, the needs/accessibility concerns and resources/skills.

The fourth stage is to choose the type of engagement: to tell, inform the community; to listen, include thoughts and feelings of community members; to discuss, create and share ideas; and to work together, to find a solution and make decisions.

The fifth stage is to choose the most appropriate participation techniques, depending on the project and the community.

Step six is to communicate and implement the plan. The organization informs the community of the final plan and implements it according to the timeline defined.

The last stage is to evaluate the process. The organization implementing the project has to collect feedback from the community and refine their project according to this feedback.

Through the activities and research they conducted in Auroville, the students learnt that the words they were using could have a different meaning for different people in Auroville so they tried to incorporate the spirit, wording and way of thinking of Auroville into their report. They also realized the importance of making information more accessible to people by, for example, communicating in different languages.

After spending time in Auroville, the students appreciated the spirit of experimentation in Auroville and the possibility to try different things that had not been tried before, says Joanna, one of the students. She explains that in Canada, for example, there are more regulations which prevent this freedom of experimenting. They also admired the willingness of Aurovilians to participate.

Gaëlle

Building bridges: the Paalam Project

Youth from the neighbourhood attending a presentation in the Unity Pavilion

The Bioregion Action Group and YouthLink are both outcomes of the Auroville Retreat. Together with Auroville Village Action they are in the process of implementing a project called 'Paalam', meaning 'Bridge' in Tamil. This is a bioregional and Auroville youth leadership programme.

The objective of this project is to establish links, bridges, with youth from villages in the immediate vicinity of Auroville. It aims to provide training in sustainable village development through a programme that would include exposure to Auroville and its ideals and to model village development throughout Tamil Nadu. The idea is that, by coming together, the youth

themselves will be able to identify and mould their own 'Paalam' initiative(s) that could be implemented over the coming years and be part of a regional development plan for Auroville and the bioregion.

Currently the project has been funded by Stichting De Zaaier and will cover about five sessions spread over about half a year. These sessions have been designed so as to provide the youth with the opportunity to build teams, explore the current development landscape, share ideas and formulate their own dreams for the future. There is also an option of including the Stewardship for New Emergence Leadership and Capacity Training workshops that are also funded by Stichting De Zaaier.

The first session took place on Sunday 29th November at the Unity Pavilion. About forty youth who had been actively working in about 18 neighbouring villages attended, in addition to ten from Youth Link. There was a brief introduction to the programme, and then the youth shared with one another their backgrounds, and their hopes and expectations of the project. The youth were also provided with a basic introduction to aspects of Auroville's organization.

The team had their lunch at the Solar Kitchen, and there was a beautiful moment in the Matrimandir gardens when a deep sharing took place regarding each individual's hopes for the project.

The highlight of the day was to hear, again and again, how inspired and grateful many of the participants felt for being able to come together in a joint collaboration. The day ended when, taking refuge from a heavy monsoon downpour, the group gathered under the Matrimandir for a moment of silence, holding hands together in a common aspiration, before heading home.

Future sessions are being planned on the basis of the interests expressed in this session.

Kavitha, YouthLink

Responsible Energy Management workshop

In the midst of the heavy rains that brought life to a standstill in most areas of Tamil Nadu, an energetic group of people came to Auroville from all over India. They were to participate in the Ministry of New and Renewable Energy (MNRE) and Auroville Consulting's Programme for Responsible Energy Management (PREM) in association with the Tamil Nadu Energy Development Agency (TEDA). The purpose of the workshop, which is in its third year now, was to train officers from State nodal agencies and regional rural banks in India to identify lucrative 'Clean Energy' projects that promote off-grid renewables, with a special focus on rooftop solar panels.

Apart from training in areas like energy conservation and efficiency interventions, energy audits, and solar photovoltaic systems, there were also site visits to clean energy installations in Auroville. Apart from the team at Auroville Consulting, Debabrata from Sunlit Future, Jorge of Min Vayu, Akash from Cynergy and Carsten of Auroville Energy Products are also involved as facilitators for the participants.

So why is there a need for such a programme? Nitin, from Auroville Consulting, explains that despite the deteriorating state of our environment and energy needs, most of the renewable energy projects face a big time lag between inception and implementation in India. This is partly due to the hierarchical approval mechanism in the energy departments, but mostly due to a lack of understanding among the officers at the grassroots levels concerning what is a functional or sustainable project. With this in mind, the workshop has been designed to cater to a layman's understanding of the technicalities of clean energy products and processes.

Shradha

Nourishing the Newcomer seed

Beatrice reflects on her process of joining Auroville in 2014

I was born in France, lived in Canada and New Caledonia, and then returned to France. Each time I chose to adapt my skills to the necessity of the place where I was. So, I have been a French teacher for migrants and for young people from difficult backgrounds, and then a social counselor. I saw that I was good at helping people individually to find their own strength, so then I decided to become a therapist. I did training and gave individual sessions with an intuitive reading tool that has a psycho-spiritual element.

Someone then spoke to me about going to Auroville as an experiment. I had read Satprem's book *L'aventure de la conscience* on Sri Aurobindo's vision when I was 24, but the effect was not so strong on me at the time. When I was planning to go to Auroville, I read Satprem's book again, and this time it was a strong discovery. I said, "I will go to Auroville to study Sri Aurobindo and The Mother". I came here for four months, and spent my time going to the library, to Matrimandir, and back to study in my room. On my visit to Matrimandir, a strong experience happened in the inner room. It was something I had waited for all my life, an opening inside. I can't define it, but I was so full, I thought that I have to offer it through some action. So I asked for service in Matrimandir, and I began worked there every day.

This strong experience in the inner chamber was the beginning of a new inner adventure, an adventure I could not stop, so I decided to come back as a Newcomer to continue this beautiful experience.

At the beginning, I didn't really understand Auroville's organisation. I was going from one meeting to another, and didn't understand how they were relating to each other, combining together. Then, nine months after my arrival, I did the Aspiration programme, which introduced me to governance and the economy etc. So step by step, I understood and I became interested in the Residents Assembly process and started to try to participate regularly in these meetings. Now I am very interested in the Active Residents' Assembly initiative.

I continued my service in Matrimandir by taking on more responsibilities. One year has passed and I am part of the Petal coordination team. We take care of the twelve Petals and coordinate a team of 20 to 30 people who receive guests in the morning for meditation in Petals. We are not just there to open the door, take tokens, give socks and help the guests to go inside. We also have to be aware of their inner attitude, as we know this contributes to helping the guests to keep silent and concentrated.

I am also part of the Aspiration programme team. When the Newcomers arrive in Auroville, they are full of something, it's so precious – it's the seed. And it's important this seed grows and blossoms, to give to Auroville the creativity that these people have to offer. When you are a Newcomer, even though you are not Aurovilian, you are already part of the organism of the community, and you share the energetic transformation. And to be part of this big bath of energy, you also have to put your own energy into it, and, in your own small capacity, to transform it some way. So the question for me is not, "May I change something?", but: "Do I contribute (with my thoughts, my feelings, my actions) to fuel the higher dimension of the community?"

For me, building Auroville is linked to an inner work. So it is the quality of the beings which permit the realisation of the ideals of Auroville. And this is the most difficult part for me. At the beginning, I thought "I am so full, I have so much to give, and I'm ready to give." But the more time goes on, the more I realize my limits! And I think, "Oh, it's not sufficient!"

We can build Auroville if we voluntarily serve the Divine, if we become tools of the Divine. But the reality is, that we are most of the time in the ego. And we want to offer only a little part of it! But that's not the way. It's about offering all of it. And I feel my limit here. I appreciate having a safe room, with comfort and a fan, which I know is not the case for everyone in Auroville. In reality, it's important but not essential. The pioneers didn't have these things. The most important thing is to keep the connection inside with something higher, which gives you the aspiration, sincerity and capacity to offer service with joy in spite of all the difficulties.

You have to keep your flame alive. I have to find a way to balance my own inner research and what I can offer outwardly. For me, there is a tendency, some imbalance to be more in action, or only in action. I need to take time for meditation and studying, mainly in Sri Aurobindo and Mother's books, to stay in contact with the flame inside, as these texts are full of powerful energy.

I am divorced, my children are grown up and out in the world, I don't need to work outside. I can be my true being here, because in Auroville we have the freedom to be what we really are. So for me, it was easier to choose this life. I just have to say yes. Sometimes the ego says "eeeee" [mimes discomfort] I feel some hesitation, and I realize I am still in process. Now I understand what unending education means, this work is never finished. There are many new experiences, interactions here, so it's always challenging… but Mother said, take these as new things to work on!

The call is always very strong. I cannot imagine living in another place in the world: it's like a wonderful adventure.

In Auroville, we have the freedom to follow what the soul asks for, and to nourish the seed of our potential. If this seed grows, blossoms and give fruits as a manifestation of their souls, human beings become happy, fulfilled and creative. If all the human beings in Auroville blossom, Auroville will blossom.

Every morning, when we open the petals, I think about that. I hope that the twelve qualities represented in the Petals will blossom in our hearts, so that Auroville will be a flower of the Divine!

In conversation with Lesley

Beatrice

The Auroville Radio Story

Auroville Radio celebrated its 11th anniversary on December 5th this year. Despite their busy schedule in the months of November and December, and having to help set up *Peridar Kaala Vaanoli* ('Radio in the Time of Extreme Calamity' in Tamil), a temporary emergency FM radio station for the flood-hit Cuddalore, Andrea and Renu share their stories from Auroville Radio.

The Auroville Radio office in the Town Hall

How did the idea of Auroville Radio emerge?

Andrea: When I first came to Auroville in 1999, and later decided to live here in 2000, the one thing that struck me was how an advanced community like ours was still using old-fashioned communication methods. The community then only had a monthly newsmagazine *Auroville Today*, a weekly newsletter *News & Notes* and *Auronet* to keep everyone informed about what was going on. I was running a magazine before I joined Auroville and had founded a radio station 35 years ago in Italy. Seeing how most of the community had only partial information about what was going on, I thought, 'why not get a tool for effective communication?' That's how we set up the Auroville Radio.

Renu: I joined the team only last year, but before that I used to have not much option but to frequent the *Auroville Today* workspace to know what was happening around Auroville,. That too, only in later years after the *Auroville Today* team took on a role of not just portraying Auroville in a positive light as a message to the outside world, but also critiquing ourselves as and when needed.

Andrea: Auroville is growing but our media are not growing accordingly with the number of people or events or policies and point of views that are evolving dynamically by the day. This creates a gap in our understanding of the reasons behind most of the decision-making that happens within the community. As a multi-cultural and lingual group of people, we need much more innovative communication tools than what we have in place today.

Auroville Radio seems to be much more ambitious than being just a broadcasting station; what would you call your vision?

Renu: We see that in Auroville a lot of energy is put in by the various parties in the field of information dissemination to cover the same story. We aspire to create a 'Media Hub', where people can deposit their stories and audio-visual data from their experiences and others can extract this information when required to understand the community or trace its evolution. Another idea is to broadcast live most of the meetings that happen, so that the community members can have a direct understanding and interpretation of the event.

Andrea: Also, the hub in terms of a shared physical infrastructure for all of the community's media units can help facilitate a process of learning; I can share about something that I don't know and another member can step up and help me out with it. It not only saves a lot of money but creates a connection between all of the people who are essentially doing the same job.

Do you think radio broadcasting is being ignored by this internet generation?

Andrea: The first radio broadcast stations in India began as early as the 1927s in Mumbai and Calcutta. Commercial radio broadcasting had started in Europe only a couple of years ago. Today, you find that kids between the ages of 14 to 23 are listening to more radio than their parents who grew up in the radio generation. Radio is a more 'intimate' media than television or the internet. Gutenberg had started printing books 600 years ago, and even now we continue printing and reading books, with or without the internet. This is just another opportunity to learn; the internet is growing but so is the radio and it is still very much around.

Renu: Surprisingly, in Auroville, it was the first generation of Aurovilians who were not so familiar with the radio technology, and the later generations that joined us embraced this. I believe the radio will always have a particular place in people's heart and minds, because you have to listen closely to a radio programme, it engages your brain more than the visual distractions that are created in television.

Auroville Radio closed down briefly last year in 2014. What happened?

Renu: There was a conflict between the Town Hall's management (ACUR) and the Radio for the space, and Andrea decided to close down the service. It took years of dedication from Andrea to create this space for volunteers to come and jump in and find a way to explore Auroville and their interests. So it really upset me when I heard they had decided to shut it down and I decided to help find a way to get around it.

Andrea: And then I ran into her Pour Tous and said, "Renu, I need you!" She was, in fact, already more of a radio person, having experimented with setting up radio stations in Auroville back in the 1980s for greenbelters. She was the right person to get our work back on track at that time, and found her calling in production and administration work.

Renu: I was just wondering what to do next and when Andrea came up with this request. Soon after I realized, 'this is my spot!'

Auroville radio has just celebrated its 11th year. What has the journey so far been like?

Renu: We have given the opportunity to thousands of volunteers and visitors to come to Auroville and plug in within the community with a role to learn and report. But it took 10 years for us to be recognized as a public service activity and more to gain funding and support from the Foundation. Without this, we were unable to nurture or deepen our content, to take it to a more professional level.

We still feel the need to create a stable team before we focus on upgrading our content. We also need a bigger studio where we can produce deeper and more personal content, and can accommodate better equipment.

Andrea: Also we have been finding it hard to engage Newcomers and Aurovilians to take ownership of the community radio station. We want it to become a collaborative service.

Renu: A lot of our time and energy and space is dedicated to training. We even help people with zero skills to start working with this medium. In the midst of doing this,we don't have much time to evolve the content..

Andrea: The last 10 years have been a struggle just to survive and we were trying to fundraise to help with our maintenances. Now we want to upgrade our content and become a true community radio station; to facilitate our understanding as a community on what it means to be on the path of human unity and of creating a city of 50,000.

What did you do in Cuddalore?

Andrea: Mr. John Nelson of 'Saranalayam' a registered NGO from Vadalur, Tamil Nadu had initiated the process and interacted with the district administration at Cuddalore. Along with many other agencies, we lent a hand and helped set up the FM emergency broadcast station within in record time. The station is being used to communicate with the affected people and provide relief to them. We keep in touch with these people who help us update through our Facebook page. Our challenge remains the language and distance barrier. But, on the whole, it is a good achievement that the Indian government immediately provided a temporary emergency FM broadcast license for setting up the station in the disaster-affected area.

Renu: We were energized when a call came to help out in the Cuddalore relief work. The government and local NGOs were very helpful and we realized we could also broadcast through FM and reach out to villages that might not have internet access. In Auroville, the FM regulations and therefore the application process for an FM license is complex and it has been very heavy for us with the amount of paperwork as we are approaching it independently. It could have been easier for us if this was done through the Auroville Foundation.

In the future, we wish to organically enlarge our content. We want to introduce multi-cultural aspects in English and Tamil for the benefit of Auroville and the surrounding villages.

Shradha

The Auroville Radio Team was in Cuddalore at the time this article was written to make an 18 minutes programme for UNESCO's World Radio Day on February 13 with the theme of 'Radio In Times Of Emergency And Disaster'.

Don't hold your breath

Auroville's population figures for 2015 have finally arrived. Were they worth waiting for? Not really. The overall population has increased by – wait for it – a grand, or not so grand, total of 55, which is an annual growth rate of a shade over 2%, almost one percentage point less than last year. No wonder the Growth Action Group dissolved itself in July, presumably in despair.

Almost two thirds of the increase is due to an increase in the populations of our two most populous nationalities, Indians and French, which added 19 and 15 nationals respectively. The Indian proportion of the whole is slightly down, at 42.5%, but Indian, French and Germans still make up two thirds of our total population. And we call this an 'international' community…

So who were the gainers and the losers? The Spanish saw the biggest percentage rise (10%) but that only represents five extra Iberians. The Dutch also added five, the Italians four, the Koreans and Canadians three, the Ukrainians and Japanese two. Is anybody still reading this?

The big losers were the Swiss who shed five of their number (couldn't cope with global warming?), and the Americans (-4), while the Israelis and Australians each lost a couple of nationals. The single Finnish and Egyptian representatives disappeared (together?).

The male/female ratio for adults is also virtually unchanged from last year, at around 50.5%/49.5%, although the women have very slightly improved their representation. For some reason, the ratio is slightly different for minors, boys representing around 53.5% of the total. But then, of course, work in the Auroville mines is tough, so you wouldn't expect so many girls to be attracted to working the pits.

So why is our population not expanding faster? After all, our annual population growth rate is almost exactly the same as that of Afghanistan and Eritrea, which are not exactly prime holiday destinations. And we have pizzerias, pools, healing centres, and so many other wonderful places ...

As ever in Auroville, theories abound. It's the lack of low-cost housing, the high cost of living, the climate, a dysfunctional economy, the fact that we are no longer 'cutting-edge' in many areas. It's because we are an ageing population, that we have gone 'bourgeois' and don't appeal to young people who are looking for a different way of life. It's because we are not living up to our high ideals (but when, exactly, did we?).

And then, of course, there is the *el nino* effect which, along with climate change, seems to be blamed for most things that are going wrong these days.

So there's plenty of food for speculation in these figures. If you feel drawn to this work, why not apply to write about the 2016 population figures next December? This exciting job opportunity has a vacancy at present.

Alan

Auroville Population by Nationality		
Nationality	Dec. 14	Dec. 15
Indian	1025	1044
French	340	355
German	221	220
Italian	142	146
Dutch	87	92
American	86	82
Russian	63	64
Spanish	50	55
British	45	46
Israeli	39	37
Swiss	41	36
Belgian	35	35
Korean	32	35
Canadian	23	26
Swedish	23	23
Ukrainian	17	19
Australian	17	15
South African	12	13
Chinese	11	12
Japanese	9	11
Austrian	8	9
Argentinian	9	8
Hungarian	6	6
Slovene	5	6
Uzbekistan	5	5
Mexican	4	5
Belorussian	4	4
Brazilian	4	4
Latvian	4	4
Danish	4	3
Tibetan	3	3
Nepali	3	3
Ethiopian	2	3
Sri Lankan	2	3
Philippines	1	3
Moldovian	2	2
Bulgarian	2	2
Rwandese	2	2
Colombian	2	2
Iceland	1	2
Czech	1	2
Taiwan	0	2
Ecuador	1	1
Lithuanian	1	1
Iranian	1	1
Kazakh	1	1
Irish	1	1
Algerian	1	1
Finnish	1	0
Egyptian	1	0
Total	**2400**	**2455**

Auroville Population break-up		
Categories	Dec. 14	Dec. 15
Adults male	905	926
Adults female	883	905
Total	**1788**	**1831**
Minors male	326	332
Minors female	286	292
Total	**612**	**624**
Grand total	**2400**	**2455**

Ursula Mack

On December 15th, surrounded by friends, Ursula Mack left her body in her house in Samasti after a long period of gradual and peaceful withdrawal. She was 91 years old.

Ursula hailed from Germany where she had lived an extremely difficult life throughout the Second World War, losing four brothers and her family's land and home. In spite of all the hardship, she remained positive and optimistic.

In the early 1970s she visited the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and met The Mother, a meeting that left her with ineluctable impressions. She also came to Auroville, and later became an active member of AVI Germany and was instrumental in hosting the 1983 Auroville International Meeting in her brother's house in Laubach, Germany.

Immediately after her retirement in 1990, Ursula joined Auroville, where she became the much appreciated, very first resident physiotherapist, helping Aurovilians wherever she could. She became instrumental in the building of Pitanga and the Quiet Healing Centre. In later years, she mostly helped people from her house, freely distributing nature remedies she ordered from Germany, as well as chocolate, marzipan and Christmas stollen.

Ursula's friendly and loving nature was apparent till the end. She suffered a stroke in June, 2014. After a second stroke in June of this year, she became bedridden and quite indrawn. But even while going through increasingly profound physical crises, she always managed to convey a steady, faithful and grateful disposition, evoking deep contact and love in the ones caring for her.

Ursula's remains were cremated at the Adventure cremation grounds on December 18th.

Monsoon work in surrounding villages

The heavy rains took many areas in South India by surprise. Chennai and Cuddalore were flooded and many small villages in our bioregion were also severely affected, some almost washed away. Auroville's effort to provide flood relief in the neighbouring area brought together three groups, Auroville Village Action, EcoPro and YouthLink, supported by the Working Committee and various other individuals. With limited resources and funds, it was decided to focus on two aspects. One was to spray Effective Microorganisms (EM) in the areas most affected. The immediate benefit of EM is the elimination of foul smells, thereby reducing the spread of diseases via flies. EM also has the capacity to restore the microbial balance in the soil, and, over time, reduce the number of pathogens. The second effort was to distribute water treatment sachets from Auro Aquasafe to help those without access to clean drinking water. The work was done in consultation with the affected panchayats.

Auroville volunteers teach the use of EM

Aquifer recharged

For Auroville's aquifer recharge, the monsoon rains were a blessing, as all water bodies filled up and even spilled over, thus guaranteeing sufficient water for the dry months. Water statistics, provided by Charlie from Aurogreen, show that this year the rains were a whopping 2084 mm, a figure that exceeded the heavy rainfall in 2010.

All the granite and concrete dams built in the Auroville area functioned well. The newly made earth dams and bunds in Aurodam, in the International Zone, in Hermitage and at other places had some surface erosion and some broke, but there was relatively little damage.

Auroville Total Rainfall	
Year	Rainfall in mm
2010	1 916
2011	1 722
2012	899
2013	918
2014	1 293
2015	2 084

The percolation of the watershed Sukhavati-Aurogreen-Bommaiyarpalayam went faster than expected. The basin near Bommaiyarpalayam filled up after receiving 264 mm in 24 hours and spilled over. The last time this happened was five years ago. Then the dam was raised by one meter to catch exceptional rainfall. Within eight days this water percolated. The village settlement at the end of the canyon was safe.

This monsoon shows very clearly that water bodies are important and should be monitored, maintained and improved where necessary. For Auroville, it means that many water bodies should be cleaned, some bunds and dams raised and spillways widened or deepened.

Irumbai solar village

The Government of Tamil Nadu has approved a Solar Village Project for Irumbai village which has been promoted by Auroville Consulting. The pilot project will demonstrate that a village can (on an annual basis) produce all the energy it consumes from grid-connected solar PV systems and should / can therefore be exempted from load shedding. The financial outlay is Rs 2.08 crore. Auroville Consulting is now preparing an outline of an implementation plan.

Youth in the Town Hall

On December 12th 2015, about 20 youth gathered in the Town Hall in answer to an invitation that said, "Ever wondered what's happening in the Town Hall? Come and join us in this educational journey and see how Auroville functions." The youth listened to presentations on topics like Auroville's ideals, Economy, Town Planning, the history of working groups, and the roles of the Working Committee and Auroville Council.

The day ended with the group gathering on top of nearby Citadines, enjoying a calming view of Auroville's landscape – the Matrimandir, Maison des Jeunes, SAIIER, and the Town Hall, all radiating gently in the sunset.

Lyle gives a presentation on the Auroville Economy in the Town Hall meeting room

The experience was a success and an encouraging indicator that youth are indeed interested and eager to learn more and participate in Auroville. Several teachers and parents have requested to be better informed of such programmes in the future, so that more youth can join. YouthLink plan to continue offering such an experience to youth every few months.

Interview Piero part 2.

The second part of the interview with Piero Cicionesi has been released. Both parts have been posted online and can be seen at YouTube. The interviews record for future generations the true history of the construction of the Inner Chamber, from Udar's first drawing under the direct instructions of the Mother, to the installation of the Crystal. They also honour Piero Cicionesi, who was the Inner Chamber's engineer, draftsman, consulting architect, ceaseless and sincere worker.

Crematorium structure collapsed

Due to the heavy monsoon rains, the keet structure of Auroville's open-air crematorium collapsed. A temporary but slightly lop-sided structure has been erected.

Road blocked

After failed land purchase negotiations, and to prevent a landowner to parcel his land in the city area and sell it as housing plots, which is illegal, the road between Surrender and Kalabhumi has been blocked.

In memoriam Anand
(who passed away on October 30th).

A well-loved teacher, talented artist,
My brother Anand was a multi-linguist.
Worked at Matrimandir, in Courage he dwelt.
Mother's sweet presence, everywhere he felt.
He spoke to the flowers, and listened to the birds,
To express his feelings, he needed no words.
Fourteen in the Ashram, thirteen in Auroville,
His years he spent, to serve eternal will.
For hours he would go, deep into meditation.
Tirelessly he worked for physical transformation.
A student of the Vedas, the Geeta and Savitri.
On higher planes he roamed and set his soul free.
A day before his passing, no limits had his joy.
Carelessly he danced, as if a little boy.
His last words that night, in ears forever ring,
"Tomorrow it will be a new beginning".

Satyajit

The Kallialay Surf-School and the INDI Surfboards

Juan and Samai, the brothers who started the surf school in Auroville, arrived in 1995 at the ages of 11 and 10 respectively. Within a year's time, they were introduced to the surfing world by the Auroville surfing pioneers, André, Patrick, Jacky, and Andy. At that time, Repos Beach was a lively Sunday afternoon destination where, in a self-made surf shack behind the community kitchen, a dozen surfboards were contested by youngsters eager to get to the waves.

Samai recalls those days: "Boards were very hard to come by, one could only get a board through someone who travelled to a surfing destination." Originally, they had only one highly-coveted board that was exchanged and used by many.

By the year 2000, the two brothers were fully hooked to the sport and 14 members of the makeshift surf club raised some money to go on a surf trip to Sri Lanka for 2 weeks. Upon their return, fuelled up by their trip's success, they began to raise money for a skate park, another sport that had caught their interest when they started surfing. Many Aurovilians may remember the loud youngsters skating on the Solar Kitchen terrace, using a precarious customised metal ramp. Six months later, with the help of their father, Eric, they built the first skate park in south-east India, in Auroville. It is called Concrete Jungle and is located near Dana. By 2004, many young people were interested in skating, and they catered to that by offering coaching sessions. Juan admits: "One of our proteges, Satya, now skates at a higher level than us!"

From 2005 till 2006, Juan went to work at a surf school in the south west of France, where he gained first-hand experience on how to run a surf school. Among other things, he learned about the

Juan (4th from right) giving group lessons at Kallialay to other surfers

built at Serenity Beach after the 2004 Tsunami, the waves are more suitable for surfing now, and enable teaching at all levels, from beginners to more advanced.

Slowly but surely, Kallialay's surf lessons attracted more and more customers, and today they give lessons almost every day of the year.

Moving forward

In 2011, KASS played a big part in helping to organise the first surf competition in Mahabalipuram, organised by Temple

Samai and Juan giving a surf lesson

safety measures that every surf school must adhere to. Today, Juan, Nicola, Samai, Dylan and Perceval all have their surf instructor diploma from the International Surfing Association. Besides this, Samai also has the level one surf judge diploma.

In 2006, Juan procured two boards from France, and soon he began teaching people. That's how the first surf school 'Offshore Surf School' emerged. Three years later, Juan and Samai met up for work in Paris, and decided to focus their surfing enthusiasm in Auroville, the place they call home. The surf school is located close to Quiet, where the waves are ideal. It is called Kallialay Surf School (KASS). This, literally translated, means 'rock' (kallu) and 'wave' (allay) in Tamil. Furthermore, 'Kallialay' can also mean 'big wave' (Kali's wave). Thanks to rock piers

Adventures. There they met India's upcoming surfing generation, with whom they saw the potential to develop and support the surfing culture and sport. Since then, the surfers from Kallialay Surf School have gained a reputation for always bringing home trophies. For example, after the last competition organised in Covelong, Juan, Suhasini, Mahiran and Perceval gained international ranking in the Asian Surfing Championship (ASC).

For three years in a row, KASS also organised its own surf competition in Pondicherry. It is called the Summer Swell Challenge (SSC). Juan explains, "SSC grew to become a platform where young people showcase their talent and meet other enthusiastic surfers and skaters from around the world." It was supported by the Pondicherry Tourism Department as well as various other local and international brands, all of whom have shown

great interest in India's surf culture.

The INDI Surfboards

In 2012, when Nicola returned after six months of work in Switzerland, he was determined to push the adventure further. After many years of importing expensive surfboards (made of foam, resin, and wood) the KASS crew developed the motivation to make their own boards. With Nicola's input, INDI Surfboards was created in February, 2014. At this point, Kallialay Surf School expanded their office (located in Auzolan, Reve) into the INDI workshop.

Samai explains that over the last 60 years, as surfing has become more and more competitive, scientists have used physics to test various raw materials and come up with the best formula. This generally comprises foam, wood, fiberglass, and resin. Parallel to this, the majority of surfboards are mass-produced on Asian conveyer belts by Computer Numerical Control (CNC) machines for the larger market. These surfboards all go through a standard process and are never handled by anyone who knows what they will be used for. Sadly, this means that commercial quality control (usually an externally hired professional) is the only factor that ensures the board's performance.

The surfboards made by INDI are manufactured from scratch, by surfers for surfers, using the most biodegradable Indian raw materials. This means that, unlike commercially-produced boards, all these boards are shaped by someone who would love to surf it. As the board's progress goes from raw material to finalised product, every detail of its journey is scrutinised and improved upon by the shaper. Samai explains: "When the foam arrives in large blocks, we cut them into four smaller blocks, using our handmade custom foam-cutting machine. Each of these blocks will make either several short boards or larger boards."

INDI Surfboards creates templates and outlines based on the output of a computer shaping programme. Using this, each of the smaller blocks is then cut out into two symmetrical pieces. At this point, a thin wooden stringer is glued between the two symmetrical pieces, and a blank is born. Nico says: "Unlike other shapers, who order their blanks according to their orders, INDI makes their own."

Using the templates, the convex blank will be transformed into a surfboard by hand. The newly transformed blank, which now resembles the final shape but is still very fragile, will travel to the glassing room. There, every eight hours, it receives a hand layered blanket of fiberglass (4 or 6 oz), each layer impregnated with epoxy resin, for a total of four layers. After this, four more coats of

pure epoxy resin with a homemade X formula are added, to complete the glassing process. Then, the board is sanded down and polished.

The first board

The first board INDI ever shaped without anyone's help materialized out of sheer motivation. It took place outside their workshop in Auzolan. Nico explains: "By the time we had the blank ready there was glue everywhere, foam everywhere, and wood everywhere. Worst of all, it was already 7 30 pm. Just then, the power cut. Dylan and Samai wanted to go home after a full day at the surf school, but I wanted to continue. So Samai became the shaping rack, while Dylan filled in for the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board with a phone torch light." He adds: "After a few weeks, when the shaping bay actually got ready, I finished that board, and that's the first board that all of us tested glassing on. We all surfed it, and that board exceeded all of our expectations!"

The workshop

After seeing Nico's heroic shot at making surfboards in the dark, the boys decided that they needed a workshop with proper lighting and shaping rack. So, together with Eric's much needed input, they got their hands dirty and constructed the INDI Surfboards workshop adjacent to the KASS office in Auzolan. Nico says: "We did a lot of research online, for weeks and weeks, long nights, there was lots of trial and error." Then, once the shaping bay was built, they hosted two experienced shaper friends from the Reunion Islands, Philippe and Yann from Ultimate
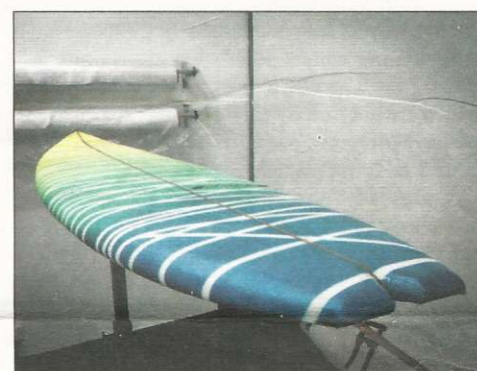
An INDI surfboard

Surfboards (who shaped two boards for three times world champion named Tom Curren). They shared some of their knowledge with the INDI boys.

Samai recalls one incident. "After we'd made a few boards, Eric, who has many years of experience in plastering and construction, asked if he could try to glass." He was not wearing any gloves or protection. "He only tried one coat. Afterwards, he had to shower for days to get himself clean," Samai says, hiding a grin.

All in all, their journey has not been easy. Actually, they say it was hell. Specifically, Nico exclaims: "Months and months of research, phone calls, driving, testing mailing, recalling, remailing, returning material, and just going crazy. We have been searching for a very long time in order to make boards from domestic raw materials only."

Today, their custom-shaped and 100% made in India boards are very popular. Professional surfers have tried them; INDI sponsored surfers have won prizes, and if you drive down to Serenity Beach on any given day when there are waves, you'll see someone in the water surfing one.

The next time you venture into Solar Kitchen and see them covered in white foam, you know a board has just been born. And if they are covered in white zinc, they've spent the last few hours teaching people how to surf.

Inge

For more information visit http://www.surf-schoolindia.com