

# Auroville Today

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PHOTO: IRENO GUERCI

Here comes trouble: the pirates board the ship.

## Sorcery at Sea

“Have you seen it, have you seen it, have you, have you, have you seen it?” was the question on everybody’s lips. They were referring to ‘Sorcery at Sea’, a musical written, composed, produced and performed exclusively by Aurovilians which filled the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium to overflowing on two successive nights in mid March.

And these were not just parents coming to see their kids perform on stage. This was a high-quality production in its own right, involving 54 actors of all ages, good costumes, lively sets, accomplished live musicians and a host of backstage and support-wallahs (including, perhaps for the first time in Auroville’s theatrical history, a stunt coordinator).

Summarising the plot would probably tax even the talents of Paul Blanchflower, who wrote and directed the musical. But a stripped-down version would go something like this. Seven years ago, a ship went down in a storm. All were lost except two lovers, Captain Jacob (Jesse) and Margaret Elsewood (Kripa). However, neither is aware that the other has survived. The Captain returns to sea, but embittered by his loss he swears that he will never allow a woman to sail on his ship again. Margaret has been disfigured by the shipwreck and will not allow anybody to see her face. Eventually she discovers that Jacob has survived and, along with her lady in waiting, she manages to get passage incognito on Jacob’s vessel which is just about to embark on a voyage.

Very soon there is a huge storm which the ship barely survives and the crew begin muttering that having women on board is bad luck. However, they are distracted when they spot a survivor of the storm in the sea, a young woman. Pulling her on board, they discover she is clutching an empty bot-

tle. Later, the doctor (Charu), who has taken charge of the bottle, notices that it has mysteriously filled up. The doctor, Captain, Lieutenant and Margaret take a sip of the delicious contents; after Margaret leaves, they empty the bottle and fall asleep.

Meanwhile, the ship is overrun by female pirates. Jezebel, the leader, calls for the captain and a young boy in the captain’s uniform emerges from the captain’s cabin. It is Captain Jacob, transformed into a young boy by the magic potion that he has drunk. Soon, the Lieutenant and doctor emerge, also transformed into young boys, followed by Margaret, now a young lady.

Jezebel realizes that they have drunk the potion which she and the pirates have been drinking for many years to keep them young (“Eternal youth is just a little drink away”). The source is a spring on their island, which only produces the potion at full moon. Taking Margaret and her attendant prisoner, they return to their ship and set off for the island. The young Captain has glimpsed the now healed face of his beloved Margaret before she is taken away so he knows she did not die at sea. However, he faces a mutiny from the ranks. Finally, he convinces his disgruntled crew that he is still the same man, albeit in a much younger body. Then the survivor of the storm emerges, who is now an old woman. She tells the crew that there is treasure on the island and they decide to sail there.

Arriving on the island, they meet Rangadoo, an eccentric English captain shipwrecked on the island many years before. He tells them where the fabulous treasure is and the crew set out to grab the spoils. Meanwhile, a determined Captain Jacob looks for Margaret (“I know I’m gonna survive and bring her back forever/I’m gonna fight for what I know is right and bring us back together”).

As it is now full moon, the pirates wait by the

spring for their monthly dose of the magic potion. Suddenly the elixir of youth gurgles out and the pirates drink, only to fall into a deep swoon. The Captain rushes in to rescue Margaret, but she will not leave without her attendant. The pirates revive and capture Jacob and Sarah but Margaret and two of the ship’s crew, along with their treasure, make it back to their ship.

The pirates pursue them and there is a huge fight on board. Eventually, Jezebel and Margaret face each other in single combat. Margaret wins the swordfight and the pirates are banished with a warning not to continue with their plunderous activities. Margaret flings the magic potion bottle into the sea and the young Margaret and her even younger Captain are reunited.

It is, of course, a jolly good yarn, and like all good yarns, there is a generous dash of humour, magic and reversals of fortune, along with a hatful of colourful characters. In addition to Rangadoo (Johnny), who sees himself as a cross between a rat and a kangaroo, there’s the first mate Old Dog John (Otto) who fears he is on a cursed voyage; Chaucer (Krishna), an obstreperous Cockney cook with ideas above his station; and Jezebel (Jana), the proud queen of her ‘free’ pirates. And there are a host of other characters with names which suggest a colourful past (or present) – Frilly, Stop’er and Knickers.

But what carried this production was much more than the ‘big’ names we are used to enjoying on stage. There were also fine performances from young Yam and Victoria (as the young Captain and Margaret), both of whom have real stage presence. In fact, there wasn’t a weak link in this cast; everybody was coordinated, ‘on board’, all of the time while the sheer verve and commitment with which everybody, from the very youngest to the oldest, flung themselves into performing this yarn

was superb.

And then, of course, there was the music, composed by Paul and Matt. In some musicals, the music feels like an ‘add-on’, unadapted to the context, but here it was beautifully integrated. Now rousing, as in All Hands Aboard; now hauntingly wistful as in Margaret’s Song (“For a moment my heart was open/But now that flame has died”); now dramatic as in Have you seen it?, when Old Dog John and a marvellously feisty Sea Gypsy (Veronique) challenge each other to come up with more and more fabulous tales of the sea; now proud and celebratory as in the pirates’ proclamation It’s Who We Are (“We’re the ladies of the sea/Reckless, wild and fancy-free/So stop making such a fuss/Burn your bras and come with us”).

Not only are the songs catchy, but they were also well articulated and sung, in no small part due to Nuria’s singing direction as well as to the carefully-placed microphones – all signs of the quiet professionalism which underlay this production.

Of course, there are one or two niggles. It’s confusing that Margaret in Act One refers to her refusal to allow anybody to see her disfigured face when everybody in the audience can see it is unmarked. Then again, the final reconciliation of the lovers is a little unsatisfying because of their obvious age difference and uncertainty concerning whether this will ever be undone. And the 2nd Act could probably have been trimmed – and the potion plot simplified – without detriment to the whole.

But, overall, this was a triumph of community theatre. In the same week that Aurovilians had been flagellating themselves about the failure of their governance system, this dollop of unmitigated joy was a reminder that a whole other Auroville exists out there; an Auroville of uncomplicated joy, love, mutual support and celebration. Thanks, guys!

Alan

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# The work of the Entry Service

A little more than a year ago, new members of the Entry Service took office. Auroville Today asked three of them, Kripa, Ishita and Saraswati, for their experience.

“We’re a service, not a working group,” emphasizes Kripa. Driving the point home, she explains that a working group may have an agenda, while a service has none. “We work on behalf of the community. Our job is welcoming people and accompanying them in their entry into Auroville. We are doing this on the basis of an accepted policy document, continuing the work of the previous Entry Service after a six-months handing-over process.”

It is a mistake to think that the responsibility for admission falls fully on the shoulders of the Entry Service. “The entire community has a role to play,” says Sarawati. “There is a large network of people working with the Entry Service, and we only take decisions after having considered all feedback. This comes from different sources such as the Newcomer’s contact person, his or her work place and, if there are children, from the schools. We also get feedback from those who conduct the Newcomer programmes, and, sometimes, from the community, after its announcement in the News and Notes that a Newcomer’s period is at an end. But strong negative criticism of people comes in rarely; when it comes, we look at it carefully.”

So does the Service then ‘judge’ a person and take decisions? “No,” says Kripa, “not really. It was this aspect of the work that initially made me hesitate to join. For who am I to judge if a person is suitable to become Aurovilian? But now that I am here, I realise that we do not ‘judge’. I have observed that the people reveal themselves. There is a process, there is a structure, and the people themselves are responsible for how they handle their integration. Each person brings his or her own qualities and difficulties. We do not sit in judgement. Most of the time, the situation is very clear for all of us, for the applicant as well as for the Entry Service members.”



The members of the Entry Service. From left Lea, Eva, Ishita, Saraswati, Kripa and Umberto

to settle well in Auroville. In all such cases we share our observations with the person.”

Yet, like all other Auroville services and working groups, the Entry Service too is subject to misunderstandings and sometimes malicious gossip, such as that it would only process the applications of Westerners and not those of Indians. “The statistics [see box] show that this is not the case,” says Ishita. “But how can you defend yourself against such rumour mongering? For example, two weeks ago there was an early morning fire in our office. An electrical socket had short-circuited. The soot was over everything and we had to temporarily close down. Out of the blue we got emails from people who said that there are ‘occult reasons’ for this, that the attitude of the Entry Service members caused the fire. We laughed about it, but it shows an attitude of basic mistrust.”

“But we also got an occult explanation from an understanding Newcomer who said that it had happened because all the negative vibes that people bring to us needed to be burned away,” says Sarawati, laughing. “That Newcomer was probably closer to the point, for the workload is heavy, and we are understaffed. Each of us has a specific task and area of responsibility.”

### Working for Auroville

So what makes people upset? “One of our main difficulties is the interference from Aurovilian friends of an applicant who object that a specific part of the entry process and programme must be followed by the applicant,” says Ishita. “But we cannot change the programme just to suit somebody. The admission policy is equal for all.” “We often face Aurovilians who blindly support their applicant friend ‘against’ the Entry Service, without trying to understand what leads us to ask the applicant to do this or that,” says Kripa. “We would appreciate it if our fellow Aurovilians would understand that when an issue arises, their main duty should be to mediate with the best interest of the community at heart.”

Another difficulty flows from one of the main principles of Auroville, that people work for Auroville and contribute towards its growth and development. “For us, there is no question about this,” says Kripa. “You come here to give yourself. You don’t come here to be in a holiday resort or to retire. We are here to build the community, make it grow, and that requires everybody’s full-time energy.”

“But, contrary to what some people insinuate, we do not force anybody to do a particular work,” says Sarawati. “People willingly do what they want to do. We allow people to work in clowning, writing for newspapers, organizing cultural programmes and so on. It is not that we send them to Pour Tous to fill-up the shelves or to the Greenbelt to plant trees, if they don’t like that type of work. People are free to select their field of activity, as long as it helps the community.”

“There is another aspect,” says Ishita. “We want Newcomers to experience the community and meet other people. Work is ideal for that. So we normally would object to someone who proposes to spend the Newcomer year in isolation to write a novel. But we would not object to someone wanting to write a book on Auroville, based on

research and interactions with Aurovilians.”

“Sometimes we are asked how we calculate someone’s ‘full-time’ work,” says Kripa. “We always answer that we don’t, but that we need a kind of schedule and, more importantly, the person’s commitment. You can’t say ‘I do this work when I feel like doing it’. Each work has a requirement which has to be met with a minimum of discipline. This includes taking care of one’s children. When they finish school and you have to bring them to their next activity, that too is work. So we don’t clock a person’s time. But if a person says that she will be sitting under the Banyan Tree for three hours a day being busy with inner work, well, then we might suggest that she does it while helping cleaning the socks used in the Matrimandir Chamber! You can also experience the Matrimandir through working there.”

### Housing

An often misunderstood issue is the Entry Service’s insistence that a Newcomer actively looks for permanent accommodation. “This flows from the Admission Policy,” explains Kripa. “As long as people are Newcomers they are here to explore and they don’t need permanent housing. They can benefit from house sitting, from Newcomer housing, or even stay in a guesthouse. But the moment they take the decision to become Aurovilian, they take the decision to become part of this community and then they take up the commitment to make

this place grow on all levels, including physically. This means that either they sign up to join a housing project, or put a certain amount of money in the Housing Fund for a future house or apartment. We insist on this commitment before a person can become Newcomer.”

“It is a question of circulating energy,” explains Saraswati. “An Aurovilian should not be benefitting from someone else’s asset, but contribute to his or her own. We also want to prevent that people, who are house-sitting during their Newcomer period, would, upon becoming Aurovilian, insist that the community give them a house for free or otherwise refuse to vacate the house. House-sitting is an option for people who have just arrived. It shouldn’t be an option for people who become Aurovilian. For if all empty places are being occupied by Aurovilians, and no new assets are being created, how are we going to have spaces for new people?”

Does this imply that Auroville is only for the affluent who have the money for a house? “There is a large influx of youngsters into Auroville who come as volunteers,” says Kripa. “They can live here on a quite low budget with very basic accommodation. The problem arises several years later, when they would like to join Auroville – then free accommodation is not available.”

“People can’t expect to become Aurovilian and be given a house for free,” says Ishita. “That’s simply no longer possible. Already we have a housing crisis. The Housing Service is hard pressed to find accommodation for Aurovilians and we cannot add to that pressure by admitting more homeless people as Aurovilians, except, perhaps, in special cases. But the practical follow up with Newcomer housing is not our business; it is the responsibility of the Housing Service.”

Contributing to housing [the present rate is Rs 25,000 per square metre] means, in the Auroville context, that a person makes a donation to the Auroville Foundation which is not refundable if the person leaves Auroville. Is this a big step for many people? “Today’s Newcomers are cautious,” says Sarawati. “In the past, many people joined Auroville after having sold-off their possessions. They put all their money into Auroville and simply ‘jumped into the adventure’. Nowadays, you see people holding on to their possessions, renting out their flat in Delhi or wherever, also to have a kind of independent income. In a way, we welcome this. We advise people not to burn their bridges until they are 100% sure about joining Auroville. For we wouldn’t want to carry the responsibility of them being unhappy in Auroville and not being able to leave for financial reasons.”

In conversation with Carel

Applicants and Newcomers by Nationality - Jan 2013		
	Applicants	Newcomers
American	6	3
Australian	4	2
Austrian	2	
Belgian	3	3
British	1	1
Bulgarian		1
Canadian	2	
Chinese	1	4
Colombian	2	
Danish	1	1
Dutch	3	7
Ecuadorian		1
Egyptian		1
Ethiopian	1	
French	7	19
German	5	5
Greek		1
Indian	60	20
Iranian	2	
Israeli	3	3
Italian	7	5
Japanese		1
Korean	2	4
Latvian	2	
Moldavian	1	
Russian	4	6
Spanish	1	4
Swedish	1	1
Swiss	1	1
Tibetan		1
Ukrainian		2
Total	122	97

“We have developed a kind of collective sensitivity, a common insight,” explains Sarawati. “In almost all cases we are in complete agreement on our ‘feelings’ if a person fits in or doesn’t. Sometimes, we decide that the one year Newcomer period should be extended, as we feel that the period for integration hasn’t been used sufficiently or that the person is not ready. In some cases, we say ‘no’, taking into account the particular circumstances in the life of the applicant which would make it hard if not impossible

NEWCOMER INDICATIVE COST CALCULATION - 2013	Monthly Adult contrib. (Rs.)		Yearly (Rs.)	
	Min.	Max.	Min.	Max.
Housing (Newcomer account)	1 900.00	8 000.00	22 800.00	96 000.00
Others (House-sitting, staff quarter, family)				
Newcomer contribution	2 600.00	2 600.00	31 200.00	31 200.00
Solar Kitchen	950.00	950.00	11 400.00	11 400.00
Food PTDC kids < 12 years: 900 - 1500 kids > 12 years: 2100	2 900.00	2 900.00	34 800.00	34 800.00
AV Health Fund kids: 150	300.00	300.00	3 600.00	3 600.00
Transport (rent of a motorbyke)	1 000.00	3 000.00	12 000.00	36 000.00
Education kid: with lunches, sport, transport = 4000				
Health Check-up average			4 500.00	4 500.00
Ticket deposit (refundable - average) kid <12 years: 70% kid >12 years: 100%			35 000.00	45 000.00
Repatriation Fund kid: 1000			1 000.00	1 000.00
Administration kid: 1000			8 000.00	8 000.00
Indicative Total Cost	9 650.00	17 750.00	155 800.00	235 516.00



# What draws them to Auroville?

Newcomers and recent Aurovilians talk about why they came

In the early days of Auroville, pioneers came to this barren plateau to create a new idealistic society under the guidance and spiritual presence of the Mother, who was nearby living in Pondicherry. In those first years, the Mother herself decided who could stay, and specifically invited some of those adventurous souls. It was a harsh environment with few trees and hardened, red earth in the summer and rivers of mud in the rainy season. There were few people and few amenities; Pondicherry was a long, hot bicycle ride away. Yet there was an exhilarating spirit of being brothers and sisters forging a new future for humanity, free of the conventions of the past, forerunners of a marvellous dawn.

Forty-five years later Auroville is changed. Instead of barren scrub land, there is a lush forest. Restaurants, shops and guest houses line the paved roads leading into town. Instead of keet huts and capsules, most people live in modern houses and apartments surrounded with landscaped gardens. What is it now that attracts new members to this very different Auroville?

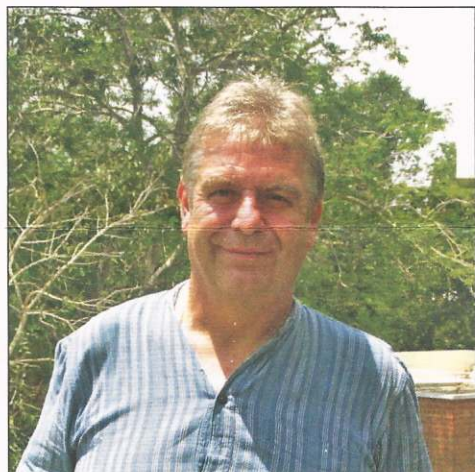


Petra

Petra had been looking for many years to find a way out of the ordinary life. Originally from a small town in Sweden, she had lived much of her life in big cities like New York, London, and Brussels, and wanted to return to nature. At the same time, with her experience in Buddhism, she was looking for places in which there would be an environment of yoga and meditation. With her husband Tom, she had explored places in Portugal, Spain and France. She had also visited India numerous times, backpacking and working, and often had a feeling that she would end up living here. She did a google search on South India, including terms like yoga and meditation, and Auroville popped up. When another work opportunity came to visit India, she took time out to visit Auroville. She "really liked it," and was "impressed with all the trees that had been planted." Also, during this visit, one night she was woken up by the flapping canvas of her beach hut, though in her

dream it was the fluttering of a butterfly while the Mother was telling her, "You have something else to take away from here."

Together with their children, Petra and Tom took a holiday to explore Auroville for a month in 2011, staying in Certitude. "On the whole it went quite well and the children were adapting." They decided then that they would take a year off from work and try it out. During one of the last days of their short visit, they visited Sadhana Forest. "We really liked the off-the-grid living," and they were offered a place to stay when they returned for their planned year-long tryout. They returned just after the cyclone, and found it "quite difficult with all the mosquitoes, no doors, and no playmates for our children." Tom found work in the city centre doing film-making, which he loved, so they decided to move closer to town. They were offered a house-sit in Auromodele, which had a great library with all the books of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Petra started reading and was impressed with the ideal of perfecting life here on earth. She started volunteering at Auroville Today and at the Bamboo Centre and enjoyed the work. They found a school for their son and everyone seemed to be adjusting well. They contacted the Entry Service, and having volunteered fully for five months were given a letter of recommendation for an Entry Visa so that they could come back and start the Newcomer process. The family returned to settle in a Newcomer house in Djaima, and Petra continues her work with the Bamboo Centre, and Tom with his film-making. The children have friends and they are enjoying the life here, which has a slower pace than in the cities and is closer to nature.



Nick

Nick, originally from Australia, came to Auroville for the first time in 2008. Retiring from a successful business career, he had joined several people to create an ecologically-sustainable community in Kerala. For two years, he had worked to develop the community, but encountered many difficulties. In the meantime, he

made an acquaintance in Auroville, and started to visit and learn about its activities. He was particularly interested in the various kinds of research and experiential knowledge in sustainable development which he was able to access in Auroville, but he also came to love other aspects of the community, and became involved in various endeavours, such as Wellpaper, the Auroville Bamboo Centre, and the Mohanan Cultural Centre. What particularly interests him is the relationship of Auroville with the local community, which he believes needs to become more equitable and integral. He also likes that Auroville attracts many young people from various countries around the world, with their bright inquisitive minds and capabilities.

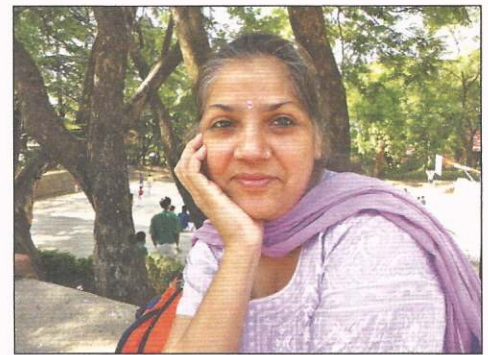


Ursula

Ursula, who recently completed her newcomer period, came from Germany for a visit to Auroville for the first time in 2006. She had earlier explored two different small intentional communities, but did not find them to be a good fit. She stayed at the guest house in Gratitude, the small community which is quietly nestled behind Certitude. During her one month visit, the beautiful natural surroundings struck a deep chord and she felt a special energy. She describes Gratitude as a cross between a Zen garden and a jungle. It is a natural breeding place for peacocks – once they counted 48 of them – and smaller numbers regularly stroll the grounds and perch upon the buildings. Many other types of birds also frequent the place.

After retiring and receiving her pension in 2007, she came back for a nine month visit in 2008, staying at the same guest house. During this visit she often felt the inner quality of gratitude, after which the community is named. She was working at the Matrimandir, and made it a practice to meditate in all the petals in her aspiration to experience the various qualities they represented. Whenever she visited the Ashram, she also felt a special presence, and had a powerful experience while meditating at the Samadhi. She knew Auroville was her place to stay. When she returned in 2009 the Entry

Service was closed, but she came again in 2010, found work at the Financial Service, and began her Newcomer period. Ursula seems to have found her place in her small house in Gratitude. "There is no pressure here," she says, "and in this quietude it is more possible to work with the energy and process of changing one's nature."



Meenakshi

Meenakshi, originally from Delhi, and her husband and child were living a comfortable life in Canada, but felt something was missing. Her husband also foresaw difficult financial times ahead, and they were not completely happy with some of the cultural differences, such as the tasteless, chemically- and genetically-modified foods, and the neighbours who remained strangers. They also wanted their son to experience the culture of India. So they decided to move back to India. They first lived in Delhi and then Himachal Pradesh, but could not find a place that was in consonance with their values. Then, in 2011, Meenakshi came across the Auroville website and took a two-week vacation to visit. During the next few days, as she talked with Aurovilians about the ideals and values of Auroville and began to explore some of the possibilities it provided for self-development, she knew she had found their home. Within two months the family had packed their belongings and moved to Auroville.

Meenakshi suggests that there may have been a hidden guidance at work, though she had not been aware of it at the time and did not take heed. Although she did not know about Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, she believes that she had sometimes seen Mother's eyes. Also, a friend had earlier suggested to her to go to Auroville, but at the time she did not follow his advice. She feels that "My journey is somehow not mine and someone else is leading me, telling me when to move and what to do. I am only listening now ... to my inner voice."

It seemed that all those I spoke with were attracted by the ideals of a more progressive community life, as well as a life in harmony with nature. At the same time, although not always consciously present from the beginning, there sometimes seems to have been something more deeply spiritual that has drawn them to Auroville.

Larry

## It felt like home

Potential Newcomer Cindy Dalglish, a specialist in online marketing and social media, is exploring settling in Auroville. She shares what brought her to Auroville and her experiences of the 6 months spent here.

It's 10:00 am. Cindy and I are sitting comfortably on cushions in an apartment in Maitreye, sipping coffee and eating Auroville bread smeared with papaya ginger jam. It's a beautiful Saturday morning, ideal for a chat.

**Tell us something about what you did before you came to Auroville.**

My professional career was very rewarding. I was always close to the political environment. I had to either apply for or distribute government funding. I refurbished, or converted public buildings for creative and cultural use as well as developing networks and delivering live events and festivals. I have predominantly worked with creative and cultural organisations in the UK in public and private sectors. However, no matter how many success stories, each time we had to start from the beginning and explain the rationale and business case, why this is a good idea, who it would benefit etc. After 17 years of this I went full circle and ended up doing the same things that I had been doing in the first 5 years. I was going in circles as the pay check just got bigger and contracts more complicated.

In the last ten years of my working life I have also been doing a spiritual practice called Vedanta. It took me a long time to find it. I went through most religious practices such as Christianity, Buddhism and Cabbalism and settled into Vedanta about three years ago as it was closest to what I sought. I made a small compromise with Vedanta as it is based within a strong religious tradition. I am non-religious, but because it is a practice that worked



Cindy

for me I accepted it.

Anyway, there was a point when, no matter how much I tried to integrate my spiritual practice with my work, I just couldn't do it. The political environment was such that it was very difficult to be honest. It was normal to be dishonest, manipulate, cajole, to try to get the job done. So what I would do is work on a contract and go on a retreat, then work on another contract and go on another retreat and so on – two years of work then 6 months out. That worked very well for a while until I realised that I needed to go

and find a place where I could do both, to do work as yoga.

**How did you learn about Auroville?**

Over the last five years the importance of my practice has escalated. The most important thing to me is my spiritual condition. I have visited communities like Findhorn and Schumacher College and have been developing my spiritual practice through retreats, workshops and coaching programmes. Six months ago I was happily booked to go to an ashram close to Mumbai. I was going deep in and accepting the approach of Swami Parthasarathy. Just prior to leaving England a friend showed me the Galaxy map of Auroville on his phone and I asked him, "What exactly is that?" He said that's a town in India that is implementing the practices of Sri Aurobindo. I knew about the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry but didn't know anything about Auroville. So I started doing research on what Auroville was and within 5 days I changed my whole plan.

**How did you feel when you arrived here?**

It felt like home. I understood the concept relatively easily and felt very comfortable. It was strange, I instinctively knew that no one would tell me what to do, that I had to find out for myself, that there was not going to be a red carpet treatment here. You are free to discover Auroville the way you want. Other communities, while they are very positive and great places to develop your practice, have distinct cultural and philosophical doctrines. You have to believe in practices, adopt some sort of belief system and choose

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*Organisation is a discipline of action, but for Auroville we aspire to go beyond arbitrary and artificial organisation. We want an organisation that is the expression of a higher consciousness working to manifest the truth of the future. An organisation is needed for the work to be done – but the organisation itself must remain flexible and plastic in order to progress continually and to modify itself according to the need.*

*The Mother*

Auroville is experiencing a crisis in governance. The Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly, the Auroville Council, the Funds and Assets Management Committee, the Town Development Council, and the Residents' Assembly function only with the greatest of difficulties. Here, members of the various groups share their personal views, which are not necessarily those of the other members of their working group.

#### The Working Committee

"This Working Committee began in December 2011 but had a hard start because of the disaster caused by cyclone Thane. The work overwhelmed us and because of that, we never sat down to discuss our functioning and how we would come to agreements. That has weakened the group ever after. There were difficulties from the beginning, and though we all tried our best, we could not solve them," says Kali. "Often, there were delays in decision making and some of us became convinced that other members would only agree to take decisions about issues after they had talked about them to non-Working Committee members. Mistrust led to more mistrust. We were able to do some work, but we could have done ten times as much if we would have been in harmony."

The Working Committee plodded on, but the non-functionality reached its apex when two absent members went out of station. "When it became clear that they would not return for quite some time, some of us proposed that they officially resign and we find replacements for them to return to the full seven member team. But it proved to be impossible to find people on whom we could all agree. We discussed for weeks, the meetings became completely dysfunctional and no conclusion ever was reached. The deadlock was complete," says Kali.

She felt that the community should be informed. On March 4th, she published an open letter on the Intranet, sharing her experience and her concerns as well as her personal limitations. "I have tried – again and again – for more than one year to work out the challenges and differences we face as a team on a daily basis. ... I experience our team as divided and so full of mistrust that no true cooperation is possible. Hidden agendas, political motivations and individual vendettas rule our discussions to the extent that our work is slowed down, decisions about important community issues are delayed, leave alone Unity in Diversity ... I am reaching out to you all because I don't want to continue to pretend that all is fine, cannot continue to support the lie we are living."

"If the letter was intense and full of pain, it was but a softer version of what I was really feeling inwardly," says Kali. "I'd managed for the first year to keep these issues away from my breakfast table. But in the last few months, they came back home with me and started to influence my behaviour and my family life. I started deeply questioning my home (Auroville) and for the first time wondered where we were really heading to and if it was not time to go for a long walkabout."

The root of the problem, says Kali, was planted during the constitution of this Working Committee. "There was an incredible amount of lobbying in the Selection Committee, with political placement and representation taking the place of looking for competence, and no regard if the group constituted would be able to work together. [see also AVToday #271 of January 2012.] When we later asked one of the members of the Selection Committee why it had constituted this group, the answer was that 'this Working Committee was not intended to be a strong body.' But why such a conspiracy? What is the personal agenda which prevented the community from having a strong Working Committee? Are we not all here for the same reasons?"

With the members of the Working Committee unable to reach agreement, the Selection

Committee decided to take matters in hand. But on March 16th it informed the community that its efforts finding the two replacements had failed. The Selection Committee then recommended that the process to select a new Working Committee be started at the earliest and reminded the community that, as the basic objectives of avoiding politics and lobbying had failed, the process of nominating members for the Working Committee, Auroville Council and the Selection Committee be overhauled.

With the summer approaching, we may expect that it will take the community many months to analyze what exactly has gone wrong and come to an agreement on how to find members for the next Working Committee. Meanwhile, the present Working Committee continues in office.

#### The Auroville Council

The problems of the Working Committee finding harmony between its members do not plague the Auroville Council. "We have other issues," says Sonja. "The Council functions as a mix of a police station, a social security complaint office, a mental health clinic, an office for complaints about domestic violence and abuse, a place to go to get support for your fence disputes, and then it is also supposed to look at the performance of other working groups and propose new policies or guidelines. That's quite a handful. But we could deal with it, were it not for the fact that the Council is completely powerless. That's our problem."

She explains: "There is an image of power and authority which is wielded by a working group such as the Council. But the image does not correspond to reality. The reality is that there is a lack of respect from community members towards the working groups. For we have no power to enforce any decision. We don't have something like a 'police force' at our disposal, so we can only try to convince people. This means endless talk, analyzing in great detail all the pros and cons of a situation, with the result that it takes weeks if not months to come to a decision, which is then not enforceable. The party who doesn't agree simply doesn't accept the outcome. And there is no consequence for any such negative behaviour. That's shocking. All the goodwill evaporates into thin air and it creates mental and physical fatigue within the members of the Council and unhappiness with the people involved."

She gives the example of a recent conflict between neighbours in an Auroville community which escalated from verbal threats into physical violence, in which even a member of one of Auroville's major working groups took part. "The Council did not succeed in bringing both parties together. Then, one Aurovilian called the police and filed a court case against the other Aurovilians. We recognize the grievances of the Aurovilian who filed the complaint and we strongly expressed to the other party that violence is unacceptable in Auroville and goes against all what Auroville stands for. Yet, only one party was open to mediation and we could not make the aggrieved party understand that involving the police and courts will only damage Auroville's reputation."

Are Auroville's values going down the drain? Sonja believes so. "I am not talking about the high spiritual values but about the human values. Here we are going down. We have people trying to push their views by threatening with violence – either physical or by spreading negative, defaming publicity via email to as many internal and external mailboxes as possible – or, worse, acting violently. In the early days, when someone was being physically threatened or attacked, the community would rise and come to his help and the aggressor would be sent out for some time. Today, nothing happens. We hear about Aurovilians receiving death threats; but when they report it, it is being shrugged off. But I consider those threats completely unacceptable as they may have consequences and create a state of fear which is not in line with our commitment to the aim of Auroville, Human Unity. Auroville should take all possible action against those who threaten fellow Aurovilians. Physical violence, emotional violence, slander, they all are completely unacceptable and should have real consequences!"

She gives another example. "I came to Auroville in the 1979. There was clarity of values, and unclarity on the use of funds, for example, was not acceptable; this was one of the complaints we had against the Sri Aurobindo Society. But today, you see the same thing happening in Auroville, by Aurovilians, and the misbehaviour is not confronted strongly. Sometimes, in a work group meeting wrongdoers are defended. 'X received in a lot of money for the project. What is wrong if he takes some part for himself?' That would not have been

# Auroville governance in c

possible 25 years ago. In those times, when we drafted projects for funding, we would often forget the needs of those who would execute the projects. Today, 'take care of yourself and your family first' seems to have become normal."

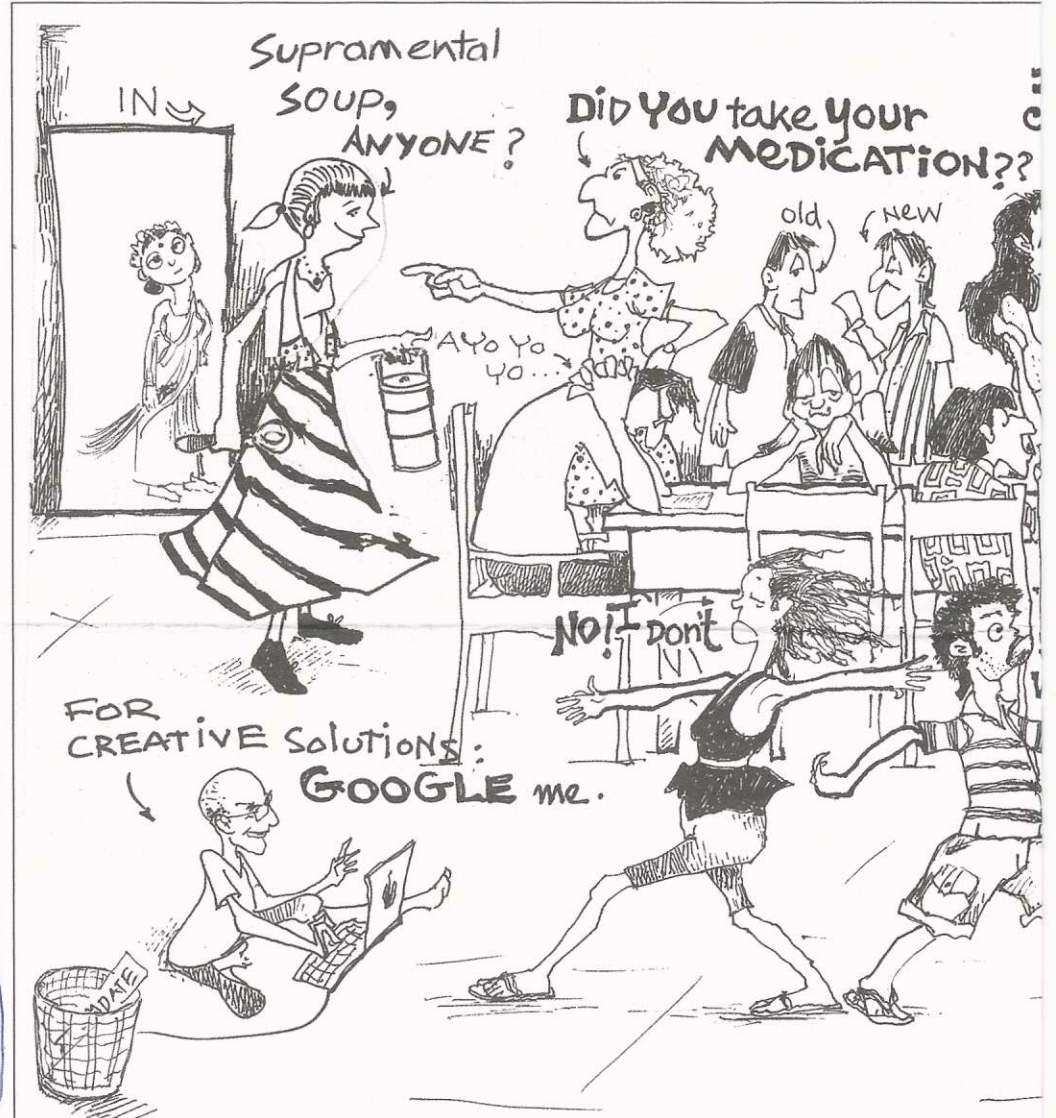
The housing crisis is yet another issue. "There are houses in the community that are standing empty or are being controlled by people who for more than 10 years no longer live in Auroville; some are controlled by someone who has plans to turn houses into a guesthouse. Others are unoccupied for a long time as the neighbour complains of a sensitive health and can't bear noise – so to find the right person who can live there could take more than a year. Then there are cases where agreements of house transfer are ignored. Yet, the work groups responsible have a hard time taking action, for they face tremendous opposition if they want to enforce a decision in accordance with the Housing Policy. There are always friends and friends of friends who come to defend the person who controls the house. But the net result is that the continued talking about issues and not-acting leads to a complete disregard and the not-acting implies condoning the wrongdoing and contributes to a decrease of values."

consciousness', are the ones who can influence and with more or less subtlety impose their views on the working group. They are able to do so through offering a kind of economic or political patronage. In other words, a system of 'political protectors' is developing. This is sometimes mentioned in our meetings, that 'mister so and so' supports this or that viewpoint, and then it is almost a 'fait accompli'. But this is not how I see Auroville's organisation, where responsibilities should be carried by us all together, according to our common values and according to our capacities."

#### The Funds and Assets Management Committee

The Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) has the distinction, as expressed by one of its members, 'of being efficient but ineffective'. In other words, while its working process is well managed and the working group publishes regular reports, it finds it difficult to execute its decisions.

Amy is the FAMC's secretary and chairperson, but is not a member. "I am probably more objective because I am not a member," she says. Asked about the difficulties facing the FAMC, she observes that



"Elsewhere," says Sonja, "newspapers expose abuses and social wrongs. But in Auroville, they are kept under wraps. You get attacked if you put them out. Auroville Today, of course, is not meant for this purpose. It should be the working groups themselves who should highlight the problems and bring them out for public discussion to get public support. Or an in-depth journalism who questions and discusses. But this is not happening. The usual reporting often leaves much to be desired in terms of regularity and transparency. The Working Committee hasn't published a report ever since it came into office more than a year ago; and the report of the Council on what it has been doing over the last eight months has only now been finally published. Many working group members do not want to go public with names and stories of misbehaviour. We have residents who are alcoholics, or who don't repay debts, or who are physically violent, or who are not working for the community – not so nice for one's reputation. But even the mentioning of this in reports is objected to. The result is that, in the public opinion, such misbehaviour is condoned. I do not mean to punish, where help is needed this can be given, but it should be possible to discuss this with openness."

"There is mistrust against power wielded by working groups. But this power is illusory," says Sonja. "In reality, it is those with a lot of influence who stay in the background, who are the real power persons. My personal concern is that there is a danger that we might be getting into a system where one or two important persons in Auroville, who are not necessarily 'highly intuitive' or have a 'higher

it is partly due to the composition of the group. "The FAMC is constituted from representatives of working groups; but not all working groups choose the best person to be in the FAMC. There is no question that most people are good willing, but some are out of their depth and do not have the capacity to do the task they are asked to do. This gives more responsibility to those who have the capacity." She believes that the FAMC's decisions are being taken with due diligence. "The group spends hours discussing an issue and often consults with other working groups and Aurovilians outside the FAMC before reaching a decision." She adds, "But then we see that the decision is sometimes ignored by one of the parties concerned."

The FAMC's recent decision to close a unit due to years of disharmony between the Aurovilian executives, which adversely undermined the effectiveness of its functioning, is a case in point. The FAMC, say those who oppose the decision, took the decision without submitting any reason and instead publicly asked the community 'to trust the decision.' The objectors wondered on what basis one could trust a decision taken behind closed doors? They also argued that there are vested interests at play that want to strip the unit of its considerable assets. And lastly, that if some people had misbehaved, not all of those who worked at the unit should be punished. The objectors believed that there was no 'due diligence' and termed the process 'unfair.'

Amy, though disagreeing with the objectors, sees no immediate alternative but to continue discussions. "For me, the human element is the most



# Crisis – are there solutions?

important. It's very difficult – we have hours of meetings and listening and sharings – but I believe I see things changing. We have to keep talking and trying to integrate the opposite view; that is part of our collective yoga. For we are all in it together – we are all Aurovilians, often friends and neighbours."

It is different when the good offices of the FAMC are being misused. "There are people who come to the FAMC to win a case against their neighbour, for example in a fence dispute. Yet, it is clear that they won't accept the FAMC's decision if it is not in their favour. In those cases, I would suggest to let them fight it out amongst themselves," says Amy. "For they only waste time and energy and goodwill. "And she wonders, "What are people doing in Auroville if they only want things for themselves? If they only want what fits them and are not interested in any kind of give and take or mediation? And why should we take the time to help resolve issues brought by people who will not respect the decision?"

The idea has been mooted that the constitution of an 'Auroville police force' of sorts would help impose decisions of working groups. "I shudder at

the issue itself – that the Matrimandir was to be built – was never questioned. The Mother used to review the progress made at Matrimandir and for the purchase of land on an almost daily basis. She had a very clear programme. But today, we seem to miss a common plan of action. Could our governance problem be avoided, or even solved, if we would all agree on a programme?" he wonders.

"In the early days, people joined Auroville because they were attracted by the ideals. Nowadays we see a mix of people: some still come to help manifest the Auroville vision, but others may be mainly attracted by the lifestyle and do not contribute much to the realisation of Auroville. But we are not supposed to settle down here but are here to help build the city, both on the physical and non-physical plane. If the individual loses the connection with the vision of Auroville and with the programme of building the city of the future within a time frame, all the usual problems will be coming up: the sense of ownership, of territoriality and of aimlessness. So the issue is not so much one of governance, but rather one of reconnecting with the vision and mission of Auroville."

So that mission, says Toine, is building the city

the existence of strong opposing views as a reason for not taking a decision, because that amounts to running away from the responsibility associated with the mandate given to them. Out of ten decisions taken, three or four may later turn out to be wrong and may need an amendment, but that is much better than not taking a decision at all and letting the status quo and an atmosphere of procrastination prevail." An appeal group, he says, could give relief to those who feel that a decision goes against their interest, "provided such a group would be able to act fast and not take years."

"If every time when a choice needs to be made between several options, that option is chosen which serves best the manifestation of the Auroville Township – in all its dimensions and within a time frame – rather than going by short term needs, fears and demands of us residents, decision-making and governance would be a cakewalk and a joyful experience," Toine concludes.

The lack of clear plans to build the city is also a concern of Gilles Guigan, one of the TDC members. But for him, an equal problem is the lack of push towards the ideal society envisaged by The Mother. "There is confusion on our purpose and there is a lack of leadership. Our development has become fossilized. Take, for example, the target population of 50,000 people. It is absurdly high, but this cannot be discussed. Land is an increasingly precious resource which needs to be used consciously but we also need to create a city whose density is such that people like to live in it – otherwise the purpose is lost. The number of 50,000 was given at a time when the city, drawn by The Mother, had a diameter of 10 kilometres and had no greenbelt. The later macro-structure model reduced the size of the city to a 3 kilometre diameter, with a density of 72 people per square kilometre. Then, because the centre had to be shifted to the banyan tree, the circle was shrunk once again to 2.5 kilometre diameter, with a density of 100 inhabitants per square kilometre, surrounded by a greenbelt. But those area reductions never led to an official reduction of the target population. It cannot be discussed and nobody questions a number of Auroville dogmas. So we see a push to build the city with components suitable for a city of 50,000 inhabitants and people dreaming about mobility, about electrical vehicles, pedestrian pathways and so on. For they believe that all will be well when the city is built, and that then the real Auroville will start."

Gilles does not agree with this concept. "I believe that if Mother would be alive today, she would have changed a lot of things which are now considered as 'unchangeable parameters of Auroville.' Moreover, I look at Auroville as being a prototype for an ideal society, a living being which we need to try and help develop but which has its own *dharma*. Auroville's ideals, its programme of education, its economy, its governance – they are all intended to help us develop a higher consciousness, and, consequently, a different type of life, to become a model of a more ideal society. Only if we can show that to the world can we expect Auroville to be built. In the best case, the development of the town will go in parallel with the development of the ideal society."

"So for me, the values cultivated by our community are far more important than its size. Humanity needs more than ever the Auroville that The Mother spoke about, and this is the place on earth which has the greatest potential to become that. For there is a 'presence' here, and there is an incredible amount of human potential. Yet, we should not forget that, when Mother wrote 'A Dream', she also mentioned that 'Humanity does not possess the knowledge and power to implement it – that's why I am calling it a dream.' We in Auroville still do not possess that knowledge and power. All our problems stem from our too low levels of consciousness."

## The Residents' Assembly Service

Elvira is one of the three members of the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS), the working group that organizes meetings of the Residents' Assembly and is responsible for the voting process. Asked about her views on the crisis of governance, she smiles and replies that 'that's nothing new'. "Yesterday I went into my computer and found material from 2006 talking about a crisis in governance. We have been here before on exactly the same issues, which made me wonder if there ever was a time when we were not in a crisis of governance – perhaps only when there was an exceptionally good Working Committee or Auroville Council."

For Elvira, the root cause of the problem is that the community has hardly ever taken time to look at questions of governance. "What does governance mean? Why do we want it, how do we want to do

it? And then, who will do it? Many individuals come here with negative attitudes about governance. For them, governance is bad, politics is a dirty word, and meetings are horrible."

The RAS is trying to do something about it. Hampered by its very limited mandate – the RAS is little more than the official vote counter, says Elvira – the group has nevertheless been actively organizing many general meetings to inform the community of ongoing issues. "For us, transparency, communication, and community participation are the key words," says Elvira. "But as a community we have never studied what these words mean. For example, is transparency used for getting information to attack each other or to pro-actively involve oneself?"

The RAS is trying to make meetings an uplifting experience, but it is an uphill battle, she says. "Over the years, Auroville has alienated and traumatised many people in miserable meetings, with the result that those who have been attacked and maligned now refuse to come." Moreover, the attempts of the RAS to widen its scope haven't gone unchallenged. "We were ticked off by the FAMC when we wanted to organize a public discussion on the unit closing issue," says Elvira. "They said it was none of our business. We are now in process to rewrite our mandate to be able to respond to what many residents expect from us."

As it stands today, many Aurovilians feel that the Residents' Assembly has failed while general information meetings are considered useless as they lack teeth. Would another type of organisation be possible, such as the community appointing a monitoring group which would have the power to remove a member of a working group for non-performance? "I don't like the idea as I am afraid of abuse of power by incompetent people," says Elvira. "But I would promote the idea of having an appeal group where decisions of a working group can be reconsidered." For her, such a group should not be a standing body like an independent judiciary elected for a fixed term, but rather a group appointed for a specific purpose whose term ends when that purpose has been fulfilled. "I would favour it if the community constitutes a pool of people from which such an appeal body could be constituted from time to time."

And that brings us to the community participation and the Aurovilians themselves. "Everybody speaks about 'rights' and feels that they can criticise the Auroville governance. But what about their obligations? How are the residents of Auroville contributing to nourish their society?" asks Elvira. For her, these issues can no longer be ignored.

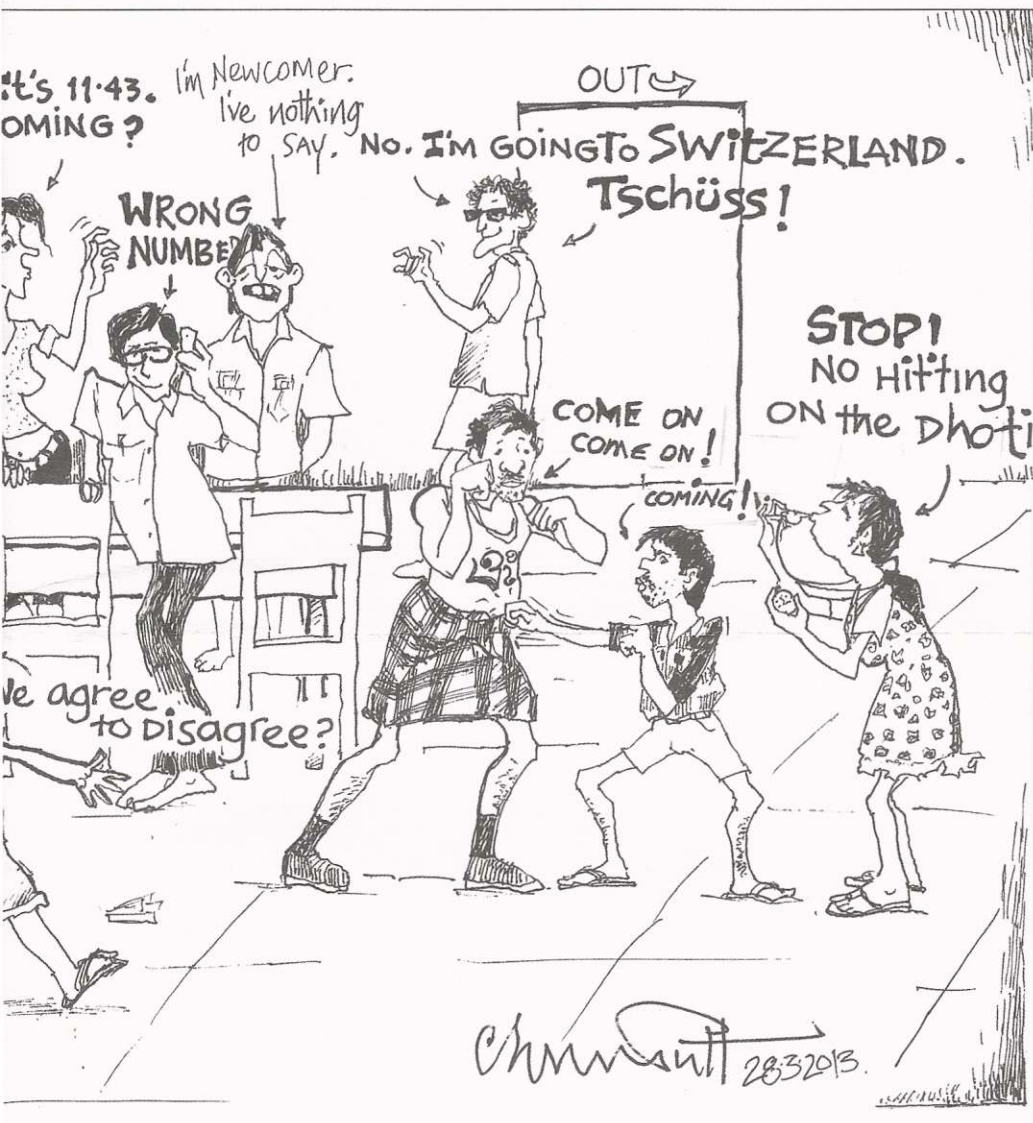
"Let's look at the Tamil section of our population. Many claim that they are not sufficiently integrated. Is that so? Wouldn't it be good, for a better understanding of the issues involved, if we had some truth and reconciliation sessions, going back to the time when the Sri Aurobindo Society bought the land? In those days, people sold their land and, to a certain extent, lost their identity as farmer because of that sale. Is the anger that is expressed by a certain section of the Tamil population caused by that loss of identity, with on the one side the village and its traditions, and on the other side the western culture? I think it would be good if we looked at that. For if we want to understand their actions, we should know the reasons. Auroville's analysis paralysis, its too superficial analysing of issues, can no longer continue."

"Then let's look at another side. To what extent is someone who has an outside income and doesn't contribute towards Auroville a better Aurovillian than someone who has too little and steals? Because the one concept is considered 'legal' and the other isn't? Are those who live in that parallel economy, who have their economic security outside Auroville, better Aurovilians? Are those good Aurovilians who have grown up in Auroville but do not participate in Auroville's development and either work for themselves or retire on the income they earned before coming to Auroville? Then what about the sense of fraternity? If they know that others have difficulty making ends meet, can that be ignored? Here too, I would love Auroville to openly discuss these issues, without attacking anybody, but in order to get to a more true human unity. For that's the aim we are striving to achieve and to which every single Aurovillian should participate."

## Solutions?

The issues are far ranging and no easy solutions are available. "My aspiration is that we can join efforts in understanding the challenge and succeed in December this year to select as our next Working Committee a group of Aurovilians that can inspire and support each other to overcome their individual limitations and continuously strive to put the Dream and the Charter above everything else," wrote Kali in her open letter. This is one of the steps to be made. But the other issues, as outlined by Sonja, Amy, Toine, Gilles and Elvira, need equal consideration.

Carel



the idea," says Amy. "It frightens me to consider that a group of Aurovilians would have the power to impose its judgement. I don't believe we have the required level of consciousness for that. There may be other possibilities. I've heard, for example, that some village *panchayats* in Tamil Nadu bring everybody together and wait till the people have fought it out and settled their disputes. It might be interesting to try this: bring the disputing Aurovilians together, with their community supporters, and see what comes out of them facing each other in public. It will be painful for all, definitely, but what else are we doing here?"

Would an appeal body be useful? "Perhaps," says Amy. "This proposal has been made quite often in the recent years, but it has never been followed up. An appeal body might be beneficial but it would likely face the same limitations as the current working groups: no power or authority to execute a decision. From my perspective, ultimately we depend on each other's goodwill."

## The Town Development Council

Asked about the present-day reality of the Town Development Council (TDC), where, it is alleged, less than half of the members are doing their work full time, [see the article 'Lessons from a selection process' in AVToday # 280, February 2013] Toine, member of the TDC Advisory Group, suggests that this may be due to the absence of a programme.

"When we were building the Matrimandir, everybody knew that this work had to be done as soon as possible. There were many problems, but

and its socio-economic fabric. "Over-simplified, you can divide the activities of Auroville into two types: all the activities relating to the planning, developing and building of the town; and all activities relating to the running of the completed parts of the town. In principle, each one of us should be active in one or even in both types of activities. The members of the TDC, evidently, have to be the drivers for the first type of activities. Here, the main issue is the lack of clarity of what we want to achieve in a given time frame. The TDC needs to develop a work plan and a 5-year development plan. This does not seem to materialize. A second issue is that the TDC members should be committed to, and full-time engaged with, building the city and have the required qualifications or the ability to attract, retain and develop people with these qualifications."

Toine is also concerned about the decision-making process, or rather the lack thereof: "It is fine and even essential that working groups hear all points of view. But after making several rounds of consultations, the working group should take a decision in line with its mandate and work-plan and stand by it. What happens often though, is that the fact of there being strong and different views is used as an excuse for not taking a decision at all. The decision is kept pending and then, often, is never made and arms are raised while lamenting 'what to do?' But not taking a decision is also a decision as you allow the status quo to continue – which may mean that the strongest or the lowest common denominator wins. Working groups such as the TDC, the LCC or the FAMC cannot afford to use



# The role of body practices in healing and spiritual growth

A professor at the California Institute of Integral Studies and a former director of Esalen Institute, Dr. Don Hanlon Johnson visited Auroville and on March 14th and 15th gave a workshop titled "The role of the body practices in spiritual transformation."

Don led the group of about 15 participants in some stimulating discussion and practices and provided some glimpses into his interesting life-story. He explained how he had first become interested in the subject of somatics. After college, he had become a Jesuit for 14 years. He would meditate daily for two hours, and frequently go on long retreats. Towards the end of this period, while sitting in meditation at a Zendo, the realization came to him of the difference between sitting and 'sitting.' 'Sitting' involved being fully and consciously present in one's own body. This has been the focus of his work, and several times he emphasized that this is a long process, a life-time work.

To help illustrate the nature and benefits of this work, Don briefly discussed the research of Tiffany Fields, who founded the Touch Research Institute at the University of Miami in 1992. It consists of a team of distinguished researchers who are studying the nature and effects of human touch and its applications in medicine. One of Fields' important breakthrough discoveries was on the benefits of massage on premature infants. Whereas the standard practice had been to isolate the babies, she demonstrated that daily massages contributed significantly to weight gain and thriving in the premature infants. Later research done at the institute has demonstrated its positive effects for conditions such as stress, depression, anxiety, pain, movement problems, auto-immune disorders, and benefits for growth, well-being, and attentiveness.

Don also mentioned his work with Peter Levine with trauma patients, and particularly with survivors of torture. He explained how the body holds the memories of traumatic events, and how it is necessary to disarm the supports of these memories, which become embedded in the soft tissues of the body. Pavlov's classical conditioning comes into play here. An automatic association develops between the traumas and the state of the body at the time they occur, and that gets embedded in its reflexive tensions, in its particular position and movements. He mentioned as an example one torture survivor who had indentations around his ankles from the chains that had once held him which, when touched, elicited the painful sensations of the torture. Less dramatically, many of us may hold the memories of the inevitable traumas of life in our body, and these memories can be released by becoming conscious



Don (middle) in conversation with workshop attendees

of the subtle tensions within the body with which they have become linked, and assimilating and dissolving these associations by consciously witnessing them in a safe environment of peaceful, supportive feelings and thoughts.

We were taken through various experiential exercises to help us begin to sense what conscious embodiment means. In the first exercise, we paired up and placed our hands lightly on our partner's shoulders, with the intention to become conscious of the micro-movements and sensations that occurred in this contact. Afterwards, there was a sharing of what we each experienced. Some of the comments were surprisingly profound, such as the feeling of dissolution of the distinction between the persons. In another exercise, we started off by simply standing and becoming conscious of the contact of our feet with the floor and their support of our bodies. Then we were asked to raise the right heel, and notice the subtle shifts that took place in the bones in the feet and up the leg and through the body as the weight shifted. Then, maintaining our awareness in the body, we were asked to take one small step forward, and become conscious of the changes taking place in the musculature. Then we took another step and started to walk very slowly, then more quickly, while retaining our awareness in the body. In another exercise, lying down, we became conscious of the movements occurring with the inhalation and exhalation of the breath, and in another exercise, with a partner, we did

the same while being touched by the other in a contact of gentle support. Each exercise was followed by a verbal sharing of the increasingly conscious sensations that we experienced.

From one of Don's papers, titled "Intricate Tactile Sensitivity: A Key Variable in Western Integrative Bodywork," I got a better sense of an important direction of his work. The paper relates the descriptions of several bodywork experts of the fine subtleties of physical sensation with which they work. With their highly sensitized hands, they feel the finest nuances of position and movement in the membranes, tissues and cells of their clients, and their own hands respond to these movements. They align themselves with them, follow them, and subtly invite the tissues and cells of their clients to shift towards alignment and health. This reading enabled me to better appreciate the length of the journey one can potentially take towards becoming conscious in and of the body, of the wideness and complexity of that world that exists at the micro-levels of our body and its contact with the world around us.

Don noted that the environment in which we live is subtly woven into our consciousness. That physical borderland between ourselves and others, of which we normally are so unaware and yet with conscious intention and training could open up to vast and intricate complexities, can become the ground for a much more harmonious and healthy development. Don noted, for example, that in organizational meetings people typically pour into a room and quickly try to solve some problem and depart without ever taking the time to first come consciously and deeply into contact and be truly present with each other. In our semi-unconscious interactions we are constantly rubbing against the rough edges of each other, wearing them away slowly through painful interactions, rather than subtly responding to the contours of the other as does the master body-worker. By not being truly present in our own bodies, we fail to see how our own perspectives are interwoven with our own physicality, with the limitations of our unique history, upbringing, education, and position in space and time, as well as our own life traumas. We fail to fully appreciate the value and necessity of other perspectives, tending to see them as threats to our own rather than as complements and sources of enrichment. In the brief workshop we were only able to touch on these points, but his website and books invite a deeper exploration.

Larry

[for more information visit [donhanlonjohnson.com](http://donhanlonjohnson.com)]

## JOINING AUROVILLE

### It felt like home

continued from page 3

between eco or spiritual. Auroville and the teachings of Sri Aurobindo suited my calling. I was interested in developing my intellect and my yoga so I set to work.

**What sort of work did you get involved in in Auroville?**

My business skills were what first came into use. I was staying at the Creativity Guest House after I arrived. There I encountered Theresa who was trying to start up two social enterprises. Theresa is a 'Friend of Auroville' and she is working to create products that have an ethical value chain (all the activities involved in making and selling a product, and any service provided after it has been bought). The project is called SeedtoSelf. She asked me if I'd like to get involved. We embarked on a programme of business development.

Simultaneously, I met Gijs, [see *AVToday* # 284, March 2013]. I was very taken with what he was doing. I don't particularly have a cause, I don't believe I am here to fix a broken world, but these guys were very committed to their cause. They were having an impact on people's lives and I felt I could give time to them. This allowed me to integrate with Auroville very quickly. It was really good fun doing business development sessions and planning with them. They are very skilled people and they progressed through the stages of development rapidly.

Along the way I wanted to get more understanding of the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. I focused on Sri Aurobindo first. I made a conscious decision to leave the teachings of the Mother until after I got my head around *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga*, *The Essays on the Gita* and *Savitri*. I embarked on a series of classes here and in Pondicherry to understand where the belief system was coming from. *The Life Divine* is my personal favourite. It expanded the whole Vedanta experience, giving me a new way into the *Vedas* which I didn't have before. *The Essays on the Gita* was a

delight for me because I had studied the *Gita*, it is very close to my heart. This just expanded and took the *Gita* to another level for me.

I also worked with an arts group called Neelanjani. I wrote a funding proposal for them so they could go outside and seek funding from America, Italy and Germany. Audrey and the team were happy with that.

The other part of the work I did was for an Auroville unit called Rangoli. I supported them through a difficult period of change. They wanted to restructure their business. This turned out to be a holistic approach which involved life coaching, training and practical business development. It was also an interesting opportunity to get to know more Aurovilians. One of the things I remember most about the experience is how engaged they were in the change process. In England, I have worked as a change manager for many years, but I have never really encountered people who were really so up for change. They implemented the theories almost immediately. Every time I went back, the change had been made. It was a revelation to see how business development can impact people's lives. A real success story for them and for me. Prema, who runs Rangoli, and her team are really amazing.

Then I did some work with Savitri Bhavan. It was a quick review of how they communicate and talk to the world. I was able to give Shradhdhavan a new view on why technology was important and how the organisation can adopt it in a way that is not going to destabilise the organisation. Technology can be quite a beast if it is not used properly so we came up with a simple staged plan on how to integrate technology into how they distribute information. They are in the process of adopting the plan now.

Through my working experience here I realised there was a great need in Auroville to develop an effective understanding of internet marketing and social media. So, as a fund-raising activity for Unltd Tamil Nadu [see *AVToday* # 284, March 2013], I conducted three workshops on social media. They were all interactive sessions and great fun to deliver.

I was also very fortunate to meet Lalit Verma and work with him in Pondy. I supported him to deliver a music festival, Raaga Tapasya, on Indian classical music. This was a whole new dynamic because I got to interact extensively with people associated with the Ashram and many highly skilled musicians.

So, it feels like the six months that I have been here were a fast-track education to all things Auroville and all things Ashram and all things cultural. I have to go back to England now, but I leave with this new and very real understanding of what I'm letting myself in for when I come back to start the newcomer process.

**What are the challenges you have faced?**

That's a difficult question to answer. On the one hand Auroville is doing incredibly well. It is a far-reaching vision that is trying to establish itself, it is trying to manifest a city based on human unity. It's not a small task! It's a big job to do. On that scale it is an incredible experiment and a very powerful message that's being sent out to the world.

If I have to suggest anything to Auroville it's to acknowledge that other communities outside of the teaching of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have already done some of the work Auroville is attempting to do. There's a lot of reinventing the wheel here in Auroville, which seems such a waste of energy when there are many people out there who are highly skilled and who can assist in the development of the systems and approaches that will impact people's lives as the city grows.

The facilities and opportunities that Auroville offers for any kind of cultural event are incredible. However, during my work in Pondy for the Music Festival which held several evenings in Auroville as well, I saw a rather different view looking at Auroville from outside in. I experienced a strange "not on my patch" response, a territorialism attitude. While there is a captive audience, it's a terrible shame that people from outside don't get a chance to come and experience these amazing events. There seems

to be a notion that Auroville should provide culture for only the people here. But is that enough? This could really be a cultural hub where people could begin to experience events that they couldn't experience anywhere else in India.

In England, the cultural sector has had to learn some tough lessons and has been forced to establish partnership agreements that put the audience at the heart of all development. I have worked at the centre of these changes for over ten years, so I can say and suggest that there is much work to do in bridging the gap between Aurovilian organisations and then more work to build new foundations for working with local, national and international organisations.

One of the things I've also encountered is that sometimes people holding positions are not adequately skilled for their jobs. What this does is create a barrier in growth because strategic working practices are not implemented. There isn't a shortage of people either, so that can't be the reason for such a set-up. People seem to be protecting their positions here for reasons that do not fit with the wider aspiration for the community. I understand that working towards the original vision is a very difficult job but Auroville will be in a constant state of change for many years to come and, to be honest, what could go wrong? How diluted can the vision or its message get with the Matrimandir right in the centre?

**What are you taking back with you?**

It was a really interesting spiritual moment for me when I realised I could, after all, integrate my work and my yoga. For me this really was integral yoga. It was brilliant. It's not unusual here to integrate yoga into everyday life. You have a conversation about waking the inner knowledge while buying vegetables, or the Mother's vision while having lunch. It's fantastic. This has been the real bonus for me. Meeting like-minded people has given me the confidence that I've been on the right path. I found a key to something I'd been striving towards for ten years.

Mandakini



# Breaking the bubble: a reflection by Luc Venet

Luc Venet lived in Auroville in the early days. Later, he was part of the close-knit group around Satprem which translated and published *Mother's Agenda* in America. After a rift with Satprem, he moved to France and began a new life. Recently, after many years away, he began revisiting Pondicherry and Auroville.

## The Satprem experience

I'll begin by talking about myself because, in the context, it is helpful to understand who I am and what my experience has been. I worked closely with Satprem from 1977 until 1993. It was a wonderful time in every respect. Wonderful because it brought out the best in me and I was doing things like working on the *Agenda*, which I felt brought me closer to Mother and the Divine. The relationship with Satprem was mind-boggling because of his trust, our mutual trust, and because he always seemed to know where I was in my own development and how to help me to progress.

However, toward the end of this period I began to feel a certain unease concerning our relationship. It no longer felt as close as it had been, and at first I blamed myself, my ego, and tried to work harder on myself. But the unease kept growing until, on a fateful day in 1993, I received a note from someone in the organization who had been asked by Satprem to inform me that I was dismissed and no longer part of any organization created by him. I was to give back the keys, the accounts, everything. A legal letter followed threatening my IRS status as publisher of the *Agenda*.

I was absolutely devastated: my life as I knew it crumbled. I had nobody to turn to because I had no friends outside the little group around Satprem and they stopped speaking to me from one day to the next.

Strangely, although I could not understand the reason for my dismissal, at first my faith in Satprem was not affected. I tried to believe that it was a quirk, a freakish happening. There must be a distortion somewhere, not in him but maybe in the people around him because there were always little ego manifestations in our tightly-knit group.

Over time, however, this developed into a horrible tension between two polarities. On the one hand, there was my belief in Satprem as the ideal man who was going to open up the new world and, on the other, there was my own experience which was telling me exactly the opposite. It was a horrible situation because there seemed to be no way out of it.

For some years I was like a corpse, at zero level, but then, gradually, something began to get born again. There was no particular experience, but Mother was working silently upon me. I owe my survival to Their grace and to nothing else. Of course, I had to be willing, there had to be something in me which aspired, but basically the energy to rekindle the life in me came from Mother.

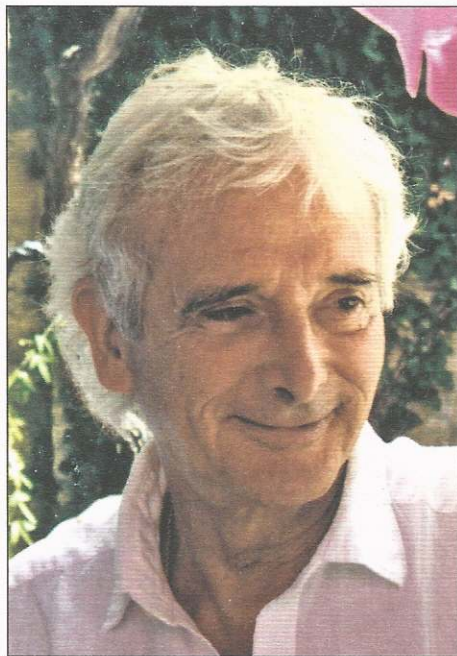
Finally I stopped blaming myself for what had happened. I learned to trust my own experience. I don't wish to go into more details, nor attempt here to analyse Satprem's own behaviour, which appeared to form a pattern of similar treatments meted out to my two successors. I moved to France, I made a living; all is now fine with my life. My contact with Mother and Sri Aurobindo is now very different from before because it is no longer happening through an intermediary. I don't need anybody to tell me anything about Them because the contact is clear and direct: it's me and Her, me and Him. That's a huge difference.

This is why I want to tell those friends who still believe they need a Satprem or any other intermediary to access Sri Aurobindo and Mother that it is not necessary. This is a fallacy, one of the mind's greatest illusions. The idea that the next step will be gained by following in the steps of Satprem is false. It is not Satprem who will gain the next step; it is us, each one of us, through our contact with Them. This is the key to everything.

## The Auroville bubble

Last year I came back to India after 35 years. I stayed in Pondicherry for a month and really loved it; it was wonderful to be back in India, wonderful to breathe the air of India, to go to the Samadhi. And it was great to be able to talk to my friends in Auroville and explain about the things in my past they didn't know about. It was like the old times all over again.

This year I came again because I thought it would be nice to relive this feeling. However, this time my experience of Auroville has been completely different. I enjoyed seeing my friends and was touched by their devoted and hard work. But I felt a great unease.



Luc Venet

Initially, I didn't know why but then, suddenly, it dawned on me. I saw that my friends are in exactly the same situation I had been in with Satprem. Just as I had idealized Satprem, they were idealizing Auroville. It's something I now see as a 'bubble'. The phenomenon of the bubble is both individual and collective. Individually, we all want to feel good about ourselves, fulfilled in our daily activities, and we create a template, a pattern of thoughts that help us to stand up and confront the mystery of this world. Collectively, repeating Auroville as a *mantra* adds a special shine to the bubble, making us special, superior, the pioneers of the New World. The problem is that this self-created bubble, like all bubbles, is completely closed, hermetic, and self-reinforcing. It is a terrible hindrance because you cannot admit anything else, any other perception, into your bubble; you are locked in so tightly there is no space for anything new.

I know this process well; I could call myself an expert on the bubble. I polished my bubble day after day, deluding myself day after day. It worked wonderfully for 16 years until it burst. Only when you are outside looking back do you realise you were in it.

One of the familiar symptoms is that anything outside the bubble is considered inferior or even dangerous, the enemy. It's a Manichean view, one which divides the world into good and bad: you are led to believe that everybody outside the circle of Auroville is a threat. In Auroville you see this in the way that visitors or people who live nearby are immediately branded as different, sometimes even accused of taking advantage of Auroville. The same applies to tourists. Tourism is often seen as bad because it brings disorder, confusion. The Aurovilians want to be left in peace in their little bubble.

Another aspect to the bubble is that it results in a great deal of pretension. In order to protect yourself from the outside you have to pretend that you are somebody special, in some sense a superior being. This is what I believed about myself when I worked with Satprem, but Auroville, too, reeks of this. Mother intended the Matrimandir as a place to learn how to concentrate, but it can also be seen as the epitome of the bubble, because here is finally the proof that the Aurovilians are really capable of something out of the ordinary. As such, it reinforces their sense of exclusivity. It's a bubble of purity, of the just, of those who have achieved the truth and who are protecting the truth, and they are protecting it with fences and with guards.

Of course, people everywhere create bubbles in order to live, to create the justification for what they are doing. But the case of Auroville is rather special because here you have the Mother's words about Auroville and these can be quoted and used as a ready-made justification of the bubble.

I have to admit, I was really upset by this new perception of Auroville. At first I tried to ignore it, and then I tried speaking about it lightly with a few friends. I soon realized they didn't want to hear about it. And that's another thing you need to know about the bubble: you're not

supposed to mention it. If you do, people get very upset and try to dismiss what you are saying. This is exactly how I reacted when, in the old days, people told me there was something wrong in me in the way I related to Satprem.

## Escaping the bubble

So how can one escape the bubble? Clearly, one needs to be aware, to have a sense of unease that something is not quite right about the way things are going. You cannot do this by talking, because then you are in danger of creating yet another bubble; that's the way these things work with the mind. There has to be another way.

For me, a key lay in the realization that the bubble is a formation of the ego. And it is in this context that the first point of the Auroville Charter is so important. For here Mother emphasises that to live in Auroville "one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness". One must, "il faut", there are no two ways about it. It means that you have to offer Her everything, your thoughts, your work, your energy, everything. You have to release your ego to something infinitely larger than yourself. And here is the solution, the way out of the bubble. The minute we sincerely turn to Her, the bubble collapses, because the Mother is vast, She contains all, She accepts all, and once you take refuge in Her, all fears and all perceived enemies disappear. This is exactly my experience.

And once you are outside the bubble it is wonderful. Now I have a much more open attitude towards people in general. Now I can feel them at a much deeper level; I can feel their souls. I am in touch with the rest of humanity like never before because the Mother is there, everywhere.

Of course, it was a crisis which projected me out of my bubble and one should not assume that everybody has to go through something similar to come out of it. In my case, Satprem was like a Zen master who gives you a strong blow to lead you to a new understanding — for me, it was extreme; it was like being confronted by something akin to death. Now I think I was very fortunate to have been confronted by such a strong experience, and to have survived it, because I would not have escaped the bubble without this kind of blow. In fact, one night in the middle of all my troubles with Satprem, I had a vision of Mother and she was laughing her head off, she was very happy. At the time I could not understand it, but now I realize She knew that what was happening was very positive.

Later, when I began reading *Essays on the Gita* I found intellectual support for these things, because here Sri Aurobindo spells out all the steps that Arjuna has to go through in order to get rid of his ego. Arjuna was also in a bubble, the bubble of the warrior. And Krishna, like Mother in *The Charter*, finally gives him the key: "take refuge in Me".

Another discovery I made in the *Gita* is the real meaning of *karma yoga* (the Yoga of Works), which is a source of great misunderstanding. Some people in Auroville seem to believe that any work done with goodwill, application, etc. (doing one's best) is *karma yoga*. But that is another illusion. If it were the case, any worker at Toyota, Google or Apple would be doing *karma yoga*! As Sri Aurobindo explains it, *karma yoga* is doing works with the constant thought, presence and feeling of the Divine in oneself, as a sacrifice and in adoration of the Divine, abandoning all fruit and even the sense of being the doer to Him.

It is not easy to do this. Everyone has to do their own part; there is no magic formula. But the moment you achieve it, the bubble no longer has any need to exist.

Auroville has to set an example, to be a beacon for the future. The world has to understand, to see, that there is a new way, and that the new way is to serve the Divine. It's as simple as that. And as urgent. The world is going through terrific, traumatic changes. What Mother clearly had in mind in that first principle of the Charter is that by doing this, by surrendering to Her, we would be offering an alternative. We would be planting collectively the first seed of a different way of being on earth.

So this is the choice. Does Auroville want to remain a little green paradise with elitist thinking, like Asterix's little village which sees the rest of the world as hostile while jealously protecting its magic potion? Or does it want to become an example of what can be done when one lives differently? For then, everything becomes possible.

From a conversation with Alan

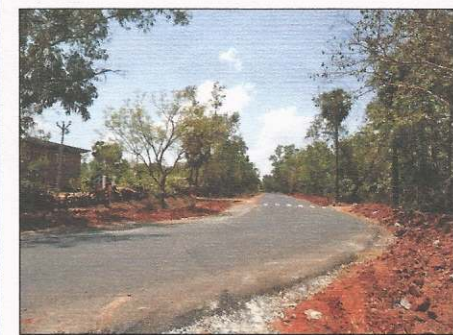
# Brief news

## New Int. Advisory Council

The Minister of Human Resource Development has reappointed Sir Mark Tully, Dr. Vishaka Desai, and Julian Lines as members of the International Advisory Council. The appointment of two more members is still pending. The members will hold office till March 13, 2017.

## Governing Board complete

The Minister of Human Resource Development has appointed Mr. Y.S.V.S. Murty as the 7th member of the Governing Board. Earlier, the Minister had reappointed the former six members of the Board, Dr. Karan Singh, Chairman, Ms. Ameeta Mehra, Dr. (Ms.) Aster Mira Patel, Shri Balkrishna V.Doshi, Dr. (Ms.) Malini Parthasarathy, and Dr. (Ms.) Mallika Sarabhai. The members will hold office till October 29, 2016. The two ex-officio members are the Joint Secretary, Department of Higher Education, and the Financial Adviser of the Ministry of Human Resource Development.



## Road widening

The road between National Highway 66, which connects Pondicherry to Tindivanam, and the East Coast Road has been widened with about 2 metres for which about 15 trees have been cut. Though the widened road is now safer to travel and a number of speed breakers have been installed, fears abound that it will be used as a bypass road for trucks to avoid paying toll fees. A request has been made to shift the tollgate to the western entrance of Auroville.

## Auroville Holi Tango Festival

For the second year, from March 14-17, the Auroville Holi Tango Festival took place in Auroville. Eight teachers from Italy, Portugal, Argentina, France, USA and India gave intensive tango classes to 90 participants from Auroville, India and Europe. A milonga (tango ball) wrapped up each evening.



## Auroville athletics meet

A one-day event for adults and children to participate in athletics took place at the Dehashakti Sports Grounds on March 24. The intention was to collectively celebrate the development of consciousness of the body via a sporting activity.

## South African Jazz

At the initiative of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, co-sponsored by the Auroville Foundation, the New South-Africa Jazz Collective performed in Auroville on March 24th, showing how young musicians in post-Apartheid South Africa have redefined the jazz landscape.

## Auroville Outpost

On February 28, *The Auroville Outpost* opened on the East Coast Road with two shops, Janaki and La Boutique, and a Tanto Pizzeria.

## Passing L.K. Tripathy

The former Chief Secretary of Tamil Nadu and the first Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. L.K. Tripathy, passed away on Monday March 11 after a terminal illness. He was 64. Mr. Tripathy served the Auroville Foundation from 1992-1993.



She is well-known in Auroville. And not surprisingly, the auditorium was filled to capacity to see Harini's first-ever solo performance. The audience was not disappointed, even though there was a slow start. After the *Ganapati Vandana*, the traditional opening prayer to the Lord Ganesh, followed the introductory *alaripu*, a technical and rather geometrical exposition. The performance picked-up with the *varnam* – showing a girl love-lost for Lord Murugan – and peaked in the *padam* with a mime item based on an episode in the *Mahabharata* where Draupadi, accosted by Dhusasana who tried to remove her saree, is saved by Shri Krishna. In this piece, Harini successfully portrayed each of the characters of the drama: the noble Yudhishtira, who could not refuse the invitation to the dice game; the wily Sakuni, who won the game by dubious means; the crude Duhsasana; and the desperate Draupadi, who, receiving no help from her husbands, turns to Lord Krishna, who makes her saree unfold without end. The final section, the *tillana*, showed Harini's technical virtuosity and complex foot-work.

"Traditional *Bharatanatyam* is definitely a puritanical dance style," says Harini, comfortably seated on the couch and reflecting on the dance's particularities and her performance. "Its origin lies in the *sadhir*, the dance which for ages had been practiced by the *Devadasis*, the Indian temple dancers. You'll find their *karanas* (dance postures) in all the temple sculptures of Tamil Nadu, particularly in the great temple at Chidambaram. But in the 1930-40's, the *Devadasis* were branded as prostitutes by the Hindu reform movement and British missionaries; they sought to outlaw the *Devadasi* institution, in which they ultimately succeeded. This would have meant the end of *sadhir*, were it not for a few remarkable persons. One of them was the Indian

## Bharatanatyam

On March 9, Harini Bala gave a classical Bharatanatyam performance in Bharat Nivas.



Harini in the *varnam*

theosophist Rukmini Devi Arundale, who was fascinated by *sadhir*. She brought the dance from the temple to the stage, renamed it *Bharatanatyam*, and removed from it all the *shringara*, the emotional elements that were suggestive of the amorous and the erotic. This has resulted in a puritan style which is called the *Kalakshetra Bharatanatyam* style, after the Kalakshetra dance institution in Chennai that Rukmini founded. Most Bharatanatyam dancers today follow this style.

"But Rukmini's views did not go

unchallenged. There are other *Bharatanatyam* styles, such as the one created by the great dancer T. Balasaraswati, who strongly objected to the removal of the *shringara*. She argued that there was never anything carnal in the *shringara* and that it reflected the mystic union of the human with the Divine as *Bharatanatyam* is essentially about devotion, bhakti, to the Divine."

Is she able to express that in her own art? "That's a big question," she admits. "Balasaraswati was talking about 'dancing from the inner

being' which is a state for which you need to be a very advanced dancer. Like any other creative art, dance needs the highest concentration – the second you think of something else, you lose your balance. But once you are 'in' it, you forget yourself in the movements and the acting. That is immediately felt by the audience. In yesterday's performance I was able to express emotions in the *varnam* and the *padam* – though in the *varnam*, perhaps, it came closer to something from the inner being as the beloved was a god, Lord Murugan."

Harini Bala first performed at Bharat Nivas when she was five, together with a group of Auroville children. "I was born into a family of artists, my Indian father and German mother, Krishna Kumar and Geeta, both being professional *Bharatanatyam* dancers, and they taught us the rudiments of *Bharatanatyam*. But when I was 7, my parents left India and settled in a small village in Bavaria in Germany. As I was eager to continue learning dance, they started a small Bharatanatyam dance school for me and my German friends. We performed dramas such as *Snow White* in *Bharatanatyam* style, but at the age of 10 we'd all lost interest."

It came back six years later, when her mother started teaching some German ladies and invited Harini to join. But it was only at the age of 24 that she re-discovered her passion for dance. "I had enrolled at the University of Heidelberg, studying Indology with as main topics Sanskrit, Tamil and Social Anthropology. In my free time I learned jazz, hip-hop and street dancing – all very rooted dances. Then I found a *Bharatanatyam* teacher and I started regular classes with her and danced on some occasions in Heidelberg. But it was always the same repertoire. My parents had meanwhile moved back to India and had settled close by Auroville. They were doing a workshop with students from Auroville and Pondicherry. I was on holiday and

joined the workshop, and that was when the flame suddenly sparked again. I decided to take dance very seriously."

Three years later, her masters in Indology completed, Harini returned to India. "There followed a very intense training with my parents," she says. "With my father I dived deeper into the subtlety of the various *karanas* and the choreography. From my mother I learned the techniques of story-telling through dance. I participated in a few dance drama performances, such as that of the Kalluvelli Siddhar. I then decided to get a Masters in Performing Arts from the Kalai Kaviri College of Fine Arts of the Bharathidasan University in Tiruchirappalli. It taught me about the theory, traditions and structure of *Bharatanatyam* and about the many technicalities and stage craft. It was very useful – and made me appreciate even more what I had received from my parents."

Isn't it rather unusual for a dancer to study academically? "It has become a necessity," she says. "Increasingly, Indian dance institutions require a Masters in Dance for anyone wishing to teach. Earlier, a dance diploma from an institute such as Kalakshetra was sufficient; but that is no longer the case. The traditional gurukuls are disappearing, and dance schools are mushrooming. It's getting very commercial; many people go for a Masters just to earn a living, rather than for the love of the art."

Her future, says Harini, is somewhat uncertain. "I would love to stay in India but my German husband has accepted a post as lecturer at the University of Heidelberg. So we'll live there for the next few years and I will try to start my own *Bharatanatyam* dance school. Many Indians and Sri Lankans are nowadays studying in Heidelberg, so this might be a good move. But we'll definitely visit India regularly and I hope to be back on stage in Auroville soon."

In conversation with Carel

## NEW BOOKS

### Building with Blocks

Recently, the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research published a book, *Building with Blocks at the Auroville Kindergarten*, on an ongoing research project in the Auroville Kindergarten. The project studies how children between the ages of three and six years develop through playing with wooden blocks. On the face of it, it sounds an unlikely subject for a study as playing with blocks sounds an entertaining, but somewhat trivial, pastime for young children. In fact, 'Block Play', as it is known, has a very respectable educational pedigree. In the early part of the 20th century, Caroline Pratt, a progressive educator in the United States, became interested in the possibilities of simple, well-designed materials for stimulating children's play. She designed a set of wooden blocks of different sizes and shapes and then observed how young children used them and how they interacted with each other as they played. She was astonished by the results and concluded that block play is successful because it is a total activity which "involves the whole person – muscles, sense, intellect and emotion, individual growth and social interaction."

This is very much in line with the integral education which Sri Aurobindo speaks of, an educational approach in which children develop their "own intellectual, moral, aesthetic and practical capabilities". In fact, this book demonstrates that, left to themselves and with the minimum of guidance, young children display an extraordinary imaginative capacity and a remarkable ability to materialise their conceptions. Here can be seen intricate buildings, sophisti-

cated rockets, fearsome dragons, stunning horses and complex and beautiful mandalas which show that these children have abilities far beyond what most of us would assume possible at that young age. "We may assume children are 'merely' playing in the block area but the more we observe, the more we stand in awe of their creativity, their ability to solve problems, the growth of their motor skills, their ability to learn from each other and their ability to conceptualize," writes the educator Heidi Watts in the introduction to the book.

Odile Fouladoux, who has been teaching in the Kindergarten for many years and is the lead researcher in this project, notes differences according to age and sex. For example, at the age of three children start exploring the blocks slowly and individually. However, by the age of six they are building elaborate structures, usually in collaboration with other children. Generally boys are more interested in building with blocks than are girls, and when girls do build, they are more likely to build decorative houses or mandalas.

The book is beautifully produced by Auroville Press. It contains stunning photographs as well as very practical information, like the simple rules of the block room and the dimensions of the blocks. As Odile puts it, "Through this book, we hope to inspire other teachers to use blocks in their schools and we are sure that you, too, will be amazed at the creativity, perseverance, imagination and problem-solving skills of very young children."

This is an amazing and inspiring book.

Alan



PHOTO: OLIVIER BAROT

*Building with Blocks at the Auroville Kindergarten* by Odile Fouladoux. Published by the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research, Auroville 2013. Available from [auroville.com](http://auroville.com) Price Rs. 699

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