

# Auroville Today

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Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

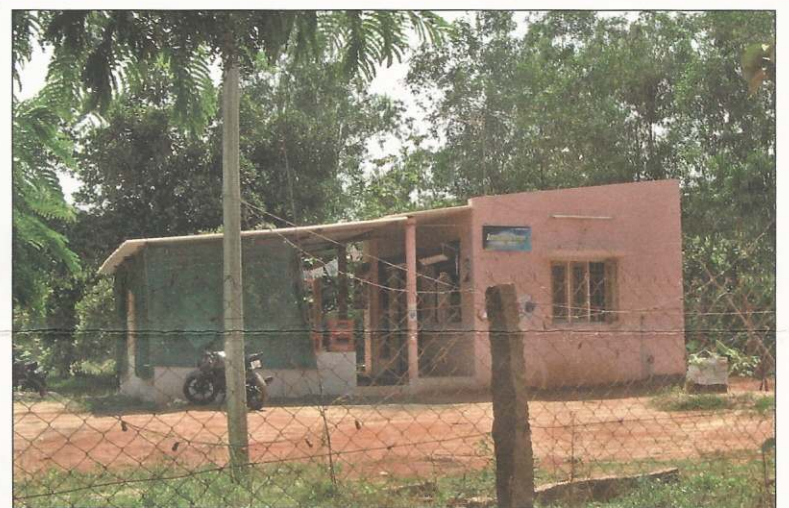
## Acres for Auroville - a fundraising campaign

Normally, in our summer double issue we focus on lighter topics. However, these are not normal times, which is why we make no excuse for presenting in this issue four big challenges confronting Auroville today - the urgent need, firstly, to acquire land; secondly, to support our farmers by eating more locally-grown food; thirdly, to take urgent action to deal with rapidly depleting water aquifers; and, last but not least, to come up with a more effective governance system for our community.

All these issues are interconnected. Control of the land, good governance, healthy food, and water conservation are all indispensable elements of any attempt at sustainable living. They are also mutually-reinforcing; take one away and the rest are weakened. This is why, as individuals and as a community, we urgently need to develop spatial or systemic thinking, a sense of how the parts fit together and reinforce each other, rather than being too tightly focussed on separate aspects of our development.

That focus had its utility in the early years when there were far fewer of us, we were much more scattered, and energy had to be narrowly directed upon survival. Today, we are a much more varied and interconnected society and, rather than sheer survival, it is complexity - reflected in the differing attitudes we hold and in the many different demands upon the community's time and energy - which we have to learn how to manage elegantly and efficiently.

For differences, whether of ideas, cultural attitudes or approaches to development, can be either a source of conflict or an opportunity for richer, more integral solutions.



Three developments on privately-owned land in the Master Plan Area. Top: Aroma Gardens, a real estate development; bottom left: Dinesh restaurant on the Certitude-Matrimandir road, which is expanding; below right: Auro Cool Corner, another restaurant on the same road.

The goal of Acres for Auroville is to secure, consolidate, and protect the land in the Matrimandir and International Zone areas. The campaign is a joint effort of Auroville International France with Lands for Auroville Unified (LFAU) in coordination with the LCC (Land Coordination Committee). Its core team members - Mandakini, Francine and Nadia from AVI France, and Aryadeep and Sigrid from LFAU - have prepared Acres for Auroville as their offering of love and loyalty for Auroville and the Mother, and as a united, collective gift for Auroville's 50th birthday in 2018.

"Auroville is a gift of the Divine to the world," says Friederike, Chairperson of Auroville International. "On February 28, 2018, the City of Dawn will celebrate its 50th anniversary. AVI France, in cooperation with LFAU, has started this great campaign to give back a gift to the Divine - the full protection and consolidation of Auroville's heart and centre."

In recent months, private developments in the planned Auroville Township area, such as the creation of Auropark [see Auroville Today, September 2013], have called attention to the urgent need to secure and consolidate the land in Auroville's city area. Dr. Karan Singh's letter and the Auroville Foundation's call to drastically accelerate the land securing process, the results of the Land Status Study Group (LSSG) with their conclusion that land acquisition must become a top priority, and the encroachments on International

May 1970.  
The lands for Auroville  
are to be bought and  
can be bought.  
The money is needed  
will you help?  
J.

Zone land near the site of the future Language Laboratory and the Unity Pavilion, all serve to highlight the need for a fresh momentum and creative solution to tackle the task.

"The land in Auroville's centre is in danger," says Mandakini, a Friend of Auroville who first came to the City of Dawn in 1980, and who also launched last year's successful fundraiser for Arogya, Auroville's new Institute for Integral Health. "Like many people, I thought we still had all the time in the world to finish consolidating.

Then I saw Carel's article in Auroville Today with the photos of Auropark, and I woke up! I decided to do everything in my power to prevent future Auroparks in the Matrimandir area before it's too late. We must secure the land before outside developers act first. If not, it will be lost to Auroville forever. And the Mother explicitly said the consecrated area of the Matrimandir must be protected. How can we consider ourselves faithful to the Mother and her City of Dawn, and allow this danger to continue?"

Aryadeep, chief coordinator of LFAU, has been a devoted activist for and exponent of Auroville's territorial integrity since his first publication in 1994. "The land base is essential for Auroville to manifest her full possibilities," he says, "and for her to develop cohesively and harmoniously." And he adds that the Mother made a direct and pointed appeal for Auroville's land "of a kind she didn't make for any other work or creation she undertook, including the Matrimandir on which She laid unique stress by calling it the 'soul of Auroville'."

"We're not on a deserted plateau anymore," says Sigrid, who is a committed land activist. "Pondicherry is exploding and the same kind of multi-story apartment blocks I saw near the Chennai airport are now shooting up all around Pondy, and all in this past year! The risk for Auroville is that it becomes just a little oasis within Pondicherry city. How soon and how much of an oasis, even as a centre of integral yoga, depends on us!

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# Acres for Auroville – a fund-raising campaign

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"We needed a professional website to be an effective and dynamic information channel. After questioning for so many years why there was so little input into fundraising for land purchase, I decided to finally sit with Aryadeep, find people, and make a start." Together, Aryadeep and Sigrid developed the Collaboration for Auroville Area Protection (COLAAP) website, with initial IT support from Sathish. ([www.colaap.org](http://www.colaap.org))

Securing and consolidating Auroville's material base is a complex task. Land is needed in the centre, in all the Crown Road area, in the outer circle, and in the Green Belt. Land prices are now astronomical compared to those in 1997. Despite the price, land purchase is the surest and simplest way to meet the urgent need. Land exchange is another crucial strategy, one which many Aurovilians support and certain landowners prefer. For some Aurovilians, selling outlying lands is the only solution, while this approach is hotly contested by others.

"The mission of the Land Task Force for securing all Master Plan land is critical," says Mandakini. "But, until their job is completed, the land is in danger. One thing we can do right now is to acquire more acres before they are permanently lost to Auroville. About 10% of the Matrimandir and International Zone areas are still needed to achieve their consolidation and protection. Our objective is to do just that by fundraising for the urgently needed donations."

The Acres for Auroville land fundraiser aims at realizing three objectives:

(1) Acquiring the maximum number of plots of land in the area around the Matrimandir and in or around the International Zone to protect and consolidate them.

(2) Raising awareness of the urgent need for everyone to act in defense of Auroville's territorial integrity.

(3) Creating a sense of unity, enthusiasm, and determination to reach these goals which support our collective aspiration and purpose.

As a consecrated offering, Acres for Auroville will fundraise most intensively in the months of August, November, February, and April – the four months with spiritually-significant anniversary dates in the lives of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. "Acres for Auroville unites three powerful symbols – the Mother's Symbol, the Earth, and the anniversary dates," says Francine, a long-time member of AVI's International Board. "May the force of these symbols eradicate all the resistances, so we can complete the puzzle of Auroville land!"

Acres for Auroville continues a tradition of dynamic action by committed Aurovilians and members of Auroville International. There was Paul's highly successful "Million Dollar Campaign" in collaboration with Aryadeep, Guy, and all the AVI centres. And there was Guy's impassioned "House on Fire!" appeal to Aurovilians some years ago. "The physical integrity of Auroville is at risk," he said then. "The future manifestation of the Auroville Township, as envisaged by the Mother, is under threat. Therefore, the first necessity for us is to be together and join hands to take up this major challenge in front of us.

## Donations for Acres for Auroville

Donations for Acres for Auroville can be made:

### From outside India:

#### 1. By cheque:

Please send your check made payable to "Auroville Unity Fund" to:  
Auroville Unity Fund  
Town Hall, 605101 Auroville, TN, India

#### 2. By direct transfer to:

Auroville Unity Fund Account # 10237876508  
State Bank of India – Auroville Township  
Branch Code – SBIN0003160  
Swift Code – SBININBB474

#### 3. On-line using the Auroville Donation Gateway at

[www.auroville.com/donations](http://www.auroville.com/donations).

#### 4. Via the Auroville International Centre in your country, to avail of possible tax exemption. For the addresses see the subscription box on page 12. Please consult the COLAAP website ([www.colaap.org](http://www.colaap.org)) and the Auroville International website ([www.auroville-international.com](http://www.auroville-international.com)) for more information.

### From inside India:

Direct transfer to Auroville Unity Fund, account # 10237876031  
State Bank of India – Auroville Township.

IFS Code – SBIN0003160

Donations for Lands for Auroville Unified (LFAU) are 100 % tax exempted under section 35.1.iii of the Income Tax Act.

This is not the responsibility of a few working groups or a small team of people. This is the responsibility of all of us, of each member of the community!"

In fact, for Sigrid "every Aurovillian and friend of Auroville is a potential fundraiser! There is also a global family out there, people who do care about Auroville, who are connected to it and its vision. Each person can contribute, not only financially, but by communicating – by informing all their friends and their network of contacts. Every effort, big or small, counts! As a

homeopath, I look for the little input that creates the biggest effect."

"This is the opportunity for a collective action that people scattered all over the world can unite on. Through it, they can stay connected to Auroville, the Mother, and Sri Aurobindo," says Francine. "It's another diaspora, and another Promised Land!" Nadia adds: "So many people have been waiting for the moment when they can do something concrete to protect Auroville's centre. Acres for Auroville is the opportunity, something we can all unite around." And for Mandakini,

"I have been moved by a deep and continuous inner feeling that the time to act is now. Previous campaigns have shown us that when we unite our aspiration, and our determination and energy in the right spirit, then the Help comes."

The formal kick-off for the campaign is August 15th. Donations can be made on the anniversary dates or at any time, starting now, to the campaign's account number (240001) or via the new dedicated button on the Auroville Donation Gateway. All donations will be held in trust for the exclusive acquisition of plots in the Matrimandir area and in or around the International Zone. Confidential access codes will permit donors to monitor our collective success and track the use of their donations. The campaign's Success Barometer – in the form of the Mother's Symbol – will be posted on the COLAAP website to show progress.

Donors will receive an Acres for Auroville Land Contribution Certificate, designed by Auroville artist Emanuele. "This is my offering to the Mother for the campaign", he says. "Auroville's land consolidation is like a jigsaw puzzle, with lots of pieces still missing. Each person who contributes to the campaign brings a needed piece." Donors will also receive a packet of Auroville earth, a much appreciated gift sent in previous land fundraising campaigns.

Please join us when the Acres for Auroville campaign kicks off on August 15th

Auroville needs everyone's heartfelt energy, determination, and support!

Mandakini and the campaign team

## Dr. Karan Singh worried about slow pace of land acquisition

The Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Karan Singh, in two open letters to the Aurovilians, communicated the Board's concern about the slow progress of land purchase.

New Delhi, December 5, 2013

Dear Aurovilians,

I had occasion to review the progress of land consolidation with the Auroville Working Groups dealing with the issue of land on 8th November, 2013. I was dismayed to learn that since 1st April, 2013, Auroville has managed to secure only about 5 acres of land. The progress in land consolidation has been very slow for many years now.

The Board finds the progress highly unsatisfactory. The City envisaged by the Mother is under serious threat from speculative developers buying large tracts of land in the neighbourhood. Land prices have risen exponentially, making it difficult for Auroville to raise the resources required to purchase all the remaining lands in the City and the Green Belt. While the Government of India has been increasing financial support to Auroville through Plan Grants, we cannot expect funds from the Government of India to purchase lands. In the present situation, Auroville has no option but to raise resources through sale/lease of lands outside the Master Plan Area. It is incomprehensible to me and my colleagues in the Board as to why the possessive attitude of a few residents refusing to move from their present location should block all progress in land consolidation. Residents need to remind themselves that they have been chosen especially for building the City that the Mother wanted, "with no private property". It is also clearly not acceptable that even preliminary talks

with the Mailam Swamy who owns a large tract of land in the Green Belt are being blocked. The Governing Board has, therefore, authorised the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation to have exploratory talks with the Swamy.

I call upon all residents to understand the seriousness of the issue and close ranks in a sincere effort to secure lands in the city area by 31st March, 2015. We also need to evolve a clear strategy for protecting the Green Belt through acquisition/exchange of critical lands to control access.

Yours sincerely,  
Karan Singh

Extract from a letter of May 7, 2014

....  
The second matter which, as you know, has been weighing on my mind is the whole question of land acquisition by purchase or exchange. I do not see any major breakthrough yet in this area, and every month that is lost means that the price of land is rising and the dangers of commercial interest intruding into Auroville steadily growing. I am unable to understand why the community is not taking this matter up with the seriousness that it deserves. In the final analysis, if we do not get the land we will not be able to build the city.

....  
Warm regards and best wishes to you all,  
Karan Singh

## ABOUT AUROVILLE TODAY

## Auroville Today goes digital

After 300 issues and 25 ½ years of existence, Auroville Today will add a digital edition to its print edition.

Auroville's web designers are working hard to make Auroville Today available on tablets and mobile phones.

From August 1 this year, the website [www.auroville.org/avtoday](http://www.auroville.org/avtoday) will be operational. Subscriptions and subscription renewals can then be made on-line for receiving Auroville Today in a print edition (with free digital), or a digital edition only.

Both print and digital subscribers will enjoy full digital access.

Present subscribers will continue receiving their hard copy for the remaining duration of their subscription. To add a digital version to your present subscription, please visit [www.auroville.org/avtoday](http://www.auroville.org/avtoday).

New subscription rates for 12 monthly issues:

Print + digital edition: India Rs. 600; other countries Rs 3,000 equivalent  
Digital only editions: India Rs 420; other countries Rs 2,100 equivalent.

For subscription questions please email us at [avtoday@auroville.org.in](mailto:avtoday@auroville.org.in)





# A new way to select the Working Committee and Council

The selection of the Working Committee and Auroville Council has always been a difficult process, and this time is no different. In January the residents were asked to vote on a so-called Participatory Selection Process, but as the required quorum of 10% of the number of residents (180 people) was not reached, with only 144 people voting, no decision was taken. As a consequence, the term of office of the existing group members was extended.

The issue was once again brought to the Residents' Assembly on March 29 and 31, 2014. This time the residents were asked to vote for one out of four possible selection processes. They were:

(1) "Intuitive intelligence". In this process, each resident proposes 1-3 residents which they feel have "intuitive intelligence" and belong to a "true hierarchy based on each one's power of consciousness". The names of those that accept their nomination are then published in the News and Notes for a two-week feedback period. The Working Committee and the Auroville Council then create a Selection Committee from the nominations, taking the community's feedback into consideration. This Selection Committee chooses the next Working Committee and Auroville Council.

(2) "Participatory". Residents interested in being considered for the Working Committee or Council express their willingness (e.g. nominate themselves) to perform any of the

functions listed for the new Working Committee or Auroville Council: Coordinator, Facilitator, Resource Person or Listener. Residents interested attend a facilitated three-day process. The final selection will be an outcome of the three-day process, using tools supplied by the facilitators.

(3) "Representative". In this process a Selection Committee is created (minimum 16 members), composed of one member of each Working Committee and Council (present and past) and one member of each present mandated working group. No member of the previous Selection Committee may be present in this Selection Committee. This Selection Committee chooses the next Working Committee and Auroville Council.

(4) The earlier used selection process. In this process a Selection Committee is created, composed of one member of each previous Working Committee; one member of each previous Auroville Council; and two members of the previous Selection Committees. This Selection Committee chooses the next Working Committee and Auroville Council.

This time 318 people (18% of the adult residents) voted, of which 203 residents were in favour of the Participatory selection process.

Auroville Today talked to Jaya, Pashi, Bertrand, Manohar and Dominique, five of the Study Group members who had conceived the Participatory Selection process. We also publish the result of the General Meeting of May 28th, as well as the views of Ashatit and Alan.

**Auroville Today:** You have initiated a new method for choosing the Working Committee and Council. Why?

**Jaya:** It all started in the year 2011, when the community requested that a new selection process for Auroville's working groups should be explored because during the selection of the previous Working Committee and Council there had been heavy lobbying for positions, and nobody wanted this to happen again. So an organization study group was constituted in which anybody could participate. We drew up a selection process for L'Avenir which brought in the element of the twelve qualities specified by The Mother. But actually the outcome was not much different from what had happened before. So when we were asked to look at how to choose the Working Committee and Council it became clear we had to come up with something new.

Meanwhile our original mandate had expanded because the feedback we received was that the selection process cannot be changed without changing the larger organization.

**Pashi:** We wanted to change the mindset, to get back to our core values, because no organization in itself is bad. It is the honesty and integrity of the people who operate in the system that result in either a good or a bad outcome. What came out was an attempt to experiment with a new way of thinking where we emphasize transparency and also try to include more and more people, while giving them a base of values.

**Jaya:** There were various threads to our new proposal. The community was asking for transparency, participation and communication, and Chandresh had proposed changing the functioning of these two groups. These factors were the starting point. Then Anny, a trained facilitator, came to observe our study group. She told us we had to stop looking, as a first step, for solutions. Rather, we had to find agreement on the values we wanted to encourage; then we needed to look at all the relevant data concerning the present situation, and only then should we turn to solutions which, anyway, would emerge naturally.

This had a very strong impact on us. We wondered which values we should use and came up with the idea of using the twelve qualities of the Mother's symbol. A lot of research went into how to use these values. Then Jean-Francois Noubel offered his workshops on collective intelligence. He observed that while many people in Auroville were very frustrated with our present society because many people were already at a different level, it was possible to shift the general level of our society upwards. Then Monica Sharma came and offered her workshops which gave us the tools to make this shift. So all these things came together in our selection proposal and in the way we handled the three-day selection process.

**Bertrand:** Though the members of the study group could be considered as the core team, numerous other people came in and helped at different times to make the process possible.

**Let's clarify the process. Aurovilians were invited to put themselves forward for the Working Committee or Council, and they were asked to specify which of one or more functions – coordinator, facilitator, resource person or silent listener – they were putting themselves forward for. You then had a list of names which were published. Finally, you required all the applicants to attend a three-day process culminating in the selection of a Working Committee and Council.**

**Dominique:** There were about 80 applicants, and 51 applicants showed up for the three-day process.



from left: Manohar, Bertrand, Dominique, Tine, Jaya and Pashi

**Pashi:** Actually, while we started with 51, some people dropped out for one reason or another. On the second day we had 48 and on the third day we had 45. So the actual selection process was handled by these 45 people on the third day.

**What happened during the three-day process?**

**Dominique:** The framework was very simple. The first day was a process of self-discovery based upon the 12 qualities; on the second day the emphasis was upon the jobs which had to be achieved; and on the third day the whole group worked together to make the selection. The idea was that by the third day everybody would be able to assess what each other could do.

**Bertrand:** The aim of the three days was to create an atmosphere conducive to bringing people closer to their higher self. Then people could recognize in each other the necessary qualities and nominate each other for positions in these groups.

**Jaya:** In order to do this, there were different exercises. On the first morning we focused on the 12 qualities in small groups of six, and in the afternoon some Aurovilians who had been working with Monica Sharma came in and focused on the values that individuals stand for, as well as their fears. Then there was a deep listening exercise, followed by learning to identify one's judgements and cultural biases.

**Dominique:** On the second day we focused on the jobs themselves. We talked about the mandates and the detailed tasks that the Working Committee and the Council had been given by the community. We asked the applicants to reflect on each task and which skills were necessary for each task, and for each item of each mandate we came up with a list of the skills required.

**Bertrand:** It was a guided work of self-discovery. We didn't give background documents, so people came to it in an open-minded way.

**Jaya:** On the second afternoon, again inspired by the work of Monica Sharma, they worked on what is called a 'conscious full-spectrum'. Three circles were drawn on a board. In the outer circle was put the 12 qualities, the Auroville Charter, Mother's Dream and To Be A True Aurovillian. In the inner circle were put the mandates of the Working Committee and Council. The middle circle represented the changes that need to take place if we want to align our values with the work we do. It's a difficult exercise, but people understood

very well that, as individuals and as a community, our values and the way we do our work are often not in alignment.

**Manohar:** There were different things done just to keep the movement flowing, friendly and relaxed. We had some physical exercises and a short movie was shown on quality and quantity. We also arranged it so that people would eat together to prevent the energy being dispersed.

**Pashi:** On the third day, the people who had opted for the Auroville Council were asked to select the people for the Working Committee, and vice versa.

**Jaya:** Everybody who had opted to work for the Working Committee in any of the roles were asked individually to write the names of the nine people they would like to see in the Council. Those opting for the Council were asked to write down the seven people they would like to see in the Working Committee. (In these numbers, two names from the former Council and three names from the former Working Committee were included.) They were encouraged to come up with the

## The twelve qualities of The Mother's symbol

Sincerity, Humility, Gratitude,  
Perseverance, Aspiration, Receptivity,  
Progress, Courage, Goodness, Generosity,  
Equality, Peace.

best team they could envisage, choosing not only from people who had expressed the wish to take up a coordinator's role, but from everybody who was willing to serve on the respective bodies in any function. If the same names were mentioned many times, they were put in an inner circle. Those that were mentioned fewer times were put in an outer circle. If people were not mentioned at all, they were no longer part of the selection process.

Then they divided randomly into six smaller groups. Three groups selected Working Committee members, three groups the Council. If all three groups came up with the same name for the Working Committee or Council, that person was in because it meant there was consensus among all three groups on that person.

After the second round all names were in place, except one for the Working Committee. For

that last name, the applicants were divided into three groups and each group asked to choose two names. The one mentioned most often was chosen. So, in the end, everybody was chosen by consensus. The two members of the former Council and three members of the former Working Committee who were included will function as a temporary 'bridge' to initiate the staggered turnover in these working groups and will be replaced in October or November.

We had anticipated that this would be a long and difficult day. But by noon the selection was done, and people felt very positive about the whole process. All participants did an individual evaluation of the three-day process, and the collective overall score was eight out of ten. This is good for a first time event.

**When the community saw the names of some of those who had put themselves forward, there was a sense that some of the old political groupings were represented once again.**

**Pashi:** The 'groupism' which has been going the rounds of the community for some time was not part of the three day process. The emphasis was on the willingness to take up responsibility and on people's competence to perform this responsibility, because this time it is all about deliverables – all of the people chosen have specific job specifications which have to be delivered in a particular timescale. It had nothing to do with politics.

We knew that there were some people who were interested in being in positions of power but when they discovered that there was no scope for power games or manipulation, then the reaction started. For example, one of the conditions for being a coordinator in either the Working Committee or Council was that you could not sit on any other working group. I had to emphasize this three times and on the third time it finally registered. This came as a shock to some people!

**Manohar:** We never cared about the politics. The main point for us was to make everything transparent to everybody. We wanted this process to be open to everybody; it didn't depend, for example, on your age or on how long you had been an Aurovillian. We made it very clear to everybody who participated that this would be a selection in the spirit of service, not in the spirit of power. In the end, everybody walked out of here happy, there was no tension.

Now everything is in the hands of the Residents Assembly. There is a period during which they will be able to give feedback on the names proposed, and then there will be a Residents Assembly meeting which, hopefully, will ratify these names.

**Pashi:** For reasons of transparency and to assist the feedback process, the photos of all the candidates as well as their abilities and experience have been made public before the Residents Assembly in a General Meeting. This has never happened before.

**Who will process the feedback?**

**Jaya:** The feedback will be looked at by the Organization Study Group, by the Residents Assembly Service, by people from the Open Platform group and by members of the present Working Committee and Council who are not standing again. We may publish the feedback – probably omitting names – so that there is openness about it. And then, in the Residents Assembly Meeting, we will present the candidates, the feedback, and our views on that feedback. Then we have to see what the community will do.

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**Will it be put to a vote of the Residents' Assembly?**

**Dominique:** There are two possible outcomes. After the presentation, either there will be consensus or, if there isn't, we will need to vote.

**One of the criticisms of the names put forward is that they are not sufficiently representative of the community as a whole.**

**Jaya:** We have to admit there were a few times before the three-day selection process when we almost stopped the process because there was a lot of concern about lobbying. We wavered and were not sure if it was going the right way. But we persisted and looking at the process now we really feel we did the right thing. People nominated themselves and the result was that 50% are from the surrounding villages and Tamil Nadu, and 50% come from abroad or elsewhere in India, which roughly corresponds to our demographic set-up. We have a lot of young people, and the groups have said they are confident of having the skills to do the job.

**Nevertheless, another major criticism of the outcome of this process is that, once again, the most knowledgeable, competent and dedicated people in the community are not in these groups.**

**Dominique:** I believe it was the best result possible in the worst circumstances. After all, the timing was bad, participation from the community in the self-nomination process was poor and the Study Group was barely ready for an experiment like this.

**Jaya:** I do not agree that we don't have the 'best' people. There are a lot of new people; you can't say they are not the best for they have never been tried. If only half of the potential they were showing in these three days manifests in their work, I would say that Auroville has something much better in place than it ever had before. And here I want to include the full group, not just the signatories but also the facilitators, resource people and listeners. Seeing them all work together in harmony for these three days gave a lot of hope about the potential.

**Bertrand:** The Study Group has taken the responsibility to continue to support these groups throughout the term of their mandate to ensure that they function well. This includes helping them acquire the necessary skills to do the job. They are asking for this. Meanwhile, we call on all the 'wise' and 'experienced' people to help them in their work so that they are not left isolated.

**In some cultures and for some individuals it is not done to put yourself forward for jobs like this, even if you are very competent. Isn't this a weakness of the self-nomination process?**

**Pashi:** This is a problem, but nobody can be forced to take up a responsibility: to take up a

responsibility should come as an inspiration from within. We have to encourage people to overcome their fears and reluctance. Here the saving grace is the resource persons. Wherever there is a deficiency in the individual who is the coordinator or facilitator, they can rely on resource persons who may be far more competent than they are.

**Do you see these new groups tackling the work in an entirely new way?**

**Pashi:** Yes. The Council's mandate, for example, identifies 16 different tasks, yet until now they have been burdened with crisis management. Why should an entire group have to deal with that? Now it can be left to some of the resource persons. Secondly, now there will be a huge emphasis on communication both with the community and within the group. Everybody will be in the loop, including the silent listeners.

**Bertrand:** We want to break down the typical office function so the office will shift to an on-line forum.

**Dominique:** The long meetings should belong to the past. Now the groups should simply divide the tasks, and when the tasks are achieved the group comes together to briefly discuss the recommendation and make a decision.

**How optimistic are you that this new initiative will work?**

**Jaya:** If this doesn't work out, there are other proposals. Let's not be afraid. It doesn't

matter if we win this battle: what matters is that we find the solution. Now we have a real good foundation. We should not give in to our fears – if we do, it will blow us off-track.

But we need to support the groups as they learn to function differently. This can easily take the next three years.

**Bertrand:** We do not 'own' this process. We do this in a spirit of service to the community. Anybody who wants to improve it is more than welcome. The study group too needs to be sustained, so come and help!

**Manohar:** We have been working for a change in Auroville, for nobody was happy with the selection processes that have happened before. There must be goodwill to support this latest initiative and a willingness to get rid of all the old projections we have about certain people. Many of the participants in this process were born in Auroville and grew up here. Finally a new generation is taking over.

**Bertrand:** I am a sceptic and have a strong critical sense, and for a long time I feared that this experiment would fail. I have gone to dozens of meetings and workshops in Auroville, but this has been one of the best and most productive workshops I have ever been part of. The atmosphere was inspired; it has been a very enriching experience to see what can be done with fellow Aurovilians.

So, in the end, I am not really worried if it is rejected. Something has started to change, and that's what's really important.

From an interview by Alan and Carel

## The participatory process

If a person wants to participate in a working group, s/he can choose between four roles or types of membership and propose him/herself for one of the following roles: Listener, Coordinator, Facilitator and Resource Person.

Each working group will have its unique set of capabilities for the three types of active roles.

### The Listener: Silent observation.

**Motto:** "I offer myself as a Silent Observer to witness the process of the Working Group, and aspire for the success of the task undertaken by the Group".

Listeners are newly added members to the Working Groups.

They are residents who want to witness the functioning of the Group.

They follow the unfolding of the short and long term goals defined by the working group and, being aware of which task has been taken up by whom, they can assess the progress of the group members in accomplishing their mission.

Whoever participates in meetings as a Silent Listener takes the responsibility to follow the information exchanged within the group.

A Listener can silently partake in various groups.

### The Coordinator: Analysis, Strategy and Action Plan.

**Motto:** "I offer to serve the work in an impartial way by coordinating the team, keeping in mind inclusivity, competency, efficiency and generosity. I cooperate and contribute to enable the best outcome for the task and the team."

Coordinators are residents and have to give full time commitment. Coordinators will not participate in other working groups. A group can have a minimum 3 to maximum 12 coordinators depending on the mandate and function of the group.

A coordinator is responsible for:

- Defining and preparing long, medium and short deliverables.
- Prioritizing tasks and short-term deliverables.
- Taking care of urgent matters and emergencies.
- Ensuring that no issues are left unattended.
- Calling on one or several facilitators connected to the working group and delegate to them a specific task and set a certain time frame for completion.
- Coordinating the internal communication flow between facilitators, resource persons and listeners.

g) Assuring that the agreed-on ethical code of conduct is followed in all group email/doc exchange, done via online forums.

h) Finding an interim substitute or have another coordinator/facilitator cover for her/him in case of unavailability or absence for over 2-3 weeks.

The intention is to ensure effective monitoring of work progress by tracking closures of task and issues at hand.

### The Facilitator: Team Spirit, Collaboration and Goal Setting.

**Motto:** "I offer my expertise and experience to facilitate a given task for the team. I cooperate and contribute what it takes for the best outcome of the task and the team".

Facilitators are residents and can be part-time team members; they are called upon by the coordinator based on a specific task.

The number of facilitators in a working group can vary.

They are responsible for completing a task in collaboration with resource persons.

The Facilitator calls on resource persons that hold knowledge or skills relevant to the task. S/he creates a team that takes responsibility to complete the assigned task, while keeping the working group informed of the status, outcome or any problem.

All communication will be done via an internal online communication forum accessible to the full team.

Coordinators and Facilitators meet as often as needed.

### The Resource person: Expertise, Experience, Wisdom and Values

**Motto:** "I offer my expertise and experience to complete a given task for the team. I cooperate and contribute towards the best outcome of the task and the team."

The time commitment of a resource person is need-based and thus allows flexibility to help the team according to her/his capabilities.

There will be a pool of resource persons created for each working group.

Resource persons offer their expertise, skills and knowledge whenever they are called upon.

When needed, the working group can call other resource persons from outside this pool.

The number of resource persons connected to a working group can vary.

**NOTE:** The individual roles can evolve and change. The group is dynamic and may shuffle their roles and the team may expand and shrink as necessary. Anyone can join at any time as a listener at the request of the coordinators of the group.

## The General Meeting of May 28th



"**F**abulously inspiring," was one of the comments made after the General Meeting of May 28th, in which the Study Group explained what it had been doing, and the proposed new members of the Working Committee and Auroville Council introduced themselves. The summer exodus notwithstanding, there was a large attendance and the explanation and introductions were received by the Aurovilians with quietness and maturity.

Yet it wasn't all smooth sailing. The Study Group explained that it had decided not to deal itself with the feedback it had received from the community on the proposed new members, as the Group felt it didn't have the mandate to do so. Instead, it had informed each of the new members about the feedback they had received, without mentioning the source, and then left it to the person to deal with it. Also, the other proposed group members were informed about the feedback, and were asked if the person was nevertheless acceptable to their group. This, perhaps predictably, had not resulted in anyone stepping out of the process.

The meeting did not accept it. It questioned the ethics of self-nominated people themselves dealing with the negative feedback against them and requested the Study Group and the Residents' Assembly, together with others who volunteer, to design a process and mechanism that ensures that the feedback received is dealt with in a responsible way.

A second criticism concerned the maturity of the proposed members. Had they all lived in Auroville for the minimum period of five years? Had they been active in major community areas? It appeared that these criteria, which had been accepted by the Residents' Assembly in 2006, had not been implemented as strictly as some residents would have liked.

Another major criticism was the perceived

lack of competence of the members of the Working Committee. Pointing out that a new government has taken charge in New Delhi, which may have repercussions for Auroville, and that a new Secretary will replace the present Secretary Mr. Bala Baskar when he resigns in August, the need for experienced and well-educated people to interact with government officials in New Delhi and Chennai was voiced. The suggestion was made that the three members of the outgoing Working Committee would not, as had been proposed, continue for a 6-month roll-over period, but instead would step back and take up the role of 'resource person' as soon as three well-qualified people have been found. These new people would need to bring in the skills and competencies to fill the gaps in the present group.

Asked why those who are qualified to do the work were not present in the proposed teams, a fault in the selection process was acknowledged: these competent people, who have experience in serving on the Working Committee or Council, will not nominate themselves. They have to be asked and convinced to take up the job in the interest of the community.

It was also noted that all new proposed members of the Working Committee (in their various functions) were male (with one lone exception) and predominantly Tamilian. The meeting suggested that the replacement of the outgoing Working Committee members would include a few North Indians, who are relatively senior, well-educated and possibly female.

The three-hour meeting did not reach any firm conclusions. It was agreed that the Residents' Assembly Service will call for another meeting soon, to discuss proposals to meet the objections.

Can the groups begin their work? A decision was not reached, but the groups are all eager to start.

Carel



# Auroville organization in decline

Auroville's organization is in decline. Over the last years we have never missed an opportunity to damage or discredit our procedures with unwise decisions and lots of agitation. Today, we don't have any more a decision-making process which is clearly defined and properly understood, let alone properly implemented, and the whole architecture of our collective organization needs to be rebuilt.

The outcome of the recent selection process for membership of the Working Committee and Auroville Council is just another misery we have inflicted to our collective body in the field of collective organization. It is a direct consequence of our present situation, an unavoidable continuation of our collective confusion which each time is reaching a new level, without much hope for any improvement.

We never assess our organization system and the procedures that build it. When we face a problem, the immediate reaction is to work out a new procedure to replace the faulty one with the naïve belief that it will automatically solve everything, a kind of magic potion. Rather than trying to identify where the process or the procedure failed and why, we rush and invent a so-called new something, with great enthusiasm. Then we crash and discover sooner or later that we have created another problem, on another level, which is even more difficult to solve.

It has always been difficult to organize Auroville's internal affairs, but since a few years the situation has started to seriously go astray after major working groups began to modify their policies without ratifying the modifications through the Residents' Assembly according to the existing procedures, or refused to execute a valid and legitimate decision taken by the Residents' Assembly.<sup>(1)</sup>

It was not difficult to foresee that this would trigger an opposite reaction from the residents, using the Residents' Assembly in an attempt to bypass the working groups, claiming it to be the sole legitimate structure to make decisions although using inappropriate procedures.<sup>(2)</sup> From reactions to reactions we have moved to the extremes and today we have reached a situation where almost all our political system has lost most of its meaning and credibility.

## Mixing legislative and executive functions

One of the recurrent mistakes we make is to mix the legislative authority and responsibility with those belonging to the executive. The legislative and the executive power or authority are supposed to be the two pillars of any organizational system. There is a body which envisions and decides how society will be organized, and another body which executes and implements

this vision and decision. The legislative responsibility and role is naturally the role of the Residents' Assembly. The executive responsibility and role is obviously the role of the working groups. The legislative and executive authority cannot and should never be in the same hands, whether it is the working groups or the Residents' Assembly. For that would result in absolutism, and such a political system is the complete opposite of what a society like Auroville needs. Therefore, those respective roles and responsibilities should never overlap and their areas of action should always be properly defined and mutually respected if we don't want to corrupt the entire system.

The legislative and the executive bodies, expressing two different but complementary levels of authority and set of responsibilities, should be articulated around a clear and sound decision-making process. Those three terms (the legislative power, the executive power and the decision-making process) should be the core of our organizational system and it is from there that the whole political architecture will be developed and will evolve. From a basic and simple principle it becomes possible to develop and manifest a complex system with a complete set of procedures in order to organize the life of a complex society.

It is those principles and their structural manifestations that constitute the institutions of our society. And we should learn to deal and behave towards our collective institutions with great respect as it is another way to respect each other. Only from there will we be able to move away from the present situation which is an endless source of deep and constant resentment and frustrations.

## Constitution of working groups and competence

Another serious issue is the constitution of our committees or working groups. There is a strong belief that those bodies, and in particular the Auroville Council and the Working Committee, should be representative of the components of the Auroville's society. The concept itself is unclear, as I don't see how we can define properly those components, but nevertheless we have come up with a few terms like gender, nationality, age, and community.

This concept is contrary to the principle of human unity that is supposed to be one of the core values of Auroville. Being male or female, youth or senior, Italian or Indian, born thousands of kilometers away or in a surrounding village, has little to do with inner and universal qualities; they are only the most external part of what we are. The true fact is that we are all human beings. We are supposed to act as human

beings without making specific distinctions based on external characteristics. The present attitude is going against the human unity principle by creating external and superficial categories, and even worse, by institutionalizing them.

In terms of organization, one of the main consequences of this perception, when it comes to selecting those who have to assume such specific and complex tasks, is that we always miss the point by focusing on the artificial parameters of representivity rather than on the competence of the people to be selected. The competence issue, which is central to such a process, is therefore never properly addressed. And when I speak about competence, I don't speak about diplomas but about inner and individual qualities and capacities like honesty, integrity, kindness, intellectual development, and specific experience of the tasks at hand, to name but a few. Everyone cannot be a teacher, nor can everyone be an artist, a healer, a manager or a cook. But in Auroville, and today more than ever, everybody can sit in the most pre-eminent working groups with the responsibility of taking decisions that will affect the community as a whole, without even knowing practically how our organization is functioning, what are the main principles that sustain the general organization of the city, what are the existing policies and how to use them, etc.

Ironically, this perception is never applied elsewhere, such as in schools, services, and commercial units, where the competence of a candidate is always the first and foremost parameter when constituting a team. But for the tasks which affect directly the well being of all Auroville residents, the development of their city and their representation in the world, we do the exact opposite.

If we want to constitute credible, efficient and respected working groups we have to go beyond this narrow understanding which is also the perfect recipe to get the wrong people at the wrong place for the wrong motivations.

## The recent selection process

The sole purpose and only justification of a selection process is to get the right people in the right position. In my opinion, the recent exercise did not achieve that goal; rather the opposite. This is not because we do not have the right people to do this particular work in Auroville. We do have them and we know who they are. There is even a sufficient number of those people to get the diversity we are so much attached to and to replace them when needed. But those people won't come forward and nominate themselves, according to the *modus operandi* of the recent selection process. They are fully aware of the

difficulties, responsibility and magnitude of the work. Moreover, they are also very cautious to make a difficult commitment in a difficult environment and they will need to work with people they can trust. In other words, those people will have to be asked and motivated to take up this work.

It is an open question to what extent the community will be affected by the outcome of the recent selection process. It is well-known that the real work of Auroville is done by the civil society and that the happenings at the Town Hall are but a small part. The Working Committee and Auroville Council have lost a lot of their moral authority over the years and are not so central anymore to the general organization of the city.

Yet, this confusion and disorganization could affect the community in many ways. It may block the way to intelligent and interesting proposals and renders impossible any progress on some critical issues, and it will affect our capacity to represent Auroville, the Aurovilians, at higher levels of competence and authority. In a time where a new government of India has come into existence, with possible consequences for the Auroville Foundation, a re-think of the selection process and the whole concept of Auroville's organization are urgently required.

Ashatit

(1) Examples are the fact that a Residents' Assembly decision regarding the benches around the Matrimandir Banyan Tree and the gardens was ignored by the Auroville Council and the Matrimandir executives; the change in the Housing Service policy which happened without approval of the Residents' Assembly; the proposed change of mandate of the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC), which contains a provision that in future any change of its mandate will be submitted to the Residents Assembly "for a four-week feedback process" instead of "for its decision", leaving the question open who will take the final decision on the change of mandate; the Maintenance policy that is supposed to be "approved by the FAMC" rather than ratified by the Residents Assembly.

(2) Examples are the unsuccessful attempt (there was no quorum) to overrule a decision of the Entry Service regarding a Newcomer; the successful vote to overrule a decision of the FAMC regarding the closing of a unit; and the attempt of the Entry Task Force to make the Residents' Assembly the final authority on admission of people as Aurovilians.

# The beginnings of a revolution?

Long ago I gave up trying to answer the question 'How does Auroville work?' The 'Auroville process' is far too complicated and unclear. Perhaps this is because there are so many different forces at work here, jostling for supremacy, all the while under the relentless pressure of that 'Something Else' which keeps us permanently (and, from an evolutionary viewpoint, fortunately) off-balance.

This makes any attempts at commenting on Auroville events extremely perilous. Needless to say, this has never stopped Aurovilians, including myself, from expressing themselves on what we believe to be the important issues of the day.

Take the ongoing process of choosing a new Working Committee and Council. This is an ordeal we impose upon ourselves every two years or so. Every time we criticise the result and promise ourselves that next time we will improve the process, only to be disappointed again.

This time there was a sustained effort to come up with a selection process which was very different from before. But hardly had the initial result been announced than the

criticism started. "These groups are not representative of the community as a whole"; "Many of these people are not competent to carry out the work"; "Some of these people are just interested in power"; "How could you allow people to be selected who, in the past, have acted against the interests of Auroville or have fallen far short of the ideals?"

All these, I have to admit, were also my initial responses. How, I wondered, could such a deeply-considered process have given such a disappointing result? Why did the Selection Group favour self-selection? Had they not anticipated that those who thirsted for power and authority would take advantage of the open door? And were they not naïve to believe that the inclusion of a 'value' element in the selection process would suffice to pull everybody up to a higher level of consciousness?

All these remain, for me, unanswered questions. But it took me some time to perceive that there may be another dimension to this. For if there is one thing which Aurovilians have been united upon recently it is the need for radical change in our governance and organization. Of course, we don't agree upon how that should happen. Some favour

returning all power to the Residents Assembly. Others feel that we should hand greater power to those individuals and groups who have a proven track record of working for the larger good of the community.

But what we all in our different ways are aspiring for here is nothing less than a revolution in our present structure. And revolutions are messy. They never run in the way their leaders intend, and generally it takes a period of considerable turmoil and chaos before any fundamental changes are felt. I don't see any reason why the situation should be different here.

I mention this because I've started to wonder if the latest selection process may not actually mark the rather clumsy beginnings of a revolution in our governance and organizational process. If this is the case, what clues might it furnish to its eventual shape?

Two things immediately stand out. Firstly, the new organizational proposal could result in the breaking down of the poisonous division between working groups and 'community', as many tasks previously performed by the groups will now be taken up by resource people from the larger community.

Secondly, the result of the selec-

tion process reveals a clear generational and cultural shift. 'Generational' because more young people have put themselves forward this time; 'cultural' because far more candidates than before – something like 50% of the total – were born in the local villages or in the region.

It's dangerous to read too much into this. It could well be, as some people seem to fear, that village politics are simply being transposed into Auroville. But it may also signal a deeper, more fundamental shift, and that is from the Westernised, rational organizational model which has dominated in Auroville until now to a different phase of development and governance. Perhaps, after all, the Western model has done its work of laying a solid foundation – so necessary because of the boundary-less, high-energy field of this place – and now we need another way of dealing with our extreme diversity than through defining mandates and guidelines or creating more groups; something more akin to a dance than to a rigid template.

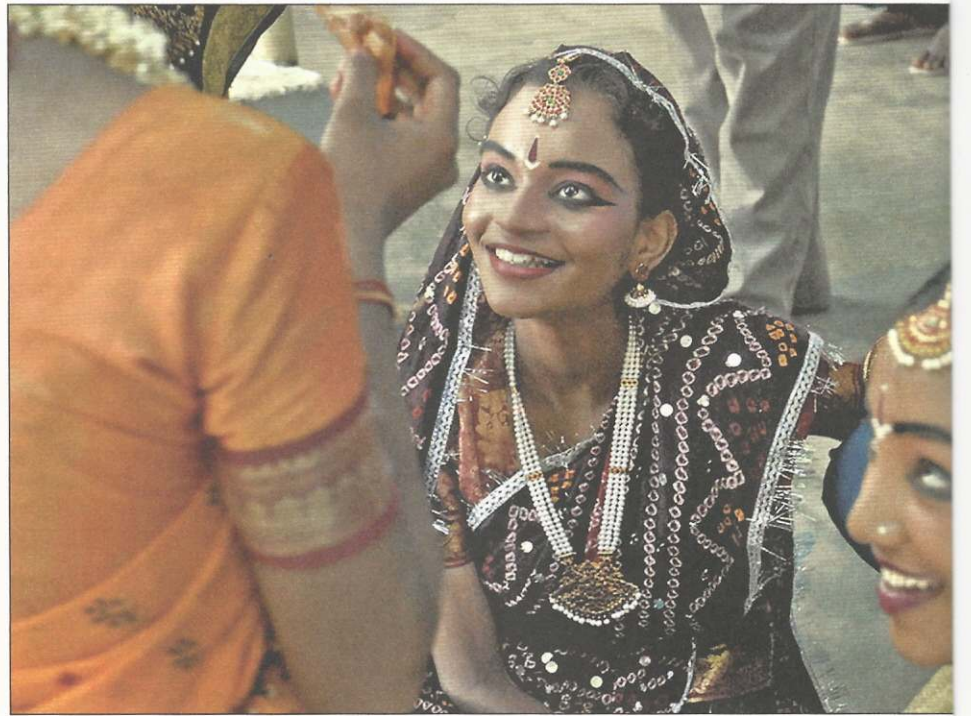
I associate this 'fluidity' more with the local culture than with the Western mind-based approach. However, I don't mistake this for what Sri Aurobindo defined as an 'intuitive' consciousness, and I have

no idea if this section of our population, the Tamil Aurovilians who have grown up and been educated here, are actually the most open to this different way of approaching things. Many long-term Aurovilians from other cultures are also searching for such another way. In this sense, the present selection process is not necessarily the final word or the people chosen for these groups the 'right ones'. As the Working Committee, for example, requires very specific skills we will probably have to go through many revisions and much turmoil before we reach something more generally acceptable.

But revolutions begin with the breaking up – often clumsy, often crude – of an existing log-jam, and it may just be that this particular process, which has scandalised some and overjoyed others, could be the barrier-breaker for the next step in Auroville's evolution. It is useful to remember this as we fasten our seatbelts and prepare ourselves for the hair-raising, rumbunctious journey which seems to be our preferred mode of making progress in Auroville. What, I think, would be wrong at this point would be to stand on the station called Status Quo and refuse to board the train.

Alan





## "Photography has to Introducing photo

Having worked for twelve years as a photographer and set designer for the Netherlands Dance Theatre (he has also worked for the Sydney Opera House) Sven was on his way to Australia when he decided to stop over in India. He visited Auroville, and stayed. It was December, 1988. "I wanted to leave behind that whole way of life that was predictable. I wanted to be in a place which was more in tune with things of the heart."

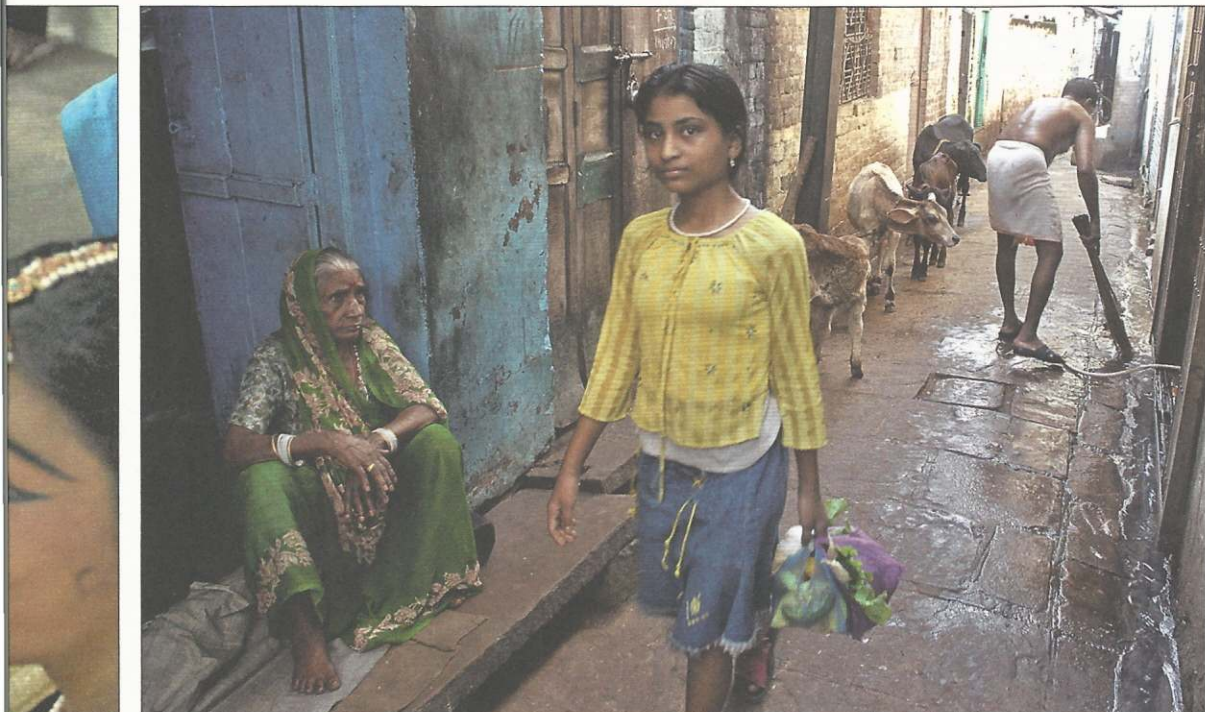
In Auroville, Sven did not immediately take up photography again. He started working with Village Action, but after some time started to document their work. "After that, I came up with the idea to make postcards on India because I couldn't find any cards that I liked."

His unit, *Joy Postcards*, opened in 1991. Now his cards sell in major cities all over India and in other countries as well. Many cards are not the usual scenic souvenir-type postcards found elsewhere. They often depict spontaneous moments of connection or joy. Or they catch the quirkiness, the unpredictable beauty or depths of life on the streets or in the fields of India.

Sven enjoys getting involved, shooting something as it unfolds around him, which is why he mainly uses a wide-angle lens. "Especially in the south, people are so friendly, so direct. I can get-up close and be a part of what is going on. The Tamil people allow that. They don't have the same sense of privacy as us. Here in Tamil Nadu you can look people in the eye, it's very simple, not loaded or charged with anything. It lets you







## do with compassion"

grapher Sven Ulsa

feel part of something universal. "

What is he looking for when he takes photos? "Usually it is the things that move me or touch me in some way. It's when people open up, revealing something about their character, about their joy or their pain. I have a deep love for India, its nature and people, and for me photography has to do with a sense of compassion, of feeling connected and involved with others. This is my main motivation - and why I have chosen 'communication' as the theme of these photo pages. If I'm touched by something I like to capture it, through movement, emotion, colour or humour. I'm the medium for these moments. And then I have the joy of sharing it with others."

He admits, however, that his best-selling cards are not always the ones that have touched him most. "People only see the photo

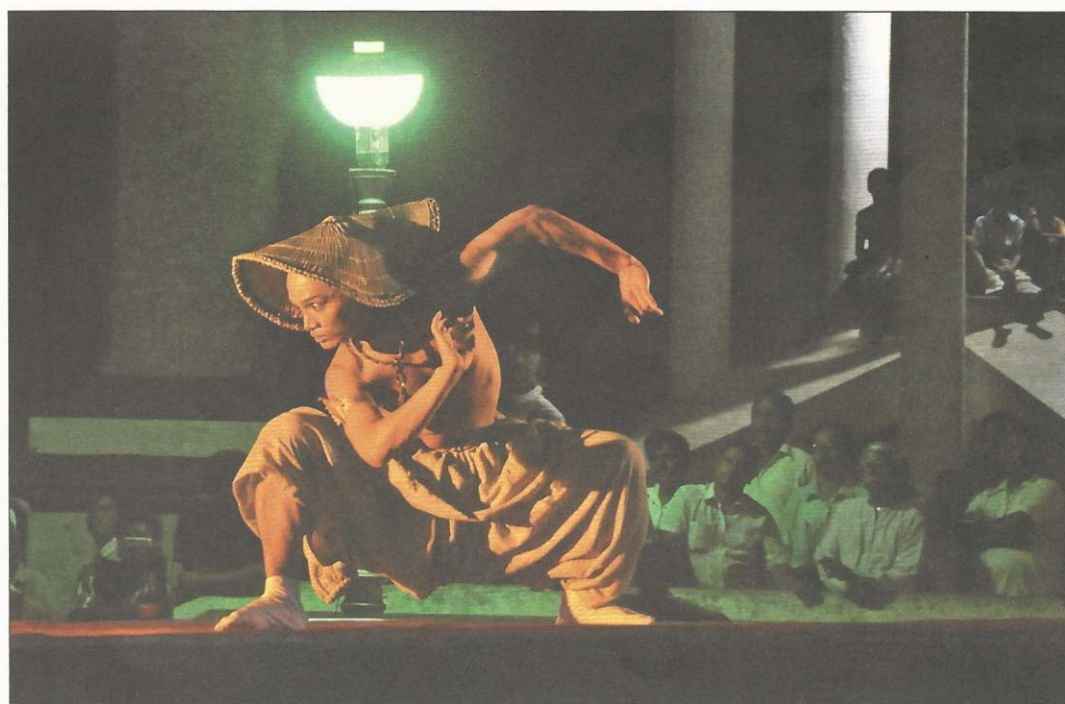
and have of course not experienced the atmosphere of the moment I took it. "

One thing which is noticeable is that few of his cards feature Auroville. Why? "It is difficult to catch Auroville in a photo, apart from obvious subjects like the Matrimandir. Another reason is that I have discovered that Auroville, postcard-wise, is not so in demand with the general Indian public. In any case, there are other Aurovilians making postcards on Auroville topics."

There is no shortage of other subjects. "On the road from Auroville to Pondy you pass the whole human parade. On every corner there is something else. And there's great beauty all around."

Alan

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# Tackling the drought

**“K**odaimazhai”, says the Tamil lady. “That’s how we call those rare showers that suddenly pour down in the midst of the hot season. When I was young, they were normal. But in the past decades they have almost disappeared.” Almost, indeed. But in May, we saw a comeback. For four consecutive days, intense rains brought a welcome freshener in a season otherwise known for its excessively hot temperatures, which sometimes exceed 41 degrees C.

But the showers, though much welcomed, were a mere wetting of the earth. Auroville’s water situation, warns L’Avenir d’Auroville, Auroville’s town development authority, is in dire straits. Many wells have less output than before; some are drying up; others need deepening. After two years of drought and countless years of over-extraction of the aquifers, the consequences are showing.

In fact, water levels are dropping all over Tamil Nadu. A recent article in The Times of India stated that water tables across the state have fallen by 0.5 to 2.3 metres since March 2013. Throughout the rest of the country, aquifers are dropping as well. North India’s groundwater levels are declining at one of the fastest rates in the world. In 2012, the World Bank released a report that stated that if current trends continue, in 20 years about 60% of all India’s aquifers will be in a critical condition..

There is little that can be done about it, but whatever can be done, should be done. L’Avenir asks Aurovilians to avoid over-watering their gardens, to close the tap while washing dishes or brushing teeth, to flush toilets less often and repair leaking taps and pipes. Auroville’s average water usage exceeds the Indian standard of 90-120 litres per person a day by at least 300%; suspicions are that the excess water is used for excessive irrigation of gardens or disappears into the ground due to leaking distribution pipes.

L’Avenir appointed Tom to take up the task of coordinating all efforts in the water sector. Tom has been involved with water from 1982 when he first set foot in Auroville. In 1989, at the request of Chief Architect Roger Anger, he made the first Auroville Water Master Plan. He recently returned to Auroville after six years working as Director of Operations of a logistics company in oil fields all over Africa. “I have been active in Sudan, Morocco, Ivory Coast, Nigeria and Chad. It was a great experience, even though it was exhausting at the physical and vital levels. But it was necessary for me. I needed to recover from Auroville, as I had been going through a difficult time when I left.”

Coming back, he didn’t see much of a change, he says, except for the fact that the work he had started had not been continued. “I was asked to once again look into Water Harvest, the company I had set up many years ago. But I encountered a ghost of what it was, drained of its strength, knowledge and equipment. There may have been reasons for this, but, nevertheless, it was painful.” Most importantly, the work of monitoring the ground water levels, which had been started by the Auroville Greenwork Resource Centre in 1994 and which



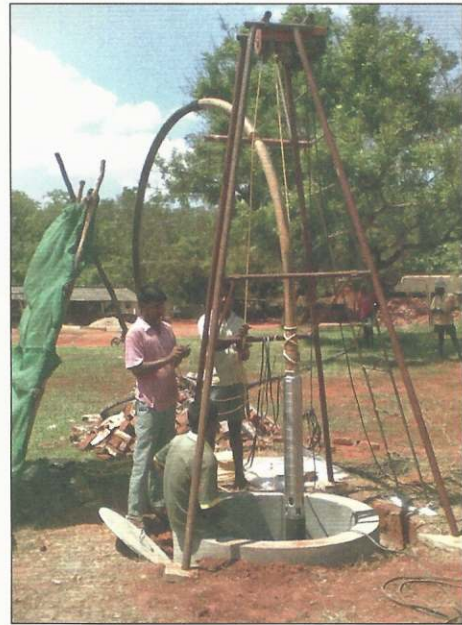
Transporting HDPE water pipes

Water Harvest had continued, had stopped. From October 2007 onwards, there are no data about the performance of Auroville’s wells.

“It has become impossible to say anything precise about Auroville’s general water situation,” he says. “Auroville presents a scattered picture, with over 120 wells operating at different depths. Lacking up-to-date data and given the complexity of the issue, you can’t make absolute statements. But the indications are that the water levels have gone down. And if that is correct, it is very serious. For it will affect the future of Auroville. We have rapidly to come up with large scale solutions, for our

survival is at stake.”

Luca, who for the last 20 years has been working in the water field, agrees. “The water yield of Auroville’s bore wells has diminished; and there are fears that the wells located near the sea will turn saline. Borewell monitoring is a necessity; but I do not expect that they will tell us anything different from what we know already: that the aquifers underneath Auroville are holding less water than before. With the population surrounding Auroville on the



Installing a new pump

increase, and drawing water from the same aquifers, Auroville’s situation cannot be expected to improve, not even if we have a few very good monsoons. Auroville will have to find solutions for her water needs and take action as soon as possible.”

## A multi-sourcing approach

Tom and Luca propose a multi-sourcing approach. Pointing to the success of Auroville’s rainwater harvesting which has resulted in ‘zero-runoff’ through the building of bunds and dams, they propose compulsory rainwater harvesting and wastewater treatment systems in all Auroville settlements. They also support building a desalination plant to provide drinking water for Auroville and some of the nearby villages. Relying on one source, they feel, is unrealistic and dangerous. “Rainwater harvesting depends on the availability of rainwater. If there is a long period of drought, you will have problems, and all your investments will be useless. Desalination is a costly but reliable source which is always available,” says Luca. He points out that harvested rain water is suitable for public ponds, the Matrimandir Lake, and for agriculture and gardening, but would need to be cleaned if it is to be used for drinking water purposes, something which is not allowed in Western countries. “Ideally,” he says, “we should implement two water systems: one for drinking water, and a secondary one for agriculture and ponds. That would have the additional advantage that less water would be drawn from the aquifers.”

They also propose to invest in centralized water distribution systems. “The water level in most of our shallow wells, those that go down to 65 metres, is declining. Communities that depend on such wells for their water needs may soon face problems. We suggest that they connect to a centralized water system, if that is possible,” says Tom. He comments that many communities still have a proprietary attitude towards ‘their’ bore wells and pumps. “This has to go. There is no longer any justification to say ‘this is my well, this is my pump, I won’t share my water with you.’ We need to develop a water system that serves the entire city and also connects as many greenbelt communities as possible.”

Auroville has three such centralized systems. They all are fed from one or more deep bore wells, with depths of around 150 metres. Auroville’s biggest system, the overhead water tank nicknamed ‘the elephant’ near Arati community, supplies 140 cubic metres a day to 21 communities in the Residential Zone and 40 cubic metres to the Town Hall area, serving in all approximately 600 Aurovilians. “This system, which is supplied by four major bore wells, can easily cover more communities,” says Luca. Two smaller centralized water systems are located in the Industrial Zone. “If, at

some time in the future, desalinated water can also be supplied to these centralized systems, Auroville’s water requirement would be secured,” he says.

## Water distribution and safety

Water distribution is equally important. “We want to install a ring mains along the Crown Road, a circular centralized water distribution pipeline to which as many communities as possible are connected,” says Luca. “The Residential Zone section of this pipeline was laid two years ago and we now want to expand it. At the same time, in nearly all communities the existing underground PVC piping systems will need to be replaced by HDPE pipes. Most of those systems are old and leaking; we have discovered systems where 30% of the piped water leaked away. Moreover, PVC is unhealthy.”

“That aspect is often forgotten,” says Luca. “Each community needs to ensure that its drinking water is not contaminated. Pollution can be caused by improper capping or protection of the well-head; or by a septic tank or a waste water treatment system that has been built too close to the well; or by water leaking into a broken underground pipe.” He clarifies that in India, ‘drinking water’ refers to the relatively clean water that is used for laundry, bathing and cleaning. All households have some kind of filter to further clean the water, which is then used for drinking and cooking. For in the tropics, the sources of pollution are so numerous that it is virtually impossible to ensure that borewell water is clean according to Western standards. Moreover, in Auroville water chlorination is not accepted. So the only solution is that each household has its own water filter “and that they do not forget to regularly clean them!” he adds.

Auroville’s laboratory at Aurobrindavan has the facilities to do all the necessary tests, but testing has not yet been made mandatory. Tests are done whenever the ‘owner’ of the well asks for it, and results are kept confidential. “This is no longer acceptable,” says Luca. He proposes that the community authorizes the laboratory to do a mandatory test of all water sources once every two months, and publish the test results. “It is a matter of public health,” he



Laying HDPE pipes along the Crown road

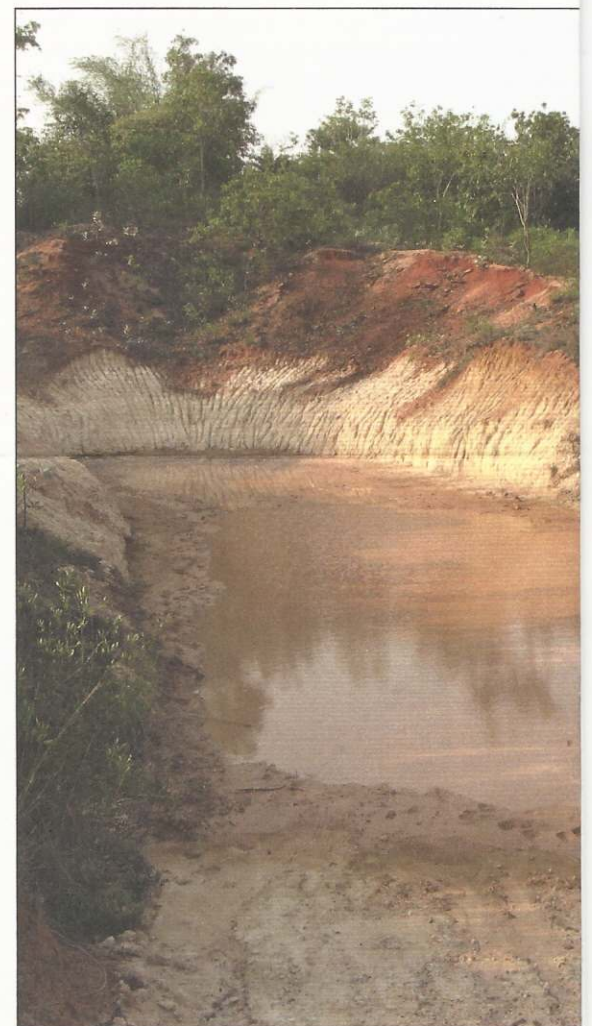
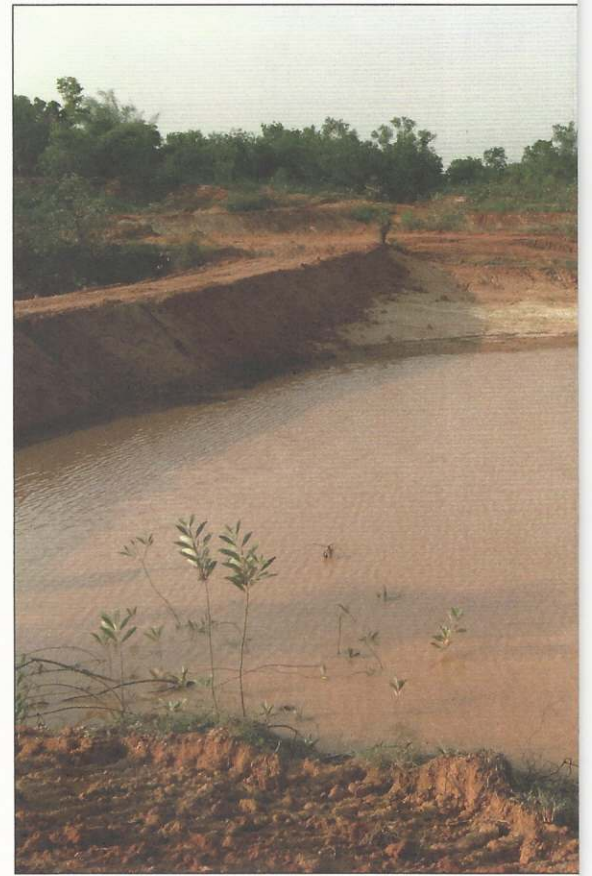
says. “It is our duty to protect all in Auroville who use that water – our guests, our workers and ourselves.”

## Towards an Auroville Water Board

Tom has meanwhile presented a substantial budget to purchase essential monitoring equipment and is in the process of reviving the Auroville Water Cell. “For many years, specialists and students have been studying Auroville’s water situation and they have written many reports that are a goldmine of information. But Aurovilians are in the habit of highlighting those solutions they like. The main challenge is how to put all that together, and this is part of the work I have come to do,” he says. A first meeting has shown the challenges: proprietary attitudes, lack of collaboration, communication and trust, and no agreed-upon water plan for Auroville. Harmonizing opposing views is perhaps the major challenge to achieving a solution to the water crisis. But time is fast running out.

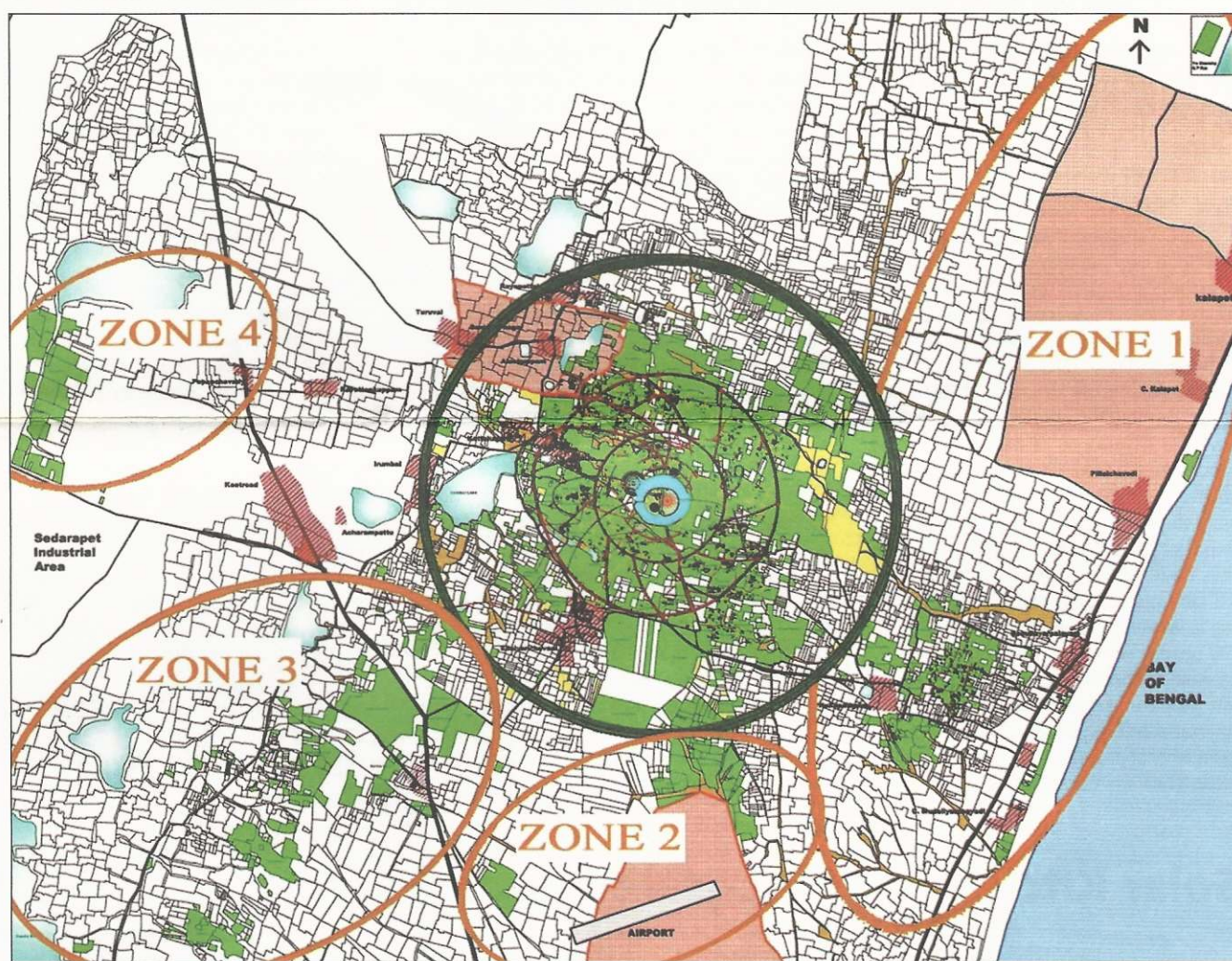
Carel

# Creatin





# g a protected water and nature reserve



**O**n the east side of Auroville, on the other side of National Highway 66, far behind Promesse community and Morattandy village, one finds Hermitage, the last wilderness of Auroville which stretches over 120 acres. The land is hard, sun-baked, covered with pebbles, scarred by erosion, pockmarked. But the stark landscape with its wide horizons is of an indescribable beauty. In the midst of this infertile desert some trees grow: the greyish green-silver leaves of the acacia that The Mother called 'work tree' wave softly in the winds, showing that, even in this inhospitable environment, something can flourish.

Ever since the land was bought for Auroville in the 1960s, a handful of people – hermits, artists and young pioneers – took up the challenge of living here, far away and isolated from Auroville's main body. Most failed the test, but even now a few continue to make this place their home. They work on the land, making terraces and creating bunds to avoid further soil erosion, and to retain the little topsoil left over from the illegal pebble mining which happened here previously.

The south side of Hermitage is one of the most beautiful canyon areas of Auroville. It is home to a rich ecology of birds, mammals and reptiles. But the lands do not all belong to Auroville; parts of it are perambok lands, owned by the government of Tamil Nadu. This, so far, has prevented them from being protected. Check-dams, built poorly by contractors in a distant past, are on the verge of collapse.

This year, the permission was obtained from the local village panchayat to start work on the perambok lands in conjunction with the Auroville lands. Seven check-dams, five on Auroville land and two on perambok land, with an average height of 4-6 metres and a top width between 3 to 4 metres were built upstream, with lengths varying from 17 to 52 metres, each with an adequate spillway. The funds to do this work were provided by friends of Auroville.

Soon after finishing the dams, the builders were rewarded with heavy rains which lashed the desert, creating large and beautiful water bodies that showed the huge rainwater-harvesting potential of Hermitage as well as the possibility of making it a wildlife sanctuary. The steward of Hermitage is now doing the final work: planting the dams with grasses to prevent erosion, and monitoring the water levels.

Phase two of the Hermitage work is scheduled to start mid-August. At the estimate cost of Rs 500,000, [US \$ 8,500] the dam-building and bunding of the entire Hermitage and inter-connected areas will be completed. The result: an integrated area of 350 acres of Auroville and perambok land that will serve as a major water catchment area with lakes, ponds and kolams holding harvested rainwater. This will slowly percolate into the aquifers and so help raise the groundwater level in Pondicherry and its surroundings.

The dream of many Aurovilians is that this land be declared a protected water reservation and become a nature sanctuary. If the nearby Auroville communities of Aranya, Sadhana Forest and Aurobrindavan could be consolidated with Hermitage and with the perambok lands in between, and perhaps with some neighbouring plots that are privately owned, this status might be obtainable. Such a sanctuary would be a gift to the entire region.

Carel



Images from Hermitage. The photos show the new dams made and the huge potential of water harvesting in this area. The white top-layer is known as Manevelli clay, which overlays at certain points the red laterite soil. The map shows the outlying lands owned by Auroville. In Zone 3 one finds the Aurobrindavan, Sadhana Forest, Aranya and Hermitage areas. Due to their location to the south of Auroville, all water harvesting in these areas will benefit Pondicherry, as the aquifers run to the sea. Infiltration of rainwater for Auroville happens from the west and north of Auroville.



# The 'eat local food' movement

**T**omas and Krishna farm on different scales and in different ways. Tomas manages the 134 acres of Annapurna Farm; Krishna farms six acres of Solitude in the 'non-till' Fukuoka style. Both are passionate about the need for Aurovilians to eat far more locally-grown food. Why?

*Why is eating locally-grown food so important?*

**Krishna:** We have lost our relationship with nature, with the land. Masanobu Fukuoka, author of *The One Straw Revolution*, said that "the society that doesn't know where its food comes from is a society without culture. And humanity without culture will perish." I think the social problems we see around the world are very much connected to the fact that many people don't have a relationship with nature, and that means with an aspect of ourselves.

Food is the foundation of any society, any civilization, but many people don't know or care any longer where their food comes from. The 'Local Food' movement is a way of connecting us back to the land and to each other: it has a huge healing possibility for society.

*Do we need a local food movement in Auroville?*

**Krishna:** Very much so. A lot of Aurovilians are buying processed, industrialized food rather than locally-grown food. In Auroville we have no excuse not to be eating a much larger percentage of the food grown by our farmers. Today, there are tons of rice in Annapurna's granary and kilos of papayas and other fruits from our farms that are not reaching or being eaten by Auroville consumers.

**Tomas:** I'm thinking that part of my rice land will have to go under cash crops because nobody wants our rice, and I need money to run the farm. But is this the right direction to go in? I don't think so.

*Over the years you have tried to encourage people to eat local food through the Farmers Markets, Foodlink etc., and food from Annapurna Farm is used in the Solar Kitchen. Are you saying that this has not changed people's attitudes to eating local food?*

**Tomas:** We have been trying to do this for the last 30 years through the Farm Group but with only limited success. I think many people agree that the processed and chemically-grown food we eat is becoming less and less safe, and a lot of the prob-



From left: Tomas, Krishna's daughter Chandni and Krishna

lems we have health-wise and psychologically have to do with this. But we continue to eat this rather than nutritious local food.

*Why?*

**Tomas:** There are many different reasons. Quite a lot of Aurovilians don't care very much about what food they eat: they just want something convenient they can pick off the shelf. We advertise ourselves as a very conscious community but this is not the reality. We like to talk about it, but in reality we don't live it.

**Krishna:** Also, there is a lack of education, communication, which means some people don't understand the advantages of eating local food. Eating locally-grown food is not only nutritious and chemical-free, but it supports local farmers, it builds community and society, and you have less associated pollution because there are zero food miles. Food that comes from far away supports the machine of industrial farming, which is highly processed and damaging to the environment.

Some people, of course, don't want to know this: they would rather bury their heads in the sand. And some people in our food sector are busy fighting their own corner rather than finding ways of working together to promote local food.

**Tomas:** The Farm Group had been working on

a five-year plan to improve the situation, but we couldn't manifest it. It wasn't so much problems with the funding as the fact that we could not get a dynamic team together to run it. We have been meeting with the Solar Kitchen management for the last five years, trying to get them to use more locally-grown food, but nothing seems to go forward. I'm not sure why this is. At the moment it could be a financial thing because they are struggling economically.

**Krishna:** I don't think the present Solar Kitchen team has thought much about local food and its implications. They sometimes mention our food is too expensive for their budget, but the reality is that the farms have only increased their vegetable and fruit prices by 4% this year, far less than the rate of inflation, and we are still losing money. Moreover, while food bought on the open market may sometimes – not always – be cheaper, that cost is heavily subsidised, and food purchased on the open market is far less nutritious and healthy.

**Tomas:** It's also to do with the energy available. The Solar Kitchen management, like the farmers, is just trying to keep its head above water at the moment; there isn't much energy for anything else. And then there is the trust thing. Nobody seems to trust anybody else at the moment.

**Krishna:** But the problem is broader than this. Fukuoka says that when it comes to agricultural pol-

icy, most societies are like a ship at sea that doesn't know where it is going. Auroville is no different. We still lack a collective agreement about the importance of food security.

**Tomas:** We have to do something different from what is happening with food agriculture all over the world. Not doing anything and letting the same thing happen here would be a huge mistake.

*What are the solutions?*

**Krishna:** Ignorance keeps us from acting together to achieve the common goal of food security which, like the water issue, is an issue of global as well as local importance. I think we both feel that the Auroville consumers have to wake up, and for that to happen we have to create a relationship with them. Our idea is to start a people's movement around local food.

We began by putting out a call in the News and Notes to all those who are ready to build the 'Slow Food' movement in Auroville. We explained that Slow Food is about embracing locally-grown food, using local recipes, while educating ourselves about the danger of chemically-grown food and the implications of industrialized agriculture.

We have a whole list of ideas. We would like to make the Farmers Market a dynamic community meeting place where we can bring local food as an issue alive. We will promote local food initiatives like Solitude Café and the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) project that Solitude has been running for five years now. (CSA is a scheme where people pay the farm six months in advance, and in return they get weekly baskets of farm produce.)

This week I put in a note in the News and Notes telling everybody which foods are abundantly available at present in Foodlink (a lot of people don't even know there is a shop at Foodlink!). Bridget and Jasmin, who write the Green Column in the News and Notes, are going to contact all the cafés and eateries and tell them that a lot of locally-grown food is not being used, and ask them to stock it as part of an awareness campaign.

Then we are going to start giving lunches to The Learning Community twice a week, and we want to pick up the community vegetable garden project again, where a group of us go out and create vegetable gardens in different Auroville communities so they can grow their own food.

In the longer term, hopefully the Farm Group will come up with its own certification of local organic Auroville food, and the schools will educate the children on building a relationship to the land, so

*continued on page 11*

## Local food and the Solar Kitchen

**T**he Solar Kitchen has been purchasing locally-grown farm-produce from Auroville farmers since it became operational. In fact, it is by far their biggest customer and has always prioritized the use of locally grown produce. However, there are some challenges in what it can do.

Every week, the Foodlink informs the Solar Kitchen on Wednesday what produce the farmers can supply the following week. But a third of the predicted produce is delivered by Foodlink at very short notice and in much less quantity than promised, and unpredicted produce is also offered frequently at very short notice. This means that the Solar Kitchen has to find alternative supplies very quickly, or has to reshuffle the menu at very short notice. While we understand that it is not always easy for the farmers to control supply, this situation is difficult and highly time-consuming.

In addition, while farmers like the Solar Kitchen to take all their produce on a daily basis, this is not feasible as sometimes there is a glut of a particular produce in peak season, and at other times – sometimes at the same time – there are far fewer people dining at the Solar Kitchen. Moreover, people who eat at the Solar Kitchen have diverse food preferences and the Solar Kitchen Team strives hard to provide a balanced meal that caters to

this diversity. The Solar Kitchen cannot take everything that the farmers can supply on a particular day because not all of it can be used in the menu of that day.

Many years back, when the Solar Kitchen used to deal directly with the farmers, there used to be more give and take over pricing. If there was a glut of a particular produce, the Solar Kitchen used to take as much as possible and the farmers used to offer the produce at a reduced rate. Moreover, farmers used to regularly donate excess produce. However, with the advent of Foodlink, this harmonious way of working has been lost and the dealing between Solar Kitchen and Foodlink has become more of a business transaction. For example, even when there was a glut of a fruit or vegetable, Foodlink continued to charge the same prices.

Only after prolonged discussions since the beginning of April 2014 did Foodlink promise to give reduced rates during "peak-seasons" for certain produce. However, it still does not offer a bulk purchasing rate to the Solar Kitchen, even though the Solar Kitchen purchases all produce in large quantities.

Solar Kitchen has its own challenges to tackle and has to carefully balance a number of priorities to provide nutritious food to the community every day of the week, all the year round.

*Solar Kitchen Management*

## Local food and the Visitors Centre

**I** agree with the farmers that communication and awareness campaigns are the key. Actually what Auroville needs is not more shops, but more kitchens and tiffin centres with a variety of styles so we can get closer to the way in which Mother envisaged our internal society would care for itself. That would not only enable us to use more Auroville products. It would also hugely cut down on our waste and free us from shopping and cooking and thinking about what to cook.

It is regretted that the farmers feel so unacknowledged that they forget to mention what is already being done. Many Auroville farm products are being taken, for example, by PTDC, Visitors Centre and Solar Kitchen. Most days, the healthy plates at Visitors Centre cafeteria feature Auroville grown cereals (varagu, red rice, complete rice, ragi in the form of noodles) and we have actually developed some very attractive recipes such as varagu pesto croquettes. We have now developed a recipe for couscous at Le Zephyr that uses varagu and a number of local vegetables. In season we make as many pickles as we can from mangoes and lemons and this lasts us several months. We supply both Sadhana Forest and PTDC with them. If we had more time we could make jams.

All our milk, except in the very high season when we cannot get enough, is Auroville

milk from four different farms. In the summer, when Auro-Orchard cannot get rid of its eggs, we take whatever surplus they have.

Every day we take fruits and vegetables from Foodlink – local produce like yams, cooking bananas, lakkis, snake gourds, pumpkins etc. for the rice meals and soups, and fresh stuff for the salads, as well as pesto and rucola. Some produce, like yams and cooking bananas, we often have to buy from outside.

However, we cannot use the particular variety of white rice supplied by Annapurna Farm for the rice meals as most of our rice-eating customers are South Indian and are particular about which types of rice they eat.

Communication needs to be seriously improved between the farmers and the eateries and outlets that take their produce. Frankly, from the point of view of the Visitors Centre cafeteria it worked better when we had direct contact with the farm. We are trying to revive this direct link with Auro-Orchard and have sat with the farm managers to explain what kind of local vegetables and fruits, such as big lemons for pickles, we would be needing and how much.

Auroville also needs another food processing unit as I don't think Naturellement can absorb everything that needs to be processed from our farms.

*Nicole (Visitors' Centre)*



# The Indian Coffee House restored

On 14th April, after about five long years, the Indian Coffee House on Nehru Street reopened its doors. The crowded tables showed how much it had been missed.

"Iconic" is a much overused term nowadays. But the old Indian Coffee House on Nehru Street, with its grubby green walls, lazy fans, wicker chairs and turbaned waiters, surely had something of that indefinable quality. Actually, what made it special was not the coffee or the food (which was never great, although the French Toast had its moments) nor the décor. It was the laid-back conversations and the chance of meeting someone mildly or wildly eccentric who would titillate your curiosity, even, at best, change your life, while outside Nehru Street stagnated in the heavy, summer heat. Remember Yann Martel's Booker-winning *Life of Pi*? It begins in just this coffee house with the author meeting an elderly man who tells him, "I have a story that will make you believe in God."

Long-term Aurovillian, Ajit Koulagi, first encountered the Indian Coffee House in 1963. He had come with his father and uncle on a visit to Pondicherry. "I still remember it. There were cane chairs, square tables and we met an old Canadian here." In June, 1971, Ajit returned for good.

"Auroville was still a desert at that time; there were just a few communities. Many of us stayed in Pondicherry and used to go up and down to Auroville with the Auroville bus. Others, like me, worked in the Auroville architects office, which in those days was located in Pondicherry: we were the 'Pondy Aurovillians'." Ajit and his friends had a daily routine. "We used to meet at the Auroville dining hall at the Society office on Beach Road, then go for our mail at the Ashram Post Office. Breakfast was at 7.30 so by 10 o'clock we were hungry. Time for French Toast or idli or dosa at the Coffee House. After

Aurovillians living here, for others connected to the Ashram and for colourful personalities like Swami Gitananda. Arindam would always have breakfast here, there was Cow John, Jack Alexander, Bryan Walton, Charlie, John Mandeem, Roy – it was like Auroville's meeting place in Pondy. It was a real hub. You had all these people sitting round chatting or sharing pages from newspapers and you thought to yourself, 'Who shall I sit with today?' Later, when we moved to Auroville, we still used to come here."

For Aurovillians, the heyday of the Indian Coffee House was the late 1960s and 1970s. At the end of that decade, Maison d'Auroville opened and Aurovillians spending the day in Pondy preferred to crash out in the more salubrious surroundings of this old Tamil house, although some old hands still preferred to lounge in the wicker chairs of the Indian Coffee House, somehow managing to ignore the bites of the bugs which had taken up residence in the canework.

Even so, the Indian Coffee House retained a warm place in the hearts of many of those early Aurovillians and Ashram school students. So it was a shock when Ajit learned a few years ago, through his work with the Pondicherry chapter of the Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage (INTACH), that the management planned to demolish it and replace it with a modern building.

"The management wanted to replace it with a concrete structure which would have lost the whole flavour of the original. The Pondicherry planning authority asked us in INTACH if we had any objection, and we answered with a very definite 'yes'. INTACH offered an alternative. They said that the main thing was to preserve the main hall, but that the kitchens behind could be modernized and upgraded. The managers were unconvinced. Among other things, they said the Madras Terrace Roof was



a good example and not demolish this."

He and Dilip Kapoor decided to speak directly to the Chief Minister some time in 2008. "We called on him early one morning when he was playing tennis at the police grounds. We told him we'd all grown up with the Coffee House, and that it is really an iconic building, a Pondicherry institution. And we told him about how it featured in *Life of Pi* and that there were plans to film the book, perhaps even in Pondicherry. So then the Chief Minister, who has been a big supporter of heritage, agreed that it shouldn't be demolished."

Reluctantly, the Coffee House management agreed. It was decided that a government organization would do the restoration and renovation work. It didn't run smoothly. They started the foundations for the new kitchen at the back without supporting the old building and, after a heavy rain, a section of the old building fell down.

"The management was not exactly displeased," laughs Ajit. "They thought they had been proved right and that now we would have to demolish the old building. But we said that this was nothing, that we had restored far worse buildings than this. Finally they asked if INTACH would do the work, and we agreed."

Recently, the renovated building opened its doors. As promised, the main hall is very much as it used to be, with its green walls and high ceiling, although now the hall feels more spacious because the pillars have been removed. There have been other changes. Gone are the wicker chairs – replaced by plastic ones – and the original tables. Ajit says INTACH has suggested to the management that the present furniture be replaced with wooden chairs and marble-topped tables and the management have agreed to this. Meanwhile, the waiters have shed their turbans and cummerbunds, but the coffee is still served in

white ceramic cups (no plastic throw-aways here) and the menu looks identical to that of the 1970s – French Toast, Rose Milk and the rest.

Over the years, a deluge of new coffee shops has refined Pondicherrians' caffeine-buds, and the Indian Coffee House coffee definitely suffers in comparison with more exotic brews down the street (particularly if you don't catch it fresh: they still make it in industrial quantities). But with coffee at Rs 15 and dosa at Rs 30 the new Indian Coffee House still offers some of the best value meals in Pondy.

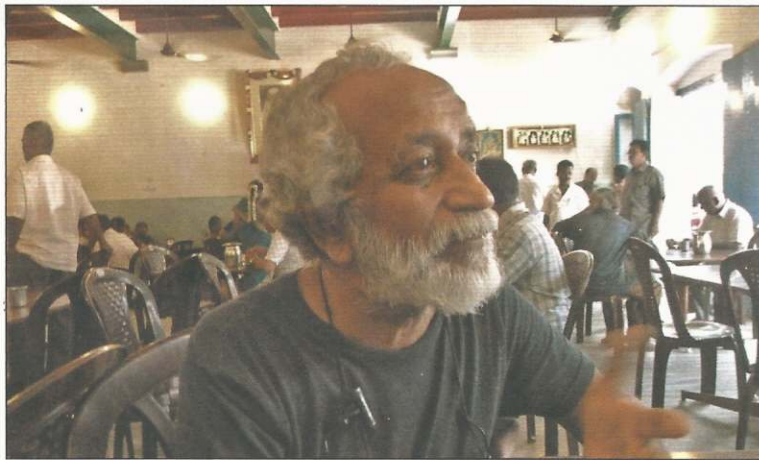
The work is not finished. Among other things, there is a plan to open another room upstairs. There will be square tables, better chairs, perhaps a sofa or two, and it will be air-conditioned. "The idea," says Ajit, "is that it will be like an upgrade, a premium service, offering wi-fi, newspapers and magazines to attract a different clientele. So below you will have the walk-in, walk-out crowd, but above you will be able to take your time. I think this is a

good mix. Two months ago we invited the Pondicherry Secretary in charge of the Cooperative Societies, who had also been to the Coffee House in his youth, to come here for a site visit, and now the Government has promised additional funds to finish the first floor. But this won't happen in a hurry. As we can only work at night, it may take many months to complete."

In the end, says Ajit, the Coffee House management has proved very supportive. "What we have learned is that instead of always saying 'no', you should always count on goodwill and cooperation from the people you are working for. You need to listen to what they want and involve them in coming up with innovative designs which satisfy everybody's needs. In this case, I think we have succeeded."

"And, of course, we had to. We are in the heritage preservation business and this place, in a way, is one of our bastions. It was also a part of my growing up. We couldn't just let it go."

Alan



Ajit in the renovated Indian Coffee House, Nehru Street, Pondicherry

lunch, time for another cup of coffee and then, around four or five, I would think, 'Let's have a coffee' (O.K., I was a bit of a coffee-addict).

"This place was the meeting place for all the crazy people who were living in Auroville and coming to town, for the

unsafe and only a new building would do.

"I thought so many old buildings have already gone on the Nehru Street, what does losing one more matter?" said Ajit. "But then I felt, let something remain. Let's get the Government to set

## Coffee House memories

Talking was the tradition at the old Indian Coffee House in Pondy. I remember being amazed at the long conversations that Pondyans, usually two or three men together, would have late in the morning or afternoon while the turbaned waiters stood around and the flies finished up the left-over coffee. The heat of Nehru Street outside of the open, louvered doors had none of the motorbike bustle of today.

Swami Gitananda, his full white beard contrasting with orange robes, trawled for foreigners to bring to his Lawspet ashram, where he lectured them about their un-yogic ways and demonstrated how he could consciously reduce his pulse rate to 18 beats a minute.

The coffee was never quite hot enough and the food was mediocre, but it was a coffee "house," not a meals hotel or a tea stall. You went out of there, your bum branded with wicker indentations, ready to wander through the streets of the French Quarter and watch Ashramites leisurely cycle through the quiet evening.

Gordon Korstange

## The 'eat local food' movement

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that the next generation will already have a different mentality.

But our emphasis now is to reach out to the community in small and simple ways. For example, if we can get the Visitors Centre to put papaya smoothies on the menu and the Solar Kitchen to serve plantain chips, I'm sure people would enjoy them.

**Tomas:** Fifteen years ago one of our people went to the Solar Kitchen and showed the ammas how to make rosella teas and juices, and since then it has become a mainstay of their menu. So we need to spend more energy on making local food attractive by helping people cook it in interesting ways. This way people slowly start to appreciate these other forms of food.

This may be far more effective than talking about all the big philosophical issues behind food, because this is too much for some people. Personally, I'm not looking so much to transform society as to find ways of providing it with healthier food. I don't mind so much if people don't know where it comes from as long as they are eating it.

**Krishna:** This is a people's movement, calling the consumer to small actions. It is the consumer, you and me, who determines that Nestle products are stocked on our shelves and that healthy Annapurna rice is sitting unused in the granary. We have to generate enough critical mass that the demand is strong enough to make the Pour Tous shop change what it puts on its shelves and the Solar Kitchen is willing to try new ways of cooking local food. We need people to come forward and help us

plan the campaign, we need marketing help, graphic designers etc.

As to the trust issue, the Farm Group recently had a two hour workshop with Monica Sharma which could be the beginning of something new. Before that meeting I felt the Farm Group was not together, but rediscovering our shared values gave me a feeling of renewed trust and hope, and the sense that something is possible.

**Tomas:** I think if we can see we are all in the same situation, and that we should hold hands rather than keep pulling in different directions, it would solve a lot of the problems.

**Krishna:** Over the years, I have had hundreds and hundreds of people come through Solitude Farm, and when I communicate to them the essentials – that we must reconnect with the land and one

way to do this is through cultivating and eating local food – everybody understands. This knowledge seems to reside in everybody's heart. So this is the essential message we have to be clear about and communicate to the community.

**How will you tell if your campaign has been successful?**

**Krishna:** Quite simply, there will be much more local food in the Solar Kitchen and in all the cafeterias, and there will be more communication between consumers and Foodlink.

**Tomas:** It will be a success if there is more trust between us; if we start to feel better with each other.

From an interview by Alan



# Conducting for harmony

We are the world and the nothingness as well. Close your eyes: we are spirit. Open your eyes: we are the body, we are the light of the Sun, the evening darkness.

Lyrics from 'Com un arbre nu'

“The lyrics are untranslatable but the song is so beautiful,” says Nuria passionately. She is talking about *Com un arbre nu*, a Catalan song by composer Lluís Llach. Accompanied by Matt, she sung it to a rapt audience in Bharat Nivas during a concert in March. “Singing, especially in my native tongue, is one of my ways to recharge my battery,” she explains, “But I also vibrate with these lyrics.”

Recharging is a must as she has a very heavy workload. That started early, shortly after she joined Auroville in 1991, when she became conductor of Auroville’s choir. Not that she had much experience to speak of. “My father was a choir conductor, so naturally all his children were part of his choir. But as a child I found the conducting business boring. Moreover, you stand with your back to the public, so where is the fun in all that?”

That all changed when Pushkar, who had started the Auroville choir, had to leave Auroville for a few months. He asked her to help out in his absence, and she agreed. But soon after he came back Pushkar announced that he would leave Auroville for a few years. “He asked me to take over the choir. I said no. And I said no again to one of the singers, who then went on a personal crusade to convince me to take it up. She kept begging me. I finally agreed to try it, on the condition that if it didn’t work, I would stop. ‘Yeah, yeah, no problem,’ she replied. That was the beginning...”

Two years later she also took up the children’s choir. It was June 1995, right after the performance of *Beyond Asleep and Awake*, the children’s opera that Holger had composed and conducted. “I had been in charge of training the children and the soloists. Some days after the performance I was having lunch at Bharat Nivas and Holger was there. I walked up to him and told him, ‘Look, if you want, I can take over the choir’. His eyes lit up. ‘It’s all yours!’ he replied, very relieved.”

But the conducting gene was slow to manifest. “It was hard going,” she remembers. “When you don’t have any experience and little knowledge and you have a group of 30 amateurs in front of you who you must make sing, it isn’t easy. I was quite young, my English wasn’t all that good, and although things were going quite well, for about two years I was not sure of myself. Was I really being accepted by the adults or were they just being nice to me? Did they like the way I was doing things? For I was doing something I never had done before. Moreover, I am a perfectionist, so there were many tough moments. Often, I went home after a rehearsal feeling quite uncertain.”

Working with the children was easier. “There are fewer voices, mostly two, maximum three, instead of four in the adult choirs [sopranos, altos, tenors and basses, eds.]; and the music is lighter. Kids are also more flexible and learn very quickly. I was already teaching recorder, guitar, music appreciation and singing at Transition primary school, so that job was less demanding as I had the skills to handle children.”

The lack of knowledge and experience was compensated by her passion. “That pulled me through,” she reflects. “I started to gain self-confidence, liking it more and more, and decided to continue.” Help came. Over the years, four professional choir conductors



PHOTO: COROLAN, COURTESY MIA STUDIO

passed through Auroville. The first was the father of Aurovilian Gilles Boulicot, who taught her some conducting essentials and gave her books and scores. “I started to study the books and used the choir as the testing-ground. My qualms about this were silenced when, on a holiday in Europe, I chanced upon a book written by a female choir conductor. ‘The best way of learning’, she wrote, ‘is having the choir in front of you every week’. This was exactly what I was doing, so I felt very encouraged.”

While Gilles’ father kept sending scores, other conductors turned up. One was Orpheus, a Dutch composer. Another Dutch choir conductor passed through, for a few days only, “but just

talking to him opened up a world.” Then came Eugene Liven d’Abelardo, a Belgian choir conductor and composer who became a Friend of Auroville and who stayed in Auroville a few months at a time. “I asked him to teach me. He agreed. After seeing my first rehearsal, he commented that I was a natural but had no technique. That was a bit shattering. ‘But it doesn’t matter’, he assured me. ‘For if you have the first, you can get the second’.”

Eugene taught techniques and provided many scores. Soon he agreed to work with the choir himself. “I became his assistant, doing the vocal warm up and making sure everybody knew their parts. That worked well for two years, but then stopped being satisfactory. I took a sabbatical, Eugene continued alone with the choir, but after a year handed the baton back to me.”

What finally confirmed her conducting skills was a conducting course she attended in Spain five years ago. “I learned many techniques and people corrected my mistakes. More than ever before I became aware of the basic requirements for being a conductor: to be very well prepared, to know the music down to your fingertips, and to know what you want from the choir. Now when I conduct, I am not even aware anymore of the public; I am all there for the music. I’m totally into the music. More than ever, conducting is my *sadhana*.”

She elaborates. “In fact, everything I do in Auroville I take as part of my yoga. But working with the choir is a beautiful tool to create human unity. There are now 50 singers in the choir. They may not relate much to one another or even may hold opposite views and opinions, but when we are singing all that disappears and something of a higher level shines through. Perhaps this is because of the way I take this work. For me, the main reason to conduct a choir is to provide a space for self-expression through refined choral music, to create something beautiful and of quality together, in harmony, and through it, work on human unity, in fact on another level.



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Has her choice of songs anything to do with this? “Not really,” she muses. “When it comes to choir music I have a preference for Western classical music from all time periods. But I also like to do gospel songs, folk songs, songs from musicals, and popular music, as it provides a good range of music for the choir.”

Is she bothered by the often religious texts of Western choir music? “Sometimes,” she admits. “I had a Roman Catholic upbringing and had to struggle to liberate myself from that influence. I do not like to reconnect to that past through this type of music, or even manifest it here in Auroville. But, on the other hand, most of that music is so marvellous and uplifting and extremely well composed. How can I say ‘no’ to the music of Händel, Bach or Vivaldi? And even if I feel uncomfortable with the texts, many others in the choir are willing to take the texts for granted as the music is so grandiose. There have been proposals to change the texts, but that doesn’t really work. This music has been composed for those texts, so we had better leave them untouched.”

Over the years, conducting two choirs and teaching at Transition became more than a full-time job. “I stopped singing for myself and started missing it. For, as a musician, you have to keep working on yourself. You cannot just give out; you also need to recharge the battery.” Three years ago, she decided to stop teaching music in the school as it had become too demanding for her voice. “It took me two years to do so, as I liked it so much. Instead, I have started teaching Awareness Through the Body which is less tiring for the voice and also interests me a lot. Now I have time to work with a group exploring modern songs, like those of Lluís Llach.”

*Like a bare tree, as a drawing made in the wind, like a bare tree, I, the bird. As a sea port, silent world, love nest, as a sea port, I, the ship. The infinite all at once and the absolute silence.*

Carel

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