Shining a light on women's health and safety issues

Auroville recently conducted its first women's health survey. Lesley spoke to the survey's convener, Paula, about the findings.

The inaugural Auroville Women's Health Survey aimed to capture a snapshot of the health of Auroville women in the areas of puberty, sexual health, maternity and personal safety. Led by Paula, a nurse-midwife at Santé and a women's health nurse practitioner with 30 years experience, the exploratory research aimed to better understand aspects of women's lives in Auroville and to gain a more precise understanding of her field.

"I wanted to shine a light on areas of life that are taboo for some women and cultures, specifically menstruation, sexual health, maternity and personal safety," says Paula, emphasising that these are the areas in which she is qualified to provide services and advice, and where she would like to make changes. "These subjects are shrouded in mystery, ignorance, and unspoken codes of conduct in cultures around the world. I wanted to investigate and find out the truth of things I heard, the cultural norms, the deficits in education. It's an incredibly diverse international community, so people have different culturally-influenced expectations about health care."

In collaboration with women working in related fields in Auroville and a research intern from Holland, Paula devised 28 key questions and protocols to administer the survey. Financial support was provided by SAIIER, and in-kind support was given by Santé and Eco-Femme. 218 Aurovilian women aged 15 and above took part in the survey – about 20% of Auroville's female population in this age range. Respondents included non-Indians, Indians from the Auroville bioregion and Indians from elsewhere – a demographic spread in age and ethnic proportions that accurately represented the population of Auroville. "This gives us the confidence to say that our research findings are an accurate reflection of the population of women in Auroville at this time," says Paula.

The survey was completely anonymous and confidential. In order to ensure equitable participation and a representational demographic spread, the team made special efforts to reach Tamil Aurovilian women, for example, by providing a printed Tamil language version and holding sessions at Life Education Centre, where the staff explained the questions for groups of participants. "I realised that there is some limitation to the Western survey method of a pencil and paper questionnaire," says Paula. "I found

Poster used for the Human Rights in Childbirth Conference which was held in Mumbai from 2-5 February 2017

that some participants really needed a lot of help to do this kind of questionnaire. Also I don't know that they've ever been able to really answer some of these questions as a free agent."

The responses for some questions were so often clearly differentiated according to cultural background, that the research findings are often presented in binary form: responses of women from the bioregion (Tamil Aurovilian women), contrasted with women not from the bioregion (Aurovilian women who are non-Indian or who are from other parts of India). Paula emphasises that the survey is merely a snapshot of women's health in Auroville at this time, and it does not investigate more complex issues relating to differing cultural norms about health. However, she hopes that the conclusions are sufficient to translate into action in the fields of education, health care, security services and public awareness, as well as to open up dialogue and raise awareness.

Research findings

The opening questions focussed on puberty, particularly how well prepared women felt before their first period. "I knew there is a ceremony in Tamil Nadu when girls have their first menstruation," says Paula, "so I thought 'Well then that must mean they're prepared! They're getting good education, they're informed about the menstrual cycle, how you can get pregnant, how you keep yourself clean.'" However, this was not the case, as 94% of women from the bioregion felt unprepared (as compared to 81% not from the bioregion), which Paula believes is due to generational taboos, lack of information and discussion, and a cultural reluctance to approach women's biology in a neutral way. Respondents expressed a number of needs in relation to periods, such as talks in schools, free period supplies, private toilets, and – as one woman stated – "education to understand that menstruation is not shameful".

79% of all surveyed women said that sexual health care in Auroville did not meet their needs, but Paula believes this figure is influenced by respondents' limited understanding of the terminology. "Some people didn't like the term 'sexual health', because it must have different connotations in different countries," says Paula. "In my world, sexual health care means everything from birth control to sexually transmitted disease – it is a huge field." Yet she says that the response to this question spurs her dream – to offer services in Auroville that address women's unique health needs without judgment.

More knowledge about sex required

80% of women not from the bioregion said they wanted to know more about sex which suggests "that they have enough self-awareness to know that there is much more to be known", says Paula. In comparison, only 58% of women from the bioregion wanted to know more about sex. "I think that indicates that, for women from the bioregion, this is a taboo area, so if women know enough about what's happening to get themselves through the situation, they are happy enough, but it's very common that women wish that they knew more. Possibly women from the bioregion are less likely to recognise the deficit in knowledge than western women, and perhaps they would never ask. I'm hoping that the whole area of sexuality can become more freely discussed and not repressed."

In relation to the first time respondents had sex, while the numbers of women from the bioregion and women not from the bioregion were largely aligned in being confident about their decision to have sex (37% and 34% respectively), there was a stark difference in motivation for first time sex: 19% from bioregion wanted to get pregnant, as compared to 1% of women not from bioregion. "Presumably, the majority of Tamil women having sex for the first time are doing it within marriage," says Paula, "so it's socially sanctioned sex and there's a cultural imperative to produce a child as soon as possible."

Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill, 2013, passed by the Rajya Sabha on 26th February, 2013, seeks to safeguard a woman's right to gender equality, life & liberty & protect her from any kind of physical or mental torture at her workplace, irrespective of age & work profile.
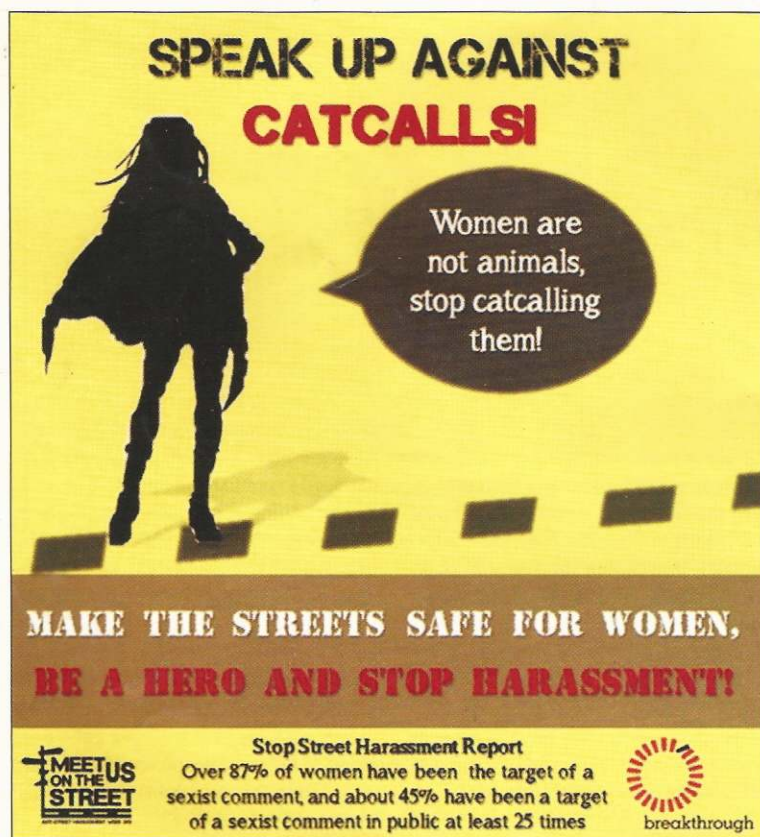
A poster for creating awareness of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013. The Act is applicable to all workspaces in Auroville.

While women from the bioregion had a higher rate of feeling confident about their decision to have sex for the first time, they had a lower rate of giving consent (21% compared to 31%). "This was a point where I realised that we probably didn't have the right tool to understand their story," says Paula about the challenges of interpreting what lies behind data that's collected across cultures. "And that was the big 'take-away' for me: this kind of questionnaire is not the most appropriate thing for the Tamil population. The question about consent probably required the most explanation for all respondents, as sexual decision-making is not cultivated across all cultures. These issues of being confident and giving consent, and using condoms or not using condoms, are all part of the intricate dynamics of a relationship and of sexual politics. This is not easily understood or dissected.

"Also, we received direct comments from Auroville teenagers about feeling pressure to have sex as they approach the age of 16. Every day at school, peers ask them, 'Have you done it yet?' So there is peer pressure, and there are dissonances at that early point in life. For example, when a 14-year-old girl says she was confident and gave consent, but she didn't use a condom or any other birth control, there you have a bit of a conflict because she may be giving consent, but is she giving consent to possibly getting a sexually transmitted infection or becoming pregnant? So there are complex dynamics around consent, and this survey has limitations in looking at that."

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breakthrough

Poster by 'Breakthrough'

Shining a light on womens sexual health and safety issues
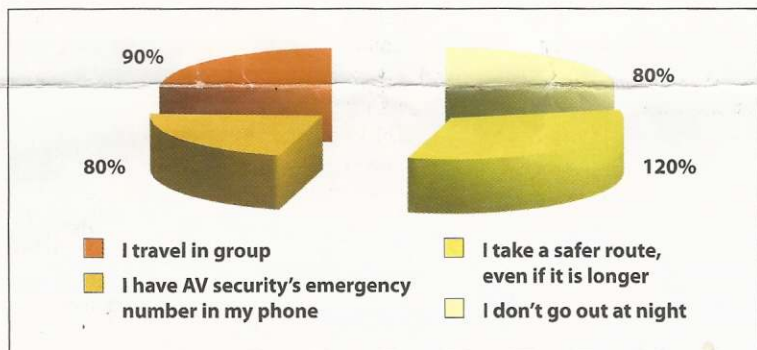
The survey findings also identified that when respondents had what the researchers termed 'early initiation of intercourse' (defined by the World Health Organisation as below the age of 16), this was often followed by a "cascading effect of unwanted events". For example, of the 18 women who had sex before the age of 16, 12 had an unplanned pregnancy, 11 were beaten, 9 felt raped, and four experienced all these events. "This seems to be linked to lack of awareness of sexual health issues," says Paula, "but I can't draw conclusions about that link, because this is really an exploratory study, and to pursue that link would require more specific research. But it was certainly a pattern, so we wonder what else was going on. Was it inadequate preparation, inadequate parental support or involvement in a young person's life? Low self esteem?"

The rate of unwanted pregnancies was surprising to Paula – 26% of women from the bioregion, 50 % of women not from the bioregion – which Paula sees as a concrete indicator of inadequate education and health services.
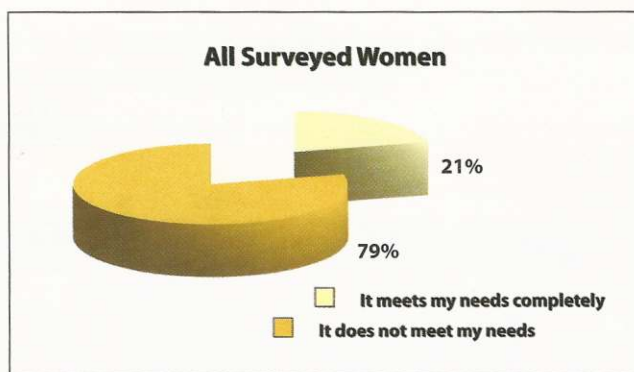
Maternity issues

59% of respondents agreed that Auroville is a welcoming place for pregnant women, whilst 41% disagreed. Of 61 respondents who had children younger than 12 years old, a greater percentage of women from the bioregion were unhappy with their birth experience, compared to women not from the bioregion – which is possibly linked to the nature of hospital births in the area. Fewer women from the bioregion (44%) felt there was enough time for them and the baby, compared to 67% of women not from the Auroville bioregion. "There was such a discrepancy, that we really saw a very strong need to provide help to Tamil Aurovilian women giving birth," says Paula, "because giving birth in a government hospital is a really abysmal situation. Women shouldn't be faced with an over 50% risk of having a Cesarean delivery when they go into childbirth, they shouldn't be delivering in unclean, unsafe environments. I would really like to help in the area of dignity in childbirth."

Response to the survey question: How would you rate sexual health care in Auroville?

respondents said they had been abused or beaten, many women raised the issue of pervasive harassment, a question that the survey did not specifically ask. "Many comments came to us saying that harassment happens all the time, or 'I wasn't beaten, but I was grabbed'. Women have become so accustomed to being inappropriately touched and harassed that it gets difficult to see it because women minimise it."

The survey found that in order to stay safe: women take longer routes home (120 women); travel in groups (90); store emergency numbers in their phone for Auroville security (80); or just don't go out at night (80 women) – the latter being an approach to safety that, Paula points out, men are not required to take.

A survey question that posed a particular challenge for explanation to participants as well as interpretation of the data, was the one that asked if women had "ever felt raped". As Paula explains, a question asking specifically if respondents 'had been raped' would have closed off responses from women, and she wanted to encourage women to express subjective experiences that included a profound sense of violation. "For example, one woman reported that a man in a train ejaculated next to her, but she would not report it as rape," says Paula. "Another woman spoke of being violated by a doctor in a clinic, but she didn't term it rape, because it didn't involve penetration. So, we wanted to broaden respondents' thinking and give them the opportunity to report different kinds of sexual assault, rather than rape that meets a legal definition."

The question gained an affirmative response of 6% from women of the bioregion, and a much higher 25% from women from the non-bio region – the latter figure more closely reflecting WHO's rates of rape of women worldwide. Paula believes the much lower number of 6% of women from the bioregion reflects how her survey "hits the six-foot wall of taboo", where Indian women largely do not report or discuss rape. "Of all the women who get raped in India, only 30% speak to anyone about it, and of that only 1% report to the police. And yet everyone says, 'We can't do anything unless you're willing to report it', but reporting means you're willing to go public, go to the police, have your name used, which has the consequence of losing your job, being ostracised from your family, and in some cases being forced to marry your rapist. Also, India does not recognise marital rape. So there, which is not reflected in the survey results, is probably a whole invisible group of people who might otherwise have determined that what they experienced was a violation and a rape."

The survey concluded with the question, "Is there anything else you'd like to tell us?" This elicited a wide variety of responses. "One woman said that a light needed to be shone on abuse and incest, citing 'alcohol abuse that leads to sexual forcing'", says Paula. "I hadn't asked specifically about incest but had heard it exists here, as in any place in the world."

Presentation of findings

The response to Paula's public presentations within the community have been highly supportive and positive, with many women and men approaching her to express their appreciation, to offer "cool ideas" and educational tools, or, in the case of Auroville's security services, to emphasise their commitment to escorting women. "I have tried to present the findings in a format that's not threatening, non-judgmental, and as something we can learn from.

At one presentation of the findings, a Tamil woman in the audience suggested that many Tamil women lack the terminology and never speak with each other about sexual health. Paula concedes that this is "a limitation" of the research. "The issue of the lines of communication – who speaks to whom about what, and what are the taboos – that's very deep, and I don't presume to have understood."

Possible outcomes

The survey aims to be a small step in the direction of normalising discussion around sexual health. "I hope that by shining a professional and academic light on it, I avoid making it salacious," says Paula."The adults in the community have a responsibility to be frank and honest, and enlightened in their attitudes towards education of the youth, because there is no comprehensive sex education in Auroville. I would like to see every school in
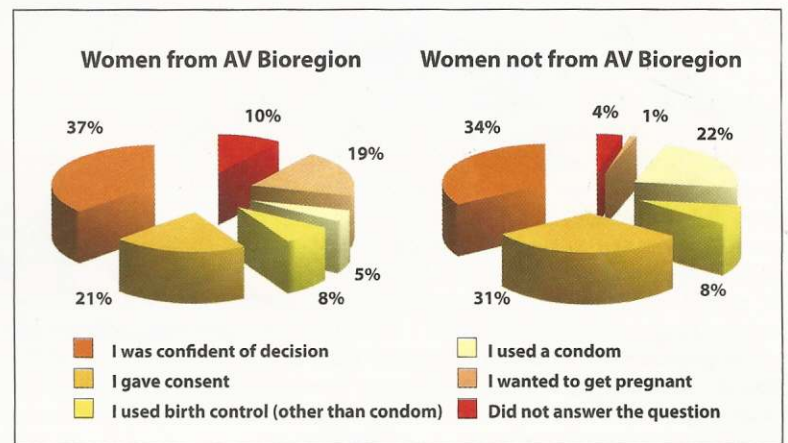
Response to the survey question: Thinking of the first time you had sex, what applied to you?

Auroville have ongoing sex education." This education would ideally start at a young age, include accurate language for anatomy, and address issues of safety and safe touch, birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, emotional aspects of intimate relationships and decision making, and ways to minimise harm to self and others." In an educational programme that I've done at TLC, I teach about making decisions that are based on values from within, that are harmonious and truthful to you and not being swayed by peer pressure or by a dominant personality – to learn to hear your own voice and to make your own decisions."

Paula believes that the survey findings indicate a need for a health system and culture where sexuality is "much more open and not judged." She would like to see a system that provides support to women after trauma and assault, where women are given the necessary emotional support, the emergency morning-after pill and screening for sexually transmitted infections. For maternity services, she would like to see the establishment of a birth centre for women who might not want to give birth at home, but don't want to give birth in a hospital. "One comment on the survey was, 'We have a farewell center where we say goodbye to people, but how about a welcome center?' I love the idea, so let's work for it."

Lesley

The top four responses to the survey question 'What do you do to stay safe in Auroville?'

Personal Safety

The topic of personal safety prompted much discussion at the public presentations of the research findings, as well as comments on the survey response forms. While 61 survey

Is there free expression in Auroville?

Sri Aurobindo spoke of free speech as being "an essential requisite for promoting and guarding the true well-being of the people".

The issue of free speech and expression in Auroville has simmered away beneath the surface for many years. Occasionally, it bursts out, as happened recently as a result of certain incidents of perceived censorship. A satirical play was not allowed to be staged in the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium; a mural depicting Gandhi was repainted after protests; and an image in an Auroville arts magazine of the Matrimandir in the form of an elephant was removed by the Visitors Centre management before being put on sale.

Auroville Today called together some Aurovilians who have been very much involved in or concerned about communication in the community to explore this issue more deeply.

Meenakshi is a nationally-awarded poet; Mauna has been involved with community communication for many years; Akash Kapur is a published writer; Fabienne is a core member of Auroville Outreach;

Manoj is one of the administrators of Auronet; and Krishna is a member of the Auroville Art Service team. The moderator was Alan.

Auroville Today: The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 defined free expression as 'Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers'. Many countries, including India, guarantee freedom of expression in their constitution. But each country also specifies limitations to this freedom.

Where are we in Auroville in terms of freedom of expression?

Fabienne: At present, we do not have a public platform where we can tell each other what we really think.

Mauna: I think we have full freedom of expression as long as we observe the 'party line', that is as long

as it is within the context of the yoga, within the terminology of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

Akash: The problem with saying that the party line is Mother and Sri Aurobindo's philosophy is that it is such a wide philosophy that your interpretation of it may be very different from mine.

Speaking as a writer, I don't think the situation regarding free expression in Auroville is particularly dire but it is pretty clear that if you say certain things you will be violating unspoken norms, and this leads to a lot of self-censorship. The longer you have lived here, the more you know how to navigate these things.

What are these invisible lines or norms that we are not meant to violate?

Manoj: Nobody would write on Auronet about the Indian Prime Minister, Mr. Modi.

Akash: We had an example of somebody on Auronet who used to question the Master Plan in very loud

terms. Some people responded by saying he was violating what Mother wanted for Auroville, so this was clearly a line for them.

Krishna: I remember that Charu, when speaking about his caricatures, told me he would never make fun of the Matrimandir. Jesse, when I interviewed him about his recent play, *Citizen One*, said he wouldn't make fun of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. So these are obviously lines they draw for themselves.

So does this mean that there is no general agreement about what can and cannot be expressed in Auroville?

Manoj: Yes. That is why each group should be allowed to choose what form of expression they allow or disallow in their context.

Fabienne: In fact, this is what happens at present. In Outreach I do my own 'censorship' of material because I know that if something about Auroville which is not explained in a proper way goes

outside, it might cause more damage than good.

Meenakshi: I am the editor of a Tamil monthly that goes to schools and colleges all over Tamil Nadu. We have decided to publish only positive news. If I was editing a magazine for the local bioregion which was presenting Auroville, I would also only present positive news.

Akash: For me, the sign of a confident society is if you can say this is a great place but it is not perfect. We give a much worse impression of Auroville when we look as if we have got something to hide and we pretend that we are a fairy tale. Any journalist sniffs this out right away.

Fabienne: From an outreach perspective, I think we should be able to speak to the world about anything that happens here, including the problems we face, but we have to provide the context because otherwise it is very difficult to understand what is happening here. But providing context is complicated; it takes a lot of time.

Is there free expression in Auroville?

That's why most of the time the things that do go out are shallow and superficial.

Akash: If we accept that every group has a right to decide what is expressed within its context, then we are effectively saying that we don't accept freedom of expression as a baseline principle. I think we need to decide as a community whether there is freedom of expression in Auroville and what that means, and if we agree upon this, it should be observed across all groups in Auroville. Otherwise, every individual group will have the right to shut down a performance or rip out a page that they don't like from a magazine. This is not freedom of expression.

Manoj: But is it freedom when everybody has to observe a party line regarding what can or cannot be expressed?

Krishna: We already have a kind of party line, which refers to unity in diversity. In that case, should not all our groups be committed to giving platforms for the expression of diversity?

Fabienne: But not if diversity means bad taste. There are many different ways to express the same thing: it can be done with elegance.

Since Auroville is meant to be constantly evolving, inevitably that will mean the status quo must be constantly challenged. Artists often take the lead in doing this. Sometimes this will take the form of a provocation, like Dharmesh's 'Sleeping Beauty' installation which represented The Charter as a corpse.
Is pushing the envelope like this a particular challenge in this community?

Manoj: I don't agree that this is the way to promote change. Art has the potential to invoke something profound but instead of invoking, it has now degenerated into provoking. This doesn't elevate society, it creates reaction and pain rather than healing. I think this approach reflects the artist's lack of capacity to invoke something higher.

Akash: But what you consider provoking I might consider invoking. It is a very personal thing. Does your personal interpretation somehow become a standard to define what can or cannot happen?

Manoj: This is exactly why, while artists are free to create whatever they want, those working in a particular context also have a right to filter out and choose what they would put and what they would not. These are all different aspects of freedom.

From left: Akash, Mauna, Meenakshi, Manoj, Krishna and Fabienne

comment from somebody who comes to Auroville regularly that Auroville should not involve itself in politics and not be posting such articles. He sent an email to the Working Committee complaining about it. As a result, we changed the name of the administrator on our site because we did not want anybody's visa to be put into question.

And somebody did want to write about the Indian government and Auroville in our recent MAgzAV issue but we asked them not to write an article that was critical. So we do apply self-censorship.

Fabienne: A real problem regarding free expression in Auroville is when somebody feels they are not able to say the truth because they are afraid of repercussions regarding their visa. This has actually happened in the past.

Manoj: A lot of problems come because our mode of communication with each other is still very crude. We hammer each other rather than trying to find the underlying truth of different perspectives.

This 'hammering' happens quite a lot on Auronet, our internal communication platform, of which you are one of the administrators. In the past, there was moderation but now, as a result of accusations of 'censorship', the administrators do not moderate postings and people have the freedom to express themselves in any way they wish. Now some people have stopped posting or even participating because they have been attacked.

defended his right to state his views.

Meenakshi: Language is another major factor that limits freedom of expression. Almost 50% of the Auroville population, many from the local area, do not speak or express themselves in English. Even though Mother talked about four languages for Auroville, Auroville has become an English-speaking society, so freedom of speech is inhibited if you do not speak English.

At the same time, individual freedom of expression means little to many of our Tamil residents. They are more concerned with their family or small group or clan, and if there is anything that needs to be expressed, they will select their leader or representative to go to the relevant group to express it. There is no real individual expression. Of course, there are a few exceptional people who can express themselves well in what they want to say.

Fabienne: Language is a huge issue. I believe if the French could speak English well, Auroville would be a different place.

Akash: A lot of the conflicts that happened in the 1970s and 1980s were clearly to do with communication problems between two cultural groups, one of which was predominantly French. It would have been very different if there had been more people able to speak across the language divide.

Krishna: I often notice that when I express myself in my own language it has a very different emotion attached to it than when I say it in another language. In English I tend to be polite, in Tamil I can be very strong!

Cultural sensitivities also seem to play an important role in inhibiting free expression in Auroville. The recent issue of the arts group magazine, MAgzAV, was on the theme of 'elephants in the room' and it featured, as its centre fold, a somewhat morphed photo of the Matrimandir with the features of an elephant. The Visitors Centre agreed to sell it but when some members of their local Aurovilian staff were disturbed by this image, these pages were removed by the management.

Meenakshi: One of the Aurovilian ladies who objected was born and brought up in Kottakarai. She has grown along with the Matrimandir and reveres it as the soul of Auroville, so she felt really hurt that the soul had been presented in this way.

Krishna: When we asked the manager of HERS to sell it, initially he had the same negative response. But after a discussion, he said you have a right to your expression and I will stock it here. He could overcome his initial visual response.

What was the purpose of representing the Matrimandir like this?

Krishna: There is a policy being discussed regarding images of the Matrimandir. The idea is that any Aurovilian who takes a photograph of the Matrimandir and uses it commercially has first to get it approved by the Matrimandir team.

So, among other things, we wanted to promote debate about this policy as well as to consider what is the worst thing that could happen if Aurovilians used images of the Matrimandir. It seems one of the things we cannot speak about is anything to do with the Matrimandir...

Mauna: But there was no article accompanying the image that explained this.

Krishna: The photographer originally photoshopped a lot of photos unrelated to any of the articles. This particular image, like all the other images in this series, was not related to any specific article.

Manoj: When you see the image there is an

immediate energy transfer, and an intellectual explanation of it is a completely different layer which doesn't touch this original response. For me, this image represents a loss of the sacred. We are a civilisation that has lost the sense of the sacred and now anything goes.

Mauna: If you see in this picture a loss of the sense of sacredness, I think you do not understand something. It's an image: sacredness has nothing to do with it, it transcends it. What I saw as the intention of this issue of the magazine was to kick a little bit against our 'holy houses' and I support this, although I think it was done a little bit too crudely and inelegantly.

Akash: But it seems to have served its purpose. We are all talking about it.

Manoj: If you provoke, there will be a response. In a collective context, you are dealing with collective emotions. When you deal with collective emotions using their sacred symbols in the name of freedom of expression, the collective emotions will burst out and it won't develop further. You cannot transform anything by this method.

Akash: But history is full of examples where a book or a performance that annoyed people served an amazing social purpose. So I don't agree that you can't effect transformation this way. Sometimes you need to poke at things that are discriminatory or repressive, you need to call them out and bring them to the surface.

Can we suggest ways that would promote free expression while assisting the transformative process?

Fabienne: There is no easy solution.

Meenakshi: Regarding the native Aurovilians, I think they need to be guided to express clearly what they want. The next generation is going out for higher education, they are learning to express themselves better. However, the problem is that when they come back they have lost the Auroville context. We need to reinvigorate them with our fire.

Mauna: Could we begin by formulating the unstated norms that inhibit free expression? If we became aware of them as a collective, it may be a way to transcend them.

I also think it would help if we could all be a little bit lighter in the way we express ourselves.

Fabienne: My first reaction regarding the Holocaust posting was to laugh; it was so ridiculous, there was no need to respond. We should be able to put these things aside and not react.

Manoj: As a starting point, we have been given knowledge of the Integral Yoga. So how can we use this to communicate better? How do we enter a space of communication that leads to transformation and oneness?

Krishna: If we really want to evolve, to move towards something new, we have to recognise that whatever one is saying is coming from one's conditioning and what the other person is expressing is from their conditioning, and that we have to move beyond both for the new thing to emerge. I am here to drop all this and the other person is also here to drop all this because this is what we all committed to when we came here.

As a first step, however, I think fearless expression is important because people should be able to say what is important for them. If we are not able to express these positions, we are not able to move towards the new.

Akash: And we don't find the new by refusing to engage with views that frighten or offend us.

Manoj: When friction and controversies happen, you are seeing the fault lines in our community. Actually, this is where the creative ferment is at work, this is where we can get out of our egos because we all have supremely sophisticated egos, and many people do not like Auronet because it is ruthless when it comes to hammering your ego. It is painful to be in that space but in terms of transformation, I find the raw, chaotic nature of Auroville very healthy. It wakes you up; it pushes you beyond your limits.

When the Visitors Centre takes out the Matrimandir page, it is an action that creates a conversation: it is a golden opportunity to step beyond our fixed notions and to see how we can take the next step. In this sense, every conflict is a wonderful opportunity to go beyond.

Akash: It's interesting that we are having this conversation now because many of these issues around free expression are going to come up in the context of preparations for the 50th anniversary next year. How Auroville is represented, what we tell the world about ourselves, and what we don't tell the world – these are all going to be big issues.

Edited by Alan
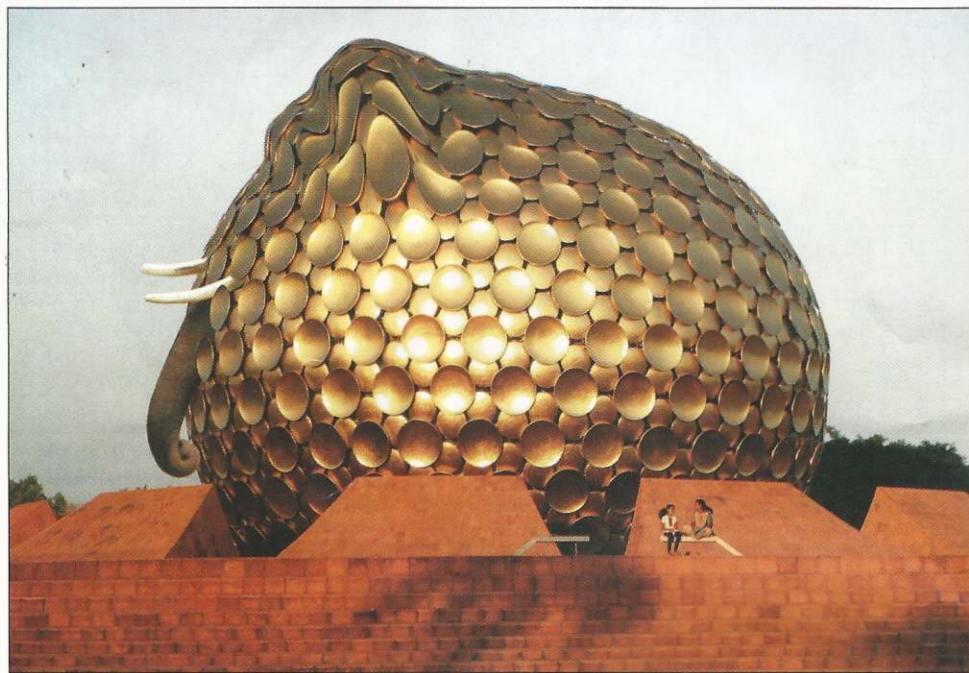
The controversial Matrimandir elephant picture

We have identified invisible norms as one of the restraining factors upon free expression in this community. Are there others?

Manoj: I sense there is a lot of fear in this community about what the government may do if we express ourselves openly. To me this threat is predominantly imaginary.

Akash: This is used as the strongest argument against freedom of expression here.

Manoj: Recently, somebody on Auronet expressed doubt about the Holocaust and this created such a panic: people wondered what the government would think if they read this. It is pure fear. I don't agree at all with what he said but why do we have to ban it?

Krishna: But there *are* comebacks to articles we publish. Recently, on our Auroville Art Service Facebook page, we published articles from major Indian newspapers about artists refusing government awards, and we received a strong

This raises the question: at what point does the personal freedom to express oneself freely interfere with other people's freedom?

Manoj: This is a huge challenge because while we have 'Rules of the Game' on Auronet, we cannot enforce them. Since we stopped moderation, the readership and the diversity of what is expressed on Auronet has gone down. The freedom of expression has actually gone down and the forum is dominated by a very few voices.

Akash: I feel that the administrators, Manoj and Annemarie, have one of the toughest jobs in the community. However, I don't think there should be any additional constraints on what people can post on Auronet, no matter how extreme or bizarre the remarks may be. As a community, I do not think we should be shutting people down. Some people wanted this to happen to the person who initiated the recent Holocaust denial thread but even though I thought the original post was abhorrent, I still
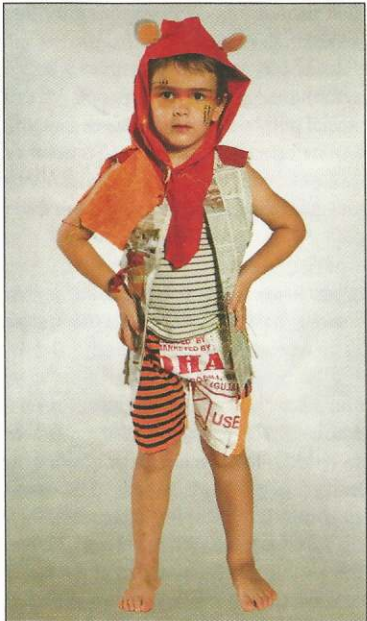
The Litter Free Auroville 2017 Trashion show

Mukta Martens, who grew up in Auroville and recently joined the team at WasteLess, reports on the recent Litter Free Auroville campaign.

ALL PHOTOS THIS PAGE MARCO SAROLDI

The 2017 Trashion show models

DESIGNER: NICOLE

In 2010, the Auroville community came together to work towards dealing with one of humanity's dirtiest problems – waste! 1,500 people joined an Auroville-wide litter clean-up. Since that initial awareness-raising campaign, Auroville's recycling rates have increased to 80%. These numbers are definitely a positive step in the right direction. However, the overall amount of waste generated in and around Auroville is steadily increasing and we, and our neighbours, are running out of landfill space. In order to tackle this problem in the wider bioregion, WasteLess, in collaboration with Upcycling Studio and Eco Service, has been working towards a community event that will coincide with Auroville's 50th Anniversary and inspire positive change in our consumption and disposal behaviour. This year's 'Litter Free Auroville 2017' campaign represented a taste of the main event that will be launched next year. The campaign is in line with the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Movement), a Government of India campaign launched in October 2014 by Prime Minister Narendra Modi to clean India.

A key highlight of the Litter Free Auroville celebrations has long been the Trashion Show, and this year was no different. A beyond full-capacity crowd at the Visitor's Centre witnessed an incredible display of beautiful and creative fashion designs made out of trash. Coordinated by the amazing team of Arlet, Jesse, Mukta and Ok, twenty-seven talented Auroville designers worked for two months on their waste-inspired

creations, creating a total of thirty-nine outfits that were paraded down the catwalk by Auroville's next top models in front of an adoring crowd.

"The goal of the Litter Free Auroville campaign is to work towards creating a centre where an integral approach to the issue of waste can be explored by the three organisations," says Ribhu from WasteLess. "We wish to engage all Aurovilians and inspire them to be conscious of their own waste and join us in experimenting to find solutions to this global problem. You'll be glad to hear that we don't expect everyone to start wearing their own trash, but we hope that the Trashion show served to highlight how waste can be seen in a new light by turning what we would consider as useless or dirty into something beautiful."

The stunning designs on show at Visitor's Centre were fashioned from a variety of materials, including juice cups, rubber tubes, insulation material, PET plastic bottles, discarded fishing nets, tetra packs, scrap fabric and paper, medicine blister packets, old X-rays and much much more. The designers carefully washed and dried items found in their own bins, at the EcoService, and on Auroville beaches. Chandrah from WasteLess adds: "It was inspiring to see what was created and we look forward to celebrating Auroville's 50th birthday in style with an all-out fun, creative, and engaging community celebration!"

Mukta Martens

Milo is wearing a newspaper waste cloth out-fit with garbage sack and feathers

DESIGNER: A FAMILY AFFAIR

Chine's sensational tetrapak dress inspired by a Paco Rabbane original from 1966

DESIGNER: ARLET

Arlet in a shade-net hoopskirt volumised made festive with reclaimed children's beach balls
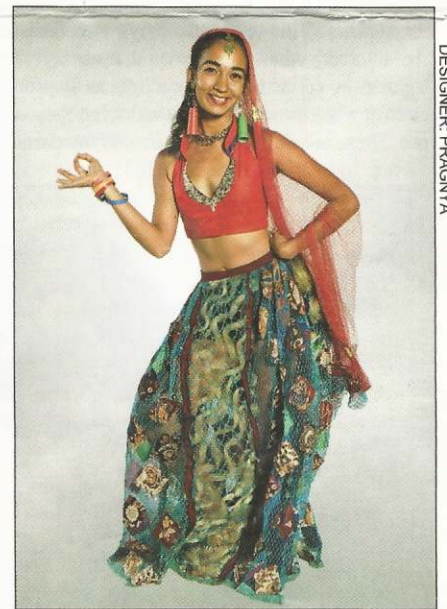

DESIGNER: HYE YOON

Masha dances gracefully along the catwalk in a stunning outfit made of impermeable shower curtain top and mosquito-proof mesh skirt

DESIGNER: OK

Sita, Grace and Aishwarya in internally illuminated re-purposed pillow stuffing, evoking images of clouds against a clear blue sky

DESIGNER: PRAGNYA

Pragnya's creation made from old fishing nets, colourful Kalamkari printed waste cloth and plastic

DESIGNER: ANYUTA

Sunja is attired in a striking hat, necklace and skirt combo made from discarded fashion catalogues

DESIGNER: UPASANA

Madhu's evening gown's bodic is made from waste cloth flowers, the skirt from strips of waste cloth, and accessorised with a golden headpiece

DESIGNER: MANJU

Manisa in a cling film bodice and stitched plastic cup dress with insulation foam ruffle and accessories made from plastic bottles

DESIGNER: YOTIS

Lea in an upcycled bubble skirt and bubble wrap bodice, coloured with reclaimed acrylic, decorated with tetrapak and butterflies made of sweet wrappers

DESIGNER: SWAHA

Kripa's evening gown made from a plastic painter's sheet cover and an emergency thermal blanket, accessorized with a hat made out of a bin liner

DESIGNER: MANJU

Chandana's dress made of waste magazine and newspaper, accessorised with a necklace made from plastic bottle caps and a headpiece from origami roses

People, Profits and Planet: Sustainability in Business Practices

Economic growth cannot be the only raison d'être of our economy.

Last month, *Auroville Today* featured two successful commercial units that are seeking to find innovative ways to increase capital funds and thereby economic growth. But economic growth is not the only raison d'être of our economy.

What is needed is a paradigm shift in the business sector itself, where instead of being stuck on the bottom line of profit-calculation, businesses engage in meeting the 'triple-bottom' line of economic profit, social responsibility, and environmental responsibility. We are already decades behind in making this paradigmatic leap. The concept of a triple bottom line was introduced in 1994 by John Elkington and is based on the fact that businesses do not operate in a vacuum but are intrinsically linked, in concentric circles, to a society and to the environment. In other words, the cost-benefit analysis of doing business should also include a cost-benefit analysis to society and the environment. A key challenge with the triple bottom line, according to Elkington, is the difficulty of measuring the social and environmental bottom lines. The elements of the triple bottom line often referred to as "people, profits, and planet," necessitates three separate accounts that are evaluated on their own merits.

Many Auroville units donate in kind or make specific contributions to projects that directly benefit "people" or the community. A recent initiative by the Auoville unit 'earth&us' in collaboration with Auro-cabs called Shared Taxi Service seeks to benefit both people and the planet [*see below*]. But, as yet, only Auroville Consulting has made that paradigmatic leap in accounting for the triple bottom line. In the financial year 2015-16, along with standard accounting practices of costs and expenses, Auroville Consulting initiated a process that they call "Geo-referencing" to spatially map their business practices. Along with this, they also sought to account for the negative externalities (i.e. CO_2e emissions) of their operations. "Geo-referencing" seeks to measure the social impact of the business, while calculating CO_2 emissions seeks to measure its environmental impact.

The objective of geo-referencing or mapping expenses across a geographical area allows Auroville Consulting to track how much they spend within Auroville: it is a known economic principle that circulating money locally is key to local economic growth. They have been doing this for two and half years now. In the last financial year, almost 80% (79% to be precise) of the total expenses of Auroville Consulting was spent within Auroville. Auroville Consulting was also able to analyze which sectors of Auroville were benefitting and also to identify gaps or leakages, where they had to rely on services outside of Auroville for their business operations. For the next fiscal year, Auroville Consulting aims to keep the benchmark it has established of 80% spending within Auroville. It also plans to directly intervene in the food and accommodation sector, for these sectors cannot yet meet the needs of their business.

The objective of accounting for negative externalities or measuring the carbon footprint of their business operations was to reduce their environmental impact and offset their carbon emission. Calculating carbon footprints and emissions is fraught with difficulties. For example, in comparing the carbon footprint of an electric vehicle and a fossil-fuel based vehicle, if one limits one's calculation to vehicle-operation, then, it goes without saying that the latter will have a bigger carbon footprint. However, if one takes into account the life-cycle assessment of each vehicle and the foot-print of the energy sources is required for the operation of each vehicle, then one cannot always conclusively say that electric vehicles are better.

Nevertheless, it is a commendable initiative by Auroville Consulting to measure their carbon footprint in key areas, namely, Energy, Water, Transportation, Materials – Soft Goods, Food and Infrastructure. They have been doing this for four years now and they estimated their carbon footprint for the financial year 2015-16 to be 8,605 kg, which to be offset would require the planting and nurturing of 396 trees. Moving forward, Auroville Consulting aims at reducing its electric energy consumption through the use of efficient appliances, increasing its solar PV capacity and reducing its transport-related carbon footprint through car sharing or the use of public transport. For offsetting its carbon footprint via tree-planting, Auroville Consulting will collaborate with the Forest Group.

Many carbon-offset gurus currently scoff at idea of planting trees as an offsetting measure, for such a measure is only short-term (the carbon captured is released back to the atmosphere when the tree dies and decomposes). Also, many international programmes offset their carbon emissions by planting monocultures in African countries, which in turn results in negative externalities to both society and the environment.

In Auroville, however, the Forest Group has the ethic of planting different species of the indigenous forest type, which in turn generates positive benefits. Also to Auroville Consulting's credit, they are currently reviewing their environmental and social matrices against international standards, namely those of the World Resources Institute and World Business Council for Sustainable Development. To comply with international standards would require refining and updating the two matrices on a periodic basis, which, in turn, means dedicating more time and resources to this exercise.

Speaking of their commitment, Martin, one of the co-founders of Auroville Consulting, says, "Behind both the matrices (geo-referencing and CO_2e accounting) is an organizational pledge towards being an ecologically and socially-just operation. This requires us to experiment with additional business matrices that include environment and social dimensions. We are looking for ways to measure what we say we are or do. If our organizational values are ecological and social justice, then we need to define these terms and find ways to measure them." Experimenting with the two matrices would also allow such matrices to be more universally applied. For instance, many Auroville commercial units train and employ local labour, but the social benefits of these are not quantified and thus cannot be objectively measured.

Auroville Consulting is open to sharing its templates with other commercial units and training their accountants to use them. Auroville Village Action Group and Auroville Earth Institute have expressed an interest in keeping such integral accounts. Martin concludes that "Geo-referencing and the CO_2e accounting process, if done by all Auroville units, can be a win-win situation allowing for growth of the business while stimulating the local economy and becoming increasingly carbon-neutral."

Bindu

New taxi-sharing scheme. A nudge in the right direction?

Taxi-sharing reduces carbon emissions

For the past two months, Auronet readers have been regularly informed about taxi-sharing possibilities on the route to Chennai. A table tells them where the taxis are going (airport or city), when, and how many places are available in each taxi. This is an initiative of the Shared Transport Service (STS), a group dedicated to making, among other things, better use of our community transport resources.

Taxi-sharing, of course, is not a new idea in Auroville. There is a regular taxi-sharing section in the *News and Notes* where individuals advertise spare seats in taxis they have booked, and in the past some of our taxi services have offered to facilitate the sharing of rides. The latter has never taken off, however. So why should the latest attempt at putting taxi-sharing on a more organized basis be any more successful?

"The previous attempts were made from a different perspective," explains Min, one of the STS team. "The taxi services would facilitate sharing if somebody asked for it but otherwise no effort was made to match people going to the same place at the same time because it was not really in the taxi company's interest: it was more profitable for them to hire out two taxis rather than one.

"However, STS is a service. We go out of our way to match passengers with rides as we want to raise the number of shared taxi trips in order to reduce the carbon released into the atmosphere. So our motivation is very different from the previous attempts."

The latest initiative seems to have touched a chord. Although it has been operating for only two months, as of 25th April, STS was able to prevent 101 single-taxi trips to Chennai resulting in carbon savings of 4 737 kgs and cost savings of Rs 222 200. "This shows that people do want to share but there has never been an adequate platform before to do this", remarks Vijay, another member of the team.

It has not been plain sailing, however. At present, only one Auroville taxi company, Auro Cabs, has signed up for the new scheme as the other companies fear that taxi-sharing will affect their profitability. So why did Auro Cabs take the plunge?

"I felt it was the right way to go," says Raju, manager of Auro Cabs. But he had difficulty in convincing his drivers. Under the old system, if a passenger booked a trip to the airport and another one booked a return trip, Auro Cabs would collect Rs 4,600. The driver's salary would be 10% of this, plus Rs 100 plus any tips. Under the new taxi-sharing scheme, the total amount collected for a similar journey would be only Rs 2,600 so, on the face of it, the drivers would be losing.

"That is why many of them wanted to refuse shared bookings at first. But I told them to imagine they are someone needing a ride. If one company is charging you Rs 2400 and another Rs 800 for the same ride with taxi-sharing, which one would you go for?'"

Raju explained that because Auro Cabs was the only company at present offering taxi-sharing, they would getting more orders. So whereas at present the drivers might earn good money once or twice a week, now they could be earning a minimum of Rs 360 every day as they would be driving more trips. "So they agreed to try it. In fact, as I anticipated, our bookings have definitely increased because of this scheme."

In spite of the popularity of the new site, Min calculates that at present Auro Cabs provides only 10% of the taxi trips to Chennai. And it must be admitted that while taxi-sharing has obvious financial benefits to the passengers because they share the cost of the ride, it also has potential drawbacks. This includes the risk of being bored to death for three hours by a garrulous passenger, and not having the convenience of travelling with one's favourite driver or being picked up or dropped at exactly the time and place that one wishes.

But the STS team point out that some people welcome having someone to talk to on the long drive to Chennai – it has even seen the beginning of deep friendships. They have also located a cheap restaurant near the airport where passengers can await their ride if it doesn't coincide with the timing of their arrival, and for trips to the city they are identifying a few convenient locations

From left: Raju, Vijay, Krishna and Min

where passengers can be dropped off and picked up.

Some people feel the present website needs to be streamlined or prefer to find their fellow passenger themselves, as the STS is charging a few hundred rupees just to connect one passenger to another. But the STS team is working on simplifying the sign-up table and have already revised their rates downwards.

But if this initiative really takes off, can Auro Cabs cope on its own? Vijay clarifies that it was never the intention to limit taxi-sharing to just one company. "We wanted all the Auroville taxis service to be involved. It was just that Raju was the only one willing to take the initial plunge. Even now we are willing to use other taxi services if Auro Cabs is not available. The main thing for us is to get the sharing to happen."

If all the Auroville taxi services do sign up, it would solve the problem of the availability of vehicles. But wouldn't it also mean that all the taxi services would lose out as the more passengers share rides, the less profit will accrue to the taxi companies and Auro Cabs will lose their present advantage?

Min sees it rather differently. "All the Auroville taxi services are suffering right now, except perhaps Unity Transport and Auro Cabs. It's a tough business to be in because while outside taxi companies have a different business model and can offer lower fares: some people will use them just to save Rs 100 on a trip to Chennai.

"At the same time, Uber and Ola have already started taxi sharing in big cities – Ola is already in Pondicherry – and their apps are increasingly sophisticated. So what I told all the Auroville taxi companies is that if we come together now and create a common platform with a good app, we may be able to corner the Pondicherry market (the Ashram is already interested). We have about 60 taxis in Auroville at present, and this would provide enough work for everybody."

In the long term, Min and the STS team also envisage a shared transport service in Auroville that would allow people to move seamlessly from one mode of transport to another when the need arises – for example, a cycle could be temporarily exchanged for a motorbike for a quick trip to Pondicherry.

Whatever the trajectory of these larger visions, one of the most fascinating aspects of the present taxi-sharing scheme is that it kills two birds with one stone. While customers are happy that they save money on shared trips – and this is the main motivation for most people – at the same time it is reducing the amount of carbon and other pollutants released into the atmosphere. In this sense, it is a classic example of a 'nudge' strategy that benefits both the individual and the larger collective.

Min feels that people in Auroville are not yet ready for actions where their personal convenience level goes down. However, schemes like taxi-sharing work because the individual pay-back is immediate and the environmental savings can be calculated instantly.

So can the same kind of approach be extended to other areas in Auroville? Min mentions the 'Library of Things' which will be up and running soon. The Library of Things, which is happening in many communities around the world, encourages people to donate items they rarely use to a central space where people can access them freely or for a small fee. Once they have finished with them, they return them for others to use.

This is part of a much wider movement described by one of its founders, Rachel Botsman, as 'collaborative consumption'. Botsman points out that many people in the developing world have numerous tools and appliances that they use only rarely – the average usage of a power drill during its entire lifetime, for example, is only about 12 minutes – and that we can cut down on the excessive consumption that is destroying our planet by facilitating the sharing of such things.

"This is something very close to our hearts," says Min. "We believe that the more sharing and collaboration there is, the more sustainably we can live."

The concept also fits very well with the Auroville ideal of non-ownership. However, it has its own challenges. For example, individuals released from the responsibility of ownership do not always look after the things they are borrowing: the sense that something 'belongs to nobody in particular' can lead to careless usage.

This makes the building and measuring of trust a paramount issue in such projects. "Sharing used to happen spontaneously in many communities," points out Min, "because we all knew each other well: we knew who we could and couldn't trust. But in the outside world these days people move around so much that they don't know each other well, so they don't have the basis to build trust. This means that peer-to-peer sharing networks like Airbnb have to find other ways of assessing the trustworthiness of people who are using them."

In a small community like Auroville, the situation is rather different. Yet even here there have been instances in the past when collective items have not been well cared for.

"Some people say there should be complete trust between us," says Min, "but it doesn't work like that. There has to be some kind of accountability. For our Library of Things we can't have a free-for-all; we need to define some conditions. For example, if somebody damages a stool they have borrowed, we will put this on the website and ask if anybody would like to help pay for it. But if this happens three times with the same individual, people will feel they don't want to help any more: that individual's collective reputation will have suffered."

Raju notes that trust builds trust. "For example, I am running a cycle hire for visitors very successfully, partly because I trust the people. I feel there is already a basis of trust among Aurovilians but we could do better, for trust is a must in Auroville."

Alan

Guidelines for Auroville Learning Activities

During the guest season in Auroville, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the number of workshops, classes and seminars that are on offer. With notice boards overflowing with announcements of programmes, Auroville does look like "the place for an unending education." Looking at this mushrooming of learning activities, and the potential impact of this sector on Auroville, the Auroville Council felt the need to establish some guidelines for the learning sector.

The first set of guidelines was drafted by the Auroville Campus Initiative (ACI), but these guidelines had two significant shortcomings: many stakeholders thought that the process of developing the guidelines was not inclusive enough and others felt that the guidelines were more like top-down directives.

A new Study Group was constituted in 2015, which has now completed its task of creating the guidelines for Auroville Learning Activities (ALA). An ALA Coordination Group (ALACG) has been formed, which will implement the guidelines for a trial period of one year, from July 2017. It's important to note that these guidelines apply to non-formal learning activities only, and not to formal programs (such as schools) or informal learning (such as learning from daily experience).

Auroville Today met four members of the Study Group – Dhanya, Dominique, Joster and Vikram – to talk about their experience and their learning from the process

Auroville Today: The Study Group has been working on the guidelines for a year and a half. Why has it taken such a long time to develop these guidelines?

Joster: What we did is a new approach. The effort is to bring all the learning activities in Auroville under one umbrella, for which the guidelines have to be there in advance. It took a lot of time to engage in the dialogue with all the stakeholders – learning providers, facilitators, venues, working groups. Even guest houses and taxi services get affected.

Vikram: Our work could have continued even longer to address some additional aspects of the guidelines, such as programme content or quality. We imposed a deadline on ourselves and decided to complete our work by April 2017.

Dominique: We did it differently this time. The Auroville Campus Initiative (ACI) had worked on the guidelines earlier, but that was more centralised and did not work for most of the stakeholders. Our approach was much more participatory. We regularly listened to and captured the wisdom of the community. For me, this was very new and very innovative. I also feel a huge sense of gratitude after the process.

Dhanya: We used an intensive bottom-up approach, where we engaged with every possible type of stakeholder. And as we worked through the landscape and the guidelines, a lot more complexity emerged than we had anticipated. But rather than cut the process short, we wanted to see how the process would play out. I don't think it took too long. In fact, we were very practical and did not get lost in philosophical debates. Very importantly, we stayed focussed on the task, which was to develop the guidelines. We did not work on a vision for the learning sector. This is needed, but this was not our task.

The important thing is that we were looking at the guidelines from a sector perspective – the non-formal learning sector. This does not fit into the standard categories of commercial units or services. It cuts across all categories and domains of work. So, we needed different kinds of guidelines. This is something to look at in the future. Old frameworks might have to change.

In an earlier draft of the guidelines, ALA was Adult Learning Activities. But now it is Auroville Learning Activities, which is a much broader set of activities. Which specific learning activities do the guidelines address?

Joster: All workshops and seminars that are paid programmes are a part of this sector. This could be for guests, but also for Aurovilians. Very often people come in for an "experience Auroville" kind of programme, which is also addressed. The programmes can be in any domain: farming, wellness, sustainability.

Vikram: Initially, it was adult learning activities, but a lot of the facilitators we met do programmes for children. For example, Kalu teaches circus to children in Vérité. So, for us it's not about the age group, but any non-formal learning activity that has grown organically in Auroville. The ALA-specific guidelines will apply only to the non-formal learning activity.

So, if someone decides to start a new non-formal kindergarten, would that be under the ALA umbrella? Also, if a unit or division of SAIIER starts a non-formal learning activity, will it be a part of the ALA sector?

Vikram: Even if a kindergarten does not give any formal certificates, they are considered a part of the formal education system. But I think we are asking the wrong question. It's not what activities are a part of ALA, but how can the guidelines help an activity, irrespective of its domain. Very often, the categories of activities are not watertight.

Dhanya: I think an important thing to keep in mind is whether the activity is considered a part of the regular education process, from pre-crèche to higher education. Such programmes would not be a part of the ALA sector. So, schools under SAIIER, or the New Era Secondary School (NESS) or the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology (AIAT) are not going to be a part of ALA. But it's possible that there is a specific activity conducted by any of these organisations which is short term, is a non-formal learning activity, and which has a participation fee. It could be a workshop, a training programme or a seminar that is open to volunteers, interns and guests. Such a specific activity can be a part of ALA. Another way to see this distinction is to see ALAs as extracurricular and different from the regular education setup. In any case, it doesn't really matter where the activity sits. We are focused on the development of the ALA sector irrespective of whether the activity is a part of a business unit, a school or a service. We need to understand that this is a very large field, and we will have to keep learning and adapting as we move forward.

How satisfied are you with the process and the output?

Vikram: It was a very satisfying process and a great learning experience. For me, the biggest takeaway is that we need to find a way for working groups to come together. If we can find a way to unite the working groups, we will find human unity!

Dominique: We spent a lot of energy on financial aspects, which involved, among other things, discussing the financial contribution with the BCC and FAMC. I would have preferred if there was no financial contribution in the first year. We are trying to grow this sector and it is too early for a tax. It's like planting a garden – you have to wait for the flowers and fruits. You can't keep pulling out the plants.

Dhanya: I think issues such as financial contributions are for the Coordination Group to consider. We were only asked to create the guidelines, for which we had to step out of our roles as providers of learning activities. In a process like this, I don't think everybody will ever be fully satisfied. But we did quite well.

What can other study groups learn from your experience?

Dominique: I remember that we began by trying to map out the landscape: mapping all the ALAs, establishing what we wanted to know from them, what was our field of play. This gave us a kind of plan, and we have been slowly digging into the complexities in a collective way. We were enriched by different skills and different sensitivities within the group. This was so much richer than one person doing the job.

Dhanya: It was very helpful to have a member of the Auroville Council on the team. Even if that is not possible for other teams, it is critical to have a designated person who can stay involved because we need to check in with the different working groups repeatedly to assess the issues and understand the sentiments.

Vikram: There are four things I can think of, which can be generalised for other such groups:

1) There needs to be some kind of endorsement for the study group from the Auroville Council. When we approach stakeholders, we are seen in a different light when we have the formal backing of the Council.

2) The process needs to be bottom-up and participatory. Certain issues, like visa and taxes, are top-down rules, but everything else needs to be figured out collaboratively.

3) We need a clear scope of work. In this team, we were constantly drawing boundaries and asking ourselves about our scope of work and our responsibility.

4) There needs to be a budget.

What are the next steps?

Joster: The first step is to register all the ALAs. Dominique and Dhanya are setting up a new unit called LEAD, which will serve as a home for learning activities that are not part of any registered unit or activity.

Dominique: It is up to the Council now to take the guidelines forward and set up the Coordination Group. This group will have to look at the implementation of the guidelines as well as the strategies to grow the sector.

Vikram: The problem in India is implementation. We have a great Constitution, but the implementation is weak. This weakness is amplified in Auroville, because the normal incentives and motivations don't work in Auroville. It's very difficult to enforce anything. So, we have to find other ways to motivate and inspire people to adhere to the guidelines.

I noticed that the tone of the guidelines is "we encourage" rather than "you must" …

Dhanya: We have to see this from an evolutionary perspective. We need to make people aware of the guidelines and then facilitate and encourage people to follow them. This is very different from saying "you are doing something wrong, shape up or else". We have to give everyone a chance to educate themselves.

How do you plan to measure success? How will you know if you are achieving your objectives?

Vikram: One thing we will do is to repeat the learning activities survey that we conducted one year ago. We had collected detailed information, such as registration status, income generation and service tax. After the survey, we have shared the guidelines several times over the past year, and the new survey should tell us if there has been any change in the learning activities and how they operate.

Dhanya: I think we need to first ask stakeholders to acknowledge that they have read the guidelines. That's the very basis of adherence. Secondly, we can measure the number of units and activities that are registering with the Coordination Group. Once we have these basic measures in place, we can start thinking about other aspects such as quality. I think these measures will emerge slowly as we work collaboratively on issues such as feedback received and a code of conduct.

Joster: We will learn a lot from the feedback of participants. The guidelines encourage activities to collect participant feedback and we have also included some sample formats.

What do you see as the main focus of the ALA Coordination Group?

Joster: The first important step is to ensure that all ALAs are registered. The Council will have to find enough people for the Coordination Group who can deeply engage with this sector and take it forward.

Dhanya: Apart from implementation, one critical issue that the ALACG will have to unpack is the interface between content and context. Can any learning content be delivered in Auroville? We have said that the content has to be aligned with the Charter. What does that mean? How should learning activities relate to Auroville's raison d'être? These are all fertile questions. The ALACG will have to work on the vision for the ALA sector.

From an interview by Manas

The ALA Study Group. From left: Daniel, Joster, Dominique, Dhanya, Guy, Lara and Vikram

Ten Key Features of the ALA Guidelines

1. Establish the need for the guidelines to:
   - promote the growth of the non-formal learning sector in Auroville,
   - promote and encourage communication, sharing and collaboration,
   - encourage practices in tune with the ideals of Auroville,
   - abide by the laws of the Government of India.
2. Differentiate between formal, informal and non-formal education.
3. Require all providers of learning activities to register themselves as an Auroville unit or activity.
4. Reinforce the legal requirement for an appropriate visa to conduct learning programmes.
5. Encourage providers to provide free, at cost or subsidised programmes for Aurovilians and Newcomers.
6. Remind units and activities about service tax regulations.
7. Propose a City Services contribution of 5% of turnover and a sector development contribution of 0.5% of turnover.
8. Touch upon the areas of content, quality and logistics.
9. Envision an ALA Coordination Group (ALACG) to implement the guidelines.
10. Include templates and tools for service providers and facilitators.

Ecovillage Design Education course in Auroville

From 4th December - 7th January, an Ecovillage Design Education (EDE) course was held in Auroville for the first time. The Aurovilian organizers invited participants not only from Auroville but also from the bioregion, India and the world. Thirty-five people attended the whole course, most of them young.

There were many organizers. *Auroville Today* spoke to one of them, Kavitha, and to Serena and Eugenie who documented and participated in the course.

Auroville Today: What exactly is the EDE course?

Kavitha: Experienced eco-village educators around the world have worked on the curriculum, which is a way of looking at existing communities or designing new ones from a sustainability perspective. It covers four dimensions of sustainability: worldview, social, ecological and economical, over four weeks.

For the Auroville EDE we added a fifth week to design new projects.

Other courses, like Living Routes, have been offered in Auroville on the theme of sustainability, but there have only been one or two spaces available for young Aurovilians, so we decided to make this course accessible to Aurovilians first and then see if we could get students from elsewhere. In the end, about a third of the participants were from Auroville, a third from the bioregion, and the rest from India and the larger world. We were very happy to have so many in the group from the local region.

What attracted people to do this course in Auroville?

Serena: Some people came from other communities wanting to know how Auroville works and deals with similar challenges to theirs. And the fact that this course was in Auroville made it special for many of them. All over the world, people look up to Auroville as the biggest and one of the oldest intentional communities.

Kavitha: The young Aurovilians who attended wanted to initiate projects we had already discussed in YouthLink, but to do this we needed some more tools and to understand Auroville better.

Give a rough overview of the programme.

Kavitha: The course was designed by YouthLink members with some guidance from Joss in Pichandikulam and from Ethan from the Global Ecovillage Networking over Skype. Each week was devoted to a particular aspect of sustainability, which we looked at in different ways. We looked at it, firstly, through the perceptions of our group, then we looked at Auroville, then the bioregion and finally the global context. We would close each week with a reflection on what we had studied and learned.

For the first week, we looked at the social aspect. We began by doing exercises within the group to understand our own process of community forming. We observed how, after getting through the initial stages, there were points of conflict when people got tired and we learned how to deal with them.

Eugenie: During that first week we did a conflict resolution course, then we looked at Auroville history and, finally, at the different systems of governance around the world.

Kavitha: The next week we spent on ecology, during which we visited many different Auroville farms and foresters. We also spent a couple of days in the bioregion.

The theme of the third week was economy. This was designed by Michael and Natasha. The first few days we looked at the global economic system that is so dominant on this planet, and we learned how destructive it is. Then we started looking at alternatives, like alternative currencies and gift and sharing economies.

It was interesting to do this in Auroville because, as Michael pointed out, almost every type of economy is represented here.

Eugenie: One of the things we enjoyed in that week was looking at the local economy outside Auroville, which is how India traditionally used to work. We talked to a couple who run a tea shop in a local village and what struck me most was that there was no accounting; they relied completely on the honesty of the customers who would settle their bills only once or twice a month. It was completely trust-based.

Kavitha: The purpose of the fourth week, worldviews, was to look at what socially-engaged spirituality can be, and aspects such as reconnecting with nature and transformation of consciousness. We also looked at the background thoughts that cause us to create the system we are in now. And then to understand the change that needs to happen to allow us to shift to a more holistic, sustainable worldview. We discussed the paradigm shifts necessary for global awakening and how we want to participate in social revolutions.

Serena: In that week, we talked about the fear and separation that underlie the present worldview, and we did some shadow work where we talked about the hidden areas of ourselves.

Kavitha: In the final design week, each participant presented the project they came here to work upon. Then we selected four topics to focus upon for the week. There was Pitchandikulam, The Hive, a new community project and a game to assist in sustainable development.

Exploring new ways about economy

Serena: We split up and chose the project we resonated with most. The approach we all used was the 'Dragon Dreaming Process'. This is a training methodology based upon principles of personal and group empowerment where 25% of the time is spent on dreaming or visioning, 25% on planning, 25% on doing and 25% on celebrating.

Kavitha: We felt the celebration aspect was something we could really learn to do more of in Auroville.

Serena: Three of the chosen projects were Auroville projects. The fourth was inspired by a conflict resolution game we played during the first week. This game was about architects going to a tribal village with the idea of building a bridge to help the villagers. The architects discover they can't just build a bridge; first of all, they have to learn about the local customs and environment.

This was the inspiration for the game we developed where, among other things, we gave voices to plants, animals, water etc. so they could be included as stakeholders in any development scheme.

Regarding the Auroville projects, did anything new or interesting emerge?

Kavitha: Regarding Pitchandikulam, the group worked on networking Pitchandikulam outreach projects, including the educational programmes they could connect up with in Sri Lanka and Bhutan.

We also redesigned the Hive project, such as integrating an aspect that involved experimenting with other kinds of economy. We plan to have a shop where we could put Auroville artwork or products and have explanatory stickers on products that are part of the gift economy or sharing economy. We could also experiment with something like a Time Bank [*A Time Bank is a community system where a person who volunteers one hour of their time helping someone else gains an hour time credit. They can then use that time credit or their accrued time credits to receive help from someone else. Eds.*]

The Hive kitchen could also be run as part of the gift economy. Regarding the hostel, obviously we would need to generate some income from it, but we would also like to provide spaces for people like researchers who can stay for free in exchange for something they offer to the community.

Serena: The other Auroville project was the Joy of Impermanence project, which is a concept for an actual community in Auroville. It is based on the realisation that nothing is permanent in life but impermanence can be a source of great creativity as it can lessen the fear of making mistakes. In this community, we only want to use natural materials, to foster a do-it-yourself mentality, and to showcase all the different solutions that Auroville has come up with over the last 50 years, while coming up with new ones.

Eugenie: In order to experiment as much as possible, each house will be different. There will not be one house that looks the same. The results of the research will be fed back to Auroville as we want to document everything, including the human process.

Serena: We have seven core members who will be the first residents. But initially we are focusing on building the team because we want to have very strong foundations before we go into physical building.

The idea is that the community will not inhabit a permanent space but will move to another piece of Auroville land every 5 to 7 years to help protect them from encroachment and to enrich them.

What was the effect upon the participants of the five-week course?

Serena: I think the course helped some people to widen their worldview. Even networking with 35 other participants opened up everybody's mind. And many people refer to what they have learned here as 'seeds' which they will take back to plant in their communities and work places.

I spent two years travelling the world making films about communities, so I have a lot of first-hand experience of the content of this course. But what I really learned in this course is the importance of people, of the social element, in sustainability. In the video, Nikethena, one of the course coordinators, makes the same point. In the end, she said, it became a very intense space where she learned not so much from the content as from the group process we were engaged in.

Eugenie: It was also the human aspect that touched me. I lived for seven years in an aboriginal tribe in Australia and made a movie with them: it was a life-changing experience. After that, I missed community. I travelled around Europe for six months trying out different communities but did not find exactly what I wanted. But during this course I experienced community again in a very intense way. And I feel that Auroville is the place I want to stay.

Kavitha: I think I was also searching for how to connect back to Auroville after being out for seven years. When I was very young, I experienced real community in Aspiration, but since Auroville has grown so big we have lost the personal contact. I felt a lot of pain in the last years because I felt our collective spirit and trust had deteriorated. What I learned during these five weeks is that there are very simple methods to bring it back. We used some of these in our group-building exercises, so now we have a sense of what we need to rebuild community, and the people who can help us do that.

During this course, we also developed a good relationship with people from Sri Lanka. They have some land they would like to develop there and we thought we could export some of our ideas and experience to them, while we could learn from that society's deep knowledge of conflict resolution. I think this link-up could be one of the strongest outcomes of the EDE course.

There could be an interchange between their youth and our youth. Before the course, we had designed a youth exchange programme to encourage young people to experience different communities. Now we have a list of communities who would like to participate and we would like to launch it soon.

Presumably, more courses like this will be held in Auroville in the future. What changes would you make?

Serena: Most participants felt the main thing to improve in future was to have a smaller group. Thirty-five people was way too many. When you have to move people around to different places or when everybody is expected to speak in a big circle, there are major time management issues.

The diversity of the participants had its benefits but there were also drawbacks. Everybody had very different levels of knowledge and experience, so maybe this has to be controlled more in the next course. If people already have a certain level of shared knowledge, you don't have to start at zero.

Eugenie: As Nikethena put it in the video, having to cater to many different individuals reduced the complexity and depth of what could be done. A smaller group with a shared platform of knowledge would make this easier.

Kavitha: I agree. Future courses will probably be shorter and more focused but now we have a good basis and the confidence to continue.

Finally, I'm very grateful for the huge support we received from Pitchandikulam's experience and wisdom and the larger Auroville community. More than 45 Aurovilians were involved in giving talks and showing people around and many others helped in other ways. We are also immensely grateful for all those abroad who have supported this programme, making it possible for many youth to receive scholarships as well as to cover the basic costs of the programme implementation.

We have no idea when or where we may create space for another course like this, but I feel like EDE has already shifted something deeply within our group and within Auroville.

From an interview by Alan

A video of the course can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4a9vx0U6Exg

Evening session in Pichandikulam

Transformational sessions – transpersonal regression therapy

For three days in January, 50 advanced therapists from all over India met in Auroville's Unity Pavilion with teacher Yuvraj Kapadia to refine their practice of "transformational regression therapy⬜.

50 regression therapists from India updating their technique with their teacher, Yuvraj Kapadia, as well as sharing their understanding with Aurovilians, January 2017, in the Unity Pavilion

What is transformational regression therapy? Who is Yuvraj Kapadia? And what has this all to do with Auroville? Sigrid, the Aurovilian homeopath and regression therapist who organised the event, explains.

"Let's start with Yuvraj. He and his family have been closely connected with the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and he met the Mother when he was only eight years old. After a business career he got into practicing, teaching and researching hypnotherapy. In September 2010, he and his team gave a 5 module course on hypnotherapy in Auroville to about 30 Aurovilians [see AVToday # 256, October 2010]. He then studied a further advanced method: "transpersonal regression therapy", developed in The Netherlands by Hans TenDam and Marion Boon (who will be visiting Auroville in the near future). Yuvraj brought this cutting-edge therapy to India and taught it to more than 100 therapists. The workshop in Auroville was an opportunity for many of them to meet and share their experiences.

"Transpersonal regression therapy is a deep healing modality. Its aim is to become aware of or increase awareness of those parts of the being that, subconsciously, influence one's behavior and may be the cause of psychological and even physical illnesses. It is a deep work to heal – or better transform – trauma e.g. accidents, abuse, violence or childhood traumas. This modality can be used to overcome repetitive psychological patterns including depression, anxiety and phobias. It's a suitable modality to working on addictions, obesity and eating disorders and even auto-immune disorders.

"All these problems have causes, but most of these causes have been forgotten and stored in a person's subconscious. The forgotten life experiences often contain emotional wounds that never healed completely, or have triggered stubborn, half-conscious beliefs in our mind. Such beliefs only change when we understand how they started and why we hold on to them.

"In transpersonal regression therapy, the patient regresses to these memories, facilitated skillfully by the therapist. But, contrary to hypnosis, there is no need for the therapist to induce a trance, because the patient's own – still active – 'natural trance' does it all. The moment a patient focuses intentionally on his bodily and emotional memory a powerful 'bridge' is formed which lets him or her access information from the time and space where the incident occurred. This could be a childhood event, something that happened in the prenatal period or during birth, or even a past life event.

"There is then a reliving of the previous traumatic occurrence, but this time with understanding and overview, which enables the transformation of these undigested experiences. The emotions are 'discharged' and the client is now able to feel and understand how the present complaint was connected to the past experience. Once this understanding surfaces, integration of those formerly unconscious parts with the conscious part of the being takes place. What we as therapists are doing technically is giving the conscious mind the logical explanation of what has happened. The moment that deeper understanding dawns, the adult personality becomes fully in charge and the problem resolves. This understanding is not purely mental. The therapist also works with body sensations to release trauma energy.

"For example, I recently worked with a patient who for many years was fainting at the most unexpected moments. She had no idea why. Through personal regression therapy we discovered that this might be caused by childhood sexual abuse, which the patient was hardly aware of. As the therapist, I facilitated her inner vision with overview: now, she was able to see what had happened with the support of the consciousness of her own inner adult. We got the story straight, followed by healing of the psychological as well as of the bodily trauma. My work was giving a structure, to help open up the memory as effectively as possible, not to go into detail, but to assist the patient in her self-discovery and healing through her own strength.

"The opening up of memories by itself is just a first step, and would be counterproductive – if not dangerous – if left like that. The second step is energy work: the inner child of the past is still there and is still in shock, and that stuck energy has to be released. Now the adult persona of the client can come forward and give the support necessary to release the sense of helplessness and the resulting trauma.

"This is done releasing the body charges and then releasing the trauma by letting the abused "inner child of the client's past" finally speak up. The inner child of the past is healed and then integrated in the client's present adult life. This changes the client's energy patterns in the present and future.

"This is the ideal situation. But regression therapy is not always successful, as dealing with trauma is such a sensitive issue. For example, a common confusion is with pre-natal and past life memories and later incidences. There have been cases of people who 'remembered' childhood sexual abuse in regression therapy, and who have then gone and accused people, but who later said that the memories that arose in regression therapy were false.

"The therapist must be very skilled to prevent the emergence of such false memories. Students of transpersonal regression therapy therefore receive in-depth training. Only experienced psychologists or psychotherapists can apply to get selected for learning these advanced techniques. They undergo six mandatory sessions with their teachers and have to do 25 supervised practice sessions before graduating. All this is done to ensure the therapeutic effect and to minimize the risk of misdirection in memory. Statistics show that 60% of regression therapies led to a positive change in a person's life, 20% to some change, while 20% was unaffected.

"Regression therapy is not only about processing traumas, discharging stress, and releasing and digesting stuck emotions or restoring lost memories. There are also forgotten hidden treasures to be discovered, and access to unblocked intuition and creativity. With regression therapy, memories of positive feelings and talents that have been lost can be re-activated.

"There are mental, emotional and bodily results of regression therapy. Mental results are the gaining of clear-mindedness and self-knowledge, understanding people, and liberation from mental prisons and tunnel views or preconceived ideas. Emotional results are inner calm, self-acceptance and self-reliance, restoring empathy and positive emotions. Bodily results include the disappearance of tensions and psychosomatic problems like low energy, low resistance, and hypersensitivity.

"An integral part of transpersonal regression therapy is facilitating a client's regress to the forgotten first years of childhood, and to the pre-natal experiences between conception and birth or to birth itself. The birth experience is often the most consequential, but some pre-birth experiences can also have lifelong consequences, such as an 'overheard' talk of a tentative abortion.

"Some patients apparently access former life experiences. A good therapist will take care to not encourage romantic beliefs, as most problems are caused in the present life. But sometimes, the cause of a problem lies in a previous life. Sometimes, a traumatic death, which has led to undigested fears and pains which have become interwoven with the present life, is re-lived. Even psychiatric delusions may be due to the remnants of undigested past-life traumas. While some of my non-Auroville patients have questions about the concept of rebirth, for us in Auroville reincarnation is commonly accepted, as Sri Aurobindo has written extensively about it and The Mother wrote and talked in detail about it in her conversations with the children of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram.

"For me, discovering the transpersonal regression therapy and becoming a therapist and supervisor has been a highly rewarding development. I have confirmed over the years that this technique based on a client-centered approach is completely in sync with Sri Aurobindo's and The Mother's teaching. I see it as one of the effective tools for many in Auroville to deepen the understanding of their own psychology and to transform the patterns that veil their psychic being."

Sigrid, in conversation with Carel.