

Last year's extraordinary rainfall and its consequences

The year 2021 was the wettest in a hundred years and the first aquifer below Auroville filled up, with unexpected consequences. To understand what is happening and what is likely to happen in the future, we talked to Aurovilian Giulio, a geo-archaeologist, who works for the Geomatics department of Auroville's Centre of Scientific Research.

With distressing regularity Auroville Today has been reporting on the challenges of providing water to Auroville's inhabitants and those living in the region around. The 2015 June-July issue (# 311-312) was all about "The Water Challenge". Two years later, the front page was titled "Auroville is facing a drought" (issue #335-336); and again two years later we reported that "A severe water crisis is expected" (issue # 358), as wells were falling dry and salinisation of the aquifer was happening. What's the situation today? Here, Giulio gives his views.

The wettest year in a century

According to Charlie from Aurogreen, who has been keeping rainfall data for the last 44 years, 2021 was the wettest year ever. The Pondicherry meteorological department even speaks about the wettest in a century.

Our area has normally two monsoons, the southwest monsoon from June to September and the northeast monsoon from October to December. On average, there are 47 rainfall days, and about 1240 mm of rain is annually accumulated. But 2021 was different with massive downpours happening in normally dry months. For example, on the Mother's birthday, February 21st, 2021, we had 180 mm, which is amazing! And it continued to rain throughout the year, with only a small break in March and April. The highest rainfall was recorded at Invocation and measured 2,985 mm, more than double the average.

But all that water didn't percolate in the aquifer. For if it rains for a prolonged time, the soil remains wet and that reduces its capacity to absorb water. Most of Auroville has red soil, which has a permeation capacity of less than 20%. This means that less than 20% of the rainwater reaches the water table of the first aquifer; about 80% runs off. That's what happened last year. And that explains why we need to build as many rainwater catchment ponds as possible.

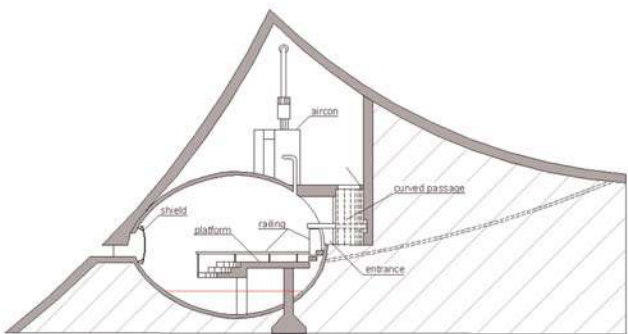
But even that small amount of percolation fully saturated the first aquifer. This aquifer lies underneath more than 75% of the Master Plan area of Auroville. It suffers from over-extraction and was empty the year before. But in 2021, it got filled. This was clearly visible at the Matrimandir Lake test pond which was partially filled up by rain water and a rise in the ground water level.

Now there are a few things to keep in mind: there was a large volume of rain over an extended period; there were massive downpours; and because of this, the pumps fell silent and there was no groundwater extraction. All this contributed to the rise of the water level in many wells in the Auroville area. But this won't last. I expect the first aquifer will become empty again before the onset of the next winter monsoon. It might even happen earlier. Our data are already showing that likelihood.

Wet floors and inundated meditation rooms

The increase of the water table had unexpected impacts. The floors of quite a few houses became wet and stayed so for a long time. And ground water welled up inside the twelve meditation rooms in the petals around the Matrimandir. The water inside was at the same level as in the test pond.

The Matrimandir itself has an underground tank below it, from where excess rainwater is pumped out. But the Matrimandir petals have no slab foundation, which would prevent groundwater entering the meditation chambers. Evidently, nobody ever expected that the groundwater would rise so high that it would well up inside the meditation rooms.



Section through the Petal chamber (not to scale). The red line indicates the approximate ground water level.



Rainwater and groundwater partially filled up the 10 metres deep test pond at the Matrimandir. Photo taken on March 4th.

Some people suggested creating an emergency opening to ensure a speedy outflow from the petals – they do not have a drainage facility – as they were concerned about the petals' structural stability. I advised against it, firstly because the water in the petals was groundwater and the petals would fill-up again; and, secondly, because slow seeping water will not affect the petals' foundations, while water that runs fast might create damage. In the last two months, water has slowly seeped out, and now the meditation rooms are dry again.

The situation of the other aquifers underneath Auroville

Auroville is situated on stratified land, as on a layered cake. But the strata are not horizontal but come to the surface in some places and then taper down towards the sea. Three strata are important for Auroville's groundwater situation: the Cuddalore sandstone stratum, which is the first aquifer; and the Kaddaperikuppam and Thuruvai limestone strata, which jointly form the second aquifer.

The second aquifer gets directly recharged by rains in the area roughly between Irumbai and Annapurna, where it comes to the surface. Indirectly, recharge happens through the Manaveli clay stratum, as this clay is quite thin and discontinuous at places, and not exactly water-tight due to carbonatic nodules which render this clay more pervious. Moreover, many wells have been dug through it to reach the second aquifer. This basically means that the first and second aquifers are in a hydraulic connection, so that when the second aquifer goes low, water from the first aquifer will naturally drain into the second.

The first aquifer was depleted the year before last due to over-extraction. This has yet another consequence. If an aquifer gets empty, an irreversible process of earth compression and earth compaction follows. In consequence, this aquifer can then hold less

water than before. This process also affects our buildings. When earth gets compacted, the houses sink and walls and floors may crack. This phenomenon is called subsidence, and it is already happening in several places in Auroville: I have been told that the Visitors' Centre has already sunk 4 centimetres.

The situation to the west of Auroville

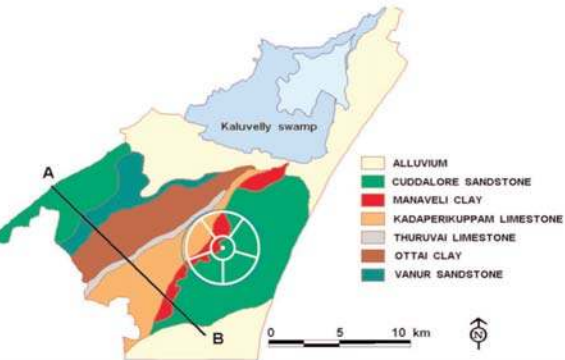
While Auroville depends for its water on the first and second aquifer, the people living to the west of Auroville depend on the aquifer composed of the Vanur Sandstone stratum. That stratum outcrops and is recharged by monsoon rains around Vanur in a very small area, and tapers down to the sea underneath a very thick and impermeable clay stratum, the Ottai stratum. This aquifer is completely disconnected from the dynamics of the first two aquifers.

So you have to the west of Auroville a large populated area, which depends on that aquifer. They pump water in a truly massive way. In the years between 1975-2005, the water level in this aquifer went down 54 metres! Earlier, the water level was 7 metres above sea level. In 2005, it was 47 metres below sea level and I assume it has gone further down since. And this brings the risk that the sea water will come in, which can happen any time. Then disaster will strike, as all these pumps will only pump saline water.

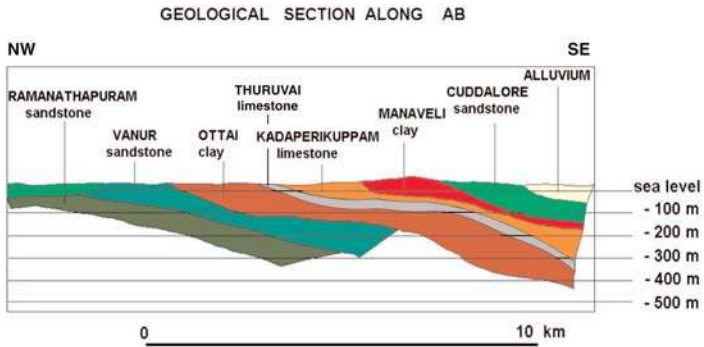
Tamil Nadu has an ancient history of building eries and kolams to catch and hold rainwater – there were more than 40,000 of them.

Many have been encroached upon or have fallen in disrepair. They will need to be repaired or rebuilt to safeguard the water needs of the increasing population. For if these people can no longer rely on ground water because of the salinisation of the aquifer, and have no access to surface water, they will move to places still having access to water. Then the Auroville area might see a massive population influx.

continued on page 2



Schematic drawings of the strata below the Auroville area. The Auroville symbol marks the location of Auroville.



● The visa crisis

● Building an experimental city

● Why?

pages 2–3

● "Everyone is a learner": update on the Learning Community

● Exhibition: Learning from the intangible

pages 4–5

● Auroville Press celebrates 40 years

● Brief News

pages 6–7

● Passing: Bryan Walton

● The Art Camp

● A profile of Anandi Zhang

pages 7–8

continued from page 1

Salinization

Salinisation is now also affecting some of the Auroville beach communities, though still to a limited extent. The Auroville beach community of Quiet pumps brackish water and has a small desalination plant for its drinking water needs. Repos no longer exists, but we know that the water there was getting saline. Further north, the Sri Ma community near Kalapet still has clean water; it benefits from the presence of a shallow stratum called Alluvium, which is recharged by the rains. But this stratum is prone to contamination.

But much of the coastal area further north and below Auroville is already saline. The salinisation of the aquifers south of Pondicherry has already reached an extent of 15 kilometres inward. Some villages along the coast south of Cuddalore have died.

For Auroville there is one safeguard, though not a very strong one. The strata all slope down towards the sea. We all know that water doesn't move upwards but always moves downwards according to gravity. Auroville's first aquifer will not easily get saline because the water level is still above sea level, so sea water cannot climb up. The second aquifer is below sea level, but as it is in hydraulic connection with the first, the risk of salinisation is lower. But the third aquifer, which has no connection to the first two, is in danger. As long as this aquifer holds water, there will be no risk. But as soon as that aquifer gets empty the flow will get reversed. The difference in height is such that the salinisation of this aquifer may then happen to more than 15 kilometres inwards.

Auroville has only three or four deep wells which reach into the third aquifer, one of which is in Aurogreen. Some of these were drilled by the Central Groundwater Board many years ago. But we do not use them because the water pumped out smells of rotten eggs. The water in these wells may come from the Ramanathapuram stratum, below the Vanur sandstone. This stratum was formed 140 million years ago, when the forests existing at that time were inundated by the sea. The forests died, and instead of decomposing they putrefied in the absence of oxygen, producing hydrogen sulphide, which has that characteristic rotten egg smell.

The influence of climate change

The Climate Change models predict that there will be an increase of rainfall in the next 15 to 50 to 100 years. There will not only be more rainfall in volume, but it will also be more intense. They envisage an increase of 15% and more over the next 50 years.

If you add 15% to the average of 1,240 mm, we would have an average precipitation of 1,426 mm rainfall per year. But if we take last year's rains as an indication, with its record of 2,985 mm, we can expect even more rain falling every year.

AUROVILLE FOUNDATION

Recently, the Working Committee informed the community that it is aware that a number of individuals of foreign origin have received visa recommendation letters from the Secretary, Auroville Foundation, for shorter periods than what was recommended and endorsed by the Working Committee, and that this is causing deep concern and insecurity in many. The Working Committee said it is doing its best to address this situation with the Secretary and requested all those affected, as well as those who are still waiting for a letter of recommendation, to send it a brief statement outlining the years they have been in Auroville and the areas of work and service they have been involved in during that time, as well as anything else that is felt to be relevant.

The issue

Out of just over 3,300 Auroville residents, 1,893 residents are of foreign origin and depend on an Indian visa to live in Auroville. The Government of India has generously issued a special visa policy for Auroville: foreign nationals are entitled to a long-term 5-year visa subject to the condition that the application is accompanied by a recommendation from the Secretary, Auroville Foundation. This visa needs to be renewed every five years. Newcomers to Auroville can receive a one-year visa, again with a recommendation of the Secretary. This visa can be renewed three times, after which the foreigner has to return to his or her home country to obtain a long-term visa. All renewals require the recommendation of the Secretary.

In the past, the Secretaries of the Auroville Foundation have followed the recommendations of the Working Committee; rarely has any Secretary refused to give a recommendation or recommended a visa for a shorter duration than was suggested by the Working Committee.

The present Secretary, however, has taken a different stand. To date, several young Aurovilians who have been living in Auroville since birth and

who are now adults, and some Aurovilians who joined Auroville more recently, have only received a recommendation letter for a three months extension of their visa. A few senior Aurovilians, amongst whom are people who have been living in Auroville for more than 20 or 30 years, also received only 3-months recommendation letters or a recommendation for a one-year extension.

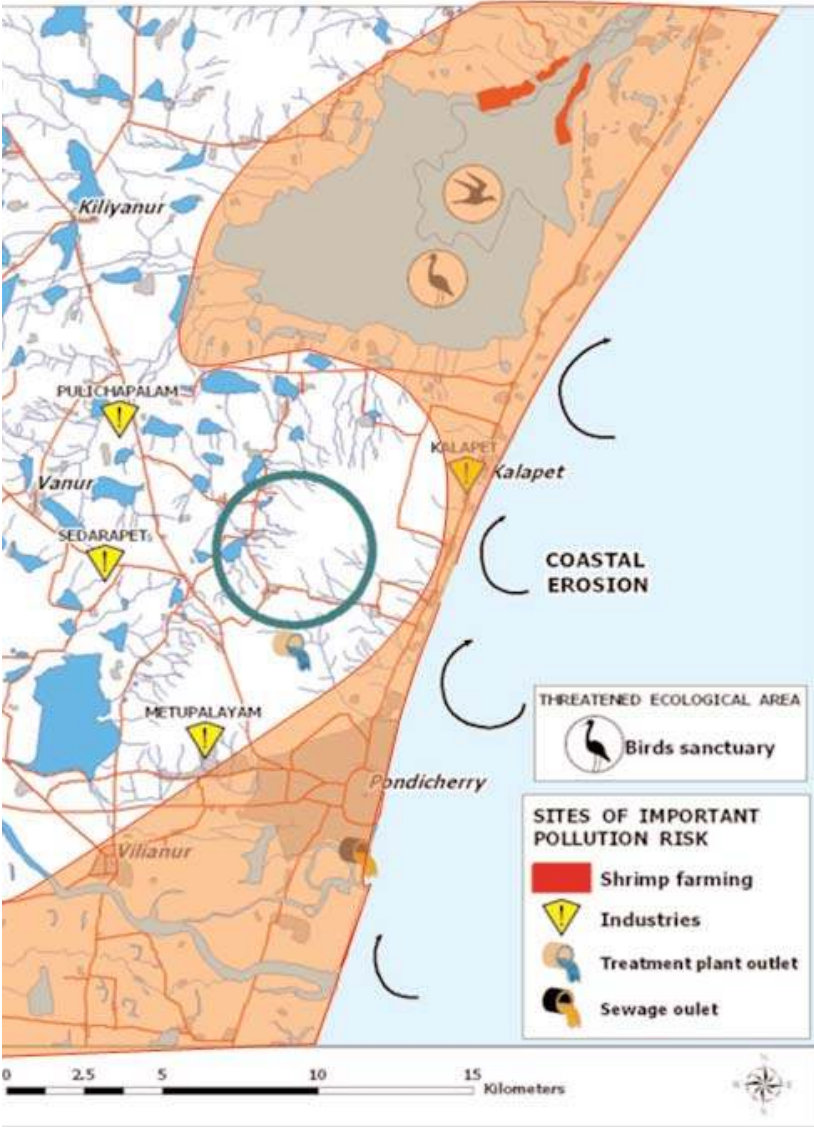
The Secretary has not given any reasons for her decisions. In an article which appeared in *The Print* she was quoted as saying that "Nobody's visas have been withheld but, yes, it all depends on the way they abide by what is expected of them legally, ethically, morally, spiritually of this project. We have evidence of people involved in illegal activities, obstruction of the intended city and it is entirely for authorities to take a call on it."

What these "ethical, moral and spiritual" expectations are have not been explained. Neither has the Foundation ever published any of its "evidence" of people being involved in illegal activities, and no investigation seems to have been initiated. Some Aurovilians who received a 3-months' visa recommendation were told that this was because of their participation in the protests against the way the Secretary and the Auroville Town Development Council proceeded in clearing the Bliss Forest and the Youth Centre. Others, who were not actively involved in the protests, learned that they received a short-duration recommendation because of their connections to people in the community who were not in agreement with the actions of the Secretary. Several Aurovilians, including families with young children, are now facing uncertainty regarding their future in Auroville. They have to leave Auroville without knowing if they will ever be able to return.

Deep concerns and insecurity

These decisions of the Secretary are not only causing deep concern to the foreign and many Indian residents of Auroville, but also to Dr. Karan Singh, who had been Chairman of the Auroville Foundation for more than 20 years. In a public

Salinization of the aquifers



During the Dreamweaving sessions [see *AVToday* #319 of February 2022, eds.] I made a rough calculation to see what this 15% increase of the average would mean for Auroville. With a 50% built-up city area (which is impervious and which generates runoff) and a 50% non built-up area, I calculated that the yearly rainfall would be sufficient to provide water for 50,000 people consuming 150 litres per capita per day: the annual shortfall would be about 400 cubic metres, which is really negligible when we consider the period of one year and 50,000 users. But to provide water for 50,000 inhabitants we would need to develop an integrated water management system, based on diversification of the water sources.

The Matrimandir Lake

The question always comes up if the Matrimandir Lake features in such a system. In the past, some water specialists have said that the lake could serve Auroville's water needs, while others argued that the lake would only have an ornamental or spiritual value. I think that now that the climatic circumstances are changing, the lake needs to be re-studied. For there are unanswered questions.

For example, the depth of the lake. The test pond is 10 metres deep, which I believe is dangerous. If you have 10 metres of stagnant water, you risk ending up with a substantial amount of 'dead' water which has no oxygen. Any organic matter that will fall into this water will putrefy. Another reason why I think 10 metres is too much is that the lake will be difficult to fill up. Even if we calculate with an increased volume of rainfall, the quantity of rain will not be sufficient to fill-up the lake, unless we catch the rain over a large Auroville area and pump it back into the lake, or use desalinated water, which, to me, makes no sense as this is a very energy-intensive and costly process. Moreover, the purity of desalinated water will be lost as soon as a leaf falls into the lake.

A third reason is that such a large volume of water will compress the stratum below, affecting the water carrying capacity of the first aquifer when it becomes empty. Lastly, there is the risk that the lake will start 'floating' upwards if the groundwater level rises again – which is likely to happen given the climate predictions – and the pressure of the water inside the lake is insufficient to counter the effects of the groundwater rise. The lake is envisaged to have a lining of HDPE foil and geotextile. If the lake would start floating, the foil might tear or the sealing of the foils come apart, causing massive leaks which will be very difficult to repair. This danger should be seriously evaluated.

With a lesser depth and with an increasing volume of rainfall, these issues could be resolved. For I believe that the lake could be filled with rainwater during the monsoon. Of course, evaporation will take its toll and the level may not be the same in all seasons. But perhaps this issue can be resolved in the lake design. As I said, I do not believe in the feasibility of keeping the lake filled up using desalinated water.

But my views here are still sketchy. I would be very appreciative if a team of specialists could look again at the various studies that have been made in the light of the present situation.

In conclusion, I am optimistic. Auroville will continue being able to supply water to its inhabitants in the future, if the predictions about the consequences of climate change hold true. But this will also depend on Auroville setting up an integrated water management system with or without the Matrimandir Lake, and making the necessary investments. I would love to take part in those discussions. But we have to keep in mind that Auroville is not a stand-alone. You can't build a city without also securing the water needs of the neighbouring villages.

In conversation with Carel

The visa crisis

message of February 26th, he stated that he was "mortified" by the recent events and warned that visas should not be disturbed, "because over the decades, people have come from almost 60 countries giving up their homes, positions and taking up residence in Auroville as a unique inter-cultural community." He acknowledged the Secretary as "a highly qualified and motivated civil servant who considers building the city of Auroville as her only priority," but warned that "means are as important as ends, and if the right means are not adopted the end will necessarily get distorted. This is unfortunately what has happened in Auroville, resulting in a great deal of tension in the community and even panic when there was a hint that some visas may be disturbed. That should certainly not be done."

What does it mean to come and live in Auroville

When a person decides to settle in Auroville, there is a financial donation to be made to the Auroville Foundation to build or acquire and become steward of a house or apartment, as all immovable assets are owned by the Auroville Foundation and only a few assets are available against payment of a monthly contribution. Such donations are substantial: for example, the cost of the apartments that are presently under construction at Vibrance range from 25 lakhs for a one-person studio to Rs 50 lakhs for a two-bedroom apartment. Also, any person who wishes to start a business or an activity needs to put up their own funds to do so. These donations cannot be recuperated if a person leaves Auroville.

Many Auroville residents have made substantially larger donations to Auroville beyond for their residence. Private funds have been donated for land purchase, for digging wells and installing pumps, for setting up farms, creating forests, building schools and cultural centres, and for maintaining all these assets throughout the years. As one educated and skilled elderly Aurovillian put it, "I dedicated decades of my most valuable

working years to Auroville, I donated all my private funds, I have nothing left. If the Government of India withdraws my visa, I am on the street in my native country as I have no longer any assets or family there."

Building Auroville

Dr. Karan Singh, in his message, confirmed that in his experience, "the Auroville community seems to be unable to come to a consensus on important matters and is constantly divided even on vital issues, which is most unfortunate." One of these vital issues is the building of the city, on which *Auroville Today* has reported in many issues. But it would be incorrect to state that the majority of the residents oppose progress and the building of the city. What they object to is the top-down approach that disregards the voice of the Residents' Assembly and the forceful manner with which the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation and certain Aurovilians proceed with development. Dr. Karan Singh advised that the credibility gap between sections of the community and the Secretary be bridged and that ten senior Aurovilians, five from each side of the dispute, sit together to seriously consider what can be done to overcome the present crisis. This suggestion has not yet been implemented.

The future

The decisions of the Secretary may have a wider impact than only affecting the concerned foreign Aurovilians; they may affect the future of Auroville. Auroville is meant to be an international community dedicated to human unity in diversity. Some foreign nationals may now think twice before making substantial non-returnable donations for the right to come and live in Auroville. But Auroville's aims cannot be reached if residents of Auroville feel under threat of their visas being revoked. For this reason, action to restore the established protocol and build transparency around the issuing of Auroville visas is imperative.

Carel

Building an Experimental City

We all came to Auroville knowing that it would be a city one day. It is a given, that's what we signed up for, we want it. **Just, not like this:** Since the beginning of December 2021, starting with a series of violent altercations – involving bashing bulldozers and polite police, a court case and now visa threats to foreigners, this coexistence of people and cultures from over fifty countries has hit a serious speed bump. The crisis that our community is going through has rattled many people to the core, who are now putting into question their life choice because of uncertainty about their future.

This type of pressure is happening all over the world, it is but normal that this is happening in Auroville too; our community is, after all, just a microcosm of the macrocosm. However, Auroville was not meant to be ordinary. In January 1973, after speaking with the Mother about some Newcomer-linked issues, Shyam Sunder Jhunjhunwala, who had been nominated Auroville Secretary by The Mother, noted: "There is no need to build another ordinary city in Auroville; already there are so many. If people are like that, it will become an ordinary city and our money and efforts will be wasted."

How ordinary is Auroville?

The list of Auroville achievements is long; it can boast numerous success stories over the past 50+ years, from ecology to industry to outreach to community. Internationally known for its achievements, people from all over visit this place and use it as a model to learn about these feats, sharing their own knowledge and experience, and bringing back some know-how to their own homes, to improve their own society.

The experience of Auroville is unique. Started five decades earlier on a sandy desert plateau, now you wake to the chirping of birds in the surrounding canopy of trees. Then, you toast your Auroville-made bread, slather on some Auroville-produced butter and chocolate spread, dunk it into Auroville-roasted coffee and read the Auroville paper, be it the weekly or the monthly one. Jumping on your Auroville-designed electric vehicle, you silently zip off to drop your kids off at their Auroville-run school offering innovative and unique programmes, such as Awareness Through the Body. After work, you go to your Auroville-based therapy session or dental care appointment, homeopathy or Ayurveda check-up with your Aurovilian practitioner. Lunch for many is at the Solar Kitchen, which offers a generous palette of Auroville-grown fruits, vegetables and millets, as do the increasing number of Aurovilian eateries. At the end of the day, accumulated tensions are loosened thanks to a visit to the Soul of Auroville, the Matrimandir, to a peaceful walk through the Auroville forest or to a yoga session with your Aurovilian instructor. After you cycle back home to the light of the moon, the Auroville night fauna comes alive and those

sounds will lull you to sleep. Just another day in this wonderful place. Auroville is a Jewel.

One may call Auroville the smallest self-run urban settlement of the world: it is the size of a town but managed in an entirely independent manner. We take care of our own water and educational systems, we have services to deal with our roads, our healthcare, the community finances, our waste management and many more. The creation, building and expansion of Auroville has also been of benefit to the bioregion, by generating work opportunities and tourism among other things, to help the surrounding villages develop.

Envy and frustrations

Seeing how exceptional this community is, Auroville has repeatedly been the source of covetousness over the years, from the Mother's passing back in the 1970s to the current scenario. For example, on a town planning level, a big chunk (around one third) of the Greenbelt has already been "eaten up" by non-Aurovilian settlements and real estate projects. As this severely affects the area included within the Master Plan that is meant to cover Auroville's need for food independence and sustainability, the entire development plan will need to be adjusted to ground realities.

Between the slow-paced building of the city, malfunctioning processes and institutions, as well as the incessant struggle for survival (at Rs. 18,700, the Auroville monthly maintenance is lower than the income of a government clerk), combined with expensive Auroville products and the shortage of housing, frustrations have been building up in numerous residents over many years. As Dr Karan Singh wrote on February 26th, 2022: "It is [also] true, in my experience, that the Auroville community seems to be unable to come to a consensus on important matters and is constantly divided even on vital issues, which is most unfortunate."

Indeed, as it is a work in progress, Auroville is far from perfect. This is, after all, a human experiment and as such we will only fail when we stop trying. The Mother said in October 1968: "*After 100 years, we will know what Auroville will be. The important thing is to make the experiment!*" And, as Dr Karan Singh said, the process is just as important – if not more so – than the result.

Land of opportunity

Therefore, many Aurovilians believe that rather than building a city, the emphasis should be on creating a society. Rather than speed, sustainability. Rather than rejection, adaptation. Rather than intransigence, compromise.

With the impending climate change and crisis, numerous cement-filled cities will soon become unliveable. Countries all over the world are studying their "cities of the past", assessing their failures and working towards finding solutions turned to the future, such as renewable energies, motor-free city centres, parks and

green areas. Often called or compared to an eco-village over the years, Auroville certainly seems to fit with that concept through its various achievements, be it with regard to reforestation or the striving to find alternative governance and societal solutions. Can it become an **ecocity**, focused on being socially, culturally, economically, spiritually and ecologically sustainable? This would address not only climate change but also reflect the spirit of the third point of the Auroville Charter: "*Auroville wants to be the bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within, Auroville will boldly spring towards future realisations.*"

On the basis of a series of precepts given by its founder, the Mother – *A Dream, The Auroville Charter, To be a True Aurovilian* – each resident is invited to actively participate in its making and shape a new society, physically as well as psychologically and spiritually. Nevertheless, funding, population and expertise are purveyed in small doses only, which implies slow-paced development. This allows for adaptation to new discoveries and the involvement of all community members in the moulding of this place. It is a work in progress: building an entire city and society hand in hand cannot be done in a hurry. In October 1972, the Mother said: "*In Auroville I do not want many men. I want some people, but true people. If you want many people, I can give you a hundred thousand in a moment from South Africa.*"

People are drawn to Auroville because it does not impose the same limitations as elsewhere. Thus, the population of Auroville is international, and what makes this place special is, among numerous others, the diversity of people all striving for a common goal! Each person has their own story of how and why they moved here; there are the "children of Auroville" (people who were born and/or raised here), whose souls simply chose this place; there are individuals from around the world who left their countries and lives to invest everything they had in Auroville; there are Indians from all over the country, for whom there is also no "going back" as they openly admit to no longer being fit for "normal" society. Even volunteers and (long-term) guests are touched by Auroville's energy. They all share this sense of belonging. Whether Indian national or foreigner, born or having moved here, they all have chosen to give their energy, time and commitment to this experiment.

Where are you from?

For some, this is the most common question one is posed around here. Our common answer is: HERE. Auroville, City of Dawn, City of the Future, The city the Earth needs, A body for the soul, A dream come down to Earth...

Due to the present limitation of visa recommendations, the feeling of trust and safety is lost, not allowing for anyone affected by that to work untroubled or start any new projects. In the same letter quoted above, Dr Karan Singh also wrote:

"However, as Gandhiji taught us, means are as important as ends, and if the right means are not adopted the end will necessarily get distorted. This is unfortunately what has happened in Auroville, resulting in a great deal of tension in the community and even panic when there was a hint that some visas may be disturbed. That should certainly not be done because, over the decades, people have come from almost 60 countries giving up their homes, positions and taking up residence in Auroville as a unique inter-cultural community."

Many Aurovilians have invested all their worldly wealth in this incredible project, without any possibility of getting it back. For studies, work or experience, many of us have lived elsewhere for some time, but we have made the conscious decision to come (back) to live and continue to invest in Auroville. Some cannot or do not wish to adapt to "normal society". Most would evidently survive elsewhere, because one of Auroville's main lessons is resilience, but it is in becoming part of Auroville that they have grown, progressed, and thrived, as Auroville itself has done.

What is the Dream?

As of today, many of us feel our physical and spiritual home is being taken from us through the destruction of the dream, values and stand we all came here for. Imagine what a loss it would be for Auroville if entire generations, entire families, were to leave! All their learning, experiences, connections and relationships would be gone, just like that. The diversity of the population would sink, as would contributions and donations from around the world. Enthusiasm and support to this project would certainly take leave too. The trust and motivation of residents would plummet, as would new requests to join the project. Who wants to live in a place where one lives in fear of retribution for putting the emphasis on process rather than end results?

Instead, let us all participate in building a trustful society with a healthy *modus operandi*. In point of fact, people from all over the world have consciously chosen this place as their home because of the essence of the Mother's guidelines included in "A Dream" as well as in the Auroville Charter. Indeed, the true raison d'être of our city is to become a spiritual city, the cradle of the superman. Incidentally, India is witnessing the death of massive quantities of Azadirachta indica, commonly known as neem or "Spiritual atmosphere" as the Mother had called it. Maybe, instead of uprooting trees, it is time to nurture what we have, and plant more of the right seeds in the right places, at the right times?

Undoubtedly, our mission is to change Auroville, but let's do that for the better! Let us build the city of human unity! Together! If we can resolve our problems here, there is a chance that this spirit of compassion and unity can spread to the macrocosm too!

Divya L.

REFLECTION

Why?

For the past weeks I have been struggling with only one question: why is our community being so deeply convulsed, fractured, at present? I find all the 'explanations' I have heard so far superficial, for I don't think they begin to account for the severity of the challenges we are facing.

Finally, I found a clue in something Sri Aurobindo wrote over one hundred years ago:

At present mankind is undergoing an evolutionary crisis in which is concealed a choice of its destiny; for a stage has been reached in which the human mind has achieved in certain directions an enormous development while in others it stands arrested and bewildered and can no longer find its way...

For I believe that, like humanity as a whole, we are facing an evolutionary crisis in Auroville. A crisis where the 'tools' at our disposal are proving entirely inadequate to deal with the challenges we are facing at present on the psychological, material and occult planes. It's as if we are trying to wage a major battle while struggling to keep our footing on shifting sand.

Some, perhaps many, of these challenges are self-inflicted wounds. However, I don't believe Auroville has 'failed' because after 54 years the city has not been built. We can be proud of our enormous achievements in many fields. And in this

community, in spite of our surface dissensions, there is much love, fraternity and aspiration.

But is this enough?

Sri Aurobindo pointed out that the only solution to mankind's present evolutionary crisis was the replacement of "the imperfect mental constructions of the past" by a new consciousness, "born of a deeper and wider truth of our being".

Mother made many of our similarities, including that Auroville was intended to be the 'cradle' of a new consciousness, and that our essential work here involves replacing the mental consciousness with a 'spiritual consciousness'.

But where are we today?

I have no doubt that there are some, perhaps many, Aurovilians dedicated to this work. But it is challenging, very challenging, for the mind has a very powerful hold upon us. For example, it is very difficult for many of us to believe that our minds are inadequate to deal with the practicalities of life, even though Mother pointed out that a spiritualised consciousness is "*capable of governing material things for everyone in a MUCH TRUER, happier and more beneficial way than any material power*". For every day we believe we see many examples of how the mind has solved particular difficulties, or made our lives easier, even though these 'solutions' often spawn complications which the mind has to wrestle with anew.

Moreover, the entrance to that other, spiritualized consciousness is difficult to access. Mother said that the first priority of the 'true Aurovilian' should be to discover the "*being free, vast and knowing, who awaits our discovery and who ought to become the active centre of our being and our life in Auroville*". But the discovery of the psychic is only the first stage in the full spiritualization of the consciousness. The peaks of the spiritual and the supramental transformations remain to be scaled.

It's not surprising, then, that time and again we fall back on material 'solutions' to our problems. Or else we envisage spiritual consciousness as something easier to comprehend and attain, like a nicer version of our present selves. But Sri Aurobindo and Mother were talking about something very different – an absolute change of perception, a 'reversal of consciousness' in which the stumbles of the mind are replaced by an intuitive surety of action and thought.

For many of us, it seems a distant prospect. And yet ... many of us have also experienced moments of 'no-mind' when events seem to have arranged themselves miraculously, or apparent impossibilities have suddenly been resolved. Often this has happened when we felt ourselves pushed to the wall, faced with a situation we had no way of understanding or resolving in the usual way, and we simply called or surrendered to something else.

Alan

“Everyone here is a learner”: up

The Learning Community (TLC) was formed in 2008 by a small group of like-minded people around a vision to create a community of children and adults who grow more conscious by living and learning together. They implement ways to practice the concept of Integral Education as defined by Mother and Sri Aurobindo, where each part of the being is helped to grow into its full potential, and the psychic being becomes the leader of one’s life and growth through an unending education. At present TLC has 20 children between 6 – 13 years, supported by a core group of facilitators and an active group of parents. Auroville Today spoke to some of the facilitators to find out more about the TLC journey, as well as the personal learnings, challenges, insights and ‘magic moments’ this has involved.

Free progress is an essential element of Integral Education as practiced in TLC. What do you understand by the term ‘free progress’?

Tamar: It is not just about freedom because freedom when one is not ready for freedom can become inner and outer chaos. So in free progress the child is encouraged to explore its individuality while being held with loving and gentle support, and being nudged when there is something in that being which is being asked to be nudged in a certain direction. I decided this is the education which I wanted to give to my children and many others so that when they reached a certain age they would have the tools to decide for themselves, from a place of inner freedom. What we do here is preparing them for that freedom.



Smiling together

Maya: When we talk about free progress, it is not freedom in a traditional sense; it’s not doing what you want, when you want, driven by likes and dislikes. It’s about getting to know yourself and learning how to guide yourself, and take responsibility for yourself and be responsible towards others. It’s not an outer vital freedom of impulses but finding the inner freedom to follow yourself in a true way. In this sense, free progress links to the discovery of the psychic being. The more we are free inside, the more we are able to be in touch with the psychic being, and that is what this education is about.

Sara: We are facilitators, not teachers. We do not impose or teach, we are more observing and guiding because we want the child to grow from within.

What are the major challenges?

Maya: When it comes to actually allowing children to be free, it’s very challenging for parents to really trust and allow the child to go through the ups and downs they need to go through to be able to work towards and discover that inner freedom. We have parents who come from many different cultural backgrounds, with their own traumas from their schooling, and with their dreams of what they want for their children. Mainstream education gives a security as we can see and measure its immediate results. When we don’t organize or measure education like ours parents can feel like nothing is happening with their child’s learning, as what we are trained to look at are academic outcomes. Some leave TLC for this reason. There are also parents who want to fully free their children from the conventional system, and to allow them to grow without any educational structures or frameworks. For parents like this who join TLC, it can be difficult to understand the concept of freedom in Integral Education, as they are looking for another type of freedom for their child. We put a lot of energy into building understanding and trust in parents: this work can’t be done without that. Also, children need time to find themselves. It can take three years for a child to begin to figure out what it wants or doesn’t want, and if parents withdraw their child during this period, it doesn’t give a chance for anything to happen.

Can any child benefit from this kind of education? Or is it only for some?

Maya: I’ve no doubt that every child can benefit from this.

Sara: Yes because we allow each child to find and follow their learning style. Some can learn better alone, others in a small group, some like to work on one thing for a long period, some like to do different things in one day.

Tamar: I think it’s for every child, but not for every parent.

In the film about TLC (see link below) somebody remarks that the real

work is with the parents, because often when you are working with the child you are actually dealing with the parent.

Tamar: This is very true. One of the challenges we are dealing with is the different forms of parenting and their influence upon the child. One of these factors is a very deep fear in parents of having their children bored. Parents are used to piling one activity upon another so that the child is never bored. However, when a child tells me they are bored, I find it a cause for celebration, because then the child realises that nobody is going to come to give them the answer about what to do next, and this is the moment when the child can really look inside, and there is a possibility of free progress.

At the beginning of TLC we had a child who, for three months, simply swung on a swing. It was a huge challenge for the parent, but we started reading about what swinging does for the being, and we discovered that it helps the two sides of the brain to interconnect. So obviously this child knew, without knowing, that she just needed to do that. This child was not bored, it would it be an adult projection to say she was bored. After three months, the first thing she did was she went to Johnny and said she wanted to learn maths. And she never got on that swing again.

Mrinalini: I think one thing that is quite unique with TLC is that it requires an active choice: it’s not a school where you simply send your child, you join as a whole family. So the parents need to be on board. They need to try to grow in this direction along with their child, because if we are looking at a holistic education it cannot happen separately from what is happening at home.

I understand that in TLC you would like to start working with parents and their children from a very young age.

Maya: Exactly, because by the time the child is six or seven, the parents have already found their way of parenting, and they also have fixed expectations for the future of their children, while parents with small children, especially with their first child, are still forming their ideas of parenting. When we have children joining at age seven or eight years, which is what happens now, it takes something like three years for a child to really land in this system, and for the parents it may take even longer.

If we could work with parents and children from a younger age, ideally with parents during pregnancy, and have them fully on board, we could reach much, much further than we do now. Typically, when a child comes here we have to start with a huge unlearning, and this takes time. If this could have happened during the first three years of life, it would be completely different because there then there would be this trust in the parents, and we can see the difference in the child when the parents are fully trusting what we are doing.

Conventional schools have tests and examinations through which the students and teachers can assess progress. Here you have none of these. So how do you assess progress or the growth of the individual?

Maya: The problem with this form of education is we don’t really have a road map, we don’t even have the vocabulary to communicate properly to parents what is happening here, even though we can see it really clearly when working with the children. So we felt we needed to understand better what we are doing here so that we can communicate it better. This research started with the making of the film, and we also formed a team to talk about it regularly. The question was, how do we assess free progress?

Quite early in the research we identified what we called ‘magic moments’, moments when we see something happens in the child, something shifts, and the child pushes through to something new in its development or inner realization. We started a whatsapp group with facilitators and parents, and as soon as somebody saw a magic moment, we would share it. Then we could go to the child and ask them what happened at that moment, what was going on?



Concentration

During one year we also shared reflections among TLC facilitators, parents and children. With the children we also conducted deep interviews to help them to reflect on their own learning. When we analyzed all this material, what emerged were three main categories of our work with the children. One was about independence, encouraging self-motivation, self-knowledge, and children steering their own learning. The second one was what we called ‘inter-independence’, which is all



Welcome to

the things that happen together, like children learning from each other, the mixing together of different ages, and caring for shared things like community assets. The third category was the forms and processes we have discovered in TLC to try to work on these issues of independence and inter-independence.

When we looked a little deeper, we saw we could associate these three categories with Sri Aurobindo’s three principles of education. The first principle, that nothing can be taught, means that it’s all about independence and inner development, which is integral yoga if you take it one step further. In other words, how can we, through education, give children a foundation for integral yoga?



Close work

The second principle is that the mind must be consulted in its own growth. So how can we create structures that offer that possibility to the children, so they are allowed to be where they are in their growth? And what does that mean for the relationships between children? How to organize education to move away from competition and comparison, as in traditional education, and allow diversity and each one to value the richness of this diversity? This is the principle that helps us work, through education, towards human unity in Auroville.

The third principle is the how, ‘from the near to the far’. We take as the starting point the child’s present interests and needs, and use this as a means of development. Everyday life and every moment is the best school of all. So, for example, we have the kitchen project where a lot of learning happens around food, and the magazine is another learning project created by the children out of their need to understand Auroville better.

It is clear from the film that at times you are confronted by children with emotional traumas. How do you deal with these when you don’t have the traditional schooling structures to fall back on?

Maya: Children everywhere have emotional issues – this is not peculiar to TLC – but generally children have to keep them inside at school and maybe let them out on to their parents when they come home. But at TLC working with the vital being of the child is what we do the most because we have many kids coming with a lot of things they have to work through, and here we provide the space for that to happen.

Mrinalini: It’s about honouring the inner being of the other. But if you’re trying to look at the need of the inner being of another, you have to have a connection with your own first. You can be calm in one part of your being but not necessarily in the vital. With children also you always have to be present in the moment. And if you are willing to be on this journey and you want that growth, it is just amazing. Every moment you’re learning, you’re growing, you can see yourself expand to be able to hold the situation when things get difficult or go wrong.

Maya: That’s why it is so beautiful that there are a community in TLC, because we have others who support us and can offer insights when we get upset about something that is happening with a child or parent. Because it’s clear, whether you’re a parent or a facilitator, that you are

Update on The Learning Community



Base Camp

joining a learning community and none of us is expected to know all the answers or be perfect. After all, we're all beginners, we're only scratching the first steps of what integral learning means. This means there is much patience and support here when we go through ups and downs in ourselves and with the children: this is a very safe and caring learning environment for adults, too.

Tamar: Everyone here is a learner, and maybe the adults the most. TLC was actually started as a vehicle for the adults' personal growth, and we are using our children's educational journey for this! In fact, the kids are fine, it is us who have to unlearn, to change, and when we do they will benefit. It's difficult when you're alone, but with a group which is also going through the same thing, it is possible because you can vent and rant and they will support you. That's a beautiful thing, because then perhaps you won't burn out and run away when things get difficult. And even if you do need to step back for a while, you can do that here because there's an understanding that if a facilitator doesn't feel able to hold the children one day, it is better that s/he doesn't come, and the rest of us will support.

Flexibility is also something that we really expect from the parents, for this is not Industrial Revolution-style education where everything, including education, is mechanized. This is life, and life flows and life changes all the time and if you are not able to be flexible with that, it's going to be very challenging for you to be part of TLC, because here it's about people and life and flow, not structures, goals and outcomes.

As TLC is also for the growth of the adults, do you remember any significant moments in your own development?

Sara: I cannot find just one, but every day there are moments when I feel I have to put aside most of my beliefs and conditioning and just try to be present. When I manage to do this, I find it's magic. But I realize that a lot of the time I have many expectations, so when something emerges which is different from what I would wish would happen, it's a real challenge. This is the work I'm doing on myself, day after day.

Tamar: My facilitation of Awareness Through the Body (ATB) is an interesting journey for me because one of the guidelines is that when we enter the ATB hall we leave ourselves outside - and that is so difficult to do. It's so tangible. If I facilitate a session when I'm feeling upside down, bothered by something that happened outside, the class is completely different. But if I manage to put aside what I arrive with, everything happens in that space like magic. This is really a barometer where I can follow very clearly where I'm at: to see if I'm managing to be in the essence of who I am rather than all the other stuff which is not me, but which is affecting me.

Mrinalini: A lot of the time, the magic moment is when it's really difficult for me to handle something, and suddenly I get an insight. For 20 years I have been working with movement in groups, and a lot of the time it's about sensing the group, being where they are and sensing what their need is at that moment, then adapting. Recently, however, I've been working with a group which always feels completely

scattered. I'd been trying different things and they were not working. Then there was this moment when I realised that they're really not a group, they are all very individual and their needs are individual, so this group thing is not going to happen. And then I knew what needed to happen.

When TLC began, it wanted to break down the division between school and community and make the larger Auroville community the learning field. One way it did this was by having no fixed campus. In 2012, however, it acquired 'Base Camp' as its fixed campus. Has this led to a certain institutionalisation of what you are doing here?

Tamar: That's very interesting because there was a moment five or six years ago where we realised that this had started happening without our really noticing it. Suddenly we found we were having fixed classes at fixed times with fixed groups, and with a predetermined syllabus. We had fallen asleep before some of us realised that actually this is not what we are here to do. It was very difficult and very traumatic because we had to really shake the boat to get us back on track, and this split the community. But since then we've been very vigilant to keep our original vision, because we all come from an educational background which uses the traditional methods of scheduled classes, predetermined syllabus and grades.

What about outside pressure? You are part of SAIIER. Has there been any pressure upon you from SAIIER to conform to any educational expectations?

Tamar: There hasn't been any intervention in terms of what we are doing, but we have definitely had challenges in getting acknowledgment for our work.



Peer learning



Learning corner

This raises the question of the larger context of education in Auroville. How supportive is it of what you are trying to do here?

Maya: I think there is a need to build a conversation around what education, and particularly integral education, should look like in Auroville because now each school chooses its own educational path and there is no common sharing. Integral education has a huge role to play in Auroville but we are not appreciating this or seeing what it would involve, and at the moment we even see a trend in Auroville of families sending their children out of Auroville to receive a mainstream education.

To get more clarity, currently I am researching the whole of Auroville education. I'm interviewing a long-term teacher from each of the Auroville schools to try to find what are the challenges and the needs of each school, what kind of education we want to foster in Auroville, and how we could come together to do this.

How do TLC students cope when they go to other Auroville schools?

Tamar: Many of them go to Last School. There is definitely a cohesiveness about the way we work here and the way Last School works, and there's very good communication between us. Some of our students have also gone to Future School and colleges outside, which are exam-based in their approach, but I think the TLC children are equipped for any kind of framework once they leave here. Children in TLC learn how to learn. And a child who wants to learn can learn anything, anywhere.

From an interview by Alan

Alessandra Silver's film about TLC, 'Learning From the Intangible', won the Cinema Paradiso Award at the 2022 Auroville Film Festival. It can be viewed at <https://youtu.be/guBtplqBl8o>

Learning from the Intangible

The photo exhibition 'Learning from the Intangible' by Alessandra Silver, with installations by The Learning Community (TLC), was hosted by the Centre d'Art in Citadines in March, and made possible thanks to the Project Coordination Group. It marks the culmination of Alessandra's 3 years of work documenting TLC, in collaboration with in-house researchers, with 400 hours of raw footage that finally resulted in the award-winning film 'Learning From the Intangible', shown daily as part of the exhibition.

However, Alessandra says that this is not the culmination but just the beginning of her research, and that the children have been the greatest teachers along her journey of documenting TLC and becoming part of this emerging playground of unending education.

The exhibition experience begins before entering the Centre d'Art: orange curtains are drawn shut around the first hall, hiding what the exhibition contains, piquing the curiosity as one approaches it from outside. As one enters, the orange curtains cast a warm welcoming glow into the air.

A certain sanctity and concentration is immediately felt, with spirals of incense smoke playfully dissipating into the air, along with the inviting warmth of candles that have been lit in a circle around a flower arrangement. These are next to a beautifully inviting seating area made of matching orange pillows on the floor. I wonder whether it is an installation or if I could sit there for a silent moment of contemplation.

When I ask if there's a specific direction to be followed to view the exhibition, I am invited to spontaneously explore and see where I find myself, in flow with the spirit of Free Progress.

The first room consists of photos of the children of TLC. It intends to inspire, 'with and through the children's eyes and hearts'. The images capture everything from the delight on a child's face as it discovers something new, to a moment of exhilaration on a swing,



or the wonder of blowing on a dandelion.

One photo shows a child's face, looking straight into the camera, wordlessly conveying so much of the 'intangible': her piercing luminous eyes appear to take up most of the frame, and like pools of sunshine that seem to contain the whole world, they fiercely emanate a promise of the new, of an unimaginably bright future.

I find myself elated by image after image conveying the poetry of moments of magic, so delicately, skilfully, and patiently captured. Every image conveys an aspect of the 'intangible', but also showcases an immaculate photographic technique and mastery of composition. Each photo is accompanied by an inspiring quote such as 'Those who don't believe in magic will never find it' (Roald Dahl).

In the second room, one is greeted by an entirely different scene. The TLC facilitators and parents have created several interactive displays that showcase some of the activities that are offered to the children, such as cooking, mathematics, arts and crafts etc.

The smell of freshly baked cookies, very temptingly on display with an array of cooking materials, giving the feeling that this space is alive, dynamic, and interactive, and I find myself wondering if I can eat a cookie.

The impact of this fine exhibition is perhaps best summed up in the words of a visitor: 'These children are so lucky, I would have been a very different person if I had gone to school here.'

Chandra De Dionigi



Apprenticeship

Auroville Press celebrates 40 years

On March 26th, the Auroville Press in Aspiration community celebrated its 40th anniversary. Claude Arpi, Christine Devin, Luisa Meneghetti and Jayalakshmi look back at a challenging past and forward to an uncertain future.

“Much of the Press’s history has disappeared in the fogs of memory,” says Claude. “When I came to Auroville, we started L’Encens d’Auroville, the incense manufacturing unit which is now called Maroma. The year was 1976; the team consisted of Paul Pinthon, André Tardeil, who left soon afterwards, and ‘Small’ Patrice (Marot). My job was printing the packaging, which I did at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Press in Pondicherry. Every day I would cycle down, along the narrow canyon, and then later back up to Auroville. The Ashram Press was run by Mr. Ranganathan, a wonderful gentleman with whom over the years I developed an intense contact. Basically, he taught me everything about printing. But we wanted to have our own press. With his help, and with our own means, we managed to buy a small letter press.”

“The Auroville Press – that is, the small letter press – was located in a small space in what is now the Pour Tous building in Aspiration. But we badly needed to expand. We then got a building in Fraternity, the place where you now find Mason & Co, the chocolate unit, and later also the building in Fraternity that is colloquially called ‘the Flying Saucer’ or ‘the Hamburger’. We employed more people, and started doing everything connected with printing: making hand-made paper, printing, screen printing, book binding and so on. We even had a laboratory where we made the plates, and a huge Repro camera for big films which was made for us by Lorenzo at Toujours Mieux (now called Aureka).”

“But by the end of the 1980s, we felt the need to have our own large press,” continues Claude. “We were ambitious; we wanted to print *L’Agenda de Mère*. Satprem, in those years, had a huge influence in Auroville. But where to get such a press? Our small letter press was not suitable for such a big work.”

“Micheline Etévenon, who at the request of Satprem had started the Institut de Recherches Évolutives in Paris, helped out. She purchased for us a second-hand Dominant offset machine from Czechoslovakia. At the time, India’s import duties were high. We didn’t have the money. But then the administrators of Auroville, Justice L.P. Nigam and Shri P.N. Ojha, helped out. After months of filing forms and going up and down to Chennai, they got us the duty exemption. Then, one day at 5 o’clock in the morning, a truck arrived with a huge crate. Our ‘baby’, the offset machine, had finally arrived.”

“Another problem was how to operate the press. We ourselves had little idea. Abha and I



From left: Jayalakshmi, Claude, Luisa and Christine

went to Bombay and met with J.R.D. Tata, who agreed to help. His Tata Press then trained two Aurovilians, Pascal and Marc-André, and by the time the machine arrived, the two trained printers were ready to start work. But our ambition to print *L’Agenda de Mère* in French went unfulfilled. Micheline and Satprem wanted it to be done as soon as possible, so it was printed in France.

“At the time there was another Press in Auroville, the Auro Press, run by Mr. Barun Tagore in the building where we are now. Barun was related to the Sri Aurobindo Society, and he became involved in the struggles between the Sri Aurobindo Society and the Aurovilians. There was a court case, which Auroville ultimately won. Barun vacated the building and we moved in.”

“I worked at the time in Pour Tous at Aspiration,” says Christine. “The Auro Press of Barun Tagore was next door, so I visited some times. I stopped working for Pour Tous in 1985 when the work on the Hindi *Agenda* started, and moved to the Press. Sir C.P.N. Singh, who later became Governor of Uttar Pradesh and who was a friend and the mentor of Dr. Kireet Joshi, had found us a highly qualified translator, a wonderful man.” “But as he was doing tantric pujas for a minimum of 7 hours day, the translation took years,” adds Claude, smiling. “And then the big job was to print the first three volumes of the Hindi version of *L’Agenda de Mère*.”

“After Aurelec, the Auroville computer company, had started operations, we bought a

computer with 8-inch floppy disc drives. One day, after two months of hard labour, the floppy failed. In despair we called Aurelec, who asked if we had a backup? For sure we hadn’t. The work was lost and we learned a hard lesson,” says Christine, laughing.

“At that time we worked with one of the largest presses in Chennai, Chandamama, which was well-known for publishing small children’s magazines in all the languages of India. They had a linotron, the ancestor of the typesetting. We would bring our 8-inch floppy, and they would create galleys, which we then had to proof. Serge had meanwhile created his own unit, Saraswati, and helped us doing the montage. If there was a mistake, for example when a wrong Hindi letter had been used, we would need to go back to Madras to retype that one letter, and then Serge would do the work of cutting out the wrong one and pasting in the right letter. But it earned us a pat on the back from Shri Narasimha Rao, who visited the Press and was very impressed that we were printing in Hindi.”

“By then we had also printed *The Aim of Life*, a book edited by Kireet Joshi, and, at his request, all the brochures of the International Youth Year held in Auroville. We were fully self-sustainable. At some point in time we employed almost 20 people. Kireet remained our patron in the years to come, during which we printed books such as *The Good Teacher* and *The Good Pupil* and around 30 monographs.”

“Over the years, our structure changed and some activities were split off. Papyrus became a separate unit dealing with paper; Lumière started screen printing; Auroville Press Publishers began selling books; and we opened the Wild Seagull bookshop. The Press was doing the design, printing and binding. All these units worked closely together.”

“By the end of the 1980s we started having labour problems,” says Claude. “One employee became ‘President of the Workers Union of Auroville Press’ and we entered a long period of endless discussions, ranging from demands for salary increase to the quality of the cookies served at tea time – the Marie biscuits we served were apparently indigestible: they called them ‘dog biscuits’. We talked and talked, and so did our advisers, Dilip Kapur and Meenakshi. All to no avail. One day, after an emotional outburst, they all wrote and submitted their resignations. This self-resignation meant that we did not need to pay them compensation but only outstanding salaries and gratuity. I took a loan, we paid them off, and we closed the unit for a few months. Afterwards we started again, this time on a much smaller scale.”

“But those were funny times,” says Christine, “and we lived with many tensions. For example, the very fact of buying a computer from Aurelec was a cause for conflict, as the management of Aurelec had refused to be taken over by the Government – they’d started a court case which they ultimately lost. Our interaction with them was seen as a betrayal by some.”

“And there were other tensions,” adds Claude. “There was a religious war going on between those who were closer to Satprem and

those who were more distant. Almost every evening there were emotional scenes in Aspiration Kitchen. If that had a consequence for the Press, it was that we did not get the order to print the English translation of the 13 volumes of *Mother’s Agenda*. To our regret, it was printed at the Thompson Press in Chennai.”

“Claude withdrew from the Press in 1991,” says Luisa. “Serge and I had just returned from a self-imposed exile in France – together with some other French Aurovilians we had left Auroville in 1988 – and we were invited to take over the Press in this building in Aspiration. It was a godsend. Olivier and Christian also came back. We started printing the books for Mira Aditi – the Indian outlet for *The Agenda* and Satprem’s books – such as his *The Adventure of Consciousness* in Hindi and others.”

“Sometimes we lost Auroville clients,” says Claude. “A major one was *Auroville Today*; the editors objected to Serge’s decision to only print what he approved of, which they

saw as censorship. Other Auroville units left for price reasons. Lumière even had to close after Maroma decided to terminate the silk-screening of their incense packets. Luckily, SAIIER and Savitri Bhavan and other units and individuals continue being staunch supporters of the Press. We have been publishing almost all of SAIIER’s publications, Savitri Bhavan’s Tamil and English newsletters and Shradhdhavan’s book series *The English of Savitri*. But there are quite a few Aurovilians and Auroville units who do not feel the need to support another Auroville unit. For example, not all Aurovilians who receive a grant from the Government of India to write and publish a book ask us for a quotation.”

“It is not because the quality of our work is lacking,” says Luisa. “When some time ago Marc-André visited Auroville – he had left Auroville many years ago to start working in one of the largest printing houses in France – he complimented us on the quality of the illustrated children’s books as ‘truly excellent’. Over the years, Auroville Press Publishers has been able to maintain those high standards of printing, such as in *Turning Points*, a coffee-table book by photographer Nadia Loury; a series of illustrated children’s books; a book on organic cultivation of cashews; the book about J.R.D. Tata by Frederick; and many others. And there are a few very interesting projects in the pipeline. We have also started doing screen printing.”

“But the future is uncertain,” says Christine. “Before COVID, we were doing somehow OK. But since the pandemic, it has been difficult. We don’t know how long we can survive. In Chennai, two major printing presses closed down as they could not compete with Chinese imports. And of course, neither can we.”

“We came with a spirit of service, not to do business,” says Luisa. “Auroville Press is a means for our karma yoga, but we will never work 24/7 in order to be competitive. Moreover, except for Jaya, we all are at a period of our lives where we still are active but no longer have the drive ‘to go for it’. All of us are ready to do something else. For the Press to become commercially viable, it will need a massive capital influx and a lot of fresh young energy.”

“Auroville Press will continue in the niche market of special products, such as illustrated children’s books,” says Jaya, who is being groomed to manage the Press in the future. “I expect that the sales in our bookshop will pick up again now that India has re-opened its borders. For foreign visitors are very interested in the publications we sell, most of which are on spirituality, on integral yoga, on Indian culture, and on the many aspects of Auroville, including writings by Auroville authors. We also want to increase our online sales through Amazon and Auroville.com. So I am not pessimistic about the future of the Press. We have an excellent team, we function as a family and each one has been trained for many years to look for perfection in all that they do. Usually people working with us appreciate this atmosphere and want to come back to us for their next work.”



A selection of the publications printed by Auroville Press

In conversation with Carel

Infinite possibilities

The third Auroville Art Camp took place on March 12-19 and the subsequent week-long exhibition in the Tibetan Pavilion allowed the community to witness some of the fruits of the artists' immersion in the theme 'Every finite is an infinite'. This year twenty participants, eleven artists selected from all over India and nine artists from Auroville, including two art students, spent a week creating and working alongside each other exploring this theme.

This year was different from the previous two camps in that mixed media artists and a sculptor participated: previously it had only been painters. Consequently, there were sculptures, mixed media collages and three dimensional pieces alongside the paintings. The organisers also invited a sculptor for the first time, who researched working with clay during the week.

The organisers, Claire and Hervé, observed that "a diversity of practices brought a lot of exchanges, learning and experimentation." As an example, Nele who had participated previously as a painter but who is also creating art installations and sculptures, added metalwork to her existing plexiglass art due to the inspiration and presence of Ami Patel of Mumbai, who works with metal foils.

One of the purposes of the Art Camp has been to bridge Auroville and India. This year Auroville artists Pujasree, Julie, Charles and Claire took part in the Auroville art camp for the first time, supporting them in this work. The invited Indian artists felt "immediately in connection with the atmosphere and spirit of Auroville, and the artists felt very connected with each other", noted Claire and Herve, observing that all week they worked alongside one another, in and around the Tibetan Pavilion. Ami Patel, a participating artist from Mumbai, told one of the organisers that "the



Auroville earth galaxy by Birgitta
Bark print and mixed media on canvas

Auroville art camp team and this place are giving so much, we want to give back". "Indeed, many of the artists gave their best, working with so much sincerity and dedication, even working at night" noticed Claire.

The Art Camp is a good example of Auroville goodwill and collaboration. Aurovilians contributed in many ways before and during the camp, and Auroville Papers offered a papermaking workshop to all of the participants. At a time of global and local tension, to work on the theme of 'Every finite is an infinite' opened artists anew to a sense of possibility.

Peter

visit <https://aurovilleartcamp.wordpress.com>



Auroville, by Pavan Kavittkar
Water colours on archival paper



Renewed pathway: "The infinite glory" by Ami Patel
mixed media with brass, copper and found materials

IN MEMORIAM

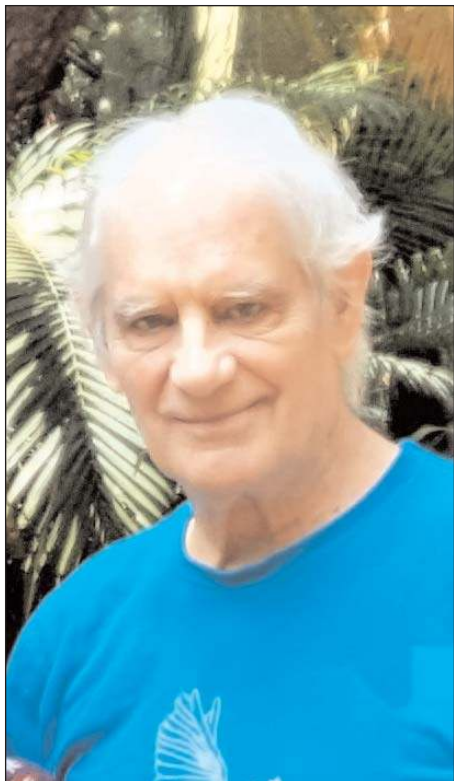
Bryan Walton

Bryan Walton, one of Auroville's early pioneers, left his body on March 8 in Wisconsin, USA at the age of 80.

Bryan left the USA in the mid-sixties for India in search for a better life, and eventually came to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in June 1971. Along with his then partner, Sally, he had several meetings with the Mother who approved of their idea to start a handicraft community which she named 'Fraternity' as village development work near Kulapalayam. Although he had no experience in either crafts or business, Bryan felt a deep 'yes', and started the Fraternity project in February 1972, with many other Aurovilians and his future wife, Fanou, joining him over the years.

The community flourished in subsequent years. With the help of Poppo, the original keet sheds over time morphed into permanent handicraft buildings, a kindergarten for workers' and village children, and an overhead tank for fresh water. The proceeds from the production of handloom and other craft products supported the training of local village women and youth, a water system for part of Kulapalayam, and a kindergarten with daily lunch, medical care and lessons in Tamil. Bryan's extensive photographic documentation of the progress and life in Auroville at the time forms a precious addition to Auroville's archives.

Pressured by the challenging circumstances Auroville went through in those years, Bryan and Fanou left Auroville in 1980 with their two very young children, Auromarichi (Christian) and Aurelia,



for the USA, where they lived in rural Spring Green, Wisconsin. With another couple, they imported art and craft products from Auroville and other parts of Asia, and found markets through their retail store, from where they would always be of generous help to Auroville. Bryan also returned to his old skills and developed a treasure of colourful and highly artistic audio-visual presentations, quietly narrated by himself, based on his wide range of interests. These were pieced together from his research into Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's works, Integral Yoga, other inspiring world views, art works, books, articles, pictures etc. During his last year he was able to upload most of them as a fine gift to Auroville – a complete list with links will be available on the Auroville website.

Bryan was also an active member of the Board of Auroville International USA, and served on the Board of the Auroville International Association from 2007, where his calm participation, dry humour and hands-on knowledge of life in Auroville was esteemed.

Since mid-2021 Bryan had been coping with a returning, aggressive cancer which eventually led him to resort to two different sorts of chemotherapy. When these Plans A and B did not work for him, Bryan decided to switch to Plan M: "For me, no fear of the Great Adventure of the Spirit with Her, the Mother is with me, she's with us all. Since 22 or so coming first back from India, I was ok with the ultimate adventure."

An interview with Bryan and Fanou by Francis can be seen at <https://vimeo.com/529655760>

Padma Shri for Tara Jauhar



The President of India awarded the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest civilian award, to Ms. Tara Jauhar at the Rashtrapati Bhavan on March, 21st, 2022, for her work in literature and education, in particular in propagating the teachings of Sri Aurobindo. Tara Jauhar, in her own words, "grew up with The Mother" in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry before taking up the management of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, Delhi Branch and The Mother's International School in New Delhi. Her correspondence with The Mother was published by her as "Growing up with The Mother".

Address of Shri R.N. Ravi, Chairman of the Governing Board

In one of the zoom seminars organised during the 'Auroville festival', the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation and Honourable Governor of Tamil Nadu, R. N. Ravi, gave a speech in which he cited the role of the Government of India as that of a catalyst in the experiment which is yet to realise Auroville's vision half a century down the line. The Auroville Foundation Act was mentioned as a Government intervention that was a consequence of the community being trapped in desires and egos which, according to the Chairman, is also reflected in the current dissonance in the community. The Chairman stated that even though the evolution of consciousness itself cannot be done by the Government, they "have to and will do the physical aspect of it, because Mother had given the design of what the township should be like."

Governing Board meeting

The minutes of the 58th meeting of the Governing Board held on January 18th were shared with the community. Amongst other things, the Board decided to establish an Organisation and Governance Committee to look into the organisation, governance and related matters of Auroville. The Board also noted the ongoing Dreamweaving process, but stated that "Ongoing works, including the Crown Road will remain unaffected" and that the outcome of the process will be an input for the Auroville Town Development Council to decide upon.

Prioritization of topics for RAD's

Confronted with many requests for various decisions of the Residents' Assembly, the Auroville Council organized a poll to help it and the Residents' Assembly Service determine which topics for Residents' Assembly Decisions (RADs) the community felt to be the most important at this moment in time. The poll result showed the top three topics for RADs, in order of priority, as (1) No confidence in the Working Committee given its failure to 'assist' and 'represent' the Residents' Assembly as stated in their mandate, and a call for the selection of a new Working Committee; (2) the membership of the Auroville Town Development Council (ATDC - this questions the legitimacy of the present ATDC constituted by the Secretary, via an office order in July 2021, as the members were not selected by the Residents Assembly as is statutorily mandated; and (3) approval of the Internal Exit policy – the last draft version, incorporating two rounds of feedback, was presented by the Exit Policy Task Force in a General Meeting in March 2020, and provides a proposed internal framework for the application and implementation of the Auroville Foundation (Admission and termination of Persons in the register of residents) Regulations, 2020 which came into force on April 4th, 2020.

Delay in selecting new working group members

The Auroville Council has informed the community that although an RAD on a new process to select members of the Working Committee, the Auroville Council, the Auroville Town Development Council, the Funds and Assets Management Committee and the Entry Board will be concluded before the above mentioned RADs on the Working Committee and the ATDC membership, the selection process itself will be held afterwards. The selection process for new members is therefore delayed and will be held at the earliest by the end of May. This means that the terms of office of outgoing members are extended until new members have been appointed.

New research publications on Auroville

"Flexible Institutionalisation in Auroville: A Prefigurative Alternative to Development" by Suryamayi Clarence-Smith and Lara Monticelli was published in a special issue of the magazine *Sustainability Science*. The article can be accessed at <https://aurorepo.in/id/eprint/232>

"Lessons from Utopia: Reflections on Peak Transformative Experiences in a University Studio in Auroville, India" by Bem Le Hunte, Katie Ross, Suryamayi Clarence-Smith & Aditi Rosegger. Published in February 2022 as a chapter of the Palgrave Handbook of Learning for Transformation. The article can be accessed at <https://aurorepo.in/id/eprint/230/>

Finding inner acceptance: a profile of Anandi Zhang

Since joining Auroville in 2016, Anandi Zhang has taken up various work in the community. But she feels the most important work is that which she is doing upon herself.

Auroville Today: Where were you born?

I was born in south-west China in a place called Chongqing. Chong means ‘double’, qing means ‘celebration’, so my hometown means ‘double celebration’. I took it as some kind of spiritual symbolism. I was born on a farm and my parents were farmers. However, they were tired of farming because it was hard and not economically sustainable, so they motivated me by saying if I didn’t study well, I would end up being a farmer, too.

I was born after the Cultural Revolution but my parents and grandparents suffered greatly during it as there was drought and famine. At one time they had nothing to eat except the bark of trees and a kind of soil which filled the stomach, but which made people sick.

So for several generations there was a lot of suffering, but then the whole economic landscape changed, and people indulged themselves in a lot of things as a kind of psychological compensation.

How were you educated?

I was educated in the public school system and did very well in my studies. From middle school onwards, English is mandatory for all students, and as I was fortunate to have teachers who have a passion for English, I developed an interest in it, and chose English as my major. I graduated when I was 18.

Then I started to teach English to students in public schools. In some ways, it is very much like the Indian school system because there are very frequent exams and the teachers would drill the information into the brains of the students. The main subjects are Chinese, English, maths, physics and chemistry. We ignored sports, music, and other arts because the whole focus was to do better in exams to reach the next level of education. So it was not at all an integral education.

We also had large classes: at one time, I was teaching over 100 students in one class! Clearly, we didn’t have the patience or time to cater to the psychological needs of individual students. It was mass production.

However, over the past two or three decades, classical, artistic, natural, home-schooling and other alternative ways of education have sprouted and grown very much. Many more options are now available and more conscious ways of bringing up a child are being tried out.

Was there any form of political indoctrination?

We had a flag raising ceremony in the school, and for some it was an occasion to express patriotism, but for many it was simply a form. There was some education to cultivate certain virtues and to love the country, but this was not done in a very experiential, interactive way.

Why did you stop teaching?

For a number of different reasons. I realised I was killing my own creativity, I was finding no joy in the teaching and I felt I was wasting my students’ time. Also, I had this inner questioning about life, I was always searching for the truth, and I felt I needed a bigger perspective on life than the kind teaching was giving me. I moved to Beijing in 2006 and joined a translation company which won the bid to provide the translation service for the 2008 the Olympic Games. We were translating from English into Chinese and vice versa for clients in many different fields, and we had to do it in a very professional way. It was a very good training for me.

During this period I felt I was opening up more and more, my former personality was cracking open. I was reading many books about spirituality and the New Age movement by authors like Eckhart Tolle and J.K. Krishnamurti. I was also reading classic works not only from China but also from ancient Egypt and Greece. (China is quite open in this respect: translation is a big industry.) I’ve always liked books because they have been an opening for me to a whole universe of different cultures over millennia.

After some time, I started to freelance with my translation work, which gave me full freedom in terms of time and place. I could do my work from virtually anywhere in the world where there was Internet, and I could travel and get to know new people at the same time. I started travelling within China, and then in Bali, Thailand and South Africa. It was a transformative experience. When I visited different cultures and spiritual centres, I realised there’s a whole dimension, a whole way of living, that I didn’t know about and that is not at all written about in the mainstream media.

At one point I felt ready for travelling wider in the world and chose India as the first country to begin.

When did Auroville come into the picture?

I landed in Mumbai because I already had a contact with an Indian friend, and stayed with his family for half a month. They had a big picture of Ramana Maharshi on the wall as his whole family was devotees. I felt a strong connection with this picture, and when they saw that, they told me I should go to Ramana’s ashram in Tiruvannamalai. I stayed in the ashram for one week and during that time I met the nephew of Ramana Maharshi. I also attended the chanting, meditation, and climbed the mountain. One day I went into the library and a title ‘came’ to me; it was a biography of The Mother. That’s when I first read about the Mother and Auroville.

My first feeling was how ignorant I had been that I had not known about Auroville, because the dream of human unity has always been inside me, and this experiment had already been going on for over 40 years. Now, I said, I must go there.

It was 2014. I stayed in Center Guest House for one week before I had to go back to China. Next year I came back again and started to volunteer at Matrimandir. In 2016 I came back to start the entry process and joined in 2017. I haven’t left since because I knew this was a very important step in my life, a great turning point – basically I’m leaving everything behind in choosing this – and I wanted to experience it to the full.

What have you been doing since joining?

When I came back, I did the Newcomer programme and then joined the Aspiration team which runs these programmes. I also volunteered at Discipline Farm and in the Botanical Gardens.

You were returning to your farming roots?

Exactly. With my farming background I had developing green fingers, and wherever I travelled I had a deep connection with the land. When I was growing up, I didn’t like my background as a farmer’s daughter. I despised it because I felt it was low status. Later on, I found it was necessary to go back to my roots because after spending years in big cities I felt I was lacking something. Living in high-rise



Anandi Zhang

buildings I had no connection with the soil, the land, and my health was deteriorating.

Working in the Aspiration team also opened me up a lot because I learned the basics of organization and how to receive Newcomers. However, although I already had an opening to different cultures, one part of me was still quite introverted. I had a need to express myself, but however much I tried, I could not express the totality of what wanted to be expressed.

So I tried other forms of expression, like poetry and body movement. Poetry has always been in me: at one point it was a lifesaver. In my childhood, on my way to and from school, I would hop and sing about how I felt and what I saw at that moment.

Last year when there was lockdown I started to read *Savitri* and the sense of poetry came back to me. I had impressions or inspirations which I put into words [see box].

One day I went to Pitanga Cultural Centre. It was early morning and the sun was shining through the fine hair roots of the Banyan tree. I felt totally inspired and decided it would be good if we Aurovilians could greet each other every morning in a special way in this City of Dawn.

So I started putting little poems on Auronet as my way of saying ‘Good morning, Auroville’.

For some time I was also doing therapy in Quiet Healing Centre. I was tapping energetic points on peoples’ bodies to soothe them and heal deep wounds. I’ve also been working in the kindergartens and for some time with the Residents Assembly Service.

Right now I’m doing freelancing translation again. I have been coordinating a multilingual translation of Sri Aurobindo’s five dreams, and I’m working with a scholar in China checking the digital version of the sixteen volumes of Hu Hsu’s collected works. Hu Hsu was a great scholar who spent 27 years in the Ashram and translated a number of Sri Aurobindo’s and Mother’s works into Chinese, and these are the works we are starting with. I’ve also made a compilation of what Sri Aurobindo and Mother said about

Chinese wisdom, and this will be published soon.

Have you had to overcome any particular challenges in Auroville?

In the first few years I cried a lot! In recent years I had become very sensitive to the kind of exchanges that happen on the energetic level, and I felt a certain lack of acceptance from some people. I was born a girl and my parents wanted a boy, so I never felt I was accepted by them for who I am. Later on in Auroville, I felt this trauma coming up again because some people had certain views about China, and they stereotyped me even before getting to know me.

Two or three years ago, after going through a major traumatic experience, I felt perhaps it’s my soul that wants to go through these conflicts because I needed a lot of healing. And I asked myself, can I grow in a more authentic way without having to engage in confrontation with others? Can I just deal with it silently?

I have been quite introspective since childhood. So reading Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, along with writing poetry, helped me deal with this. I told myself that if I wanted to change the community or the perception of others, that is a longer project. Our biggest contribution to the community is actually our inner work. So now I feel a responsibility to heal myself, to find inner acceptance. Even if the whole world doesn’t accept me, I need to accept myself.

For years I have struggled to break free of my family and the social roles I have been assigned, and I really cherish where I am now. Before, when I didn’t feel I’d been fully accepted in my family, in my society, or in Auroville, I would confront people or I would withdraw into my own world. They were fight or flight reactions. It’s taken me a long time to recognise this and to find another way of dealing with it. I also made myself a promise that however bad I feel about how another person is treating me, I will see their beauty, their merits, shining through them and find something worth learning from them.

If we can integrate what we have rejected, or escaped from, in our own history, our own cultural background, we become a vaster version of ourselves, and this allows us to work with people very different from ourselves. In fact, if one is following Sri Aurobindo and Mother one cannot remain small any more because they are vast. They tried to share their experience with us, but they leave a vast openness for each of us to explore in our own way. I feel this is true love.

Nevertheless, at one time I felt very challenged and I was wondering if I should stay in Auroville. I wanted to find out why I was here, so I went to the Ashram and stayed in Golconde for one week. While there, I met people who have been following Sri Aurobindo and The Mother for a long, long time and they had a wonderful sense of calm and sweetness. So I felt this was something I wanted to bring to my life in Auroville.

I also sat in the Garden of Existence at Matrimandir for some time until the sense of fundamental existence, of fundamental acceptance, came to me. These are moments when, feeling challenged, I felt saved by the Grace, by the hand which is really upholding everything.

So now, when I look at our difficulties as a community, I have a different stance. I see it has its own process which is being worked out, and everyone is playing different roles and is driven by different energies, and every moment there can be a new way of looking at things.

In fact, I see what is happening now as a great spiritual opportunity. If we can take all the past and present traumas and put them into the furnace, then the real transformation can happen. Ultimately, I have a firm belief and great hope for the future of Auroville because we carry that Dream in ourselves.

From an interview by Alan

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