

Managing tourism in Auroville

The community has no policy regarding how to handle tourism. Recently, visiting students studied the situation and made some recommendations.

The number of foreign and domestic tourists in India is steadily increasing. According to a recent report in *The Hindu*, in 2017 Tamil Nadu was the most popular state for domestic tourism, and the second most popular destination for foreign tourists. In all, it received over eight million visitors that year.

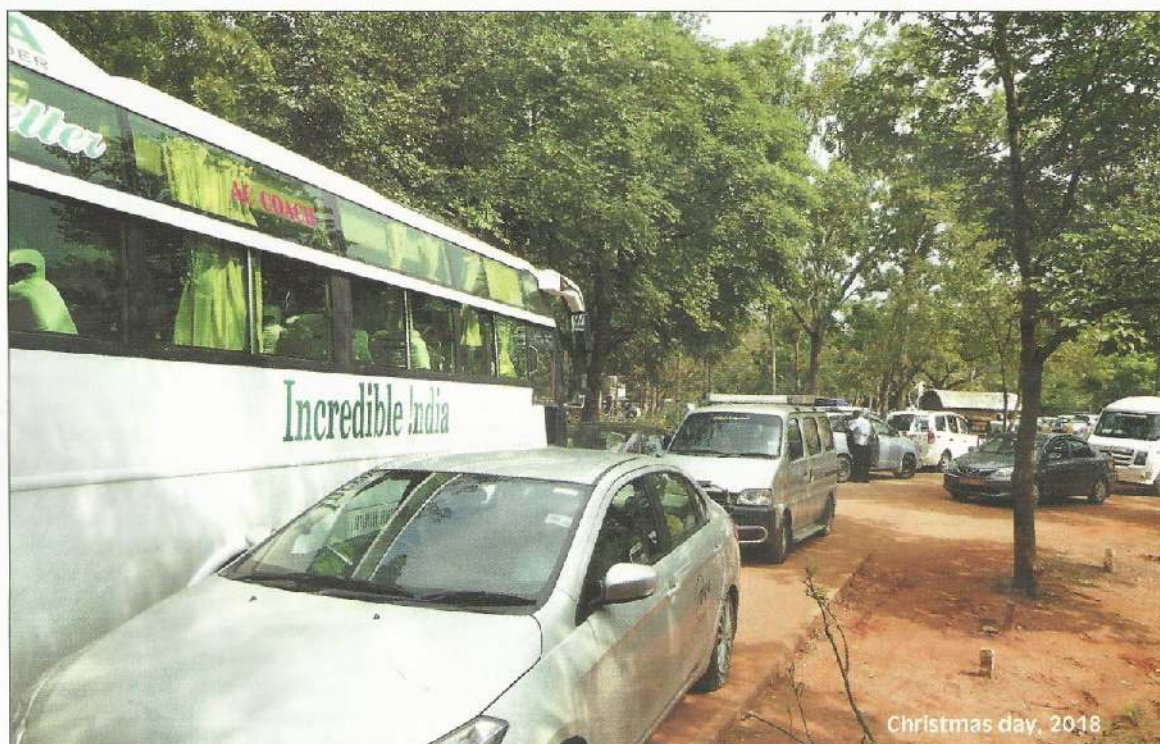
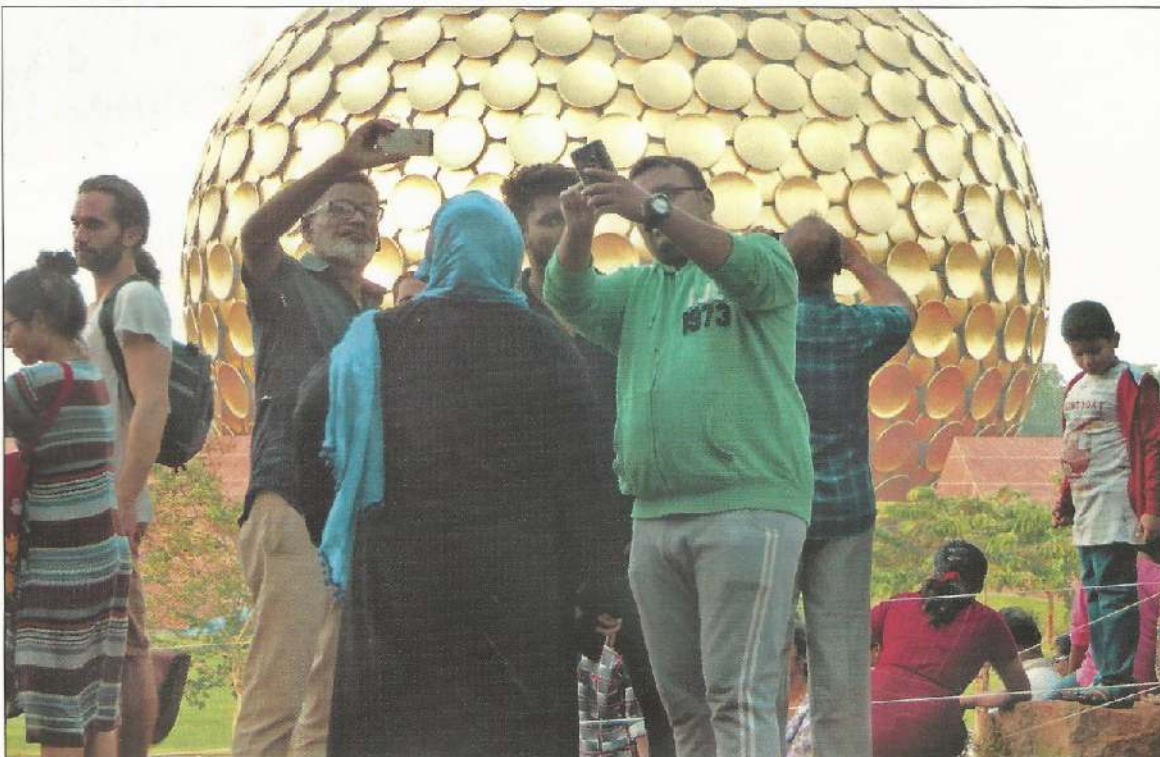
Sometimes, it feels as if most of them are coming here. In 2016, the Auroville Visitors Center logged 637,961 visitors, and this rose to 714,000 in 2017. Most of these were day-tourists, intent upon seeing the 'golden globe'. And, indeed, the Matrimandir remains the magnet for the vast majority of casual visitors. But visitors also include longer-stay guests as well as volunteers, many of whom contribute valuable energy and ideas to the community.

Aurovilians' attitudes to visitors, particularly the day visitors, are mixed. Some see them as a useful source of revenue, others as disruptors of our daily lives and threats to our essential values. But two things are clear. Firstly, tourism to Auroville will continue to grow, particularly as the Matrimandir is actively promoted as a tourist attraction by India and Pondicherry tourist authorities, and this will put increasing pressure upon our roads, resources and way of life. Secondly, the community has no policy or plans about how to deal with tourists. Tourism 'happened' to Auroville: it was never planned.

It was in this context that Aurovillian planner Lalit invited postgraduate students from the Urban and Regional Planning School of Queen's University, Canada, to make a study of tourism in Auroville and to suggest a framework to manage tourism impacts in Auroville and its Greenbelt.

The students spent several months doing preparation work in Canada. They studied documentation on tourism and on Auroville, explored best practices regarding tourism management in other parts of the world and engaged in Skype conversations with Aurovilians. From the information they received, they concluded that day-trippers are the cause of most of our tourism-related impacts; that Auroville is more welcoming to long-term visitors because they gain exposure to Auroville by learning from and contributing to the community; and that the surrounding Greenbelt villages are fast developing tourism infrastructure because of a relative lack of infrastructure in Auroville itself. The students also did a preliminary SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis of tourism in Auroville and suggested a list of possible management tools.

However, when they arrived in Auroville in early December they realized that nothing had prepared them for the ground reality. "We thought we had understood the situation when we were in Kingston but when we were on the ground our perspective completely changed," says Natalie, one of the students. "One thing we learned about Auroville is you can't really compare it to anywhere else. The plans and priorities of all these other places we studied beforehand are very different from Auroville."



I think that in our preparatory work we were just scratching the surface."

As the students planned to be in Auroville for just two weeks, they decided to focus upon the day-visitors as these were the most numerous and, in some ways, the most problematic in terms of tourism impact. The students conducted audits with these tourists to find out where they were coming from and what they wanted to see.

"We discovered," says Natalie, "that almost every tourist who came to the Visitors Center was only coming for the day and only wanted to see the Matrimandir. Some had checked the Auroville website before coming, but said the information they gained at the Visitors' Center was beneficial. Most of those we spoke with seemed satisfied with their visit."

The students also held interviews and group discussions with villagers from Edayanchavady – the village most affected by tourist traffic – as well as with Auroville Village Action Group, the Visitors Center, Security, and the Auroville economy group, as well as with individual Aurovilians.

"The local villagers had a lot of concerns regarding noise pollution and environmental pollution from traffic congestion as almost all the traffic to the Visitors Center passes through their village. Tourism was mainly negative for them. However, we did not have time to speak to villagers who owned guesthouses and restaurants. We gathered that there is a shift in Edayanchavady's economic base from agriculture to tourism and I think these 'hospitality' villagers look at tourism from a different perspective from the Aurovilians. So I think there is a need to develop partnerships, to find ways that work for both parties."

"The Auroville economy group would like tourism to develop in Auroville but to find a better way to incorporate it for its economic benefits, while Village Action emphasised the need for more collaboration between the Aurovilians and the villagers in managing tourism. As for individual Aurovilians, some love the tourists and think tourism is a huge opportunity for Auroville, but others do not want tourists at all."

Generally, however, we gathered that many Aurovilians want a shift from 'consumeristic' tourists to those who want to participate and give back to the community as much as they take away. Finding out how to manage this transition is perhaps the biggest challenge today."

As to the larger regional perspective, the students learned that Pondicherry tourism is promoting Auroville as a tourist site. However, it provides little information and many tourists arrive without being prepared for Auroville or understanding the significance of the Matrimandir. While information is available at the Visitors Center, a substantial number of short-term visitors leave Auroville with little understanding of the ethos or purpose of this place. Moreover, there is a lack of opportunities for day visitors to engage with Auroville in any way except for a visit to the viewing point of the Matrimandir.

continued on page 2

- **Rethinking tourism: interview with Professor Ajay Agarwal**
- **Day visitors' responses**
- **'Inwardly, Auroville is blossoming' the Journey of Aster Patel**

pages 2-3

- **Can we improve how we communicate with each other?**
- **Subtle communication**
- **Searching for social change: the Solar Village Search Engine**

pages 4-5

- **Population and rainfall statistics**
- **Passings:**
 - **Paul Berdah**
 - **Krishna Kumar**
 - **Peggy Paff**

pages 6-7

- **Passings:**
 - **Rudy Phillips**
 - **Letter to the editor**
 - **Thamarai: the lotus blooms again**

pages 7-8

Rethinking tourism

Professor Ajay Agarwal was the supervisor of this year's group of graduate students from Queen's University, Canada. He initiated the original programme six years ago and since then has accompanied five groups of graduate students to do research on different topics in Auroville.

Auroville Today: What is your perception of how Aurovilians see tourism?

I am surprised by how many people have a negative attitude to tourism. The only good thing they seem to see in it is the revenue that it brings. Of course, tourism brings increased traffic and pressure on the infrastructure and environment, but tourism can also have a lot of positives for Auroville.

After all, we from Queen's University are tourists. Yet, over the six years we have been coming here, I think we have contributed a lot by doing projects for Auroville. Also, by absorbing the knowledge and values of this community and taking these back home we have made a contribution to Auroville's work in the world.

I think the Aurovilians have to start thinking about tourism in this way.

Perhaps we are looked upon as an anomaly because we are a small group that comes and engages. But the same could be true for 70% of the day visitors who come to Auroville if you were able, during the three or four hours they are here, to inculcate in them even very small things, like not wasting water or not throwing away a plastic bottle. These kinds of things can change the flavour of the visit. Even if they have come to have fun, to look at the golden globe and take their picture with foreigners, if they can take away an ounce of knowledge I think that would be a big contribution to Auroville because in this way your values are being carried outside.

Practically, how would they absorb values like this?

When tourists visit a new place, they pay more attention to everything because everything they see is new. So I think there has to be a very

well designed educational campaign. For example, it's a fairly long walk from the Visitors Center to Matrimandir. Along the way there could be small demonstrations of best practices regarding waste disposal etc.

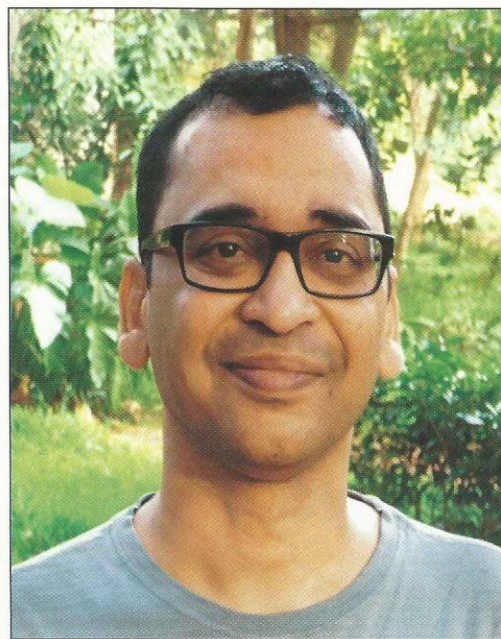
If you don't actually actively engage with them, if they just take photos of the Matrimandir and then go away, they have left without making a real contribution to Auroville. If somebody comes they should get some knowledge value out of it. Tourism can be positive for Auroville. It all depends upon how you handle the visitors.

What is clear is that Auroville cannot be a gated community; you cannot close yourself off from the rest of the world. As long as there is this uniqueness to Auroville, people will keep coming. But you need to have a very strong tourism plan for how to deal with them, otherwise things could get out of hand. Sooner or later big resorts could come up around Auroville and the neighbouring villages could become havens for people who just come just for fun, to rent a cheap room and drink beer. This is not the spirit you want brought into Auroville, so you also have to engage with the villagers who are providing facilities for tourists.

This is the fifth time you have come here with a group of graduate students. What has been your experience over the years?

When I started this programme in 2012 I chose to come because I knew Lalit. I also thought Auroville would be a much more benign environment for Canadian students than an Indian city. However, the first time we came it was very difficult to penetrate the Auroville knowledge base because people did not know who we were and why we were here. All that has completely changed now. Many more people are interested in talking to my students because they understand we are here to learn and that we will try to pay back to the community what we have learnt.

As my own understanding of Auroville has improved we are ready to take on topics that are more challenging and controversial within the community.



Professor Ajay Agarwal

Which topics have you researched over the years?

We started with street design guidelines. Another year we developed sustainable development indicators which were tailor-made for Auroville. We have also designed a public participation framework for Auroville's consensus-building approach to planning. In each case we followed the same methodology. We did background studies in Canada, came here, gained new information, then made a final presentation of our findings and recommendations.

When you look at the research and recommendations that Queens' students have made over the years, not much seems to have been implemented. For example, has there been a follow-up to last year's study on how to manage village development in the Greenbelt?

I've talked to Cristo, who was enthusiastic about the work we did last year, but it seems to be stuck at the moment. Over the years, we have been asked by people what happened to all the information that we collected from them. Some are not happy because they feel that the work has not gone anywhere. However, I am aware that

Auroville has a somewhat time-consuming implementation process, and has very limited resources to move from planning to implementation.

But much of the work we have done will retain its currency for years. For example, anybody who wants to start a public consultation process can use the public consultation framework we suggested. Similarly, anybody who wants to start a dialogue with villages in the Greenbelt can use tools and techniques suggested in last year's report.

However, if we make some suggestions I do not assume they will be implemented in the same form. I think the Aurovilians need to convert them into tools that are suitable for this place. All we do is bring together research from the outside world and research we do here and then present it to the residents. The next steps have to be taken by you.

Do the students find Auroville a difficult place to do research?

They come here thinking they are coming in as experts, but then they realise they barely have rudimentary knowledge. A few of them feel frustrated by this but more often they feel excited by making new discoveries. The Aurovilians are very open with them. And when, in spite of time and logistical challenges, the students finally manage to accomplish something, it gives them a high level of satisfaction.

What kind of learning do they take back with them?

There are some very tangible skills that they learn through working on this project. These include communicating with people from diverse cultures and different languages. A lot of our students have been able to get jobs after graduating in settings that require communication with non-Canadians as a direct outcome of having worked in an international context.

They also learn a lot of resilience because the work environment is very challenging here.

Finally, they are extremely impressed by the strong stewardship of the environment here. Auroville residents may differ on a variety of things but the students see this and spirituality as your binding theme.

Interview by Alan

Managing tourism in Auroville

Continued from page 1

On the conclusion of their research, the students summarised the main concerns they had heard as unmanaged regional, state and private promotion of Auroville tourism; traffic congestion; security issues; unplanned tourist-related development in the neighbouring villages; Auroville being viewed primarily as a tourist attraction rather than a place for learning; and the lack of a unified response to tourism in the community.

In their final presentation to the community, the students noted once again the negative impacts of tourism—disruption of daily life, traffic congestion, pressure on the community's infrastructure etc.—but they also emphasised the potential positives of managed tourism. These include economic benefits to the community (in November alone, the Visitors Center parking fee generated Rs 2,152,050 while in the same month 50 Auroville guesthouses and 31 home stays generated Rs 8,542,670), and increased employment opportunities and learning exchanges.

The students made a number of recommendations to help Auroville manage tourism in such a way that it would benefit both the community and its neighbours (see box). Short-term recommendations included decongesting visitor traffic flow through Edayanchavady by creating new parking on the periphery of the Auroville township and providing a walkway and/or electrical shuttle service to the Visitors Center; and a certification system for tour guides/operators and guesthouses in Auroville and the villages to ensure that certain standards are achieved and maintained.

They also suggested providing introductory tours of Auroville. "Auroville has so much more to offer than just the Matrimandir," observed Natalie. "If Auroville would be willing to share more of these other activities,

visitors would have a richer and more complete experience. Of course, one needs to find the fine line between providing these opportunities and preventing disruption in the community and invasions of personal space."

Longer-term recommendations included collecting data related to tourism (through visitors' audits, economic impact assessment, amenity checklist, etc.); determining Auroville's tourism carrying capacity in terms of its existing infrastructure and resources; collaborating with the nearby villages on tourism-related development; and establishing a regional planning approach with the Pondicherry tourist authorities. As Natalie put it, "Pondicherry is promoting Auroville as a tourist location, so the community should have a stake in that conversation to ensure that the correct information is conveyed."

Most fundamentally, the students felt that the community needs to develop a unified response to tourism. As a first step, they suggested that residents engage in a community visioning workshop on tourism. They also proposed that an Auroville tourism working group be formed to collect data, undertake discussions with all stakeholders and, finally, implement a tourism impact management plan.

Their concluding thought was that, in terms of managing tourism in Auroville, there is a need for improved communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing with all interested and affected parties both inside and outside Auroville, and a bottom-up approach to the implementation of any management plan.

The students' final presentation was well received. It was remarkable how much they had absorbed and understood during their two weeks' stay, and many of their recommendations will remain relevant for years to come.

Alan

Short-term recommendations

- Decongest the flow of vehicular traffic entering Auroville
- Periphery parking lot and electric shuttle system
- Complete mobility plan for the International Zone and Visitors Center
- Use tourism spending to limit visitor access and provide a source of revenue
- Strengthen use of Aurocard and eliminate use of cash outside of Visitors Center
- Implement a mandatory visitor contribution or donation
- Update visitor information resources
- Implement visitor signage
- Update Auroville website with visitors tab
- Provide cell phone application
- Create a certification programme for guesthouses and tour guides
- Set of standards and plaque system for guesthouses in Auroville and surrounding villages
- Certification programme for tour guides/operators in Auroville
- Provide alternative programming to facilitate knowledge sharing with day visitors
- Introductory tours of Auroville
- Signage at Visitors Center to include current Auroville priorities and projects

Long-term recommendations

- Bring community together on topic of tourism
- Run a community visioning workshop on tourism
- Form a tourism working group
- Undertake a community self-assessment
- Collaborate with Edayanchavady on tourism-related development
- Involve key stakeholders from Edayanchavady in a tourism working group
- Educate villagers on sustainable development practices / environmental stewardship
- Establish a regional planning approach to tourism
- Dissuade Puducherry and Tamil Nadu from promoting Auroville as a tourist destination
- Form a collective agreement regarding tourism in the region and how it impacts Auroville
- Collect data related to tourism
- Determine Auroville's tourism carrying capacity

Day visitors' responses

What are day visitors' common responses to Auroville on their first visit? *Auroville Today's* own super-sleuthing at the Visitors' Centre - vox-popping visitors and perusal of the guest book comments - suggests that the vast majority of tourists are satisfied with their experience and the information that is provided. This largely supports the findings of the research undertaken by Queen's University, Canada. Most day visitors are tourists visiting Pondicherry or travelling through Tamil Nadu. They are largely from India's southern states, with a smaller proportion from northern states, or non-resident Indians from USA. A sighting of Auroville's 'golden globe' is part of their tourist itinerary, and most of these people allow about 2-3 hours for their visit.

Day visitors overwhelmingly described Auroville as "peaceful" or "calm", which they often connected to "nature". Their responses were largely positive, with many describing Auroville as "inspirational" and the 'golden globe' as "beautiful." While most people were satisfied with viewing the Matrimandir from outside, a small percentage expressed their disappointment that they could not go inside. "We learnt from the video what was inside and how unique it was. We regretted we could not go inside and had to book two days in advance," said one woman. Families with children appreciated the electric shuttle that conveyed them to the Matrimandir, although one family complained that the shuttle took only women and children, and that the father was forced to walk to Matrimandir: "The exhibition says there is no religion, no barriers. But I think there are barriers... because the shuttle does not carry men." Tourists who were canvassed verbally expressed that the information

presented in the exhibition explained Auroville's goals in a way that was clear and that satisfied their curiosity. "We understand the principle of humanity unity, people from different nations coming and living together." "The concept of human unity as the foremost aspect is appealing. Also having peace of the soul as the centre of the spiritual concept." Very few of them referred to the teachings of Sri Aurobindo or The Mother, unless they had prior knowledge of them. They often connected their conception of Auroville's philosophical goals to nature and sustainability. "It's close to the nature, which is something we don't find in the city. It's pleasant," said one man, while another referred to how people in Auroville "are sustainably living with nature." Many referred to how they could "learn more" from Auroville about sustainable living (some visitors believed Auroville is entirely self-sustaining), and a couple of respondents asked how Auroville could be replicated in other parts of India. They appreciated the quality of displays, the cafes and products, and how "the juices are very natural. The purity they follow is very good". While most the tourists we vox-popped had stopped for ice-cream or coffee, they were reluctant to buy products in the shops, which they perceived as catering to an elite clientele. "When we see the cost, we see that nature makes things at very high cost!", exclaimed one woman from Hyderabad.

In summary, our somewhat improvised detective work suggests that day visitors' expectations of Auroville - to see the 'golden globe', to enjoy nature, to learn a little about Auroville - were largely met. And a selection of recent comments in the Visitors' Centre guestbook suggest that Auroville may have touched something a little deeper in people during their tourist experience.

"Inwardly, Auroville is blossoming"

In November this year, Aurovillian Dr. Mira Aster Patel, "in recognition of her invaluable contribution in developing Auroville," was awarded the Auro Ratna award from the Overman Foundation in a ceremony in the Hall of Harmony of the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. *Auroville Today* asked her about her journey.

Auroville Today: Can you tell us something of your youth?

I grew up in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. In 1942, at the age of 10, I had come together with my parents and my brother. We were among the earliest children admitted to live in the Ashram. My father, Indra Sen, joined us a few years later.

The sacred 'courtyard' of the Ashram was our home, our playground. We were there all day. We went to The Mother two or three times a day. These were the days of the Second World War, and sometimes She would call us, with our parents, as late as eleven at night, as She was busy with Her Work 'somewhere' we were told! Sri Aurobindo was 'up there' in His Room. We felt His Presence and had His Darshan four times in the year.

When I was about 12 years old, I said to my father that I wanted to go alone for Darshan, to stand alone in front of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. My father agreed. One Darshan day, while I was waiting at the gate of the Ashram, I saw Dilip Kumar Roy coming in, who Sri Aurobindo had called "a friend and a son". I slipped into the queue behind him. When he was in front of Sri Aurobindo, Sri Aurobindo's look changed. He always had that vast impersonal gaze, which did not focus on anyone, but when Dilip-da was in front of Him, His look focused on Dilip-da in a 'personal' manner. His look encompassed the personal and the impersonal at the same time. What transpired between them was so intense that even now, as I relive those moments, my whole being feels the vibration. Dilip-da was standing there for quite long, and I would peep around his robes to see Sri Aurobindo. I hold that precious memory deep within me. On all other Darshans, I used to wait at the gate for Dilip-da to come and would slip in after him in the queue!

The last Darshan Sri Aurobindo gave, on November 24th 1950, was very special for me. Some message went through, which guided all my future steps.

And your contact with The Mother?

The Mother took the children in her embrace and held them in her Being! She would see us three or four times a day. She arranged for us to be with the senior disciples of the Ashram and study with them. Since a very young age, She would tell us frequently, "Find the psychic being. Be conscious."

The first work She gave me was to pick up the yellow flowers that fell from the Service Tree in the courtyard of the Ashram, and count and arrange them in big brass platters. These would then be taken to Sri Aurobindo's Room.

When there were about a dozen children. The Mother started a School on December 2, 1943.

One day, Mother called another girl and me – we were all of sixteen years – to present in recitation/dramatic form a text from 'Savitri'. She gave us typed copies of "The Debate of Love and Death", as the book had not yet been published. She gave me the role of 'death'. This was rather 'overwhelming' at that age! I asked Her, "Why have You given me this role?" Mother drew Herself up and said, "Death is nothing to be afraid of. It is a great power that has to be conquered. Let's get to work." She said She would train us Herself, which She did, in the long room upstairs in front of the Darshan seat. She showed us how to pitch the voice, how to speak each part. Later, She brought out costumes and make-up from Her own treasure-chest and dressed us for the part.

When this was done, She said to us, "Sri Aurobindo will hear us." To have His Darshan for the 'fifth' time in the year! We could hardly believe it – for nothing meant more than 'seeing' Him! He chose to sit in the room by the side, the narrow one, to hear us! This 'Divine Dispensation'.... I have never understood how this was given to us.

Mother asked me, about the same time, to take kindergarten classes, along with my studies. I said to Her, "But, Mother, I don't know how to teach!" I was about seventeen! Everything began early – there was perhaps no time to waste.

She replied, "It is good to be with the children. Give them freedom." They were 5-7 years old! I asked, "Freedom at such a young age?" She said, "It is never too young to give freedom. But one must create the right atmosphere." I took the whole class to Her each

morning and sent up to Her a written account of what we had done during the day. She returned the same with Her remarks and blessings.

Other work was given by Her from time to time, many-sided, to help me to grow, within and without. A major one was to work with my father and assist in all that he was doing. He was asked to present Sri Aurobindo's work to academia and in the scientific conferences in the country. This was done for the first time when the major works were being published. My father, Indra Sen, wrote to Sri Aurobindo around 1940 about a completely new structure/system of Psychology and Practice which he found on studying His works. The term used by him was 'Integral Psychology'. This was accepted by Sri Aurobindo, who asked that he write about it. Thus the writings of Indra Sen were first sent up to Him, and later to The Mother, before being published.

Then came the years 1954 to 1957! A great sense of 'things happening' was in the air! The 'charge' was palpable and one was 'bathed' in it.

In mid 1956, Mother asked me to move into Golconde, saying, "It is a place of great beauty. I want you to move in tomorrow." I was then studying in the Higher Course of the Centre of Education and living with my parents.

One day, walking down a street in the town, I turned to a friend who was with me and said, "I would rather have lived at this moment of history than any other." The words rushed out from somewhere deep within – and they remain with me.

How did you decide to study at the Sorbonne in Paris?

I finished a five-year Higher Course at the Centre of Education of the Ashram in Philosophy and Psychology. Then I had a strong seeking to study Sri Aurobindo's works further in the context of European thought and culture. A kind of wholeness was my aspiration. I referred this to The Mother and She asked me where I wanted to go for this work. Very spontaneously, from somewhere deep within me, I replied, "Sorbonne." I didn't know much French at the time and I can't even say how this sprang from me! Mother was very happy that I had made this choice.

My subject was, 'Comparative Study of Philosophies of Sri Aurobindo and Henri Bergson', for a Ph.D. thesis. This was the first time that a study on the work on Sri Aurobindo was accepted at a University in France. The experience of this time was very rich.

So I was in Paris during most of the 1960s, in the heart of the changes that took place in May, 1968. I wrote to The Mother about the movement by the students and She replied that She found this very interesting and would like to know more about it. I wrote to Her regularly, telling Her what was happening.

I was back home before the new year of 1969 to finish the writing of my thesis. On returning to Paris, I asked The Mother, "The thesis is nearing completion. What do I do after that?" She replied, "You will know when your work is finished. You will know when you are in France – but it won't be for France!" I defended my thesis on February 28, 1970 – Auroville's second birthday. It was the first time a work on Sri Aurobindo had been presented for a thesis defense at the Sorbonne.

What was that next step which Mother had indicated?

In June 1970, when I was still in Paris, I received a letter from André Morisset, Mother's son, who handled The Mother's correspondence. He wrote to me that the United Nations, to commemorate its 25th anniversary, was organizing a United Nations World Youth Assembly, that Mother had said that Auroville should be present and that She was thinking of me for that. But what was this Auroville, this new 'creation' of Mother? I hadn't been there for its inauguration in February 1968. I had been in Paris, walking up and down the boulevards, studying 'The Life Divine'!

The conference, I learned, was in response to the demand of thousands of students who were asking for a 'new education, that would prepare them for the future'. About 750 official delegations of young university people from all over the world came together for three weeks to share their dreams of the future and to indicate the directions that world leaders could take to set their policies!

I was elected to the 18 member Steering Committee of the Assembly. For three weeks we poured our hearts out about the 'future' that we wished for – in education, culture, economy and polity. We began at 12 noon and went on till 3 in the morning! It was a far cry from being in the silent libraries of the Sorbonne! That is where I had to start exploring "what Auroville is". Janet Fearn, visiting from Auroville, brought me some literature. The visions of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother were there to guide me.

There was a surprisingly common focus in our deliberations. We looked for patterns of 'wholeness' in personal growth and a spirit of 'oneness' among nations and cultures. It was a rich experience of the world trying to create its future.

When did you join Auroville?

I came home by November, 1970. On my birthday in March, 1971, Mother gave me a long interview. She spoke of India, the country that, She



Aster

said, "...is open to the deeper consciousness, to the new Forces that wish to manifest". She mentioned that India represents the life divine on earth, and that "it is that that one must show – in action, in life, in the manner of being." She spoke of the work that lay ahead and what my work was to be. Thus began my journey to Auroville. And in July of that year, She started the Bharat Nivas in the International Zone of Auroville, with which I have been intimately connected.

But I did not come to live in Auroville immediately. As I had always been a student and, later, a teacher at the Ashram's Centre of Education, I returned to work in 'Knowledge' for four hours each morning. The students were young adults and the courses all centred around 'matter'. On Saturday mornings, I would go to Matrimandir and join the team carrying cement and pebbles in 'chetties'. But I noticed that was all I could do! Standing there with a spade in hand, beside the skeletal structure of the time, I found I could not relate to the 'matter' in front of me, I could not enter 'into' it! However glibly I could speak about it from Monday to Friday across a table, come Saturday morning I could not sense the reality of its 'existence'!

This was a major turning-point for me, in consciousness. Here there was a 'matter' to explore, to be made a 'substance' of one's conscious experience.

Roger Anger's experimental house in Auromodèle was given to me as a base for life in Auroville, but it was unfinished and there was no architect or a construction team. Roger told me to finish the construction as he was going back to Paris! Thus began this journey of exploration – into matter, space and consciousness, as it turned out to be!

Other work followed: joining the work at Matrimandir, at Bharat Nivas, setting up a Centre for Research in Indian Culture, organizing study programmes and international conferences and participating in them in India and the U.S.A. Also, for almost twenty years, I was a member of the Governing Board of Auroville Foundation.

What are your views on Auroville today?

I recently heard that someone had said that The Mother and Sri Aurobindo "had passed on, but left Auroville". I replied that Their consciousness, Their force and Their evolutionary dynamism are more active and visible in the world today than ever before. Open your eyes and your inner sight and see the changes taking place in the world. For those who have a contact, Their help is constant. In my experience, Their presence is more active and stronger than ever before.

Auroville cannot expect to be an ideal society distant from the problems of the world. When Mother was asked why she had created Auroville, she said that India has become the symbolic representation of all the difficulties of present-day humanity, that India will be the site of its resurrection, the resurrection to a higher and truer life and that FOR THAT she had created Auroville. In other words, the problems of the world will also be present in Auroville.

When I look at Auroville today I see that, inwardly, Auroville is blossoming. I feel its dynamism and force expanding way beyond its physical boundaries. There are an increasing number of people in Auroville who are manifesting that inner growth: in art, in education, in so many fields. But with Auroville's inner growth, its limitations and its difficulties, which perhaps have been there all the time, are coming to the surface. I believe this is so that we can look at them more clearly and deal with them. It is because Auroville has the inner strength to deal with them that the problems are coming to the fore.

In practical terms, a lot of change is necessary: in the area of our economy, of town planning and organisation, to mention a few. They do not seem to be commensurate with Auroville's inner growth. But the change will come – if we let Her force work through us.

In conversation with Carel

Le 8 juin 1970.

Chère Aster,

Vous savez peut-être que les Nations-Unies organisent du 9 au 18 juillet à New-York une "United Nations world youth assembly" où doivent se réunir environ 750 jeunes gens du monde entier.

La Mère a dit qu'Auroville devait être représentée à cette réunion et a pensé à vous pour cela...

Bien affectueusement à vous.

André.

The letter from André Morisset, Mother's son, informing Aster that The Mother was thinking of her to represent Auroville at the United Nations World Youth Assembly

Can we improve how we communicate with each other?

Can we improve how we communicate with each other? Do we want to meet? If so, how? What do we want to discuss? How?

These were some of the questions that stimulated an open discussion on communication during *Auroville Today's* 30th birthday celebration.

Around seventy people had come to the Unity Pavilion to hear reminiscences of the early days from the original *Auroville Today* team and to enjoy the mocktails. But they were also drawn by the opportunity to discuss Auroville's communication culture.

The majority view was clearly that we could do a lot better. But how? How, for example, should we meet?

Many of those who came were clearly missing physical community meetings where we could openly discuss topics of the day together, something which is a rarity in the present day Auroville where we only attend carefully prepared community presentations or communicate through our computer screens.

But why is it important to come together like this? After all, Mother never mentioned the need for gatherings to discuss or decide upon community matters. On the contrary, she emphasised that the governance of the community should be in hands only of those with the highest consciousness, and that the rest of us should follow a collective discipline.

"We need to have a shared sense of being on the same page", said one participant. "We are here to build something together and the collective work cannot happen with just an avant-garde who think they know everything," said another. Yet another recognised its efficacy for personal growth. "When I need help to grow, I need to bring my personal issues to the collective table."

At a deeper level, another participant pointed out that Mother had said she was waiting for the Aurovilians to realise their group soul and without the group soul there could be no real community. "So one reason for us coming together as a community is to grow into the group soul."

One long-time Aurovillian missed the community meetings of the early days. "People sat on shelves and among the groceries in the cramped old post office but those were fantastic meetings: they were the most successful forums we ever had. In contrast, I find the community meetings of today totally aseptic. We are just looking at technology; it is not living at all."

But how practical is it to meet as a physical community when we have an adult population of over 2,000 and our largest hall can only accommodate 200 – 300 people? Can we really call this a community meeting? When the notes of the 30th discussion were posted on Auronet, the community intranet, somebody remarked that the

number who actively took part in the 30th birthday discussion (around 60) was about the same as participate in discussions on Auronet. "The biggest difference is that on Auronet hundreds more Aurovilians can be and are first hand silent observers."

"But sitting in front of your computer is not conducive to good behaviour so it is necessary to create ways and means for us to actually relate," remarked someone at the 30th meeting. "It could be something like a 'stammtisch', an informal meeting around a big table where people come every month or so and talk." "Let us come together, share, let us see each other again," was the heartfelt cry of another.

But what could or should we talk about?

"I would really like a regular forum where we meet and there is no set topic. The topic would emerge from whoever attends," was one suggestion.

So would this include facing the collective 'shadow', all the things we usually prefer to sweep under the carpet?

The response was a clear reluctance to restrict the frame. "There should be no rules and regulations. Life itself will present us with what needs to be discussed at any moment," said one participant. "I do not think there are any topics which cannot be shared with an open heart and an open mind," said another.

Others preferred more structured meetings, more focussed on the issues of the day. Regarding this, there was a pervasive sense that community members are being excluded from discussing important community matters. "Before, the residents used to discuss most issues together, but now they are discussed only in the Council, Koodam and restorative circles and I think we are losing something," one participant lamented. "If somebody could communicate what is happening in our groups in a living way that would also be useful. Now people feel very disconnected. It's not helpful for the people slaving on those groups or for the rest of the community."

Yet another participant objected to the fact that all our meetings today seem to be recorded or filmed (as was the case with this particular meeting). "I think this makes it very difficult to express yourself because you have to measure very carefully what you say; there is no room to make mistakes in a society that has become very legal-minded and where people are ratting on other people and copy-pasting elsewhere what is written on Auronet. There is a lack of trust in the community and all this doesn't make people feel safe."

This, in turn, introduced the topic of how we communicate with each other when we meet. Our public meetings have not always been a pleasant experience. Indeed, the 'aseptic', controlled quality of our present meetings is partly a reaction to the unruly

meetings of the past where rudeness and character assassination seemed to be the norm. As participants in the 30th discussion seemed to resist any restrictions being imposed on what we discuss in community meetings, the question arises, how can we discuss sensitive matters in a way that builds unity and brotherhood, rather than fracturing the community?

Auronet is an interesting test case. At present, Auronet, our Internet, is the closest we have to an open forum for public discussion. There has been no moderation for four years now. But how successful has Auronet been in allowing free expression while keeping a certain level of consciousness?

Not successful at all, according to some. "At present it is an awful forum. You have to put on armour to go on Auronet because you are going to be hammered," said one Aurovillian. "On Auronet we can see our shadow starkly in raw, crude, often violent forms," observed another.

"I'm very concerned by what is happening on Auronet because I believe it is a tool that we need," said a concerned user. "It is for all of Auroville and we have many things to discuss, but this is a tool which is going down and down because of a few elements who are discouraging other people to participate."

One of the administrators of Auronet observed that this was a common perception. However, he had made a ten year study of postings and the conclusion was that more positivity than negativity has been expressed over that period. "It's like when we have a wound in the body it takes all our attention, even if the rest of the body is healthy."

He went on to explain his understanding of what is really happening when someone expresses themselves negatively. "The community's pain shows up in the few representatives who hold that pain in themselves. This is our own pain and somebody is symbolically going through that journey. So the challenge is how we hold the space for them without getting aggressive and without trying to shut them down, because when we release that voice we are also releasing that pain."

He acknowledged, however, that the expression of pain triggers pain in others, and then the pain can snowball.

So can we find a way to improve communication on Auronet?

There were a number of suggestions. One was to raise the standard by periodically publishing articles from *Auroville Today* on the forum. Another suggestion was to create a 'high-quality' forum on Auronet where Mother's criteria about how to discriminate between truth and falsehood (*To discriminate the impulses of truth from the impulses of falsehood, one can take as a guiding rule that all that brings with it or creates peace, faith, joy, harmony, wideness, unity and ascending growth comes from the*

truth) would be applied to every posting. Those who disagreed with the application of such criteria could continue to post on the existing discussions forum.

Another participant suggested that the Rules of the Game – agreements about basic communication behaviour which everybody who posts on Auronet signs up to but which are never enforced – should be ratified by the whole community and this would give the moderators the right to delete posts which do not conform. Another agreed that that 'freedom of speech' requires 'some form of moderation'.

This, predictably, evoked howls of rage when this was reported on Auronet. "Freedom of speech on Auronet needs some form of moderation: this oxymoron notion needs to be looked at in light of its utter contradiction," wrote one 'Auronetter' who felt that moderation was definitely not the path to be pursued.

Others were more nuanced in their response. "It would seem that the need of the hour is to come to a collective agreement regarding in which spirit and to which end the interactive part of Auronet is made use of. Once that is achieved, moderation would only have to come into play whenever the agreement is broken," wrote another frequent user.

However, in the 30th birthday discussion one of the administrators pointed out that moderation need not imply Aurovilians passing judgement on fellow Aurovilians. "Another way is shifting to self-regulation where participants earn their rights to participate in a forum by their behaviour. We have installed the Discourse forum as a test sample." Moreover, "In terms of emerging technology, Artificial Intelligence (AI) can give instant feedback on what you are going to post before you publish it. AI can ask you to rephrase it in such a way that the emotional content of your writing can be lifted up and made more rational. This is where AI will help humanity to move on."

However, some were sceptical of the usefulness of Artificial Intelligence when it comes to improving communication generally in the community. "I don't think technology is the answer in a multi-cultural community. It's on the human level we need to work," said one. "I think there has to be clarity on our common ground, on what brings everybody here, and agreement to strive towards this before all the diversity of our individual expressions happens," noted another.

The question of trust, of feeling in a safe space, was also mentioned as critical to good communication. One participant noted, "I am desperate to communicate but I can't communicate if I don't think I will be understood. If I am in a small circle where I can be trusted and I can trust the others, I can open up."

Yet another participant noted that what really mattered is not the topic but the level of consciousness with

which we discuss things. This focussed the discussion upon the individual's responsibility in ensuring that communication takes place in the right way. "The word is an invocation. So we need to consider what we are invoking through using words, regardless of the topic," observed one participant. Another spoke of the need to work upon the 'internal dynamic' that precedes communicating one's thoughts and feelings to others. "I need to be able to translate what I hear in a way that can be accommodated inside me and then be communicated back. I appreciate technology and tools but I am here to grow, and if I want to use communication as a very powerful means of growing, then I need to study and practice this internal dynamic."

And what about that other much neglected side of communication: listening? "Communication works best when listening has happened. I do not believe we are very good at listening and training in this has to happen," said one participant.

In fact, there seemed near unanimity in the room that much more needed to be learned and done to determine not only what we want to communicate but also how best to communicate with each other in Auroville.

This is why the editor of the *News and Notes*, who is often in the firing line when it comes to people wanting to use the *News* to express their feelings publicly and who is concerned how false rumours go worldwide now, would like to initiate a one-year study programme on communication in Auroville. "I would like the community to decide how we want to communicate, at any level, and then apply this. It could start in small groups discussing how we communicate with each other now. We could also look back and see what worked and what didn't work in the past, as well as find new ways."

The nature of communication and the need to communicate better with each other has been much neglected in Auroville. It seems to have been widely assumed that communication happens naturally, and that anybody can do it, anywhere. Moreover, nobody has a right to interfere with someone else's mode of expression.

But we are beginning to realise that none of these assumptions are necessarily true. Rather, that good, effective communication is something we need to work at, to practice and refine continually, that unconscious expression and *ad hominem* attacks can do great harm to individuals and to the community as a whole, and that certain milieus are more supportive of good communication than others.

Hopefully, this lively 30th birthday discussion will be just the prelude to further discussions and initiatives to improve our communication with each other and advance us on the rocky road to human unity.

Alan

Subtle communication

What is meant by "communication"? Can verbal address to an individual, the putting up of a notice, making a speech, inserting an announcement in *News & Notes* or on Auronet, sending an email, a broadcast on AV Radio, dropping off leaflets at people's houses, using advertisements and posters, or sending a note or writing a letter to someone be seen as communication?

Here in Auroville there is a widespread assumption that communication occurs on each of the above occasions, but does it? The answer – surprising to many people – is "No!" All that is happening is that someone is sending out a message of some sort in the hope that it will at least be heard or read and understood by the individual or audience

it is addressed to. But what if the person or people verbally addressed are deaf, or don't speak the language, or are not even listening to what is being said? What if the notice pinned up or placed in *News & Notes* or on Auronet is not read, or the person who sees it can't fully understand the language or content? What if the email, note or written letter fails to reach or be read by the addressee(s)? Or the advertisement or poster is not seen? The answer is that there is then no communication, just an *intended* communication. The speaker, writer or sender has failed to communicate.

Communication only occurs when the message sent is received by the person or people it is addressed to and is heard/read/seen and understood. That is *basic* communication. However, there is a further requirement for completely

effective communication, and that is that what is basically communicated brings about the effect that is intended, the desired reaction or action on the part of the recipient(s).

The other day in Auroville's Unity Pavilion, the *Auroville Today* team hosted a well attended meeting to celebrate the publication's 30th anniversary, and at the same time to explore with everyone there the topic of communication in the context of Auroville. It was an interesting forum of discussion, with a wide variety of inputs from the attendees, but in virtually every case the focus was on the written or spoken word.

I think that at least basic communication is occurring in Auroville. Then what is it that makes us often feel otherwise? I think that it is not so much about basic communication, but much more

about why we so often see no change as a result. Surely it is that that makes us feel we frequently fail to communicate effectively.

If I am right, and we want communication within Auroville to bring about changes for the better, to actually move us closer to the ideal of human unity in diversity that we are here to achieve, then we need to become aware of another form of communication, a much more powerful tool for triggering the changes we want to see in Auroville society, and that is *subtle* communication.

What is subtle communication? It is being who and what we are, for at all times this is silently and subtly communicating something, whether consciously or unconsciously.

Continued on page 5

Searching for social change

On 5th December, Auroville Consulting launched the Solar Village Search Engine to help fund its Solar Village Initiative, which aims to power 100 villages in Tamil Nadu with solar by the year 2030. Auroville Today talked to one of the team members, Ahmed Ibrahim, to find out more.

Auroville Today: Where did the idea come from?

Ahmed: For a long time, Auroville Consulting has been aware of power problems in the villages that hamper their development. Although official figures show that 100% of the villages in Tamil Nadu are electrified, this is misleading as a village will be shown as 'fully electrified' if only 10% of the homes are connected to the electrical grid. Moreover, even homes that are connected suffer frequent power cuts.

These have many social and economic impacts. They affect the education of children as well as agriculture, and the viability of small-scale industries. This is why many people migrate from the villages to urban centres.

A basic way to resolve this is to provide a reliable electricity supply. But if we provide this with conventional fossil fuels we will be using the very polluting Indian coal. So the obvious answer is sustainable energy.

Our goal is to 'solarise' 100 villages in Tamil Nadu by 2030, which means installing around 100 MW of new solar capacity in rural Tamil Nadu. This will provide energy security to more than 200,000 people, while reducing greenhouse gas emissions by 129,000 tonnes.

An additional idea is to democratize benefits arising from renewable energy generation by contributing 10% of the net cash profit from the sale of solar energy to village level self-help groups.

The installation target for the first year is 3 MW. Targets for the following years will continuously increase to reach a total installed capacity of 100 MW in 10 years.

Irumbai, a nearby village, was the site of the first pilot project in association with TEDA (Tamil Nadu Energy Department Agency). Local women and youth helped us do an energy audit and energy-efficient fans and lights have already been installed. But further work has been stalled over the allocation of land for the solar panels.

Solarising even one village requires financial means. So we started looking at different sources of funding for the project. Our co-founder, Martin, learned about Ecosia, an internet search engine in Germany which uses revenue generated from searches to plant trees in Africa. Ecosia has now been operating successfully for ten years. So we wondered if we could do the same thing in India to help solarise villages here.



The leading commercial search engines are making a lot of money. But surely it requires huge resources and expertise to develop a search engine?

We haven't designed our search engine from scratch. Like Ecosia, we are collaborating with a technology service provider. This service provider provides the search results and we have entered into a revenue sharing model with them.

How does it work?

If you click on an advertisement on our site we earn money. But users also have the option to use an ad-blocker. In fact, we are happy if users simply use us to search.

One of the issues with Google and other big search sites is they collect information on users and then sell this to advertisers who then target advertisements. What is your policy?

The service provider for the Solar Village Search Engine does collect information on users but allows us to choose which information we are going to collect. On our site, no personal data will be collected and no information about our users will be shared. But the number of searches will be recorded as, by the end of the first three months, we hope to reach 100,000 searches per

day (meaning about 40,000 users). Otherwise, our partner will not be interested in continuing with the collaboration.

That's a big target. How will you achieve it?

We are looking for support from organisations and people we have previously partnered with or who are associated with Auroville, like Auroville International, Greenpeace India, Oxfam, World Wildlife Fund, and the Alliance for Rural Electrification are already supporting us. We are also working on collaborating with e-commerce platforms, such as organic online shops, in order to reach a wider audience. We are also connecting to social media because our target group is youth. By 2020, 600 million will be using the Internet in India, and the majority will be the youth. We will have Solar Village ambassadors, young people who want to promote the search engine in their organisation or on their campus, and we will give them a certificate and proper recognition.

In addition, a few universities and their students are collaborating with us on dissemination and coming up with marketing strategies.

But are young people really interested in supporting a project like this?

The feedback we have received is that youth are definitely connected to these causes, but they don't have time to practically contribute. However, we are not asking them for money, just to use our search engine. By using this search engine, if you worry about children you are helping children, if you're worried about rural agriculture you are helping agriculture, if you're worried about the loss of rural small-scale units, you are helping support small-scale units. So we are providing people with an easy way to help to make big changes in the villages.

And we want to be transparent. We will publish all our financial reports.

Are you hoping to attract advertisers who also support social improvement? Otherwise, you may also be indirectly supporting businesses that contradict your vision.

We are aware of the possible ethical contradictions but right now the advertising is not under our control. In future, we may be able to develop guidelines, but we are quite far from that at present. For the moment, our focus is on providing a very good search engine because we

are competing with the commercial ones that dominate the market, and if people are not satisfied with our search engine many will switch back to the one they use today. We want to connect to people who really want to help this cause while giving them an excellent search engine.

Let's look at figures. What is the cost of solarising a village?

A village of 500 people will require 250 kW of solar capacity. This will cost about 1.15 crore rupees.

And how much do you expect to earn from the search engine?

Our current projection is that, if we get the right number of searches, we can get two crore rupees a year from our search engine to begin with. This will gradually increase, so after five years we may be earning up to eight crore rupees a year.

But if you are aiming to solarise 100 villages by 2030, the search engine will only provide a small part of the money. Where will the rest of the money come from?

The current thinking is to have a solar village fund. This fund will have three distinct income streams: the solar village search engine, revenue from the sale of solar energy and grants and donations. We are expecting that this Solar Village Search Engine initiative will give us visibility to attract funds from Corporate Social Responsibility schemes etc.

How will you choose which villages you are going to work with?

Auroville Village Action currently works in 98 villages in Villupuram District. The first solar villages may be selected from these villages. We will start with the villages close to Auroville. After doing energy audits, we will select based on population size, annual electricity consumption and the availability of land.

We will also need strong village level support from the *panchayats* and self-help groups. The initial phase may be difficult, but once we gain their trust it should be much easier as everybody is looking to better their lives. If we successfully solarise a few villages, interest will increase because others will know that we are doing our job and this will make our reception in villages far from Auroville much easier.

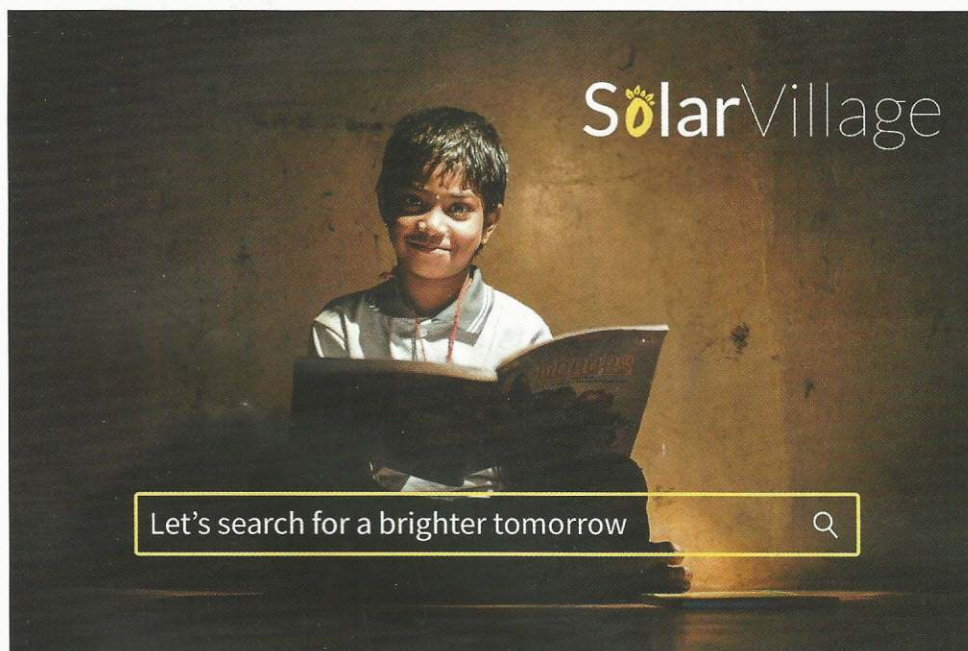
The business plan is that some of the surplus electricity will be sold to private companies – this income will help solarise other villages – but 10% of this money will go back to the village where the panels are located. Then the villagers will have to sit together to decide how to use the money for the development of the village. This is called participatory budgeting.

Won't this be challenging in villages made up of different communities, castes?

Our experience in Irumbai, where there are different communities, has been very positive. There the head of the village is a woman. Women are the most forward-looking people in our society at present and are very supportive of this project because they want to see their children's lives change.

From an interview by Alan

For more information on the Solar Village initiative visit <https://thesolarvillage.org>



Subtle communication

Continued from page 4

People observing us or encountering us receive a distinct impression of our nature, how we talk, how we behave, how we react in various circumstances – especially difficult situations, how we interact with people from other nations, class backgrounds or age groups, and how we generally conduct ourselves in the society of Auroville. That communication can make a deep and lasting impression on those around us. I know from personal experience in the course of my life that certain people have so impressed me that I have wanted to be more like them. None of

them have consciously set out to instruct or guide me as to how to achieve such a change within myself, how to better myself, how to be more conscious or spiritual in my behaviour, yet they have had a major impact on me through being who and what they are. They have subtly communicated something, and that subtle communication has played a life-changing role for me.

For an example of what I am saying, consider one's parents. In India they – especially the mother – are considered to be the first guru(s) in a person's life. Whether consciously or

unconsciously they are our first role models, yet most of the time they are not aware of this. They can be role models in terms of their best habits and behaviour, but they can also be role models in reverse, highlighting for us the worst possible forms of behaviour, and making us want to be different from them, better than them. Either way, subtle communication is occurring throughout our time with them, and likewise with other family members, friends, teachers, and colleagues at work.

And so, I believe, it can be for all of us. If we constantly watch and monitor ourselves to become the 'Ideal Aurovilians' that Mother wants us to be, then like pebbles dropped into a

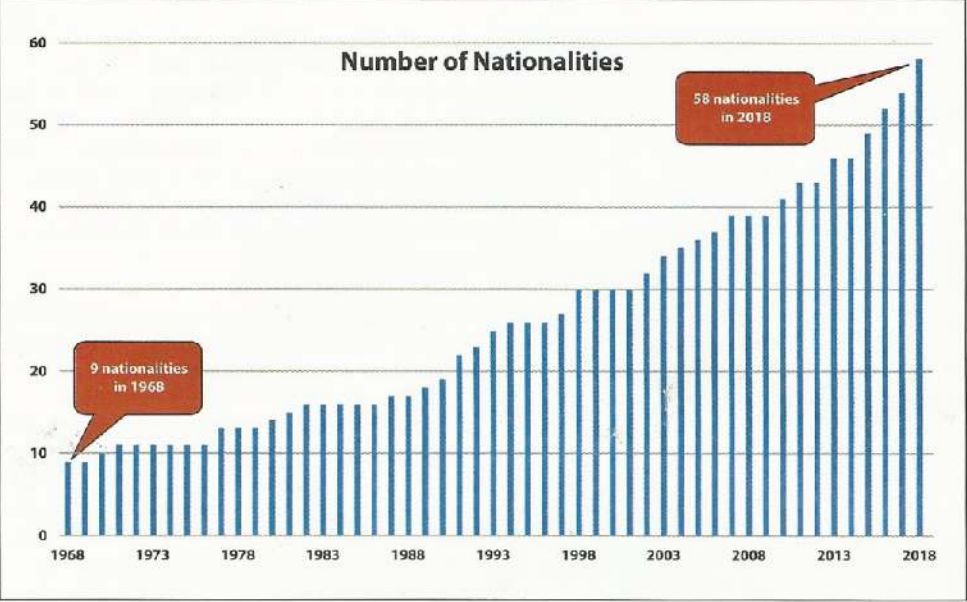
pond the ripples go out and affect all around us. And if those ripples are of a higher nature, then, whether consciously or unconsciously, we are contributing to a further step towards the human unity in diversity that we are here to collectively realise.

Essentially, it is so simple. Only, we need to be aware of it, and the power we each have to raise or lower – consciously or unconsciously, by way of subtle communication – the level of behaviour and consciousness all around us, throughout Auroville, at every moment in every type of circumstance, by just being who and what we are.

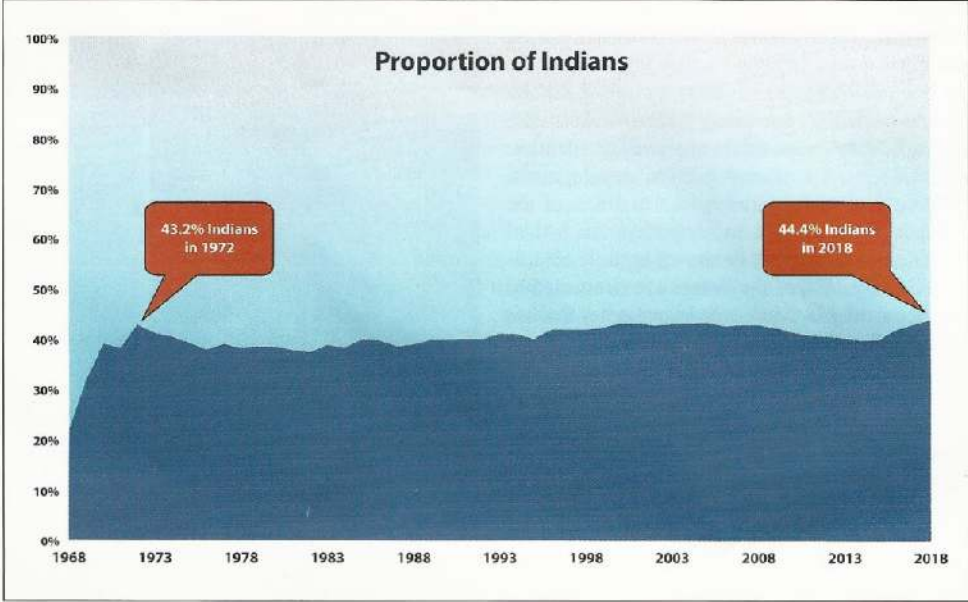
Tim Wrey

The increasing diversity of Auroville's population

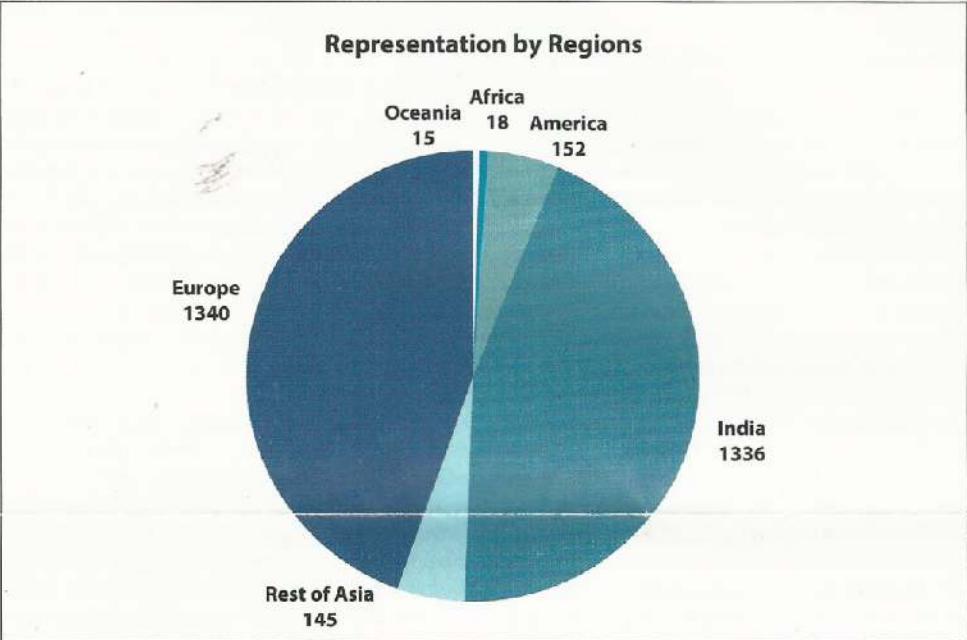
In 2018, Auroville's population crossed 3,000, growing by 8.2% over last year. But what might be more interesting from the perspective of human unity is the diversity of its residents – Aurovilians and Newcomers now come from 58 countries. Here's a look at our population through six charts.



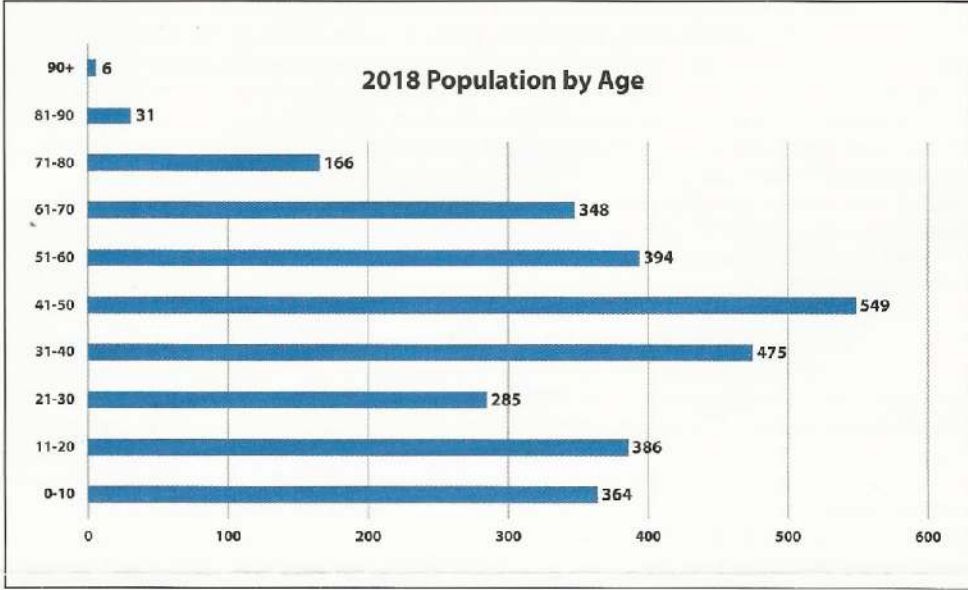
From 9 nationalities in 1968, Auroville residents now come from 58 nationalities. Since the early nineties, the number of nationalities has grown steadily. However, not all nationalities have a strong presence - 36 nations have less than ten residents, while ten nations have only one resident each.



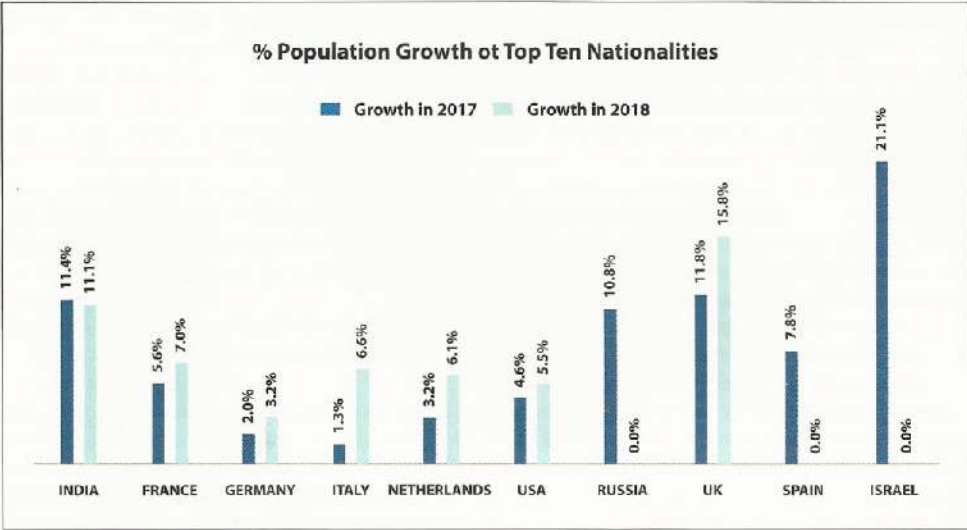
Auroville continues to retain its international character. The proportion of Indians has remained largely unchanged over the years.



The overwhelming majority of Auroville residents are Europeans and Indians. What is most striking is the underrepresentation of Africa, a continent with 54 countries and thousands of ethnicities and languages. Asia, without India, also has very few representatives given its large population and extreme diversity.



The age profile of Auroville residents continues to be a cause for concern, especially the small number of people in the 21-30 age group. Some of these youth leave Auroville for higher education and only about half of them return to work in Auroville. In the coming years, it will be critical to work with the under-20 age group to provide them with creative and stimulating opportunities in Auroville. The median age (age with equal number of people older and younger) in Auroville is almost 40, compared to 27.6 in India.



Other than the Indian population, growth is quite uneven over the years. In 2017, Israel, the UK and Russia had the highest growth rates, while in 2018, the highest growth rates were for the UK, France and Italy.

Population by Country											
Sn	Country	2017	2018	Sn	Country	2017	2018	Sn	Country	2017	2018
1	INDIA	1203	1336	21	BRAZIL	7	11	41	ICELAND	2	2
2	FRANCE	398	426	22	SOUTH AFRICA	11	11	42	IRELAND	2	2
3	GERMANY	249	257	23	HUNGARY	7	9	43	LITHUANIA	2	2
4	ITALY	152	162	24	ARGENTINA	9	8	44	NORWAY	2	2
5	NETHERLANDS	98	104	25	NEPAL	6	7	45	PHILIPPINES	2	2
6	USA	91	96	26	IRAN	4	6	46	PORTUGAL	2	2
7	RUSSIA	72	72	27	SLOVENIA	6	6	47	RWANDA	2	2
8	UK	57	66	28	MEXICO	5	5	48	TAIWAN	6	2
9	SPAIN	55	55	29	BELARUS	4	4	49	ALGERIA	1	1
10	ISRAEL	46	46	30	COLOMBIA	3	4	50	CHILE	0	1
11	SWITZERLAND	41	45	31	DENMARK	3	4	51	CZECH REPUBLIC	1	1
12	SOUTH KOREA	37	44	32	KAZAKHSTAN	1	4	52	EGYPT	1	1
13	BELGIUM	38	41	33	LATVIA	4	4	53	INDONESIA	0	1
14	SWEDEN	27	27	34	MACEDONIA	4	4	54	LUXEMBOURG	0	1
15	CANADA	23	25	35	ETHIOPIA	2	3	55	MOLDOVA	2	1
16	UKRAINE	20	21	36	SRI LANKA	3	3	56	POLAND	1	1
17	AUSTRALIA	16	15	37	TIBET	3	3	57	ROMANIA	1	1
18	CHINA	14	14	38	BULGARIA	2	2	58	SERBIA	0	1
19	AUSTRIA	13	13	39	ECUADOR	1	2	Total		2777	3006
20	JAPAN	14	13	40	FINLAND	1	2	Growth			8.2%

For the first time, Auroville's population has exceeded 3,000 people

RAINFALL

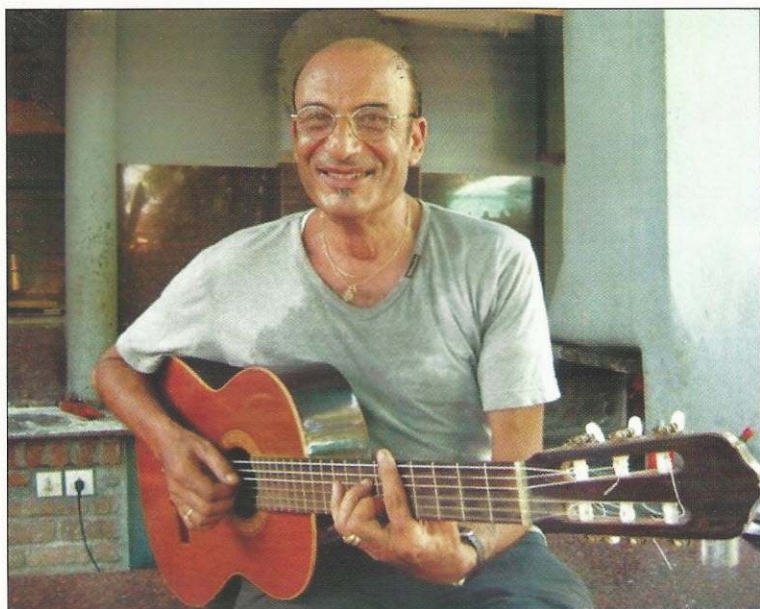
Aurogreen Rainfall Records for 2018

2018 Records	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	Yearly Total
Days with Rain	2	1	1	0	1	8	2	11	9	10	13	6	64
Total mm of Rain	1.8	0.8	11.2	0.0	9.6	40.3	19.5	83.1	98.0	273.3	381.6	47.0	966.23
Trace Days	1	0	2	1	1	4	4	5	0	3	0	0	21
Monthly Deviation from Average	-85.6%	-94.8%	-9.0%	-100.0%	-80.0%	-24.1%	-73.7%	-37.0%	-29.4%	108.7%	103.7%	-77.3%	
Seasonal Rainfall Averages - 2018	Dry Period Five month Rainfall Total - 23.4 mm					S/W Monsoon Rainfall Total - 241 mm				N/E Monsoon Rainfall - 702 mm			Average as on 24/12/18
Seasonal Deviation from Average													-28.72%

Average Last 41 Years Records

Average of last 41 Years Records	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	August	September	October	November	December	41 Years Average
Seasonal Rainfall Averages - last 41 years	Dry Period Five month Rainfall Average - 107 mm					S/W Monsoon Rainfall Average - 398 mm				N/E Monsoon Rainfall - 826 mm			
Average Rain - mm/month	12.5	15.4	12.3	18.8	48.1	53.2	74.2	131.8	138.7	251.4	367.9	206.7	
Cumulated Monthly Averages	12.5	27.9	40.2	59.0	107.0	160.2	234.4	366.2	505.0	756.4	1124.3	1331.0	1331

Paul Berdah



Paul Israel Berdah, better known as Paulo of Tanto, left his body at the age of 71 on December 2nd in a hospital in Paris where he had been treated for a cancer from which he suffered since early 2017.

Paulo, born in Tunis and of French nationality, was an accomplished dentist in France who used to travel in India during his holidays. On one of these trips in the early nineties he discovered Auroville, where André Hababou directed him to Auroville's Dental Clinic. Upon meeting Jacques, an immediate bonding took place between the two dentists and since the mid-nineties Paulo came, along with his wife Claudine, almost every year to help his friend out in the Clinic. He also wholeheartedly plunged into Sri Aurobindo and Mother's works, specifically into 'Savitri'.

As soon as he was pensioned, Paulo and Claudine came over and moved into their house in Petite Ferme. In 2008, Paulo officially joined Auroville and while still working at Dental Clinic, gradually his attention shifted and he became involved in the very early stages of the setting up of Tanto Pizzeria, of which he was co-executive from the very onset. His gentle, easy going presence became the perfect counterpart of Tanto's Daniel and the two of them worked along very well.

Many Aurovilians will know him from there. His pleasant demeanour and happy-go-lucky stance in life, combined with his singing of South American songs while accompanying himself on the guitar, endeared him to many. He will be acutely missed.

On the late evening of Saturday 1 December, Aurovilians came together at Matrimandir's Banyan Tree, in a prayer for a peaceful transitioning toward the Light for this friendly, unassuming man.

Paulo's remains were buried in Paris on December 4th

Peggy Pfaff

On December 23rd, Peggy Ann Pfaff passed away in her daughter Lila's home in Fraternity at the age of 91. Both Lila and her sister Laura, who had come over from USA, were with her in the moment of transition.

Already from the seventies onward, Peggy used to come over from the USA to visit Lila which eventually resulted in her joining Auroville in 1997. Living in her house in Surrender, Peggy was unvaryingly present for her Matrimandir Chamber duty and worked with Krishna Tiwari at the Auroville Archives in Bharat Nivas, where she interviewed and recorded Aurovilians.

Coping with a severely arthritic constitution as well as other general health problems, it became clear in 2008 that she could no longer live alone and Peggy moved in with Lila in Fraternity. One of her delightful characteristics was her great sense of humour and her innate capacity to make people feel good, which carried her through till the end.

Peggy's remains were buried in Auroville's burial grounds on Dec. 26th. A short clip with Peggy talking about her life is available at goo.gl/3dSGhf



Krishna Kumar

What struck me most about Krishna Kumar was his intensity: in dance, as singer in his band Temple Rock, and as a teacher of dance and Carnatic music. Many were the occasions where he shared his gifts with Auroville, as dancer – always together with his wife Gita, "his Goddess", as he used to say – or as a choreographer, enthusing and pushing all who were on stage to go beyond what they thought they were able to do. Many Auroville residents will remember his two hour "Tale of the Kaluveli Siddhar", performed at Bharat Nivas and at the Irumbai temple, where he put to music and sang the words of local bard Murugesan. He'd choreographed the dramatic episodes with Gita, while his students – many from Auroville – performed, on one occasion with his daughter Harini in the lead role of the beautiful Valli, the dancing girl seducing the impassive yogi played by Johnny.

Intensity was also the hallmark of his performances of Temple Rock, a band of musicians from Auroville and Pondicherry, which became so well-known that, to his great amusement, he was regularly recognized while shopping in Pondicherry. And then there were his private music classes where he taught the philosophy, intonation and rhythms of the Carnatic idiom, tirelessly repeating the correct inflection till the student finally got it. A beaming smile would be the reward.

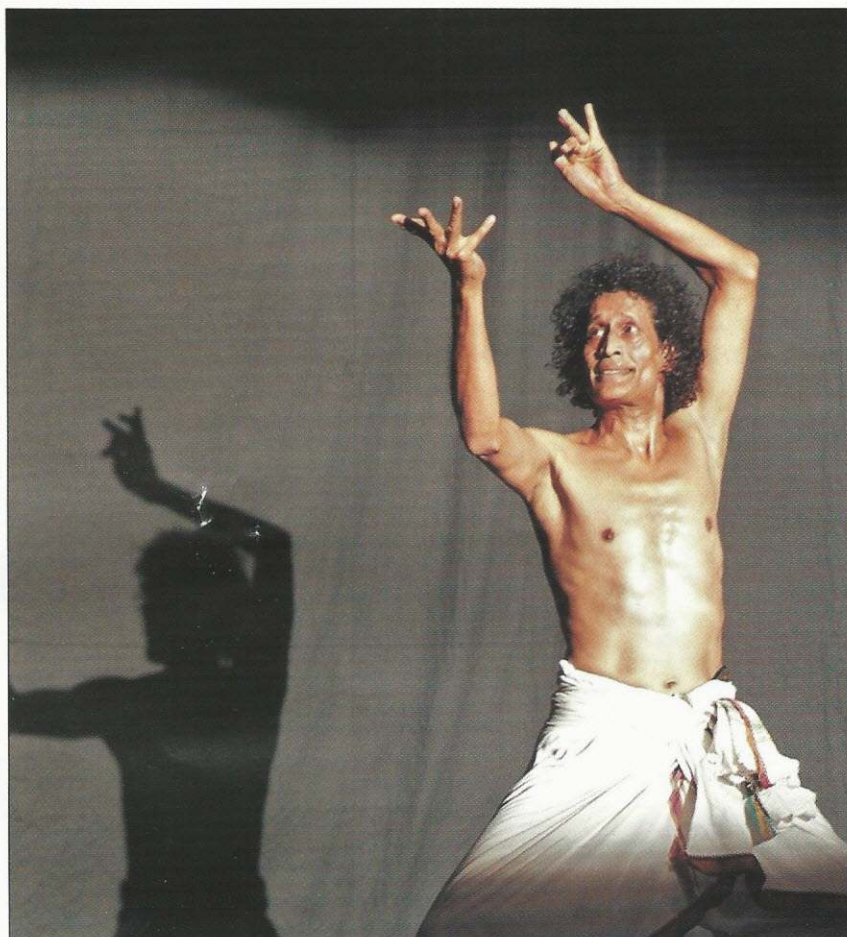
Krishna came from a highly artistic South Indian family. He had trained at Kalashetra, and was – "by pure accident," he said – present at the inauguration of Auroville on February 28, 1968. In the seventies he went to New Delhi to teach Bharata Natyam dance. One of his foreign students, Gita, became his wife and together they came to live at a beach near Auroville. Later they spent many years in Germany, travelling all over the country to teach and give dance and music performances. They finally moved back to India, to their home at the beach, sharing with Auroville their love and passion for Bharata Natyam and Carnatic music.

Last year the couple moved to the New Creation community in Auroville with the intention to join, after an initial period of being 'Friends of Auroville.' The move was welcomed by their many friends and students, and even more by the children of New Creation who suddenly had two top-quality teachers of dance and music in their midst. If the children enjoyed it, they did too. "He loved it!" says Gita. Together, they started preparing a performance with the children for the closing ceremony of Auroville's 50th anniversary, in February 2019.

One week after celebrating their 40th wedding anniversary, Krishna Kumar came down with a severe bout of asthma. The morning before he left his body he told his Goddess that he had dreamt that The Mother had called him to sing for Her. The call must have been strong: he left his body that same evening, on December 14, at the age of 68.

Krishna Kumar's remains were cremated at the Auroville Burial and Cremation Grounds on December 17th.

Carel



Krishna Kumar during a performance at Bharat Nivas in 2006

Rudy Phillips

Rudy Phillips, who served as President of the Foundation for World Education for ten years, passed away from complications of colon cancer on November 26th. At his bedside was his partner, Tom O'Brien, and his two sons. He was 77 years old.

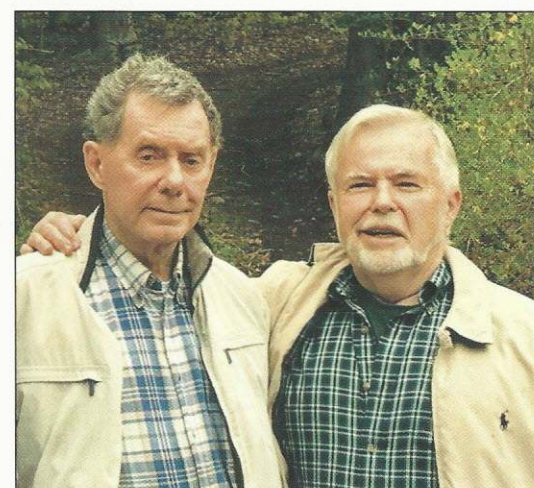
Rudy had also served on the Board of Matagiri Sri Aurobindo Center and was instrumental in creating an annuity for founders Sam Spanier and Eric Hughes and helping to transfer the property to the nonprofit organization which now owns the land and buildings.

Both a lawyer and chemical engineer by training, Rudy brought his corporate background and skill-set in service to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville and participated in numerous All USA Meetings. He served as President of Crompton and Knowles, a leading ingredient technology company.

He and Tom hosted many visitors from India in their New Jersey homes. For the past 16 years Rudy practiced massage therapy on Cape Cod where he and Tom had moved.

Rudy was an avid skier, painter, gardener and scuba diver. He was deeply committed to human and civil rights.

Tom commented on his partner's passing, "In an early morning dream state I saw Rudy walking in the Elysian Fields of paradise surrounded by light and feeling very peaceful and blessed. He sent love and encouraged me not to worry. He will also live on in the hearts of all who loved him."



Rudy (left) and Tom

Dear Editor Alan

This is my first 'Letter to the Editor' of *Auroville Today* but I am not nervous. You usually graciously publish all the letters you get, and you get very few. I think this is because AVT is such a sterling publication that has enlightened Auroville and the world for the last thirty years in such a fair and accurate way that there is little need for complaint. There is truth in my slight exaggeration. Congratulations *Auroville Today* on your 30th Birthday and having never missed your monthly deadline in all those years.

My letter is about a book review in the October 2018 #351 issue just to make sure a reader might not get a wrong impression about the origins of the new two-volume publication of *Auroville in Mother's Words* edited by Gilles Guigan. Alan, you have positively reviewed this comprehensive chronological compilation as "timely and useful" giving some historical context as well as a "few words of warning." However in the first sentence of your review, it would have been better to refer to me by my current name of B since I took the "ill" out of Bill so many years ago. Gilles kindly gave all my names

in his introduction. You ascribe to me the most notable compilation on Auroville by 1990. That credit is not for me but I understand you may have been misled by Gilles' introduction. Gilles will change that introduction in the next edition to reflect how that compilation began with Navoditte keeping the messages of Mother sent for Auroville, and these were later incorporated into "cards" made by Barbara for the early and still-used brochure 'Mother on Auroville'.

Finally, it was Bhaga who, with Barbara's blessings, put all this together in chronological order with other material she had researched. Much of that new material came from what was recorded by Satprem in the thirteen volumes of *Mother's Agenda*. The translations of the *Agenda* into English only came out slowly after the French edition. Bhaga had permission from Satprem to use this material and to do provisional translations of the Auroville material in the untranslated French versions. I only assisted her with the English fluency of what she translated, and with fund-raising to pay Auroville Press for the printing. When this comprehensive compilation was complete with References List and Index done by Shradhdhavan, all typed up by Brigitte from Arya, and given the name

'Auroville in Mother's Words' by Bhaga, its publication was blocked. Some people felt the *Agenda* material should not be mixed with the other material. We could not go ahead. The only way out then was to take the *Agenda* material and publish that in a separate volume. I extracted that from Bhaga's compilation for printing at the Auroville Press with the title: *Mother on Auroville: References in Mother's Agenda*. Since that time, this book has been continuously reprinted and sold by Auroville Press. Now, finally, we have the other half of Bhaga's compilation and so much more in the two volumes Gilles has edited.

Gilles has also always kept his own compilations and has been researching the history of Auroville for the last 35 years. One last thing, the book review might have acknowledged a bit more the monumental achievement of Gilles in accomplishing a real magnum opus that is such a gift for Auroville on its Fiftieth Birthday. In the next fifty years, may we create Auroville according to Mother's words.

Thanks,
B

LETTERS

Thamarai: the lotus blooms again

Thamarai, which means 'lotus' in Tamil, is an Auroville educational and health project in the bioregion. There were challenges in 2016 when the Thamarai centre had to shut down in Edayanchavady. What is the status of the project now?

Thamarai was founded in 2006 by Bridget Horkan and Kathy Walking to collaborate with villages in Auroville's bioregion aspiring to further the values of full potential, well-being and empowerment for all. On the ground, this meant programmes in education and health, with a particular emphasis on capacity building of local volunteers.

for an after-school facility. Thamarai was also approached by a friend who had some space to offer in Annai Nagar. "We were offered a temporary, rent free, place for after-school, so we quickly took the opportunity to begin a new chapter, taking the learning from the previous experience of building strong community connections through a village support committee," says Bridget.

Even though Annai Nagar is a small

curricular activities. Once a week, students practice stick dance, a folk dance known to improve concentration. They have Silambam classes every Sunday, a traditional martial art that originated in Tamil Nadu at least 2,000 years ago. And with the Kalvi project, children use drawings and patterns to make games.

Thamarai is also partnering with Udavi School on an early childhood programme. Every child who attends the Thamarai Playgroup programme is assured a place in Udavi School. The Playgroup curriculum, managed by Maliga, is designed to provide holistic development of a child, including sensory-motor skills and psycho-social development. The Playgroup currently has 32 children from Edayanchavady and other neighbouring villages.

Realising the value of empowering the local community, the project has enrolled a group of 12 local facilitators who take care of the day-to-day functioning of the centre and conduct classes for

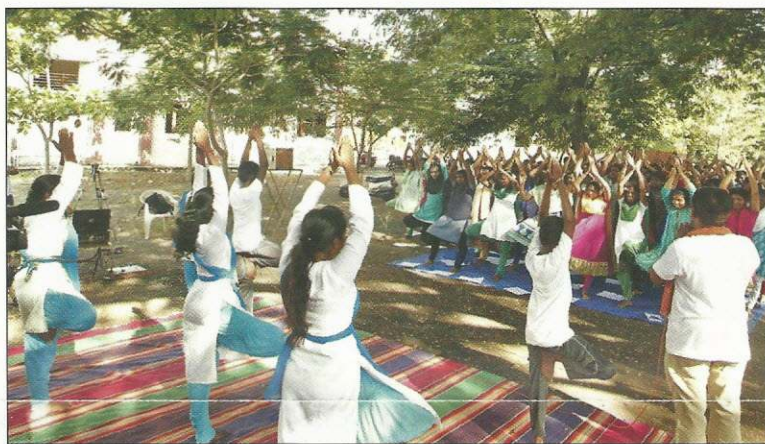


Conducting healing sessions with women

The first project was started in Edayanchavady, one of the neighbouring villages with a playgroup and after school. A year later, an all-day free healing centre was added for the villagers along with regular yoga therapy sessions. In the evening, between 60 and 90 children would come for homework help, English language learning, and computer classes. "When we started our projects in this village, the youth of the village were the first to step forward to help us. We established the system of graduates being coached as facilitators," says Bridget, co-founder and coordinator of the Thamarai Learning Centre.

When the occupancy of the building that housed the project was challenged in 2016, Thamarai decided to close the project in its current form. The play group remained in Udavi School and it was decided to support the older children through computer and health programmes in the government school.

Just after the shutting down of the centre in Edayanchavady, villagers from Annai Nagar, a nearby Dalit village, requested support from Auroville



Yoga at the Government Higher Secondary School, Koot Road

settlement of about 1,500 people, the programme has high attendance. Around 60 students attend the after-school programme that runs from Monday to Saturday. Like in the earlier project at Edayanchavady, the new project focusses on providing guidance for homework, English classes and digital literacy lessons. But the new project has an additional dimension of extra-

children. Three of these facilitators had the opportunity in 2018 to take part in the Anveshan youth exchange programmes in various parts of India. Shubhlaxmi, a volunteer from Annai Nagar, says that facilitating in after-school has improved her fluency in English and exposed her to new concepts and general knowledge. The effect is rubbing off on the children. "Before, if someone from Auroville, especially someone from abroad, spoke to the village children, they would hesitate," she says. "After the after-school has come to our village, our children are more exposed to different cultures and more familiar with English."

The training of the local facilitators does not stop with English and computers. A leadership programme is being implemented as well. Bridget explains: "Six years ago, Monica Sharma introduced us to a programme and practice called Stewardship for New Emergence. This programme builds capacity and leadership and supports each participant to design effective and



Bridget and Muthukumari, the Thamarai Coordinators

sustainable projects in many different sectors. We aim to train the youth and children through the same courses, so that there is effective change in their village development."

Thamarai children have been trained using the tools of stewardship and have designed projects that focus on water and waste management, education and sports development, and overall wellbeing in the village. In affiliation with Yatra Arts Media and supported by funding from the 50th Anniversary fund, a group of children have been trained in filmmaking so that they can make their own films and raise awareness about social issues. Thamarai recently received co-stewardship of a plot of land in the village, which is now being developed into a sports ground. "The youth and children are working together on the design and layout, on what they need and how it can be done, all using the tools taught in the stewardship programme," says Bridget.

What about the health programme that had run successfully in Edayanchavady? "After the healing centre shut down in the village, I thought of engaging with more villages and reaching many more people by designing a mobile health programme," says Muthukumari, the programme co-ordinator. The mobile health programme

to support the people of the bioregion to be responsible for the well-being of their villages. So we trained the women to take these attitudes into their own communities. Some of the women have started their own yoga classes in their villages," says Muthukumari.

Alcoholism continues to be a huge problem in the villages, and Thamarai has started conducting counselling sessions with the help of experienced professionals and de-addiction practitioners.

Thamarai has overcome the hurdle of being shut down in one location and has emerged stronger. The real strength of the programme lies in the empowerment of local youth. Praba Haran, a software engineer from Edayanchavady village, is one of the current Thamarai volunteers. "For me, Thamarai has been a way of realising my capacity and skills, and letting me build a positive character," he says. "I want to share what I have learnt in all these years, from being one of the children in the programme when it was started in my village to now when I support the children of another village."

Poovizhi wasn't able to join Thamarai as a student. "I used to hear about children dancing, singing and interacting with international volunteers. But the centre was too far from my home," she says ruefully. "I wanted to



Homework help at the evening after-school programme

now reaches several government schools, where sessions are conducted on healthy lifestyle and yoga.

Eighty-nine women working in Auroville units have been trained in yoga and healing through herbal remedies in a six-month programme in 2018 supported with funding from Stichting De Zaaier. "The vision of our projects is

learn and explore abilities beyond academics and also work on social issues." Now, while pursuing a degree in software engineering, she has become a facilitator in Thamarai.

It is they — Praba, Poovizhi, Shubhlaxmi and so many others — who will make sure the lotus continues to bloom.

Mitali



Children learning film making

Subscription information

Subscription rates for 12 issues :

India: Print + digital edition: Rs. 600

Other countries: Print + digital edition: Rs 3,000 equivalent

Other countries digital only edition: Rs 2,100 equivalent.

Reduced rates: Those for whom the subscription rate is an obstacle are invited to email us for information on reduced rates.

Benefactor: Auroville Today does not receive any subsidy nor carries advertisements. Subscribers are invited to send donations to help continue this work.

There are three ways to subscribe:

1. Through our website.

Subscriptions can be ordered and paid on-line through www.auroville.org/avtoday and auroville.com. On-line subscriptions have additional unit charges and bank costs.

2. By sending your contribution directly to Auroville Today.

Cheques sent directly to Auroville Today should be made payable to Auroville Unity Fund, specifying: 'Contribution for Auroville Today'. Personal cheques are preferred to bank cheques.

Please do not send money orders or cash.

3. By sending your contribution to:

U.K.: Auroville International U.K., c/o John Mulrey, 7 Cubb Field, Aylesbury, Bucks, HP19 7SJ tel. (44) (0)1296 415685

email: john@aviuk.org

Germany: Auroville International Deutschland e.V., Solmsstrasse 6, 10961 Berlin, tel. (49) (0)30-42803150, Fax (49) (0)30-92091376, email: info@auroville.de. GLS Gemeinschaftsbank, BIC: GENODEM1GLS, IBAN: DE 1643 0609 6780 1938 9200.

USA: Make checks payable to Auroville International USA, and send to:

AVI USA, P.O. Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818, Tel: (831) 425-5620' email: info@aviusa.org ' or to: Pondicherry, 12 Tinker St, Woodstock NY 12498, tel: 845-679-2926, email: info@pondi.biz

The Netherlands and Belgium:

Auroville International Nederland, Koninginneweg 129, 1211 AP Hilversum. Email: secretaris@auroville.nu Tel. 0031 (0) 6 4807 8595. Triodos Bank nr 1984.20.927, IBAN NL26TRIO 0198 4209 27, BIC: TRIONL2U

Editorial team:

Alan, Carel, Manas. Proofreading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

Contact: Auroville Today, Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu, India. Phone: +91.413.2622572. Email: avtoday@auroville.org.in

Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole.