

Breaking down menstrual taboos

Auroville unit Eco Femme recently celebrated ten years of existence. Dedicated to transforming the menstrual landscape in India – through education and sustainable products – the initiative has achieved massive reach in just one decade.

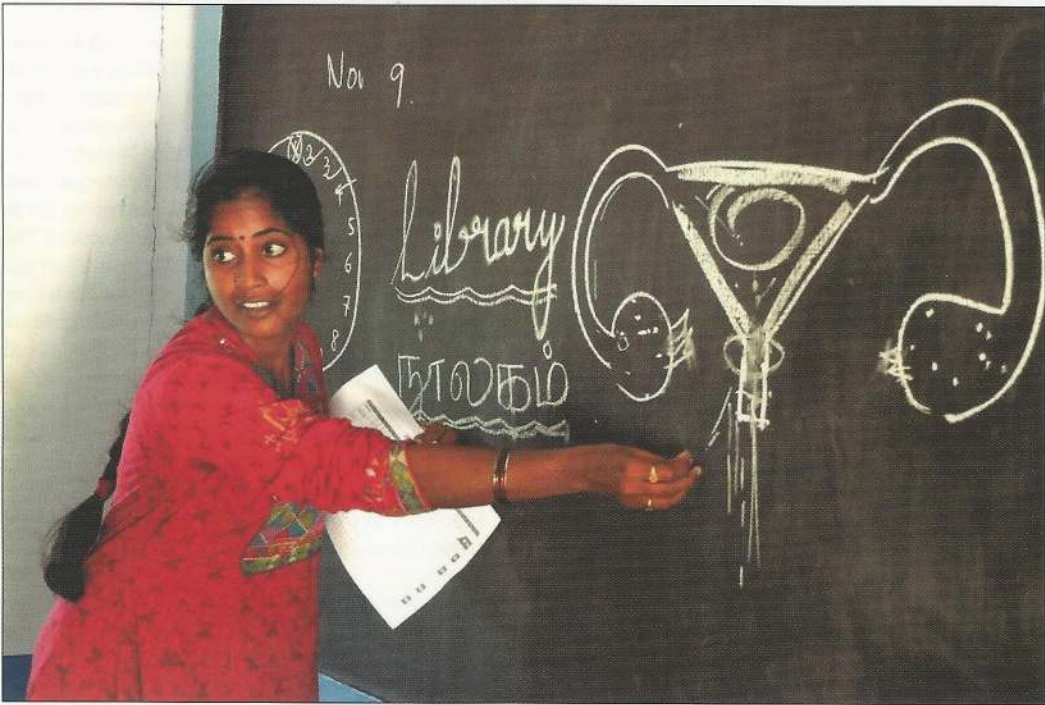
When Eco Femme founders Kathy and Jessamijn started the initiative ten years ago, they couldn't imagine that their dreams would find such fertile ground. As a social enterprise that provides both menstrual education and washable cloth pads, the project's stats speak for themselves. In the last ten years, Eco Femme has sold or freely distributed 731,000 washable cloth pads to women, which has prevented 54.8 million disposable pads from ending up as landfill. 175,000 of these washable pads were provided free of cost to girls in schools in India as part of Eco Femme's educational strategy. The pads now retail in 27 countries, and 193 global ambassadors spread the work and vision of Eco Femme, which has grown into a unit that sustains 45 women.

"There's a joy from having poured your energies into something and feel that it's borne fruit," says Kathy. "It's been super exciting and satisfying to be part of something that has actually created a shift on the scale that it has."

The context and early days

When Kathy and Jessamijn started Eco Femme, their original goal was to provide an income-generating opportunity to village women, through Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG). Cloth pads seemed a good idea, given that AVAG had trained women in tailoring, and the stitching work could be given to them. The environmental benefit of pads also held appeal to them, as they wanted to counter the growing trend towards disposable (often plastic) pads that were becoming increasingly popular in India.

Kathy and Jessamijn confidently assumed that commercial sales to affluent women would be possible with good marketing, but they were less sure that cloth pads would be accepted by women in rural areas. Wanting to know more about rural menstruation beliefs and practices, they undertook a survey in the local region to get a sense of how menstruation was understood in the culture, and what products women were using. Early prototypes of Eco Femme cloth pads were well-received, giving Kathy and Jessamijn hope that the traditional practice of folded cloth could be revitalised through a more functional and practical cloth



Kalvi leading an education session about menstruation

though a girl's first period is celebrated in a very public way in Tamil Nadu. This public-private dichotomy is underlined by Kalvi, an educational trainer with Eco Femme, who points to the increasingly large events held to mark the occasion: "Some families put a banner of the girl on the road, to gain status in the village. People bring gold and sarees for the girl, and she gets pampered." This can be contrasted with daily life, where cultural taboos around menstruation mean that girls are not enabled to talk about periods and are expected to keep menstrual practices 'private'. "This is rooted in the bigger story of how we relate to women's bodies, especially in India," says Kathy, an understanding that guides Eco Femme's more normalising and positive approach to menstrual practices.

The few NGOs in India working on this topic ten years ago were primarily concerned with the hygiene aspect. Due to a sense of shame around menstruation, many women in India washed and dried their menstrual cloths under a bed or behind bushes. Kalvi points out the practice of drying menstrual cloth in hidden places was also shaped in Tamil Nadu by a suspicion that if blood or a menstrual product is seen by an eagle or snake, that women will become infertile. However, when cloth is not dried properly in the sun, sometimes infections can result – and this influenced the hygiene focus of most NGOs, which encouraged women to shift to disposable napkins, because they were considered a cleaner and more hygienic option.

Government initiatives were also starting at that time to provide girls with free disposable sanitary napkins so that they would not drop out of school because of infections or lack of products. "It was a very unsophisticated and superficial analysis of the problem," says Jessamijn. "I think they also thought it would create work for women who could make those disposable napkins."

The government and NGO emphasis on hygiene also ignored the environmental aspects of pads, particularly the problem of disposal and incineration. An average disposable pad contains five carrier bags worth of plastic, as well as chemicals. It takes 500-800 years to break down into microparticles in a landfill. This aspect was generally "left out of the larger conversation," says Kathy.

These experiences shaped Eco Femme's decision to contribute to the landscape of menstrual health in a more comprehensive way, viewing cloth pads as "an entry point into a rich and interesting transformational opportunity" that entwined aspects of education, environment, health, economics and women's empowerment. And the name Eco Femme aimed to capture these feminist and ecological elements, as well as the initiative's holistic approach.

Education

The main focus of Eco Femme's outreach strategy is education sessions that target girls in government schools or women from low income backgrounds across India. Kalvi, who hails from Edyanchavadi and has been an educational trainer with Eco Femme for five years, points to the need for young women to have access to good factual information about menstruation, which she says is lacking in traditional Tamil culture. "My grandmother didn't tell my mother anything, and same with my mother and me," recounts Kalvi. "When I started menstruating, it was my aunt who gave me a piece of cloth and told me how to use it. And I wasn't comfortable to ask her questions. This is a typical scenario."

In an effort to overcome women's discomfort and knowledge gap, Kalvi provides "factual knowledge" in the education sessions and encourages conversation. "Once young women are given a chance to discuss menstruation, they are full of questions, and are eager to shift their understanding," she says.

As part of the education sessions, the Eco Femme facilitator invites participants to do a critical product analysis, by presenting all the products on the market – traditional cloth, sanitary napkins, cloth pads, tampons, cups, period panties. They consider parameters such as the ingredients, usage, care required, lifespan of the product, disposal methods, the impact on health, impact on the environment, and cost. "We're conditioned to think of the ease of disposables: you just throw it away," says Jessamijn. "But for a lot of women, it's a fraught matter, especially in crowded small houses. Where do you put it? Who is picking it up? Do you keep it separate? Do you burn it, or put it in the soil? Some women were washing disposable pads before they disposed of them."

The team also emphasises the potential health issues that can arise from the ingredients in disposable napkins. "They're potentially carcinogenic," says Kathy. "When we give the information about the ingredients, women say, 'Oh, that's why I get this itching and rashes and all.' And when they make the switch to cloth pads, women report back that they are surprised that they are free from rashes and allergy."

The Eco Femme educational approach encourages women to consider safe and unsafe practices, without suggesting that there are right or wrong practices. "We make them think, how does it feel for you?" says Kalvi. "How is it affecting your health? If it's affecting your health, then maybe that's not the right way to go. If it's not affecting your health, then you decide what to use."

Each menstrual product has its own demerits and merits, as Kalvi points out. While cloth pads are a good alternative to disposable products, some women hesitate to handle their own menstrual blood while washing, or have concerns about the pads being visible while drying or worry about staining. "For some women, it's a shock to see an internal product [such as a cup or tampon], and it's not conceivable for them to use these," says Kalvi. By the end of the product analysis, most women are ready to use cloth pads, according to the Eco Femme team, because they now understand the multiple benefits – the cost savings, product safety and waste reduction.

At the end of the education sessions, girls are offered a free kit of Eco Femme washable cloth pads. The cost of these pads is sponsored through the organisation's Pad for Pad programme, where every pad bought internationally funds a pad given to a girl in low-income settings in India. To date, the Pad for Pad programme has distributed 175,000 pads to 44,000 girls in India. And the team does follow up research to determine the long-term impact of menstrual education. "While young women might right now be under the influence of their mother," says Kalvi, "we realised that by educating a daughter, she will create impact in future for her daughter."

The team initially received some pushback from women who believed Eco Femme's approach would set back the progress they felt they had achieved with disposable products. "Some women perceived disposable napkins as having set them free from the drudgery of cumbersome cloth," recounts Kathy about one early presentation in Chennai.

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The women behind EcoFemme: from left Kalvi, Jessamijn and Kathy

product. The unit thereafter launched itself as a hybrid model social enterprise that delivers free or subsidised cloth pads and education to women and girls from low income backgrounds, financed through commercial sales of cloth pads in India and internationally.

At that time, the topic of menstruation was largely ignored by most NGOs in India, and it was still something of a conversational taboo in homes and schools, shaped by beliefs that menstruation was considered something 'dirty' or to be ashamed of, even

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"We were perceived as arrogant foreigners who wanted Indian women to 'go back' to using cloth. But slowly, other Indian women started advocating for Eco Femme's washable pads, and more Indian women joined the Eco Femme team. "So it happened gracefully that we didn't have to defend what we were doing," she says.

Ambassadors and alliances

Since Eco Femme began its work ten years ago, the wider menstrual health terrain has massively expanded, with an influx of NGOs and freelancers working on this topic. It is now more of a widespread movement that goes beyond pads.

As a consequence of the groundswell of interest, Eco Femme has formed a number of alliances which enable its work to be scaled up. Eco Femme now has about 200 partners and ambassadors, 120 of whom are in India. These partners voluntarily promote the idea of sustainable menstruation in their local communities. Eco Femme supports them in their work, by tailoring advice on how to educate or introduce women to cloth pads according to the partner's setting (i.e., country, urban or rural, commercial or grass roots), and encouraging organisations to conduct exploratory research in their communities to avoid assumptions about local practices.

Along with its partner organisations, Eco Femme continues to collect a lot of data and has seen indications that some health symptoms such as rashes actually resolve when women switch to using cloth pads. Along with the steady increase in sales across all market segments, there is growing evidence that cloth pads are gaining rapid acceptance. "There are now at least 15 companies manufacturing cloth pads in India, some of whom started as Eco Femme partners or customers," says Kathy. "It's a clear indicator that the concept has taken root."

Reflecting on ten years

With so many players now operating in the menstrual health field, how has this changed Eco Femme's role? Jessamijn highlights the way in which Eco Femme is continually prodded to keep considering how to remain relevant. "That asks us to innovate and change approaches – that's something I really like." In this vein, Eco Femme is launching a range of cloth diapers this month.

Both Jessamijn and Kathy emphasise the benefits of EcoFemme's collaborative approach, which doesn't fit with business models that argue that organisations should protect their collateral, in order to progress. "Aiming for collaboration instead of competition may sound counterintuitive," says Kathy, "but our



The starter kit

organisation has expanded hugely due to our approach. We discovered that when you share and support others without counting the cost, it actually has its own reward. The mission grows and is bigger than the brand. That was a happy discovery! They don't teach that in business school!"

Jessamijn draws attention to the benefits of partnering with people and organisations who inject energy, which creates mutual stimulation. "We'll continue to empower others to do similar work, through collaboration and support. That feels like more fun than just increasing quantity, because quantity always comes at the cost of quality."

Auroville

Given that Eco Femme was born and bred in Auroville and its bioregion, how has Auroville shaped the organisation's trajectory? "Eco Femme is an offspring of the way in which I learnt to look at life and think about things as a result of being Aurovilian," says Kathy. "I consider that living in Auroville deeply shaped my thinking about global issues, interconnection and integral thinking, and this in turn influenced my thinking about how Eco Femme could evolve. Nearly half our team is Aurovilian. It's intangible, but Auroville's value base is underpinning everything we're doing in Eco Femme."

The enabling environment of Auroville is also a factor emphasised by the founders. This includes: the advice provided in early days through Auroville start-up incubator Unlimited Tamil Nadu and other mentoring programmes; interest-free loans provided by supporters; and the many volunteers who have come for long periods. "We get so many interesting people who come to Auroville, who put in their skills and creativity where the values resonate for them," says Jessamijn. "They believe in the idea. This would have been very different if we'd been outside Auroville." The bioregion context also provided a "laboratory" to test and tweak ideas (aided by AVAG), before exporting to them other parts of India. "It's such a rich range of options that one can explore here," Kathy says.

Future plans

Eco Femme currently employs 21 people in its office, and 24 tailors working from nearby tailoring units do stitching for piece rates. The team is preparing to build a new workspace as they have outgrown the space in the Saracon campus where they are currently located.

While the team sets annual targets (for example: commercial sales targets; number of educational sessions conducted; number of pads given for free etc.), they also aim to create impact beyond the measurables. "We've come to see that the impact of our work is bigger than cloth pads," says Kathy. "The work we do on menstruation can lead to a deeper worldview shift that impacts how women relate to their bodies and to the body of the earth. Cloth pads and education can make that connection more visible, and women and girls can end up feeling much more connected to themselves and nature as a result."

The team aims to continue nurturing ambassadors: empowering them with confidence, knowledge and skills, so they can speak on behalf of big issues and create impact. "Kalvi's been saying how transformational it is for girls – they're connecting with a different story about who they are as embodied women," says Kathy. "There are so many collateral benefits of the work we're doing."

By decentralising production (through mentoring other organisations to produce cloth pads), Eco Femme has been able to quickly achieve a scale of work that has become a major contribution to the global movement towards sustainable menstruation, which has grown exponentially over the last ten years to create a "massive shift in awareness". "I think it's special to be in a field that's changing so fast," says Jessamijn. "I was working in organic agriculture before, and nothing seemed to change!" Kathy underlines the sense of satisfaction that comes from having created a large-scale shift in practices and thinking: "I feel really touched that so much has been possible. This has happened because of everyone's contribution – but there's still plenty to do."

Lesley

ECONOMY

The Aura: creating a genero-city

A year ago, *Auroville Today* profiled the launch of the Aura network. Since then it has quickly grown, reflecting some of the core aspirations that drew many of us to Auroville.

The "Aura" is a virtual community credit and unit of exchange. The network of the same name aims to bring community together through offering a platform of connection. Once you've joined, every day you receive twelve Auras, as part of a basic income scheme, of which three have to be shared with your peers – encouraging generosity.

Growth

The Aura team launched their mobile app in November 8, 2020 and the network has since grown to over 400 individuals and some services. The Aura is available as a downloadable app, on Android and iOS, and was developed in Auroville for those living here. It is the only networking app in the community, which, alongside the exchanges of goods and services, also facilitates chatting to others. In the last year, the network has offered ten workshops and organised the Aura Fest, with over five hundred attendees. They have filmed some short 'Aura Talks' videos on their website (and YouTube), showcasing individuals' stories from the network. Alongside the development of the network, they are conducting ongoing research.

They did have a few challenges. There were some glitches with the app which they have been working to solve and the Coronavirus forced all work to be virtual. Moreover, the tech phobia of some Aurovilians, many of whom are not familiar with apps, has been a challenge.

Once you have joined the network and access the app, you can choose between 'offers' or 'needs'. 'Offers' has over two dozen categories and can include plant seedlings, teaching Chinese calligraphy, how to brew and experience Chinese tea, how to make a Slovenian style potato salad, and teaching Tamil. It is a typical mix of items that people might no longer need, and unique services that the Aura encourages us to find within us and then offer to others. 'Needs' varies from searches for a metal whisk (alongside a bamboo

steamer), to the modest request for a large envelope, supplies of kimchi and the rather more ambitious wish for a 'detached house' (though with a willingness to help repair it).

Unlike some alternative currencies, the Aura does not have a monetary equivalence, and neither is it simply a system of bartering. It is a way of helping the community move one step closer to the cashless society Auroville strives to be, by facilitating a care economy where the diversity of skills and talent from members of the Network can cover the unique relative needs of others in the community. In practice, this happens by emphasising an attitude of finding and sharing personal offerings.

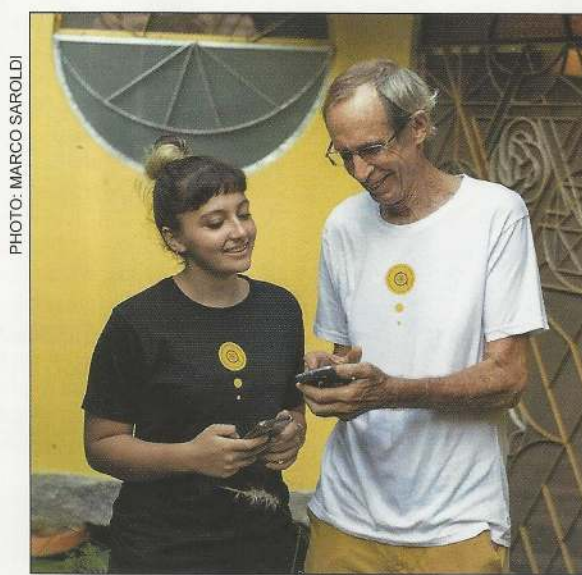
Philosophy of Generosity

The Aura has inspiring plans to create a more generous and creative society. Its purpose is to shift from scarcity to abundance, reshaping our consciousness about money. The principle of giving away three of the twelve allotted daily Auras grounds this idea in practice. They also have a daily 9% depreciation to prevent hoarding which B, one of the core team members, says is to stimulate people to share more. On their website they mention their aim that money as a tool is not intended for accumulation, but rather circulation.

Community

Using the Aura, Hye Jeong, a project coordinator of the Aura team, notes that the network helps "bring people together in community", and that it aims to "rebuild connection between Aurovilians, even if it's in a virtual space". She mentions that through the app she has got to know more people.

Hye Jeong narrated a personal story which illuminates this ability to deepen our communal connections. Under the category of 'senior assistance', Thera had offered to read a book. Hye Jeong shyly replied that whilst not a senior, she



Jasmine and B looking at the Aura app

was far away from her Korean homeland and missed memories of her mother reading to her as a child. Thera did indeed come and read her requested book, *The Little Prince*, and Hye Jeong remembers that "it was one of the most beautiful moments I have ever had in Auroville. This is the spirit of the Aura; it's not only covering our material daily needs. She was so good to me." As the website puts it, *When we realize the interconnectedness of life and learn to share, a fulfillment naturally arises. The system is a conscious use of technology to bring us together, to share the prosperity and abundance we already have, but are not aware of.* Luke Marsh, another member of the team, underlines this by pointing out that "community is strongest when we are a network".

Creativity

Hye Jeong notes that the Aura app isn't just for physical needs but also allows expression of our own potential creativity. There are unique offerings on the app. For instance, Amy, formerly of the Auroville Council and now in the FAMC, offers a talk about how the community works under the offering 'Want to know more about Auroville?' Teresa reaches out to those who, like

her, grew up in Auroville and are wondering about moving abroad to go to university as such a shift 'probably feels daunting.' She notes she is 'Not trying to provide life coaching but is available for a chat in case you are curious is what I learned along the way'. Manish offers to be there for a chat or talk if it's needed and Arumugan offers a 'Bioregion experience'. These are examples of individuals tuning in to what they have to offer, which could be of use to others beyond the conventional selling and buying of goods and services.

Circular

The network emphasises that a Circular Basic Income assumes the existence of abundance – that within any given community, certain needs of the people can be met with existing resources without having to generate more income, or provide additional (financial) means to consume (new) goods and services. Luke mentions that whereas capitalism aims for perpetual growth, the Aura aims for perpetual sharing. That giving spirit is evident on the app, and links to Auroville's early history of collective living and sharing. Environmentally, it facilitates a second chance for many items, and even abilities, that are currently unused.

On a larger scale of giving, Science Walden, the Korean research centre, has been supporting the project since its inception in early 2019, helping to further the purpose of the International Zone where each culture brings its own particular offering.

Auroville's aim to create a cashless society, and to be a human laboratory for transformation for human unity, provides a fertile seedbed for the Aura's experiment of facilitating a more giving society. In Latin, 'aura' means 'gold', and the greater communal connection could be its most valuable offering.

Peter

For more on the aura visit <https://www.auranetwork.app/en/>. The Aura Network App can be downloaded from the Play Store for Android devices, and the App Store for iOS devices.

Making Auroville accessible for everyone

On February, 28th, 1968 Mother gave the inspiring message, *Are invited to Auroville all those who thirst for progress and aspire to a higher and truer life*. But for many years the reality seemed to be 'Don't come to Auroville if you are not young, strong and able-bodied'. This was understandable given the physical rigours of life in those early days. Nevertheless, it comes as a shock to realize that it took 41 years for Auroville to host the first workshop focused upon making Auroville welcoming for all seekers, able-bodied or not, which was surely the spirit of Mother's invitation.

Not that there hadn't been earlier attempts to wake up the community. In 2001 Christel, a regular visitor confined to a wheelchair, said she had tried to convince architects and town planners to make Auroville barrier-free in order to make it more accessible for people like her, but to no effect. A few years later, Alex confirmed that nothing had changed. "It's difficult for a wheelchair guy like me to move around in Auroville," he said. "The cycle paths we like to move on are riddled with bunds and potholes and often have sharp curves and barriers. For a cyclist this is no problem. For someone in a wheelchair, it's plain hell. The alternative is to drive on the main roads but that's playing with your life."



Srinivasan's play to sensitise people to accessibility

But his main criticism was reserved for the inaccessibility of Auroville's public buildings and recreational areas. "If Auroville wants to live up to its ideals, it should provide proper access for disabled people," he said.

One of the residents who took up the challenge was Susmita. Partially different-abled from birth, she knew first hand the challenges faced by those less able to negotiate our roads and buildings. In 2009 she invited people from *Samarthyam*, a Delhi-based organization specializing in facilitating accessibility in buildings, transport and public places, to visit Auroville and raise awareness. During a three day workshop, they defined a "barrier-free environment" as "creating and maintaining environments in which people can participate in ways which are equitable, dignified, maximize independence, conserve energy, and are safe and affordable". Barrier-free access, they stressed, involves much more than constructing a ramp or a handicapped toilet. It requires taking into account the whole environment, including the need for signage, special flooring, lighting, colour contrasts and emergency evacuation routes.

And who benefits? Not only the disabled, but anybody with reduced mobility, like people with short-term ailments, senior citizens, pregnant women, asthmatics, those with heart disease, and families with young children.

Samarthyam clarified the legal obligations of public buildings to provide accessibility to the differently-abled, but admitted that many of the provisions of the relevant Act have not been implemented as individual states need only implement them if it is within their 'economic capacity'. Finally, they invited participants to be blindfolded and then negotiate the Town Hall. Even though some knew the building well, it was a frightening, and illuminating, experience for them to be so incapacitated.

Samarthyam returned in 2011 to train Aurovilians and others to become accessible auditors. Participants were put in wheelchairs and then asked to audit public places like the Town Hall and Matrimandir for accessibility. The results were damning.

This stimulated Susmita and her 'Accessible Auroville' group to greater efforts. With Srinivasan, she produced 'Sometimes I can fly', a deeply moving documentary of Alex's struggles to get around Auroville in a wheelchair. The film subsequently won an award. Later the group brought out a booklet which highlighted the architectonic barriers to mobility in Auroville in a humorous way.

In 2016 Auroville's accessible bus, the first one in this part of India, was inaugurated by Dr. Karan

Singh, and in 2019, Susmita invited Kiran Bedi, then Lieutenant-Governor of Pondicherry, to inaugurate an exhibition on accessibility in the Town Hall. It was a memorable morning. Prior to her arrival, Susmita and her group invited Aurovilians to either sit in or push wheelchairs from the Solar Kitchen to the Town Hall to give them a sense of the struggles involved, and following the inauguration Srinivasan put on a play in which blindfolded customers in a restaurant were served by differently-abled people. It was both funny and deeply touching.

In other words, there have been a number of events over the past decade aimed at awakening the community to the need to make Auroville a more accessible place for everyone. Has it had an effect?

"Something has changed," admits Susmita. She says that now people call her when they need a wheelchair or advice about how to convert their living space or community. "Recently Guy from Quiet Healing Centre urgently asked me to make the Centre more accessible as a scuba diving workshop

for the differently-abled was planned. Thanks to the work of Alexandre, a skilled technician in Adaptive Technology who works with me now, the Centre is now at least 90% accessible." Susmita also notes that the Visitors Center has made major strides towards becoming fully accessible, mentioning the specially adapted toilets, ramps and clear signage.

On the whole, however, Susmita feels nothing much has changed over the last decade.

She mentions that while some architects consult her regarding making their structures more accessible, they rarely follow her advice, and that while she has offered a number of times to discuss the Auroville Accessibility code (see box) with different town planning groups, they have not responded. Moreover two of the buildings – Matrimandir and the Town Hall – which were seen to have major accessibility issues by the *Samarthyam* team in 2011, have still not been modified. For example, the ramp leading up to Le Morgan restaurant at the Town Hall is still too steep for wheelchairs and lacks safety features, and there is still no wheelchair access to the second floor of the Town Hall.

Accessing the Matrimandir remains even more challenging for the differently-abled. The first two levels are inaccessible for those in a wheelchair, and the entrances and Lotus Pond below can only be reached by ramps which are far too steep for wheelchairs. While the Matrimandir management says they are always willing to assist the differently-abled to access the structure, this misses the point that they don't want to be made a special case, to be "Carried up to the Chamber like a maharajah on his throne" as one of them put it. They want to be able to access to Chamber under their own efforts, without fuss or attention. "If I'm in a wheelchair and I can go everywhere without your help, I feel I am a human being just like you," points out Susmita.

While some places, like Savitri Bhavan, Cinema Paradiso and the Auroville Foundation office, are easily accessible, other public places in Auroville that remain inaccessible or very challenging for the differently-abled include the Kala Kendra art gallery, La Terrace restaurant, SAW-CHU, CRIPA and Pitanga. In addition, there are large apartment complexes, like Humanscapes, Creativity and Maitreya Two, where there is no accessibility to the upper floors. And while Kalpana does have a lift, Susmita says it is too narrow for Indian wheelchairs.

Why has so little been done?

Architects and building managers often cite the additional cost of making a structure accessible. But *Samarthyam* estimates that making a building fully accessible only costs an extra one to two per cent if accessibility is incorporated into the design from the beginning (retrofitting existing buildings is more expensive). And many significant changes, like making toilets accessible, lowering counters, providing easily negotiable footpaths and removing barriers to mobility, are not expensive. Even a small detail like ensuring the door on a toilet opens outwards rather than inwards can make a huge difference to somebody with mobility issues.



Alexandre and Susmita

In 2010, a member of the town planning group suggested that new guidelines for constructions should specify that an extra percentage be included in the building's budget to cover the cost of fully accessibility. And another Aurovillian suggested that a special fund be set up to make existing public buildings fully accessible. Nothing has happened.

Sauro, another member of the group at that time, commented "L'Avenir should take the lead in drawing up a code of practice ensuring full accessibility of public buildings". The code exists, but is seemingly ignored.

Apart from financial considerations, the belief that making a building more accessible will make it less beautiful also seems to be a concern for some architects. It certainly seemed to be a major factor in Roger's resistance to making the Matrimandir more accessible. But Alexandre points out that the Matrimandir can be made fully accessible without compromising on its appearance. For example, he points out that in India now there are simple and elegant chair-lifts which can transport the differently-abled up the first two stairways and fold away when not in use.

However, the main blockage to making Auroville more accessible is not financial or aesthetic. It is the mindset that fails to comprehend the difficulties faced by those who are differently-abled or temporarily mobility or sight compromised.

"There is no understanding, no empathy, for those who have difficulty accessing our buildings, guest houses and public spaces," says Susmita. "People cannot imagine the hurdles these people face on a daily basis. This is why the *Samarthyam* team stressed that the first thing that has to happen is to pull down the mental barriers. Once this has been done, they said, the physical barriers will come down more easily."

"It's about a new way of thinking, seeing. But there is no impulse to change until people experience these difficulties for themselves," notes Alexandre. Of course, this will increasingly happen because today a significant proportion of Auroville's population is over sixty and likely, at some stage, to be physically incapacitated.

Susmita gives a recent example of a lack of empathy. Susmita asked the BCC to pay Rs 80,000 to cover the insurance of the accessible bus that

takes people to Pondicherry as COVID had impacted their daily takings, but the BCC refused, telling her, "You don't need to go to Pondicherry".

"They don't seem to understand that the bus is used by those who cannot, or are afraid to, go to Pondicherry on their own, people who, like me, need to visit the Ashram regularly. The BCC people have no such problem as most of them have independent transport and can go wherever and whenever they wish."

The other mindset that needs to be changed, says Susmita, is the discriminatory mindset that differently-abled people are somehow inferior to 'normal' people. "Different doesn't mean 'less'. For example, if you are blind you may develop other capacities which far exceed those of sighted people. It's all about embracing diversity."

Susmita admits that for 50 years she was ashamed to show her hand because she felt a little bit different from others. "But Goupi was my saviour, he helped me to accept my body. Now I am not shy to show that I am different and to ask for help if I needed."

Discrimination also happens when people feel they cannot cope when confronted with somebody with a disability. Susmita recalls a conversation with a sadhak outside the Ashram. "I was with Alex, who was in his wheelchair. But this man couldn't even look at him: he couldn't acknowledge his existence."

Susmita says that now they are planning a family support group for Auroville families who may have children that our schools cannot cope with because of physical disabilities or autism, "so these children don't feel put aside".

So what can be done to make Auroville more accessible?

Samarthyam point out everybody can begin to cultivate this awareness. They encourage people to

look with new eyes at the buildings they work and play in. Are they accessible for all users? If not, what practical changes could be made?

"The Auroville Accessibility Code gives clear guidance," says Susmita, "but fundamentally it's a matter of goodwill and of education. We have to start with the families and the schools and also get the architects and the urban planners to understand that accessibility means inclusion, creating an inclusive society."

"Accessibility means giving dignity and freedom to everyone. It's about accepting, celebrating, differences in abilities. As long as we don't accept this kind of diversity, we don't live in a city of the future, the city to which Mother called all those in 1968 who aspire to a higher and truer life."

Alan



Auroville Accessibility Code

For all public buildings, areas and facilities

1. Safe ascents and descents with ramps, made according to accessibility standard specifications.
2. Ramps at entrances and exits to public buildings
3. Handrails at different heights, for different users, on steps and ramps.
4. Signage supplemented with pictograms, Braille, sounds, textures.
5. All doors to have a minimum width of 90 cm.
6. Non-slip (anti-skid) flooring in all public areas.
7. Specially adapted drinking-water facilities in all public areas.
8. An accessible unisex toilet in every public building and, in the case of buildings over three stories, accessible toilets on alternate floors.
9. Guesthouses to have at least two rooms at ground level with integrated toilet and bathing facilities.
10. For new communities, at least two fully accessible ground-level flats.
11. Public transport vehicles are now obliged by law to have devices to assist people getting on and off. Buses and other public vehicles must be adapted, if necessary.
12. Safe, fully accessible pathways for pedestrians, including wheelchair users, people with babies and small children, elderly people, people with physical difficulties, and others, in parallel with major cycle paths.
13. Balconies on public buildings to have safety barriers.
14. Wherever there are cattle-grids, accessible entrances for people in wheelchairs or on crutches, those carrying heavy or awkward objects, etc., to be constructed.
15. Educational activities: interviews, research, movies and dramatizations for all adults, young people and children here to raise awareness of accessibility issues, with a view to establishing and maintaining a caring, inclusive society.

Accessible Auroville and L'Avenir
d'Auroville, March 2010

"Celebrating the Feminine" - women's creativity on display



I am what you would call a reluctant artist. And so when Priya enthusiastically encouraged me to submit some work for a proposed women's exhibition, I hemmed and hawed, made some half-convincing excuses and respectfully declined.

It would seem that Priya found two reluctant artists, myself and Pala. Perhaps realizing that that she has more than one stubborn, creative friend, Priya did the only thing that made us both budge: propose that we collaborate. And so began one of the most beautiful collaborative artworks that I have undertaken in recent experience, which uses thin shells of plaster, Khaya bark and ceramics.

The exhibition marking International Women's Day, Celebrating the Feminine at Kalakendra, Bharat Nivas, was put together in a similar spirit as my work with Priya and Pala – collaboratively, collectively with an inspired group of Auroville women. Initiated only some days before the exhibit was to open,

its organization of 54 participating women artists was herculean. The couple of hundred individual artworks were hung only two days before the opening. The exhibition included paintings, drawings, collage, mixed media, photography and printing, ceramics and pottery, film and installation, kolams, flowers, fabric, dance, food and more.

In fact, I would say that the way the exhibition came together was as much a celebration of women's strength as the showing of women's artworks. There were contributing artists and there were organizers and curators; but there was also a seamless flow of one to the other, and a distinct coming-to-form of the show from the collaborative instinct of the many. Priya, Pala and I named our piece Call and Response, yet the title could be said to represent the curatorial collaboration of the whole exhibition: many voices and hands overlapping.

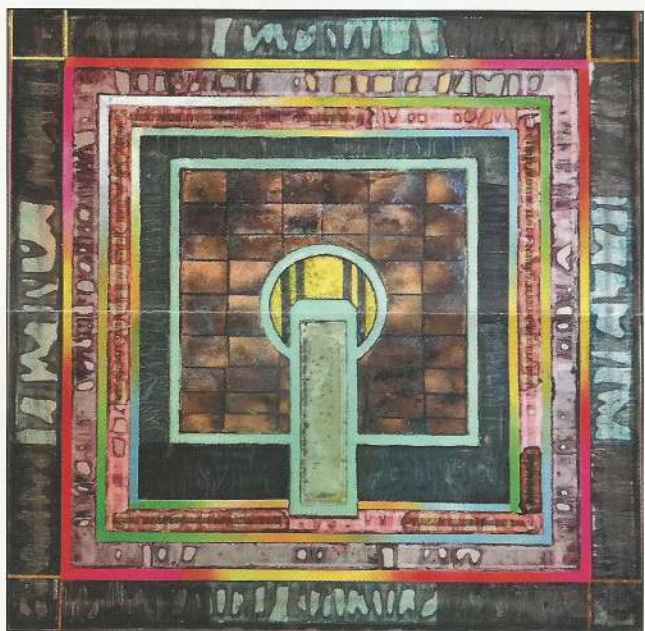
When was the last time that Auroville organized an exhibition of Aurovilian women's work? Has this ever happened before? If it

has ever happened, I can't recollect it. Perhaps this is why so many Auroville women unexpectedly emerged to participate in this unusual endeavour.

Perhaps – and I lean heavily towards this thinking – women in Auroville love the experience of cooperation with women, particularly where the inner creative and spiritual aspiration of each is expressed. International Women's Day: a day to celebrate women collectively reaching towards the divine, each in her own way. How lucky we are in Auroville! How blessed to have a society of such strong and sensitive women! And how important for us to remind ourselves of this – to never take it for granted.

The work of the individual women came together in this exhibition like a show of women's hands raised together, women's collective aspiration towards the divine. How beautiful it has been to witness this. I am thankful that this wonderful group of Auroville women helped me to overcome my reluctance.

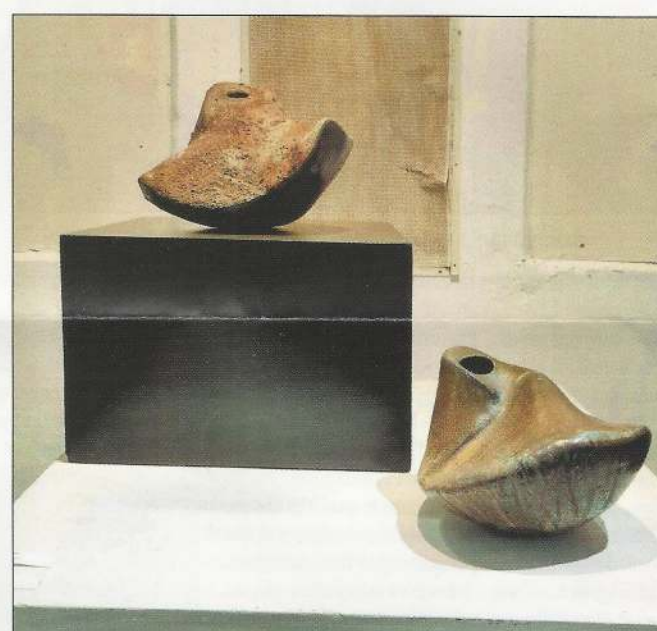
Lara



Microscope, by Dominique Jacques



Protection, by Nele

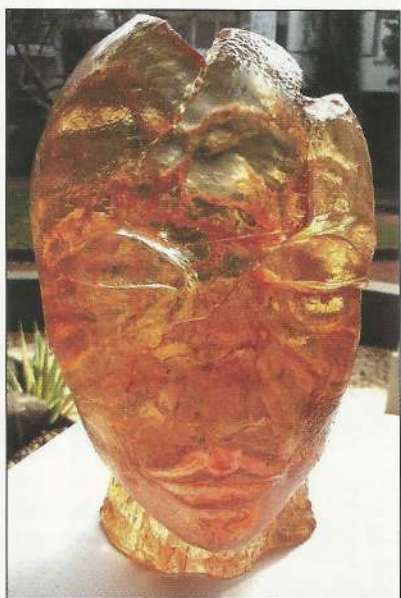


Sacred pots, ceramic art by Supriya

Transparency - a group exhibition interpreting the intangible

Transparency is an elusive concept. At the borderland between here and beyond, between substance and transcendence, it's a particularly interesting concept for artists to explore. For some, like Priya S. who erected an empty golden door frame, it represents an invisible threshold, inviting each one of us to step across and become a true servitor of the Divine. For Jean-Luc, whose hypnotic video of swimmers appearing and disappearing plays with the elusive boundaries of being, the transparency of water represents, as he puts it, the innocence of the child.

On the other hand, Marie Claire describes her transparent glass head ('Aspiration / Transformation') as representing the purification of consciousness through the emptying of memories, and this sense of stripping things back to essentials is also figured in Saravana's 'Speaking root' and 'Venation', which expose the underlying structure of natural forms. Nature herself is the artist in Mariana's photos of dragonfly wings, inspiring her to soar: You are yourself made transparent, so dare to open heart.



Aspiration/Transformation, by Marie-Claire

Transparency as a new way of seeing is explored by many of the participating artists, including Sabrina whose porcelain 'Liquid Matter' evokes the hidden liquidity of form, while Dominique wittily invites us to imagine what lies beneath our feet through revealing, by means of a cut-out, the pattern hidden beneath a carpet.

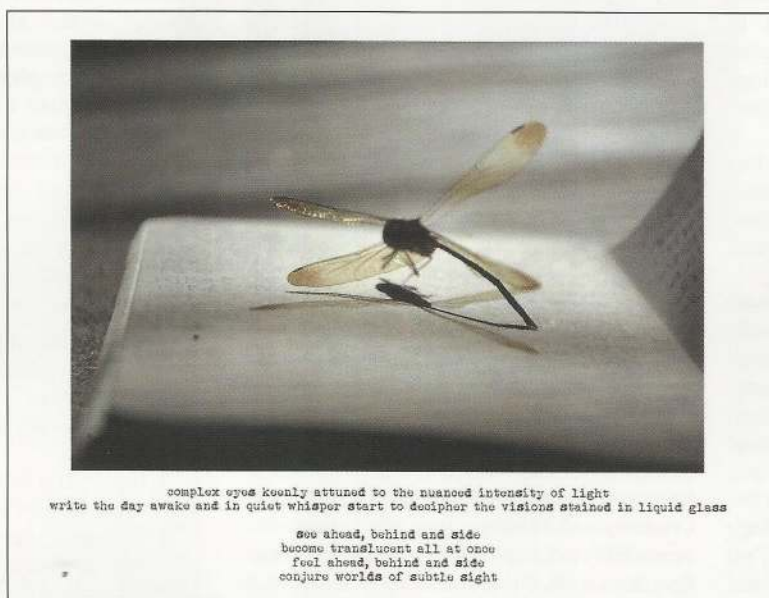


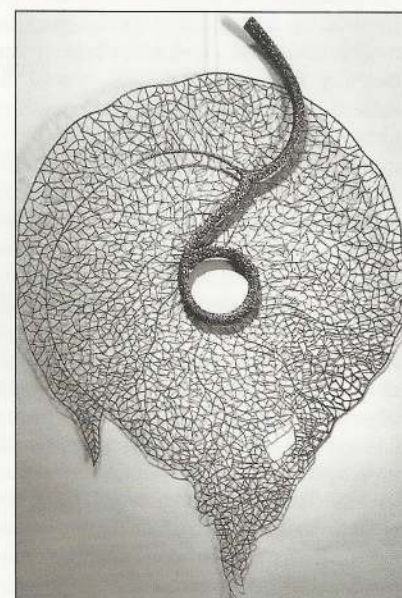
Photo creation, by Mariana. The caption reads:

Complex eyes keenly attuned to the nuance intensity of light
write the day awake and in quiet whisper start to decipher the visions stained in liquid glass
see ahead, behind and side
become translucent all at once
feel ahead, behind and side
conjure worlds of subtle sight

Group shows can sometimes be messy, chaotic, as differing artistic egos clash. Yet here one sensed complementarity. It seemed that each of these twenty four artists was taking part in a common

exploration into the many dimensions of transparency. The result was very stimulating. Alan

Right: Threshold of transformation, by Priya Sundaravalli



Venation, by Saravana



'Out of Lockdown' - a group exhibition emerging from solitude

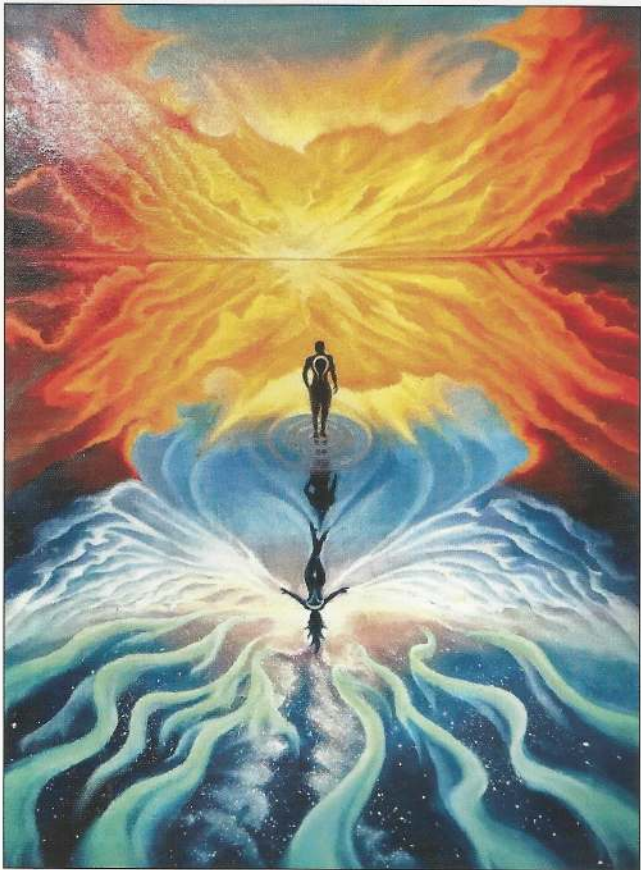
There is an old British World War II saying of some people 'having a good war'. Without denying the widespread human suffering involved in Covid19, I have been wondering if some Aurovilians are 'having a good Lockdown', which could emerge from people stopping, taking an in-breath and potentially reconsidering their life direction. So when this exhibition was announced, I was intrigued to see what the creative fruits of this time would look like.

Audrey of CREEVA who curated the exhibition was also aware that many Auroville artists generally do not have the time to paint, as they need to work service jobs for their livelihoods. They were suddenly freed up in those weeks of lockdown to express their muse. The exhibition's remit was simply that the art was created in lockdown.

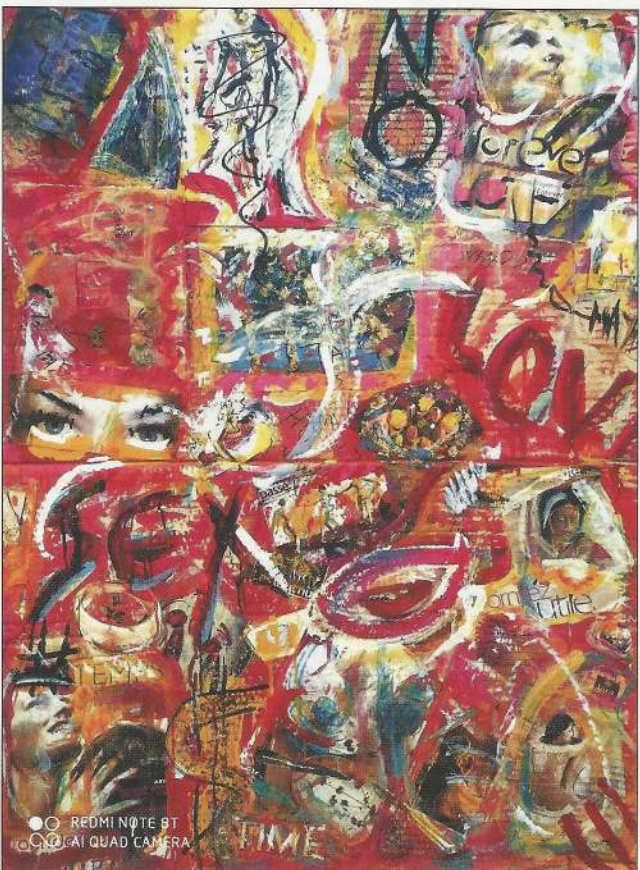
Twenty-three different Aurovilian artists displayed artworks in a great variety of styles. Amongst many beautiful pieces, those that stood out include the beauty of Miki's tree

spirit, perhaps hinting at the return to the earth that Covid brought in its wake. Orev's images burst with the potential power of a new world and also of nature's fullness. Giovanni's collages teem with a vitality and chaos that was another aspect of life stopping. Xinpeng's trilogy of parallel worlds captured some spirit wishing to emerge, with a hint of Tolkien and mythic journeys.

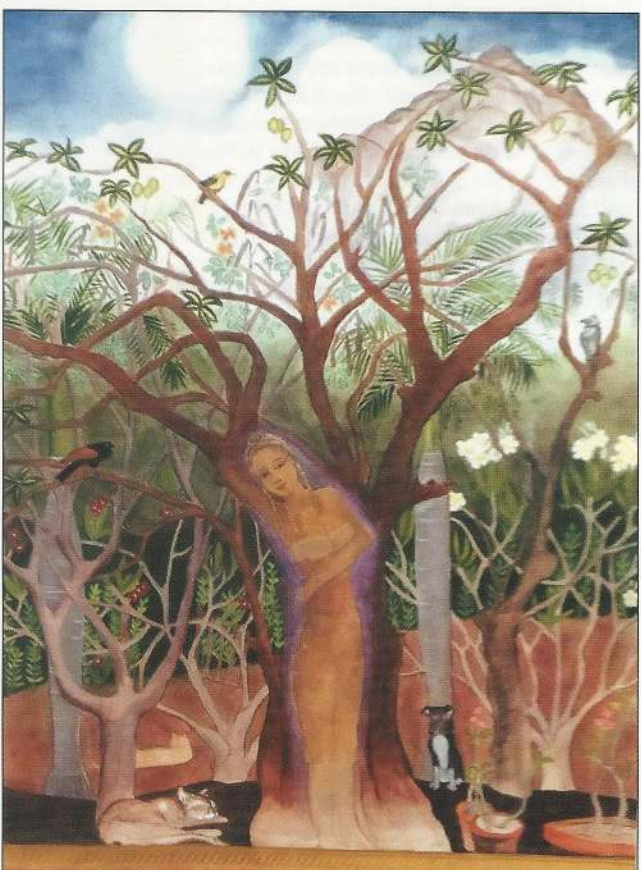
Peter



Fiord Land Survivor, by Xinpeng



On Love and More, by Giovanni Parrillo



The Garden, by Miki

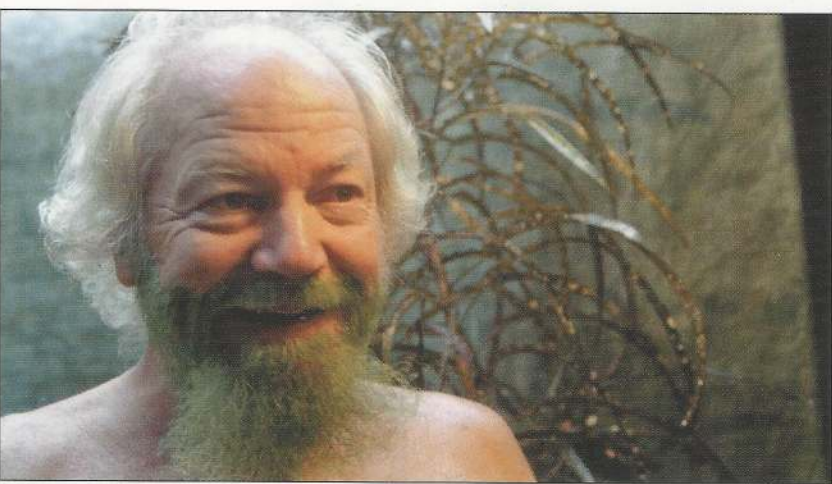
LANGUAGE

Esperanto and language justice

Miko Sloper is a man of many talents, a philosophy graduate, mathematician, language teacher, musician. As I sit down to have a brief talk about his latest interests in Auroville, I notice his beard and hair, which were previously white, have turned green, so I start the interview by asking...why green?

Miko: I speak Esperanto and I teach Esperanto at the Language Lab, so Esperanto uses green in its flag and as its general symbol. Actually, Esperanto speakers very often refer to each other as "verdulo" (green person). There is a lovely mythological figure in Celtic culture called "The Green Man". He's got all kinds of foliage coming out of his features. Instead of a beard, he's got oak leaves; instead of hair, he's got tendrils and vines, so I tried to invoke green as the colour of Esperanto and of the Green Man.

Auroville Today: How and why did you come to Auroville?



Miko Sloper

Two years ago, I was in Chennai for the music and dance festival and a friend of mine said: 'Miko, you're just a couple of hours away from Auroville by bus. You need to see Auroville'. I asked, 'Why? What is in Auroville?' She said, 'it's very hard to explain, but trust me, just go there, you'll love this place. It's a city of the future, it's a city where they're going international and making new things happen.' I thought three or four days would be enough to figure the place out. But I ended up staying eight days because I read that there was this Om Choir, and that just rang a bell to me. I usually wear an Om ring, I have an Om shirt and in the United States I used to wear a cap that said "I root for the Om team". So I 'Om a lot' (laughter).

So, I joined the Om choir and it completely changed my life. I thought, 'My God, there is a place where an Om choir is one of the "normal things", and where people get together and make spontaneous music based on Om - this is my city.' Of course, after that, I ran into many things, African Pavilion and drums, or just meeting people on the streets, so I completely fell in love with the place.

I had to leave after eight days because I had an Esperanto conference to go to. Eight days of immersion in this culture really convinced me that this is the place I wanted to be, so I left knowing that I would come back, which I did in late August 2019. I've been here ever since.

How did Esperanto come into your life?

About thirty years ago, I had a teaching career in the US. I started teaching internationally, and my first job was in Israel. Because of taxes and visa bureaucracy, it is very common in that type of career that you spent two years in one country, then two years in another and so on. I thought to myself, 'I'm not gonna learn Hebrew in two years, and after that, where am I gonna be? In Japan? I'm not gonna learn Japanese in two years, and then I'll be in Brazil?' So I figured I should learn the international language. I had a two-week intensive

class in Esperanto in San Francisco and then I flew to Israel, contacted the local Esperanto community and found out that I could have conversations with these people after a two-week Esperanto class.

So, one of the reasons I'm here in Auroville is to demonstrate that Esperanto is a useful tool for internationalism, and it should have a place here. I'm teaching in the Language Lab, and while we have an Esperanto club that meets once in a while, there is still not that much interest in it, maybe because The Mother didn't specifically approve it.

I know it would be unrealistic to adopt Esperanto as an official language starting next week, but I'm not advocating that. This is the city of the future, so I think the city of the future should use a neutral international language. People could come here from all over the world and speak not only their own mother language but also Esperanto. The other obvious place for Esperanto would be the United Nations. Right now the UN has six official languages but more than 90% of the communication and international transactions are in English. Native English speakers have a huge advantage in the world now, and as an English speaker, I have the same advantage. But I'm more interested in justice, and the justice implied in using a neutral language is really profound. Everybody that I know in the Esperanto world that doesn't speak English as a first language appreciates that. I'm hoping that actually some day the World Esperanto Congress will happen in Auroville.

Amilton

Mother on the Auroville language

They're beginning to wonder what Auroville's language will be. I think it will be a language that will... (Laughing) The children are setting the example: they know several languages and make sentences with words from every language, and... it's quite colorful! Little A.F. knows Tamil, Italian, French and English; he is three years old, and (laughing), it makes a fine muddle! Something like that.

People who speak Esperanto wrote me an official letter to say how many they are (a considerable number), and that they would like their Esperanto to be Auroville's language.... There are lots of people who speak that language, lots. Everywhere, I think. I got that letter two or three days ago.

But Auroville's language, let it just be born spontaneously!

Yes, spontaneously, naturally! Ah, we shouldn't intervene."

Mother's Agenda, May 28th, 1970

And after all, what we want... we know that we need, not an artificially new language, but something supple enough to be able to adapt to the needs of a new CONSCIOUSNESS; and that's probably how that language will emerge, from a number of old languages, through the disappearance of habits.

Mother's Agenda, February 18th 1967

Esperanto is the most widely spoken constructed international auxiliary language. It was created by Polish ophthalmologist L. L. Zamenhof in 1887. Zamenhof's goal was to create an easy and flexible language that would serve as a universal second language to foster world peace and international understanding, and to build a "community of speakers", as he believed that one could not have a language without such a community.

The word esperanto translates into English as "one who hopes". The vocabulary, orthography, phonology, and semantics are all thoroughly European. The vocabulary, for example, draws about three-quarters from Roman languages (French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese and Romanian), with the rest split between Greek, English and German. The syntax has Germanic and Slavic tendencies, with internal tensions when these disagree; the semantics and phonology have been said to be Slavic.

Estimates vary of the number of Esperanto speakers, but 60,000 may be speaking it regularly and 500,000 occasionally.

Embracing the multiplicity of opportunity

Auroville-raised Lili spent eight years studying art history, theatre and fine arts abroad, and is now perhaps the busiest youth in Auroville. She is a sculptor, professional horse riding instructor, acts in theatre and film, is training to be a surf instructor, and builds treehouses and theatre sets.

When Lili arrived in Auroville with her mother and sister at the age of three, all of them “fell in love” with the place. Even though the family bounced between 17 houses in their first five years in Auroville, Lili describes her childhood as “fantastic”, thanks to the freedom kids were given to pursue their interests. “We ran around barefoot, and experienced so many cultures and languages,” she says. “I realise now, coming back from living abroad, what a privilege it was to grow up here. There’s beauty in the opportunity we have here.”

When Lili was eight, the family finally moved into their semi-completed house in Sukhavati, designed by her architect mother, Jana. As the second floor was still being constructed, the three women slept in the kitchen for a year. “We would pack the bed away in the morning, and the building work would continue,” recounts Lili, “and in the evenings, Mum would clear away the dust, and would unpack our bed again.” After a year of building, the house was finally finished on Christmas Eve, and the sisters celebrated having rooms of their own. “My sister was happy about that, as I used to kick a lot in my sleep!”

As Lili went through Transition school, she also did ballet, hip hop and Bharatnatyam dance, and made regular appearances in Johnny’s plays. She and her sister also became passionate about horses. Their first horse, Twinkle, was an injured thoroughbred rescued from a racecourse in Chennai. And a second horse, Monica, soon joined the family.

When she was 14, Lili went to Kodaikanal International School in southern Tamil Nadu, but was surprised to find that the curriculum didn’t challenge her. “That experience was a real validation of Auroville’s educational system, because we Auroville kids were so far ahead.”

She and her sister had shifted their horses to Kodaikanal, in an arrangement where Lili taught the landowner’s daughters to ride. The mountain weather was much better for the horses than the humidity of Auroville, so even though Lili disagreed with the philosophy of the school, she stayed on in order to remain connected to the horses. But after 18 months, she eventually decided to go abroad.

Education Abroad

Her first experience of the European education system was in Germany, which was a “big shock”. Although Lili had previously visited Germany once a year to see her father and grandmother, she was faced with a different reality in the form of cold weather, heavy clothes, and the difficulty of studying subjects like physics and history in German. “I realised my German was really archaic. Mum spoke Hochdeutsch [high German] and had read Goethe and great literature to us, so I didn’t understand the way German teenagers spoke. It was a culture shock. English was the language I was comfortable in. And this small school in a small town had been told an Indian girl would be joining them, and then I turned up with blonde hair and blue eyes!”

After six months in Germany, Lili gained a scholarship to a boarding school run by Quakers in England. “It was very Harry Potter,” says Lili about the school, “with prefects and four houses. It was another big change for me.” She found interesting parallels between Auroville’s values and the way in which the Quaker community functioned. “Their decision-making process as a community is similar to the Auroville general assemblies where people discuss and make decisions by general consensus,” she says. “The spiritual side of the school suited the part of me brought up in Auroville. I liked the cultivation of the thoughtful side of seeking and interpreting.”

After finishing school, Lili wanted to study theatre and art at a university. She decided to remain in England and start a Bachelors Degree at the University of Birmingham. Studying theatre in England proved to be very different from treading the boards in Auroville. “I realised I’d been a medium sized fish in a very small pond,” she says. “I lost some confidence as I encountered the gruelling, competitive audition process. There’s a lot of rejection, a lot of being told that you’re not right for a role. But,

still, I loved it. I met a lot of great people.”

Lili also got involved with environmental activism at university. Her lived experience of Auroville’s non-consumerist lifestyles collided somewhat with the life experiences and attitudes of her fellow students. “I was baffled by how little life experience people my age had in the UK.”

During her studies in England, Lili continued to nurture her passion for horses. She volunteered at a horse rescue centre, and worked towards gaining her British Horse Society (BHS) qualifications as a rider, yard manager and horse riding instructor. After she completed her bachelor degree, her volunteer role evolved into a full-time apprenticeship that involved more than 10 hours work per day. The horse centre was visited by youths and convicts who came to learn horsemanship as part of their rehabilitation activities. “Here I was, a young woman telling a bunch of grown men who’d committed a criminal offence that they had to shovel shit! Most of them were lovely, but they didn’t want to be there. And

combined with rescued horses that were not yet safe, it was really challenging. But in terms of developing confidence and leadership, it was a good exercise for me.”

Lili stayed on in Birmingham to do her masters degree in fine art. By this time she had moved out of a shared house with other student friends, and was living with her then partner. To fund her studies, she worked full-time at a BHS riding school and eventually attained her formal riding instructor qualification, all while trying to progress in her studies and sculpture practice. “Anyone in the equine industry will tell you it’s a lot of work. Mucking out horse stables is surprisingly good as a repetitive manual work that allows the mind space for creativity and ideas to take shape.”

Lili’s masters degree focused on philosophy and sculpture, and her thesis explored embodied ways of knowing. Her final artwork also had a connection to Auroville. It was a life-size floating polar bear sculpture made out of dried cotton maché that was shipped to Birmingham by Auroville Papers, who guided Lili over the phone about the technical aspects of completing her sculpture.

Returning “home”

After finishing her masters degree three years ago, a couple of factors spurred Lili to return to Auroville. Her grandmother had developed dementia and had moved to Auroville. Lili wanted to help her mother care for her, and she also wanted to pursue a natural horsemanship project with some other Aurovilians. The horsemanship project quickly fell through, but Lili soon after observed the Treehouse Community team building a small treehouse in Forecomers. “I was so impressed with the fluidity in the team, the consciousness and the dynamic of how they worked together. I thought, ‘I want to be part of that team!’” Lili had done some woodwork in her masters degree, so the team was willing to try her out. Over three years, she learned many aspects, including arborism, forestry, rope-assisted climbing, engineering, design, woodwork and carpentry. “Every tree offers a different shape and opportunity,” she says, “so every treehouse is different – it’s a very creative and innovative way of building.”

Lili describes the Tree House Community as a “special” team of people who have become family. “This embodies what Auroville should be, how a community can work. You have to be conscious because the work is very challenging, so everyone has to pull their own weight. As a team we each individually try to hold ourselves accountable and be reliable. It’s wonderful yet difficult to be working with your friends because you have to be honest and critical, as well as supportive and find ways of making it work.” Lili also speaks about the importance of sustaining alternative lifestyles such as treehouse living, saying that her team hopes to show that a treehouse can be a comfortable home,



Lili

while also being part of the ecosystem and a way for people to reduce their carbon footprint.

Horses continue to be a big part of Lili’s life. At Ashwaganda in the Auroville forest, she practises ‘natural horsemanship’, a training approach that uses play to teach humans to understand horse psychology and what the horse is communicating, and teaches the horse to be a little more human – an interrelationship that develops confidence and trust.

Theatre also continues to be a passion for Lili. Her most visible role was that of the heroine Fleur in Jesse’s 2018 play *Message in a Bottle*. “It was challenging and exciting, with a huge cast of more than 30 people, with elaborate and beautiful costumes and set.” She has continued with theatre training, most notably doing a workshop with visiting French theatre practitioner Ariane Mnouchkine from *Théâtre du Soleil*. For the Auroville production of British comedy *Noises Off*, Lili built a complex set with nine entrances and exits, staircases and windows, which could be completely turned around as part of the production. “The actors had to climb in and out of the doors and windows, and the turning of the set worked perfectly and was the highlight of the play to me!” She constructed the set with help from the Treehouse Community, and used pipes from Matrimandir’s scaffolding.

More recently, Lili was cast in a small but pivotal role in a Tamil psychological thriller film, *Pisasu* (devil), by Chennai-based director Mysskin. Playing a German woman who falls in love with a tribal Indian man, Lili’s scenes – as the mother of the lead character – will be included as flashbacks to the main narrative. “It’s extraordinary to witness a film being made. I had to deliver my [German and Tamil] lines in front of three cameras and a crew of forty. Mysskin was excited about my experience in theatre acting, and asked me to help the other actors act more authentically, which was intimidating as they are experienced film actors!”

Currently on a break from working with the Treehouse Community, Lili now juggles three afternoons a week working in Quiet Healing Centre’s reception, along with a role as a trainee surfing instructor in Auroville’s Kallialay Surf School at Serenity beach. “From the trees to the ocean, it’s a big change! I’m supporting the instructors, and surfing as much as I can to improve my skills.”

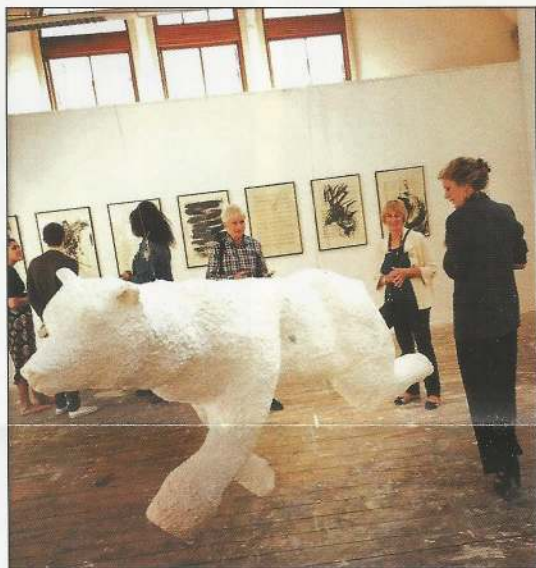
As to the many strings in her bow, Lili quips, “Too many I think sometimes!” While financial security takes a back seat to shaping a meaningful life, Lili questions how young Aurovilians with scant financial resources are sup-

posed to survive in Auroville. “If someone wants to build a house, how are they supposed to do it? Or to travel? It’s unfeasible on a maintenance. Even in India, it’s challenging to put aside money. I would like to engage with India and not be separate from it. I’d like to travel around India on my motorbike and visit artists and institutions and understand the contemporary art scene, as I’d like to learn more about training or collaborating with different groups or institutions of young people.”

While Lili emphasises that Auroville is “home” and holds possibilities for growth, she’s also open to spending more time outside. “I’m trying to find a thread where I feel fulfilled in what I’m curious about, and what I can contribute to Auroville and the world at large. I’m trying to find the silver lining that ties together art, performance and sports.”

Lili credits her mother Jana with being a “spectacular” role model and for giving her a sense “that I can do whatever I want.” She sees her form of integral yoga as being “fully present in a craft”, whether it is performance, dance or sculpting, as long as it is “bringing some truth in the process of making.”

Lesley



The life-size floating polar bear sculpture made out of dried cotton maché shipped to Birmingham by Auroville Papers



Early days in Auroville. Lili and her sister Fee

What it means to be stewards of the land

Nikethana is a resident of Anitya community, the first community in the Joy of Impermanence (JOI) project, which aims at creating community spaces based on impermanence and self-sufficiency. This piece was written in 2019 and recently published on Auronet.

I write in the peace of the dawn, kept company by birdsong and tree whispers. The community dogs and I greet each other in the ritual morning bath of love. The orange light permits in me the articulation of memory. I have felt inspired to write these past few months. I asked myself, what is it that is giving me voice?

Ever since we started planting on the land, there is a renewed connection to the nurturer in me, the realization of dreams I did not know I had. Birth takes so many forms, the land is the mother, loving me and holding me in its wisdom, connecting me back to the feminine. I feel also the mother of the trees, loving them and caring for them as they breathe life. What a beautiful duality, to be the mother and the child. The land is teaching me to love and to listen. She is creating in me the aching knowledge that I need to learn to truly love, to be able to see her take the journey in the times ahead.

In JOI Anitya it seems we are constantly faced with the existential anxiety of having to give up our land. It is a borrowed time we have in building our community, we are hearing constant reports of the future of town development on this piece on earth that we guard now. The highway transformed into our own road nightmare, to be forced to accept the bigger, grander picture instead of our delicate, just emerging hopes for this land. I keep thinking of this small branch of the bougainvillea (Mother's name:

protection) that I planted a few months ago that is flowering now and feel this deep ache at the thought of this plant replaced by road. She represented a hope, a deep wish for life and soon she might be trampled without care by the "vast noise of the creative urge".

Paved roads are violent things. Wendell Berry meditated so beautifully on the difference between the road and the path. Unlike the road, the path is not destructive. Berry says, "it (the path) is the perfect adaptation, through experience and familiarity, of movement to place; it obeys the natural contours; such obstacles as it meets it goes around." I walk such a path through the eucalyptus and cashew groves many a morning to say hello to the trees on Anitya land. Berry continues, "a road, on the other hand, even the most primitive road, embodies a resistance against the landscape. Its reason is not simply the necessity for movement, but haste. Its wish is to avoid contact with the landscape; it seeks so far as possible to go over the country, rather than through it".

I don't know where I stand in the seeming contradiction between what is called "pragmatism", "reality", the nature of growth of Auroville versus the wish for a quieter life, a more conscious one. I hold these options in me, even as the wish dawns for better questions, deeper reflections. I doubt that when the choices seem like the only ones, they are. They are the only ones we see.



Nikki mud plastering a wall in Anitya community

I agreed to certain conditions when I joined these circles of communities, I thought I understood the nature of saying "yes" to temporarily inhabiting a land in order to preserve it and enrich it while the planning goes on for its future – determining its place in the 'higher' order of things, the Master Plan, the Galaxy or whatever interpretations it will take. I did not expect to feel so. I understand more now the advice to refuse to move from the land when the time comes, to refuse the development, the instinctive recoil in some when I explained the philosophy of our project. Only 5 years? What kind of community is that? What kind of relationship do you build to your place with that?

Perhaps ours is an ill thought-out definition of this term "impermanence", we are children

playing with grand words without truly knowing... It presents a real dilemma, to see your loss before you even love. Is it worth it? I could just build on this land, I could just grow some gardens and have community meetings and already start planning the next move. Why is this happening? For the first time in my life, I am feeling the other entering me. The breath of life, the growing sense of place, this overwhelming sense of connection to my surrounding. And yet, it comes with the awareness of almost immediate loss, of a constant knock on the door, asking me to move.

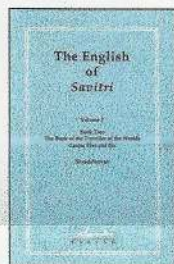
Perhaps it is the ultimate cosmic joke, to be a part of the "Joy of Impermanence" when everything in me is asking for home, for belonging, to really get to learn a place over the cycles of time. Or perhaps, this is the lesson to learn – to love when you know it will change, to love in the knowledge of an end, a transformation of expectations, a surrender to the divine will. To leave behind a richer place, to go in the awareness of movement between life and death, to not be in the centre of either, to observe, to help the beings be full and alive and to respect their passing and change. Masanobu Fukuoka comes to me now, reminding me that while I am the centre of this piece of writing, in reality, I will do better to not be the centre of anything. Perhaps that is the truth of what it means to be stewards of the land.

NEW BOOKS

The English of Savitri Volume 7

Six years ago, in 2015, *Auroville Today* reported on the publication of the first volume of *The English of Savitri*, containing the explanations of Shradhdhavan on *The Book of Beginnings*, Book One of Sri Aurobindo's monumental epic, *Savitri*. While recommending the book, we expressed the hope that Savitri Bhavan would publish the transcripts of all the classes that the author, Shradhdhavan, had been giving over the years on the entire epic. At the time, admits Shradhdhavan, she had little inclination to do so, and in particular not to continue Book One with Book Two, *The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds*, which, with over 7 000 lines in fifteen cantos, is the longest book in the epic, because it was considered by her as "far too difficult". Instead, over the years Savitri Bhavan published Shradhdhavan's explanations of five other Books, and her commentaries on the first four cantos of Book Two, in a no particular order.

Savitri Bhavan has now decided to publish all of Shradhdhavan's explanations, starting with Volume VII, which contains the explanations of cantos Five and Six of Book Two. The publication of the remaining nine cantos of Book II is planned to take place in three additional volumes in the next years and will be followed by Shradhdhavan's commentaries on Books 4, 5, 6 and 8. After which, she says, the series may, perhaps, one day be republished in the sequence as given by Sri Aurobindo himself.



The aim of Shradhdhavan's explorations into *Savitri* – to give a better and deeper understanding of the poem by providing explanations about vocabulary, sentence structure and imagery – is again well-served in the present volume. But the explanations are far from dry and, incidentally, are mixed with a touch of irony, such as when Shradhdhavan explains how something creative can come out of chaos. "In our world everything is seeking for order even though it 'is Driven by Chance', as Sri Aurobindo writes. Powers that come into our world, e.g. life and mind forces that originate in other planes and are 'Strangers to earth nature', have to 'learn earth ways' and have to submit to the earth's law of oneness and harmony. This happens through clash and conflict. So they work and battle and sometimes they come together in alliances. They agree with difficulty and struggle." And she adds, "This sounds like Auroville, doesn't it? Creative chaos."

For all those who wish for a better understanding of *Savitri*, this volume is highly recommended reading.

Carel

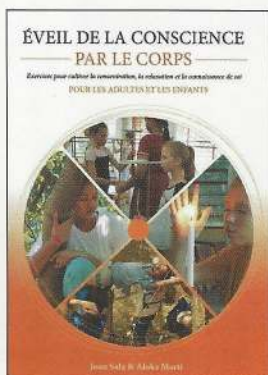
The English of Savitri Volume 7
Book Two, *The Book of the Traveller of the Worlds*,
Cantos Five and Six
Published by Savitri Bhavan
Price in India Rs 650.

Awareness Through the Body in the Kindergarten

Awareness through the Body (ATB) is one of Auroville's truly groundbreaking programmes. Beginning in 1993, Aloka, Joan and people who have since become facilitators in ATB have helped generations of students, as well as adults, to know and manage the complexity of their own being through simple tools rooted in sensory experience. Since then, many people in India and abroad have successfully introduced ATB practices into their life and work.

In 2006, they released their first book, *Awareness through the Body – a way to enhance concentration, relaxation and self-knowledge in children and adults*. Now they have published a companion volume: *Awareness through the Body in the Kindergarten: First steps towards cultivating attention, relaxation and self-awareness*.

While the underlying principles of ATB are common to all age groups, over the years Aloka and Joan have identified essential principles to make kindergarten classes more effective. These are



rhythm, play, imagination-fantasy, surprises, and learning about boundaries.

The new book gives many examples of how topics like attention and concentration, sensory awareness, breath, physical structure and relaxation can be developed in young children, thus providing a foundation for many of the ATB activities that are developed later on in primary and middle schools. There are also sample class plans.

This beautifully produced book is a distillation of years of sensitive explorations into how young children can be helped to make the first steps towards becoming more self-aware and responsible beings. It is a joy to share the journey.

Alan

Awareness through the Body in the Kindergarten: First steps towards cultivating attention, relaxation and self-awareness. Published in 2021 by Sri Aurobindo Institute of Educational Research. Available from the usual outlets and on auroville.com

PASSING

Menaig Renouf

Long term Aurovilian Menaig passed away on March 26th at the intensive care unit of the Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences due to multiple organ failure leading to cardiac shock. She was 73. Menaig suffered from TTP, a rare hereditary auto-immune blood disorder and used to say she "lived on borrowed time" since her mother died of the same at a much earlier age. Throughout her many years in Auroville she would have strokes and hospital treatments because of this but, being a lively, courageous and spirited personality, she always bounced back. This time she knew that she wouldn't since she mentioned to her friends during her birthday in February this year that she "was really tired".

Menaig, a Canadian born in France, first came with her little son Gandalf to Pondy in 1979 and joined Auroville in 1980. For a short while they moved in with Judith in Kottakarai, and soon built a house with Hero where now Celebration is. Her artistic qualities started expressing in beautiful batiks on cloth and canvas. In 1984, during a summer holiday school trip in Yercaud, young Gandalf stumbled during a climb in the mountains, fell and died. The whole of Auroville was stunned and mourned with Menaig this terrible, sudden loss.

Not long after that, the couple moved to Centre Field where Michael and Shyama had vacated a house. A new life started and work at Matrimandir intensified. Throughout the eighties she worked on the structure and in the workshop, wherever needed overseeing the meticulous sanding and re-sanding and painting and (re)painting of



Menaig working on the marble walls of the Matrimandir's Inner Chamber

the columns, the cleaning and placement of marble in the Chamber etc. Her joy, humor, total commitment and passion for the work was a true strength for the team and will never be forgotten.

In the nineties, Menaig started working with Auroform in Pondy, using her skills to provide artistic touches to the company's interior designs through wall paintings, curtains, bed covers, – all pieces of art. At the same time, she managed a little guesthouse at the side of her house.

In these last years, Menaig's health started gradually deteriorating, leaving her at times confused and at a loss. Having arrived with a difficult karma, she lived through it with a free spirit, chutzpah and a colourful outlook, leaving good and loving memories behind.

Menaig's remains were buried at Auroville's burial and cremation grounds near Adventure on March 29th.

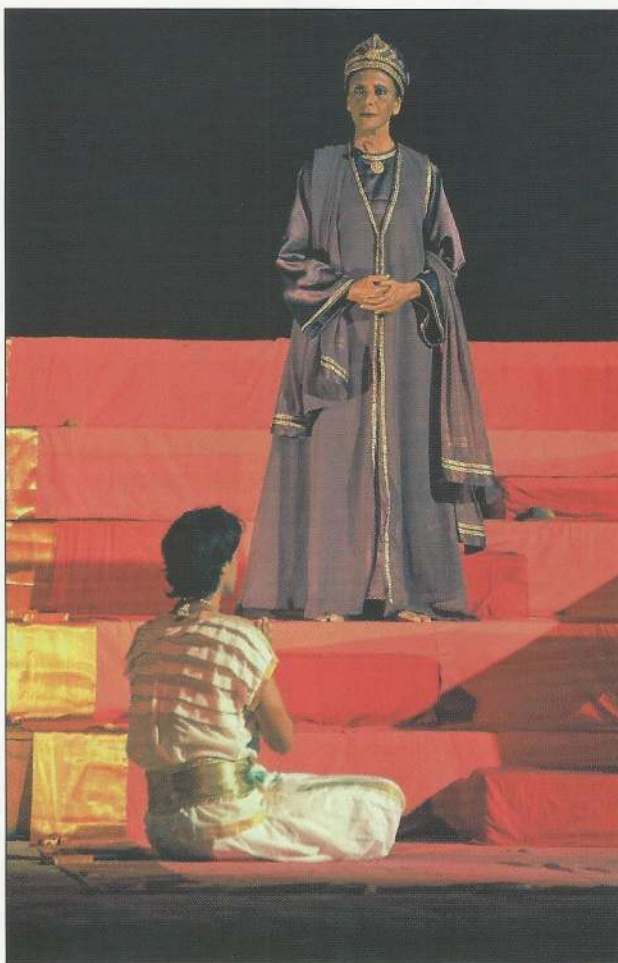
Nachiketas

The small amphitheatre in the Matrimandir Gardens was once again the site of a dramatic exploration of a spiritual search. A few years ago Aryamani staged excerpts from Sri Aurobindo's *Debate of Love and Death*, from Book Ten of his epic *Savitri*. This time she had chosen the dialogue of Death with Nachiketas, the subject of the *Katha Upanishad*, as translated by Sri Aurobindo. For three evenings in the second week of March, Aurovilians and guests, seated in the open air, could listen to Death granting three boons to Nachiketas. The first was the boon of tranquility for Nachiketas's father, who agonized after cursing his son to be given to Death. Then, as a second boon, he answered Nachiketas' questions about the heavenly Flame.

"Hearken to me and understand, O Nachiketas; I declare to thee that heavenly Flame, for I know it." Death then explained that the heavenly Flame is the Divine force concealed in the subconscious which has originated and built up the worlds and which is also concealed subconsciously in man's mortality, by the kindling of which man sacrifices his lower existence to the divine and transcends his earthly nature. "Know this to be the possession of infinite existence and the foundation and the thing hidden in the secret cave of our being."

But Death was reluctant to grant Nachiketas the third boon he craved, the answer to the question of what happens to a man who passes over into death. "Even by the gods was this debated of old, for it is not easy of knowledge, since very subtle is the law of it." He asked Nachiketas to choose another boon, and offered him riches and other objects of desire, but to no avail. "This boon and no other is for my choosing," replied Nachiketas.

Death then explained the difference between the good and the pleasant that come to man, and that the wise choose the good and not the pleasant, but the dull soul chooses the pleasant and live in ignorance. "They who dwell in the ignorance, within it, wise in their own wit and deeming themselves very learned, men bewildered are they who wander about round and round circling like blind men led by the blind. The childish wit, bewildered and



Death instructs Nachiketas

drunken with the illusion of riches, cannot open its eyes to see the passage to heaven; for he that thinks this world is and there is no other, comes again and again into Death's thralldom."

But those who thirst for the good are led to the realization of God by spiritual yoga, having entered deep into that which is hidden in our secret being and lodged in the cavern heart of things. "Know the body for a chariot and the soul for the master of the chariot: know reason for the charioteer and the mind for the reins only." Death then explained to Nachiketas the Self-born. "The Purusha that is within is no larger than the finger of a man. He is like a blazing fire that is without smoke, He is lord of His past and His future. He alone is today and He alone shall be tomorrow. This is the thing thou seekest." And Death concludes, "The Purusha, the Spirit within, who is no larger than the finger of a man is seated forever in the heart of creatures; one must separate Him with patience from one's own body as one separates from a blade of grass its main fibre. Thou shalt know Him for the Bright Immortal, yea, for the Bright Immortal."

Srimoyi, as Death, gave a fine performance declaiming the stanzas from the *Katha Upanishad* with great intensity, while Nachiketas, played by Vivekan, listened in intent concentration – as did many in the audience. The chorus of two men and three women narrated from a book on the topic written under the auspices of late Kireet Joshi, and recited lines from Sri Aurobindo's poem *Savitri*.

The small amphitheater in the Matrimandir Gardens was eminently suitable for this otherwise rather static drama performance. Aryamayi is to be recommended for creating this play.

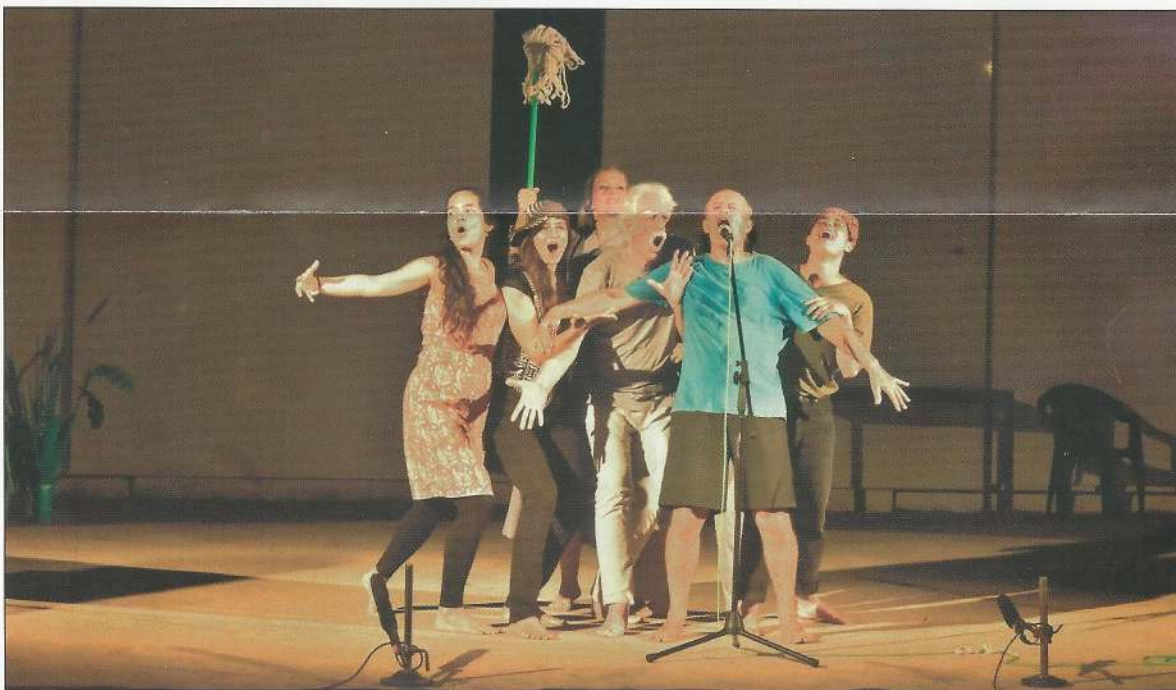
Carel

* All quotations have been taken from Sri Aurobindo's translation of the *Katha Upanishad*, in Volume 18 of his *Complete Works*, *Kena and other Upanishads*.

The performance was filmed and subtitled by Manohar and can be seen on You Tube at <https://youtu.be/-Z3sGNClyzM>.

The Akademik Genius Brothers Family

The Akademik Genius Brothers brought us back to community theatre with a fun-packed evening to provide our annual dose of theatrical levity. The Genius Brothers expanded including Genius Siblings by introducing six very talented young women – Ahilya, Isa, Lili, Chandra, Ancolie and Raquel – who showcased their own singing voices, comic touches, acting abilities, musical and other skills, including rapping, tango dancing (with a mop no less) and Tamil singing. Otto added his typically deft comic touch. Jesse and Paul exuberantly played respectively the highly strung casting director and his factotum and anchored the performance of the new stars, who hopefully will become a regular feature of the possibly soon to be renamed Genius family. Wazo was in and out of more roles than a baker, and was delightful fun, whether singing opera or doing over-the-top German, French, Russian or Italian impressions.

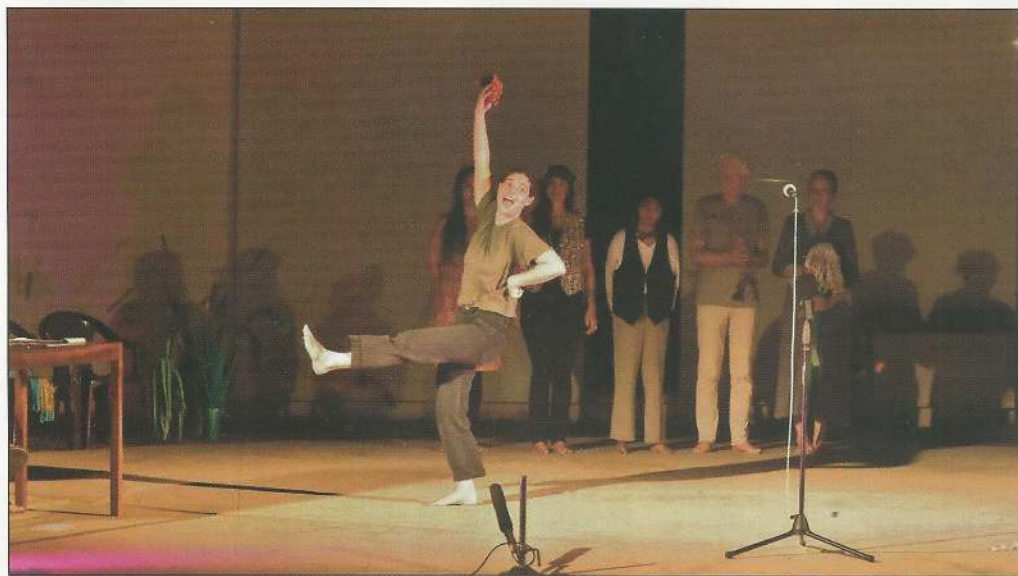


The auditioning characters in full voice

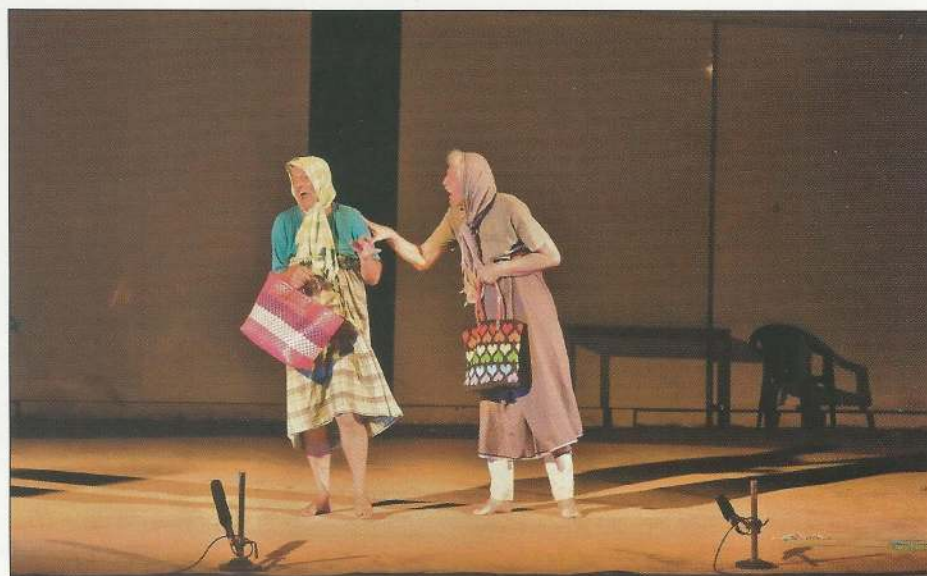
'The Audition' gently mocked our recent working group selection debacle by using the storyline of people auditioning for a musical show. The audition formula allowed for parodies of national stereotypes, light hearted songs and sketches from all the new participants. Sacred cows were lightly prodded; including quorum percentages, voting options: A, B, C, D, the revolving chairs of those in working groups; all allowing for an evening where we could step back, and laugh at Corona life, ourselves and our community processes.

In a packed Kalabhum ampitheatre under the stars, I was sitting in the front next to children of all ages, and it's hard to know who laughed harder or enjoyed the night more: the kids of all ages or the adults. As a first time Genius attendee, it lived up to its billing as a not to be missed irreverent and joyful night out.

Peter



Isa hitting a high note in Tamil



Otto and Wazo dressed to the nines

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