

## Saving Quiet

Twenty years ago, generations of Aurovilians enjoyed the beaches and the sea. Now almost all the beaches and many Auroville houses have disappeared. The Quiet Healing Centre will be next, unless saving measures are taken.



PHOTO: LAVANYA

The reception building of the Quiet Healing Centre is now only 12 metres away from the 'cliff' since the erosion onslaught last year. The continuing erosion will eventually destroy the building if nothing is done.

Auroville owns a number of properties along the beach across close by the villages of Bommayarpalayam, Chinnamudaliarchavady and Periyamudaliarchavady in an almost uninterrupted length of 1 kilometre. Most of these lands were acquired in the early 1960s. Some of the communities had beaches up to 70 metres wide. Sundays were the days for beach life – so much so, that guards were hired to protect the bathers and their possessions.

Now the beaches have all but gone. Over the past 20 years, there has been beach erosion leading to massive loss of land and buildings. The Auroville beach communities have been heavily affected: Wild Waves no longer exists; Repos and Gokulam are almost completely washed away, and in Samarpan buildings have already disappeared into the sea. Now the same fate is threatening the land and buildings of Quiet Healing Center.

In financial terms, the losses are staggering. According to the Auroville Housing Service, Auroville has already lost immovable assets to a value of more than Rs 2.5 crores, and this does not count the cost of the land lost.

The rapid erosion of these shores is caused mainly by the building of the Ariyankuppam harbour and its breakwaters in the neighbouring Union Territory of Puducherry as well as various other hard structures, like seawalls and groynes, built by the Puducherry Government. These constructions, designed to protect the Puducherry seashore, have negatively affected the littoral drift of the sand offshore, leading to excess of sand in some places and depletion of sand in others, including the Auroville beaches.

### Steps taken by the Tamil Nadu Government

After representations from the affected people, the Tamil Nadu Government allocated Rs 32.3 crores to build protective structures in the form of sea walls and groynes. In January, 2013, the Public Works Department, Government of Tamil Nadu, started to build a groyne field and a sea wall at Chinnamudaliarchavadi village. It was intended to continue along the beach between the Auroville communities of Quiet and Samarpan, but the construction of the sea wall was stopped after some 400 metres following an interim injunction of the National Green Tribunal South Zone as no environmental clearance, a mandatory requirement under the Environmental Protection Act, 1986, had been obtained by the Tamil Nadu Government. The interim order directed the coastal states of India to come up with an integrated coastal zone protection plan.

Following the stoppage of construction, the exposed lands were left without protection. Quiet's sandy beach front, which had been 70 metres wide, disappeared after two years. Quiet's reception facility, once a comfortable 150 metres away from the sea, is close to the sea's edge, while the distance to Quiet's guest facilities has been reduced to 35 metres. In neighbouring Chinnamudaliarchavadi village, about 80 dwellings had to be vacated after severe damage or imminent danger of collapse.

At present, the erosion is continuing rapidly and preventive measures need to be undertaken on a war footing. However, it was only on November 24th, 2018, that the Government of India approved the Coastal Zone Management Plan for Tamil Nadu while the Comprehensive Shoreline Management Plan for the entire coast of Tamil Nadu is still awaited.

### Action by Auroville

Concerned that the erosion would affect more Auroville properties, the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation in its

meeting of February this year instructed the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation to take up the matter with the National Green Tribunal, South Zone, as well as request the Ministry of Human Resource Development – Auroville's nodal ministry – to take up the matter at an appropriate level. The Board also advised that a Supreme Court lawyer should be consulted.

The Secretary filed a petition with the National Green Tribunal, South Zone, to be granted interim relief for the stretch of land where the Quiet community is situated, stating it requires immediate protection. The petition stressed that the relief sought would be temporary: in other words, it would be removed by the Foundation in case it interfered with the final measures to be taken by the Government of Tamil Nadu; that it would be executed partially on land owned by the Foundation, which is now under water; and that it would be built at the expense of the Auroville Foundation. The petition also mentioned that the Foundation will seek the necessary permission from the Tamil Nadu State Environment Impact Assessment Authority, but in the meantime the Foundation should be allowed to protect its properties as this permission may take some time to materialise.

At the same time, Supreme Court lawyers were approached for their views. They advised that Auroville should not be seen as only wishing to protect its own properties, but also show concern for the plight of the neighbouring fishermen communities, many of which have lost their houses and boat berthing facilities. As the National Green Tribunal South Zone is not functioning for the time being, the lawyers advised that both the fishermen and the Auroville Foundation should file a petition before the Chennai High Court. The fishermen should ask the High Court to instruct the Tamil Nadu Government to protect their properties, arguing that they have already lost their habitats and livelihood and the government has not done anything since 2013. They should request the Tamil Nadu Government to immediately undertake measures to prevent further sea erosion by completing the construction of the sea wall and groynes according to recommendations made in studies conducted by the Department of Ocean Studies, IIT Madras, and other experts in the field.

The third action was to ask the Chennai-based National Institute of Ocean Technology (NIOT), an autonomous body under the Ministry of Earth Sciences, to do a feasibility and environmental impact assessment study on how best to protect Quiet.

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## AVToday turns 30

With this issue we celebrate 30 years of publication. To celebrate we have made it a double issue.

It seems a long, long time since a few of us decided, over multiple cups of coffee, to launch a new Auroville publication in 1988. In those days, the only news friends and Auroville centres would receive about what was happening in the community came from the irregularly appearing *Auroville Review*.

"I give you six months," was the cheerful prediction of one Aurovillian. And, indeed, we had no idea when we set sail where our frail craft was heading.

But somehow, due to an unlikely combination of optimism, doggedness, luck and, above all, the Grace, we have managed to stay afloat, and even improve the vessel.

Thank you, everybody, for your support.

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# Saving Quiet



Performance of groyne and sea wall during a) southwest monsoon b) northeast monsoon

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In July, NIOT submitted its study and recommended the construction of three short (40 metres long) T-groynes. "The concept is to have groynes in the shape of a T running out from the shoreline, with the top of the T lying seaward. The sand will then be trapped within the T shaped structure and start to hold beach for a small stretch," stated the report. Short T-groyne systems also allow sand to bypass downstream to minimize the negative impact of the groynes elsewhere.

## The Pondicherry solution

Within four years of the construction of its harbour and its breakwaters in 1986, the city of Pondicherry lost kilometres of its own pristine

beach. Attempts to restore its beach by pumping sand from south of the harbour breakwater to the promenade have failed.

A new plan is now in operation. In August this year, a 900 tonne artificial reef was immersed near Pondicherry's Chief Secretariat. This reef is part of a triple action plan, designed by NIOT. There is already some measure of success. Sand accretion is happening and a small beach has returned to Pondicherry.

Another submerged structure is planned to be installed offshore, parallel to the coast, to reduce wave activity onto the shore.

The last element of the plan is the dredging of around 0.3 million cubic metres of sand from the south of the harbour to the area of the former

promenade beach. Dredging will be done by the Dredging Corporation of India with the Puducherry Public Works Department supervising the project.

## The effect on the Auroville beaches

What the effects of these measures will be for the beaches of Tamil Nadu, including those of Auroville, is unknown. Jan Imhoff, one of Auroville's engineers, fears that the newly submerged reef will be "nothing but a big groyne" which will have the same disastrous effects as the groynes already in place. "The second parallel reef may allow sand to freely move towards the north and prevent erosion along the coastline. But this has yet to be seen." He adds that for Tamil Nadu, the effects of the Pondicherry project will depend mainly on whether or not the Pondicherry Government will sustain the dredging and sand bypassing. "Doing sand bypassing was also done in the past, but it was soon discontinued as dredging is a very costly affair. If once again they do not sustain it, we will have more erosion."

Jan hopes that the action of the fishermen will help bring the requested relief. "They have been badly affected and they are ready to take action against the government and the politicians. For the Coastal Zone Protection Act was written to protect the fishermen, and it is not doing that."

## The National Green Tribunal Principal Bench decision.

Unexpectedly, the Principal Bench of the National Green Tribunal New Delhi took up the petition of the Auroville Foundation. On September 5, 2018, it passed an order stating, "In view of the fact that the preparation of a Coastal Zone Management Plan is under process



Conceptual layout of Proposed T-groynes

and is to be finalised by the Central Government, which has to be prepared by the State Government, there is no just reason for us to pass any order in this case. However, we deem it proper to direct the Tamil Nadu Coastal Zone Management Authority to look into this matter and take appropriate steps, in accordance to law."

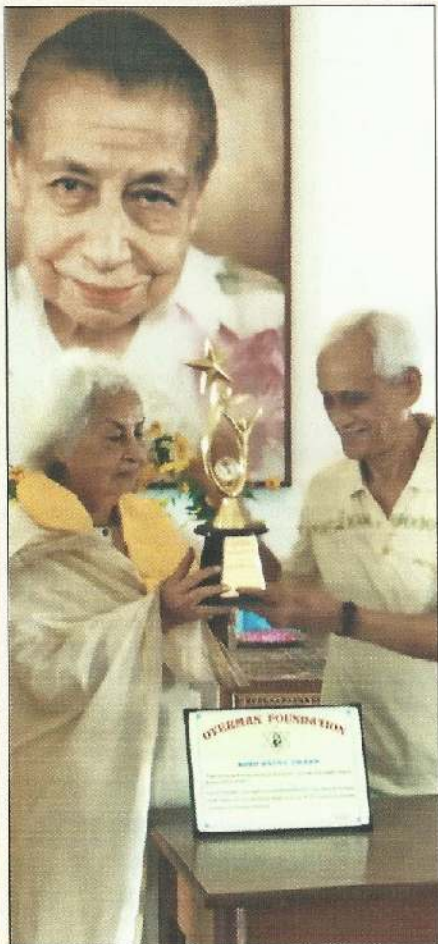
The Auroville Foundation has meanwhile approached the Tamil Nadu Coastal Zone Authority to obtain the required permission to construct the groynes at Quiet. Jan is hopeful that NIOT's solution will be accepted. "There is no danger that these three groynes would negatively affect the flow of sand, neither north nor southwards. If approved, Quiet's beaches would to some extent be restored, which would also benefit the fishermen communities which can again berth their boats and dry their nets there."

Carel

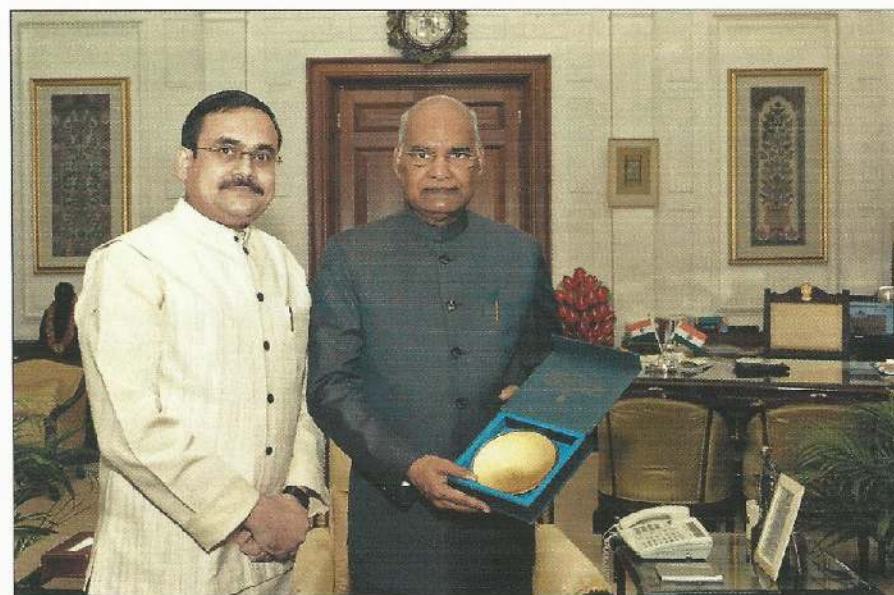
A 14-minute documentary titled "India's Disappearing Beaches - A Wake Up Call" by wildlife and conservation filmmaker Shekar Dattatraya focusing on Puducherry's disappearing beaches can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KgTn6Opgjok>

## BRIEF NEWS

### Dr. Aster Patel receives Auro Ratna Award



### President of India receives Auroville memento



On November 14, 2018, Governing Board member Dr. Anirban Ganguly offered an Auroville memento to the Hon'ble President of India, Shri Ram Nath Kovind, who in February 2018 honoured Auroville with a message on the occasion of Auroville's 50th anniversary, in which he speaks of Auroville as reflecting "our quest for achieving oneness in diversity."

Dr. Aster Patel was awarded the Auro Ratna Award of the Overman Foundation on November 25, 2018, in a ceremony in the Hall of Harmony, Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education, Pondicherry. Aster came to live in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in the 1940s as a child. In the early 1970s, she joined Auroville, and later became one of the members of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation. Her work and efforts, particularly in the area encouraging Indian studies, have contributed invaluable in the journey of Auroville in many ways, and she continues to contribute today.

Left: Shri Manoj Das Gupta, the Managing Trustee of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, gives the Auro Ratna memento to Aster.

### Highway update

An important meeting was held at the Auroville Foundation Office on 21 November with a delegation from the Ministry of Road Transport and Highways, New Delhi, and officers of the National Highway Authority of India and their consultants attending. They were joined by the Tahsildars from the local area.

From Auroville's side, Governing Board members Dr. Nirima Oza and Dr. Anirban Ganguly, Secretary Mr. Chunkath, Under Secretary Mr. Srinivasmurthy, representatives from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and members of the Working Committee and the Highway Task Force attended.

The focus of the meeting was the proposed highway alignment, its impacts, and the need of realignment. Following a short documentary on Auroville, the discussions and arguments presented by the Highway Task Force against a highway on the eastern side of Auroville were well received, and a cordial discussion ensued on ways forward. Mr. Chunkath encapsulated Auroville's concerns with clarity. The delegation from the Transport Ministry, acknowledging the concerns, explained that the alignment was not yet fixed, and will go through a due process of consultation and exploring alternative solutions. They showed a map with another western alignment that is a work in progress. At the end of the meeting it was clear that the authorities are still exploring other options and that they will take into consideration Auroville, its concern for the bioregion and its inputs. They agreed to keep Auroville informed of the development.

In turn, Auroville offered its various skills and collaboration as needed.

The meeting was followed by a short visit to the Matrimandir before the delegation left Auroville.

The Highway Task Force



# A delegate remembers Auroville's Inauguration

**A**mong the invited speakers to the recent Auroville International (AVI) meeting in Barcelona was Dr. Gonçal Lopez Nadal who had a very interesting story to share. Some time ago a member of AVI Spain had sent him a photo, a photo he had never seen before, of him representing Spain at the inauguration of Auroville in 1968. Here is the short version of his speech:

It was my first trip to India. I had arrived there precisely on the day of my 15th birthday (January 10, 1968). I was the guest of my uncle, Mr Guillermo Nadal, Counsellor at that time in

the Spanish Embassy in New Delhi. Several weeks later, my uncle told me that the Ambassador had asked him if his nephew – myself – could be the Spanish delegate at the great Auroville event. Of course, I had no choice. Knowing precisely nothing about Auroville, all I had to do was to carry with me a little box containing soil taken from the garden of our Embassy. My uncle summed up what I had to do: obey all the organizers' orders and observe protocol to the letter. I thought it shouldn't be too difficult to fulfill both aims.

On 27th February I woke up at 6.30 a.m. A van came to collect me from the house. We drove directly to the Residence of the Prime Minister, Mrs Indira Gandhi. She wanted to bid the foreign delegates a personal and official farewell. We waited for her in the garden, where she arrived dressed in her habitual white saree. Because of my small stature, I was standing in the front row, and so I was one of the few people with whom she shook hands. One of her assistants let Mrs Gandhi know that there was a considerable number of delegates, and that it would be best to make a general salutation. With utmost solemnity, she put her hands together and said: *namaskar*.

When we arrived at Madras airport, the weather was terribly hot, fifteen, or even twenty degrees difference from the temperature in Delhi. On arrival in Pondicherry, I was guided to the big private house which I was to share with three other delegates from Great Britain, Australia and New Zealand. However, I realized that we were unlikely to get on easily because of my very poor English, so I applied to stay with other representatives who spoke Spanish. I ended up staying with the representatives from Argentina, Peru and Colombia. They were all older than me – about 22 or 23. We were set on having as much fun as possible.

Wednesday, 28th February: We got up at 6.00 a.m. Breakfast was ready. Buses carried all the del-



Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi with foreign delegates for the Foundation of Auroville. Gonçal is third from left.

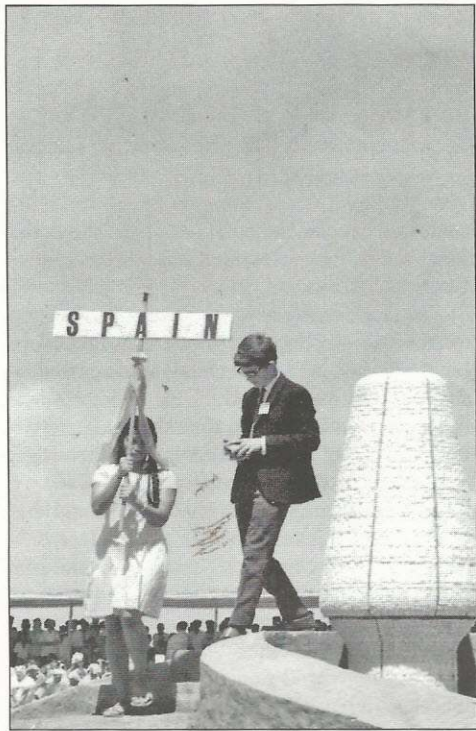
egates to a big deserted patch of land where the only shade was provided by a big tree: the banyan. Of course, huge shamiana – ceremonial tents – were put up with the express purpose of ensuring that people survived the event! We delegates had to stand for a long time in the sun, with only our Indian girl partners for company. Each of them carried a simple wooden placard bearing the names of our countries. Finally, accompanied by my Indian partner, I walked up to the Urn into which I solemnly deposited the Spanish soil. Mission accomplished!

Thanks to Catalan friends from Auroville, fifty years later I was reunited with my colleague and partner in the Auroville ceremony, Gita Dolia. At that time, she – like most of the Indian participants – was a student at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education (SAICE); these days she works at the aquarium of the same Centre.

Thursday, 29th February: The third day was much quieter but in the evening there was a truly elevating event – a *darshan*, or visitation of a deity. I was on the terrace of our residence from where I was able to witness an unexpected and striking spectacle: all Pondicherry seemed affected by Mother's *darshan*. People were in ecstasy, in trance. This was not like watching some fantastic American film version of Jesus Christ and the Sermon on the Mount. I was actually there, very close to the Sri Aurobindo Ashram where, every Leap Year on the 29th February and on other special days, Mother used to perform *darshan*.

How privileged I was to have witnessed this marvellous event! Together with my climbing to the Urn, witnessing the Mother's *darshan* was the high point of the journey.

Dr. Gonçal Lopez Nadal



Depositing the soil of Spain

## The guardian of the Banyan

**“I**t's a great shame that people don't know about or have forgotten my grandmother,” says Jayamoorthy, long-time printer of the *Auroville News and Notes*.

Andhayee 'Ammal' was born in Edayanchavady. In a love marriage, she married a man from a higher caste, a temple builder from Naidu caste, but this was not acceptable to either family and they were sent out of the village. They moved to Kottakarai, where they had four children.

When her husband died, Andhayee went to live alone in a small hut about ten metres away from the Banyan tree. She chose this spot, explains Jayamoorthy, because it was *poromboke* land and therefore not cultivated by the local farmers.

She became the protector of the tree, guarding it against goats and people who wanted to cut the branches for firewood. As it was also the only tree in the area and at the intersection of two dirt tracks, people who were walking to the local villages or to Pondicherry and back would

put down their loads there and eat their food in the shade of its branches. She would provide water for them and so the tree came to be called the *tannipandalalamaram*, meaning the 'tree where water would be given'.

She would also watch over the farmers' fields crops during cultivation time. In return, they would give her a portion of the harvested crop.

The local people believed she had special powers. Jayamoorthy says she could foretell when rain was coming. David Salmon, an early Aurovilian, recalls in a recent book (*What is the Matrimandir? The most mysterious monument of modern times?*) that she would do a daily *puja* under the Banyan, and the local people would ask her to do a *puja* for the rain to come or to bless their crops. “She was a very powerful woman, she had a divine power,” says Jayamoorthy. Perhaps this is why she also came to be known as Andaiamma, a name of the Divine Mother.

The Banyan had been identified in 1967 as the centre of Auroville. As Gilles Guigan of the Auroville Archives points out, it was important

to locate this because this is where the Inauguration ceremony would take place. In a 1996 interview, Roger describes going to Mother with a map and asking her, “Where shall the centre of the town be? At that time, I did not know. I asked her to point to where the centre should be. So she pointed to it. We made a mark there and went to identify the place with a jeep.

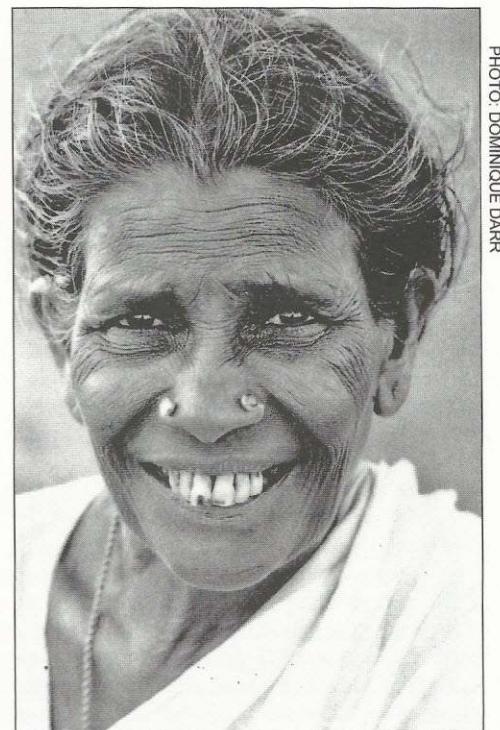
“There was no road. There was nothing. The land was vacant. The only place where there was a bit of greenery was the Banyan and that's where she placed the centre.”

It's not clear whether Andhayee was living there at the time. Roger didn't mention her and Gilles points out that her hut does not appear on photos taken during the Inauguration ceremony. Furthermore, Gilles notes that there was no water connection to the Banyan prior to the Inauguration, so if she was to provide water she would have had to bring it from Kottakarai village some kilometres away.

What is clear is that she and the hut were there when a dedication ceremony for Matrimandir was held on 14th August, 1970.

Alain Grancolas, the organizer, remembers her hut being located close to the tree, where the pond for the Life Garden is situated at present. It must have been around this time, when the first people came to ascertain exactly where the future Matrimandir would be, that an extraordinary encounter took place. According to Jayamoorthy, his grandmother came up to them and said, “So, you have finally come to build the temple”. She said she had been waiting for this for some time. They, of course, were astonished.

On February 21st, 1971, the excavation for the Matrimandir began. On February 21st, 1972, the concreting of the foundations began. In the following years, the structure took shape. “My grandmother did not want to move the hut,” says Jayamoorthy, “but this was unpopular with some people who wanted to develop the area. In



Andhayee

late 1975, when my grandmother went to Pondicherry to purchase some food, somebody set fire to her hut. When she returned the hut and all her belongings had been destroyed.”

“She ran round the Matrimandir chanting, obviously very upset, chanting and calling the Divine Shakti, beating herself,” remembers David Salmon. “This felt to me the opposite of what Mother would have wanted. How could anyone treat an old woman possessing almost nothing like that?”

Afterwards, she went to live in a small keet house on a piece of land near Kottakarai, where the Auroville community, Equality, is today. Jayamoorthy remembers as a young boy collecting bread from Otto at the old Auroville bakery and taking it to her. A few years later she died. She was between 85-90 years old.

The Aurovilians may have forgotten her or know nothing about her but the older villagers still remember her as a special woman with special powers. Perhaps the Banyan remembers her too...

Alan



The Banyan Tree with Andhayee's hut behind



# When the future of Auroville seeks a future in Auroville

**T**he Auroville Gap Year Programme (AGYP) was designed by Auroville Campus Initiative (ACI) to provide a learning platform to the youth of Auroville between the ages of 17 and 30. It would launch them on a quest for knowledge about themselves, their home, and eventually the profession they would like to explore.

Some time ago, Auroville Campus Initiative, part of SAIER's further education activities, initiated the Swadharma programme, which aims at helping youth from all around the world find their path in life. While this programme has been running smoothly for the past two and half years, none of our Aurovilian youth has shown any interest in participating.

The lack of possibilities for pursuing higher education is one reason why most of the Auroville youth leave to pursue their higher studies elsewhere, sometimes returning only many years later. After interviewing a few young adults who followed this path, ACI discovered that this was a healthy and necessary "exile", as these youngsters often crave some fresh air and anonymity after spending their lives in a small city.

Even though ACI understood the importance of leaving Auroville as a young adult to explore the world and make a conscious decision to come back or to settle elsewhere, they still believed that there should be an opportunity for those who want to pursue higher studies within Auroville to do so.

The Auroville Gap Year Programme is intended to do this. Designed by Sophie, Manoj, Lalit and Valentine, the vision was simple, yet ambitious. It would be a two-part programme, catering to each participant's individual interest.

The first part of the programme would be common for all participants, while the second part would consist of an apprenticeship in a unit of Auroville.

It began on September 24th, with seven participants: Ganesh D., Ganga, Jonas, Mahana, Jeeva H., Kalai G., and Aswini J. They were later joined by Arpana and Ahilya, who heard of the programme once it had begun but blended in fantastically.

The participants spent the first week introspecting, exploring themselves and setting goals for their future, using tools such as Vision Boards, Ikigai, and finding their values.

They participated in a Non-Violent Communication deep listening workshop with L'aura Joy, which was a leap out of the comfort zone for some and a revelation for others. Some also participated in the Y-PEER training organised by Youth Link and facilitated by Juan Andres and Anna, in which they learned techniques to educate their peers about issues like gender sensitivity,

peer pressure, and safe sexual practices.

After the exploration of the Self came the exploration of Society.

Although most of these youngsters have grown up or were born here, they were never given a detailed explanation about the Working Groups, how the commercial units function, where maintenance comes from etc. At their request, meetings were organised with people from Financial Services, the Town Development Council, SAIER, Housing Service, Working Committee and the Residents Assembly Service.

Kalai, who is born in Auroville but always went to outside schools, admitted: "I was totally unaware of how the system worked over here. I was out of Auroville for some time, so this programme helped me to understand the economic system, how the system works, how units are running here..."

When asked if she would have liked to learn such things in school earlier, Ganga answered: "Now that I have an interest and want to learn, it interests me. But if I'd been told about it while I was in Transition School, I wouldn't have paid attention." The other participants agreed.

Their biggest discovery? The Master Plan: "When we met Divya to find out more about Mother's plan for Auroville I was really surprised... I knew the Mother had a plan, but I did not know what it was. That was really interesting" says Mahana.

Based on their emerging domains of interest, more sessions were organised. There was Creative Writing with Francesca, who taught them techniques to "open the tap of Inspiration," and six design sessions organised by Lalit, each covering a different theme, including kolam design with Grace.

They visited UpCycling, where Marc showed them the amazing products that can be made with "waste". The youngsters' enthusiasm touched him, inspiring him to possibly start a design course for young Aurovilians.

The group also visited Solitude Farm, where Krishna enlightened them about the benefits of eating locally-grown food. This left a very strong impression on them, and Jeeva, Kalai and Ganesh explored other farms such as Buddha Garden and Auro-Orchard, volunteering and studying the



From left: Arpana, Jonas, Ahilya, Kalai, Ganesh, Ganga, Mahana, Aswini and Jeeva

different techniques used.

A beautiful surprise for the participants was how open the Aurovilians were to share their stories and experience with the youth, as everyone they came into contact with was very enthusiastic and welcoming.

Coming from different academic backgrounds, they reflected on the differences in their education. "My schooling was done in Pondicherry. It was a hard time there. In my college, we had classrooms, we had laboratories, we had machines, they taught us design, everything. But in Auroville we have a big laboratory, which is nature, and we can find everything in nature" says Kalai, who left his job as an engineer in Coimbatore to join the Gap Year. His new interest is in exploring diverse farming techniques in Auroville.

As this programme is based on individual motivation and self-discipline as the participants needed to explore activities on their own, we asked them about the cliché that the Auroville youth tends to be wild, free, and careless. Ganga answers: "We are a lot freer than kids outside and we have more choice, and sometimes, some kids lag off a bit. Obviously, you have kids just driving around. You eventually get back on track, it's part of the normal growth of youth, I think. In the end, I believe that here we do things more out of choice, we do things that we really like to do instead of settling for just any job."

The next step was exploring their domains of interest. Mahana chose yoga, Jonas and Aswini design, Arpana education, Jeeva and Kalai farming, Ganesh mechanical engineering, and Ganga

continued her exploration of art, while Ahilya and Jonas started a project with L'aura on Restorative Circles.

As they deepen their research and exploration on their own, collective sessions will take place less frequently, until they commit to an apprenticeship and only meet their batch mates and facilitators once a week. At that time they will make a PowerPoint presentation, summarizing their latest activities away from the group.

When asked if they would recommend that others take a Gap Year to explore themselves, they all said "yes". Aswini says, "It has helped me in a lot of different ways. I really needed a break. I think this is the perfect place, where you are doing something and you're not just sleeping at home".

Ganga agrees. "I would definitely recommend it because it has helped me a lot. It's a good base for your future, it brings more clarity. When you study the classic academic subjects, you're doing something but you don't really know for what, and that's kind of depressing. I think it's good to take a break and see what you want to do."

"I think it's also really good to take action for yourself, because when you're in school you're told what to do, but here you build up discipline to create stuff for yourself. I think that's really good."

Kalai would also recommend it to anyone who, like him, is doing a job they are not interested in.

One final request came from Ganesh: "If I could ask for anything from Auroville, I would say: please build a university. Auroville needs to think more about higher education."

Valentine

## OUTREACH

# Untranslatable? The responsibility of communicating Auroville

**I** recently returned from several months at my university in the UK dedicated to writing up my doctoral research on Auroville, and a series of related presentations in various academic conferences throughout Europe and the United States. I usually feel limited and stifled in these contexts, divorced from the rich reality of Auroville, lacking the common ground of relatable embodied experience, and as a result, faced with a gulf in communication.

But my experience this year was markedly different. For the first time in my lifetime, I felt that a critical mass of people in 'mainstream society' are waking up to their need to actively participate in shaping society if they want a world worth living in. It's no longer only a particularly awake, prescient fringe of radical or alternative people. In the present socio-political climate, Auroville suddenly becomes not only something people can relate to but which is also relevant, since we have been experimenting with this for the past 50 years. When I spoke of Auroville, I clearly noticed it was taken seriously, as opposed to being a curiosity. People were open and sincerely engaging in what the existence

of something like Auroville means, and what it has to offer them.

It would be very one-sided of us, however, to place the onus of a successful transmission of Auroville on the receptivity of an outside audience. Yet this view has had quite a stronghold within Auroville. Many feel that Auroville simply cannot be defined, or even described by any framework outside of Integral Yoga, in any language other than Mother and Sri Aurobindo's own words.

However, in order to participate in what are increasingly global conversations and shifts, we need to make an effort to actually communicate what Auroville is about – in words, in language, in contexts that others can relate to and understand. In refusing to translate it, we do a disservice to others, to our own experience, and to the purpose of Auroville – which is to participate in a transformation of consciousness that is not limited to a 20 square kilometre radius.

Doing so does not mean that we need to define ourselves according to other peoples' terminologies, categorizations, frameworks. But we can use these as points of reference; we can unpack how Auroville does and does

not 'fit' into these, and beyond that, look at how it informs, expands, and deepens the understandings they try to capture, for the benefit of humanity as a whole.

With academic audiences in particular, who understand that the way we conceptualize anything is simply an analytical exercise, there is far less risk of anyone actually identifying the categorization with the reality. When I go to different conferences and present on Auroville, there is of course, always an overarching theme to the conference. As a result, I have presented on Auroville as a polity, as a site of utopian practice, as a learning society etc., but my experience was not of presenting a series of 'categorized' aspects of Auroville. It offered me enriching opportunities to explore Auroville through different lenses, each highlighting different aspects. Not at the expense of others, but as invitations to delve deeper into each, something which necessarily rippled out into my evolving understanding of the whole. For example, Auroville as a polity greatly informs and is included in how I understand it to be a learning society. That Auroville is a learning society is key to how I challenge



Suryamayi

common understandings of what it means to be utopian – a word many Aurovilians shudder at being associated with, for good reason.

Some of us, myself included, have questioned whether there is any point in presenting Auroville given that such a significant dimension of this 'laboratory of evolution' is one of inner transformation. Can any presentation on Auroville be a substitute for such

experience? Of course not. But there is a vast spectrum of opportunity between experiencing it directly – a privilege denied to many – and knowing nothing about it. Besides, Mother did say Auroville is not the only answer. It is just one nucleus of transformation. So does everybody need to experience Auroville? From what I've observed, just knowing it is there, as one expression of this global transformation of consciousness, can go a long way to affirm and nourish others in doing what they feel called to in their own realms, spaces and communities – many of which have significantly contributed to my own evolution towards being "a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness."

Accordingly, I find myself called to present Auroville in a spirit of service, rather than as a demand for recognition. To me, this has to do with the quality of generosity, translating as a willingness to reach audiences in ways they feel they can relate to. In my experience, creating connection is what allows transmission beyond words to happen.

Suryamayi



# Brahmanaspati Kshetram: a quiet seed

In a quiet back street of Edayan-chavadi village there is a neat house. Beside it is a beautiful garden of plants and creepers with a magnificent statue of Ganesh. When you step through the front door you are in a welcoming hallway. Across the hall is a meditation room with pictures of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

The whole house breathes a special peace and care. This is Brahmanaspati Kshetram, a Centre dedicated to The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. It is the loving creation of Rajan, the modest man who shows you around.

Here is his story.

## Pondicherry

Rajan was born in Tindivanam, thirty kilometres from Auroville, in February 1980, but went to live with his grandmother, daughter of a renowned astrologer and an astrologer herself, in Pondicherry. Rajan's grandmother had attended several *darshans* of The Mother, but she did not really feel very connected to Her. Whereas when Sri Aurobindo passed away, she was in the queue to see his body as she really wanted to have His final *darshan*. But when she reached the Ashram gate, she was told he had already been put in the Samadhi. Rajan's grandmother always had a deep connection with Sri Aurobindo.

When Rajan was four and half years old his mother passed away. His grandmother became mentally disturbed as this had been her only child. Together with Rajan, she ended up living on the streets of Pondicherry.

It was a life full of struggle but also filled with moments of kindness, deep concern and support from people around. Many Ashramites were kind to him and tried to help him. Rajan spent a lot of time in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Library with the gate man whose calendar picture of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo stayed in Rajan's heart. From his childhood he enjoyed festivals as they often meant gifts, sweets and good food. He particularly remembers Saraswati Puja being celebrated every year in the Ashram Library, when Ganesh's statue would be placed between photos of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

At one point, a German lady called Ursula Guthoerl, who had lived in Auroville during the 1980s but now lived in Luxembourg, took a keen interest in Rajan's wellbeing. During her annual visits to Pondicherry, she tried to take care of Rajan's education but his grandmother would not cooperate.

## Coming to Auroville

Finally, in 1991 Ursula came with two of her Aurovilian friends, Durai and Hans from Agni community, who offered to take Rajan to Auroville in order to look after him. Strangely enough, Rajan's grandmother readily agreed to part from him, when previously she had refused all proposals by others. In a few weeks Rajan moved to Durai's parent's house in Edayanchavady, from where he moved to Agni Community a year later.

To catch up with schooling, Rajan was first taken to Isaiambalam School, from where he moved to Udavi School. Schooling was very difficult. The teachers didn't know what to do with him as he had to start everything from scratch.

While in Udavi School, Ursula, who was by now his foster mother, was supporting him financially from abroad. Once Rajan asked Ursula for a big statue of Ganesh. She readily granted this. The following year he celebrated Ganesh's birthday in a grand manner, spending a lot of money for it, as since his childhood he had felt very close to Ganesh. When Ursula came to know about it, she couldn't believe that so much money had been used for the celebration. She thought he had misused the money and so she refused to support him anymore, suggesting that he find a job to support himself and his grandmother.

Rajan was deeply shocked by this incident. He was forced to stop his studies after the 9th standard and moved to land in Edayanchavady village which had been bought earlier for his grandmother by Ursula. Thus, from 2001 for some years his grandmother and Rajan stayed together once again, looking after each other.

For a year Rajan did not have a job. That



Rajan

was a difficult period. Rajan cycled down to the Ashram every day to sit by the Samadhi. Finally, after some struggle, he found a good job in the Auroville Town Hall as an office assistant. This allowed him to discover Auroville and to connect with the people there in a fresh manner.

From his childhood, Rajan felt very closely connected to Ganesh. One day, when he was still living in Agni Community, he came across a letter written by The Mother to an early disciple, Madanlal Himatsingka, which made him realize how deeply The Mother and Ganesh were connected. In the letter She says that Ganesh appeared to Her and said: "Each one must invoke Ganesh according to his own feeling – the traditional way is not necessarily the best."

Though he had read this letter earlier, he understood the full meaning of it only after the unfortunate incident with Ursula. That letter was a big eye-opener that helped him understand the relativity of pujas and religious ceremonies, things he had been so much interested in earlier. He felt that he was introduced to the real Ganesh by The Mother – he received the way to the inner approach – while at the same time he felt that Ganesh was introducing The Mother and Sri Aurobindo to him.

## The dream

Growing up around the Ashram, Rajan was aware of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. When he moved to Auroville, in the early years he even had some dreams of Them, yet he did not really feel a close connection until 2003, when he had a dream which linked all his earlier dreams together. In Rajan's words:

"I was with a lot of luggage on the road right in front of the playground gate. I knew that The Mother was inside the playground. I had three different kinds of flowers (Aspiration, Transformation and Radha's Consciousness) with me and I wanted to offer them to The Mother. I went to the gate and it was half open; I saw all the Ashramites sitting in front of The Mother. The Mother was meeting everyone individually. I went in and I was the second person in the queue. I offered the flowers at Her feet; as the flowers fell at Her feet they turned into something like puff-rice. With all my devotion I put my head at Her lotus feet, then The Mother removed Her left foot and put it on top of my head. I was crying and crying nonstop. I felt that I had had such a privilege to have such a blessing. The Mother, after blessing me, gave me a Blessing Packet and a small booklet and two blank cheques. She smiled and said 'It's for you'. Receiving all these from The Mother I moved away, weeping in joy. I heard one sadhak saying what a lucky person he is."

"I felt the cheques didn't mean money or any material thing. It meant that She had taken me fully; that She would look after me and I would receive the necessary guidance from Her. It was clearly an initiation."

Before that dream Rajan had a strong feeling that there was something he had to do, but he did not know exactly what. After that

dream it became clear to him that he had to start a centre. He asked Nishtha to give it a name. As Nishtha knew Rajan was very fond of Ganesh and that he wanted a Vedic name, he suggested 'Brahmanaspati'. But Rajan didn't want just plain Brahmanaspati, so Nishtha added 'Kshetram' which means field. Thus Brahmanaspati Kshetram would mean 'field of action for the power and expression of divine soul' which he liked very much because it also links it to the work of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. In fact, he added 'The Mother and Sri Aurobindo Centre' to the title to make the connection with Them explicit.

His grandmother passed away in 2009 and in 2010 Rajan married Kasthuri, an Aurovilian. Meanwhile, he got in touch with his foster mother once more.

## The Centre seems far away

In 2011 Kasthuri gave all her money for completing the house and his foster mother gave him some money too. Because Rajan had told Kasthuri before the marriage that he wished to have a centre, Kasthuri built a room upstairs for that.

Although the house was completed in 2011, the Centre did not materialize right away. After their marriage, they felt that they were too young to start a centre, that they should have a family first. Their daughter was born in 2012. The manifestation of the Centre seemed far away, but he started making cards with the name of the Centre and with quotations from The Mother and Sri Aurobindo.

One day, Saravanan from Palani came to attend a seminar in Auroville and picked up one of these cards. He phoned Rajan and said, "Your card is very beautiful. Tell me about this Centre."

When Rajan told him his ideas, Saravanan became very interested. After that, whenever he came to Pondicherry Ashram for Darshans, he would come and stay with Rajan, and they would talk until late at night.

Rajan had made a compilation of all that The Mother and Sri Aurobindo had said on Ganesh for which he wanted a facsimile of The Mother's original writing. He was also creating a 'fairy garden'. He had heard that Sunanda-ben, a senior sadhak from Sri Aurobindo Ashram, was connected to fairies and she could also help him to get a copy of the document he wanted. So Rajan contacted her for both these reasons. She said she would call him when she had time... but she didn't call.

Later, by chance he met her at Unity Pavilion in December 2013 when she was visiting with two of her friends. Rajan talked to them about the fairy garden. The two friends were very keen on visiting the garden, so the three of them came to the house. When Sunanda-ben saw the garden, she was very much touched. She said that there are beautiful beings there and that Rajan should take good care of the place.

## The seed is sown

Then he invited them to the meditation room. Sunanda-ben sat there for some time.

Rajan placed the board bearing the name of the Centre on Sunanda-ben's lap. It was then that Rajan told them about the project for the Centre. They were very touched. Rajan felt it was a very significant moment. Through the presence of Sunanda-ben, a senior sadhak, The Mother had sown a seed.

From that moment, everything seemed to happen by itself. The 29th March 2014, the centenary of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo's first meeting, was a special Darshan day. Rajan, Kasthuri, Rajan's daughter and Saravanan went for Darshan in Pondicherry. Later, at the same time that The Mother and Sri Aurobindo had originally met, at 3 pm, the four of them inaugurated the Centre. They held a silent meditation. Everything was simple and extremely beautiful.

The aim and aspiration of the Centre was put together through a few quotations from the book *White Roses*, which was compiled and published by Huta. On that day these quotations were framed and installed permanently at the Centre as the guiding spirit. The words are:

*To my dear little child*

*Aspire only to the Divine*

*Love only the Divine*

*Work only for the Divine*

*Serve only the Divine*

*Be attached only to the Divine*

*Want only the Divine*

*Seek only the Divine*

*Only adore the Divine*

At first, the Centre was just the meditation room upstairs. Rajan and Kasthuri would clean it every day, but they only opened it to the public at Darshan times and on Ganesh's birthday. In September, 2016, Rajan moved with his family to the Courage Community. Then Ayyanar K and Helena B joined the project as trustees, and in December, 2016 Brahmanaspati Kshetram was registered as an Auroville Activity under Village Action Trust.

Slowly, activities began. Today the Centre has a library with books of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo and their disciples, in both English and Tamil. There are also six panels depicting six scenes from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri* created by Sunanda-ben.

## Activities

Presently they hold weekly meditations on Thursdays, and seven reading circles every month in Tamil and English, led by Buvana Sundari, Dhanalakshmi and Rama Narayana. Every full moon there is the chanting of Sri Aurobindo's *Gayatri mantra* and regular exhibitions related to The Mother and Sri Aurobindo are held. The last exhibition was held for Auroville's 50th birthday on The Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's Blessing Packets. It was a great honour for Auroville because it is the first time that such a selection of historic Blessing Packets have been exhibited anywhere.

Rajan would like to open the Centre full-time to the public and hold more events to bring people together in a common aspiration to serve The Mother and Sri Aurobindo, but at present this is difficult as additional manpower and financial support are required. The Project Coordination Group has graciously supported the purchase of some equipment. In fact, the Centre has only been improving since its inception, and Rajan would like at least to be able to sustain all that has been achieved by Her Grace, leaving the future at Her Feet.

Today, when Rajan looks back he realizes how all his life has been woven together around this Centre and every woman who came into his life has been a support for the work. Rajan's grandmother, who looked after him and for some reason wished to live near Auroville in Edayanchavady, Ursula, who opened up new possibilities for him and supported his grandmother's wish by buying her the land where the Centre is established today, and Kasthuri, his wife, who with her selfless dedication is ready to journey with Rajan all the way along this path. He feels deep gratitude to them all.

*As told to Alan*

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# Planning for the wider bioregion: Pondich

An important meeting in terms of planning for the larger bioregion took place on 11th September in Pondicherry. Hosted by Citizen's Action Network PondyCAN and the Puducherry Planning Authority, with participation of civil society from all the sub-regions, the consultation meeting was also addressed by Lt. Governor Dr. Kiran Bedi, Chief Minister V. Narayanasamy, the Puducherry Chief Secretary Ashwani Kumar and the Principal Secretary of the Tamil Nadu Government.

*Auroville Today* asked three of the organisers to assess the significance of the meeting and to talk about the challenges and successes of bioregional planning in this area. Probir is the President of PondyCAN, Lalit is an Aurovillian planner who worked for many years with L'Avenir d'Auroville, and Aravinda is an environmentalist and member of the Auroville Highway Task Force.

Moreover, town and country planning are totally segregated and sufficient attention is not given to the countryside. In bioregional planning we want to break this dichotomy and emphasise a rural-urban continuum where the rural areas are seen as the more important aspect because without them the towns cannot be sustained.

Secondly, conventional planning is confined to political boundaries: states do not participate in each other's development. But when it comes to shared issues like water or coastal erosion, sticking to state boundaries make no sense. Bioregional planning is defined by environmental and cultural factors, not state borders.

The other problem with conventional planning is that it is typically a top-down approach. The government will conceive of a project and implement it without hardly any consultation with the people affected. This is why many such projects fail. Bioregional planning places great emphasis upon consulting with those who will be affected by planning decisions in their area, because they often know much better than the planners what should be done.

Bioregional planning consists of three layers. One is the spatial foundation which is the natural features, water, minerals, crops, fauna. Then there is the infrastructure of human settlements. Finally, you have the superstructure which is the various activities.

The built component has to be harmonised with the natural environment because we are dependent on ecosystem services and human activities can have hugely negative impacts on the environment. Unless we understand the impact of nature upon society it is difficult to plan.

**On what basis did you define the Pondicherry-Villupuram-Auroville-Cuddalore area as a distinct bioregion?**

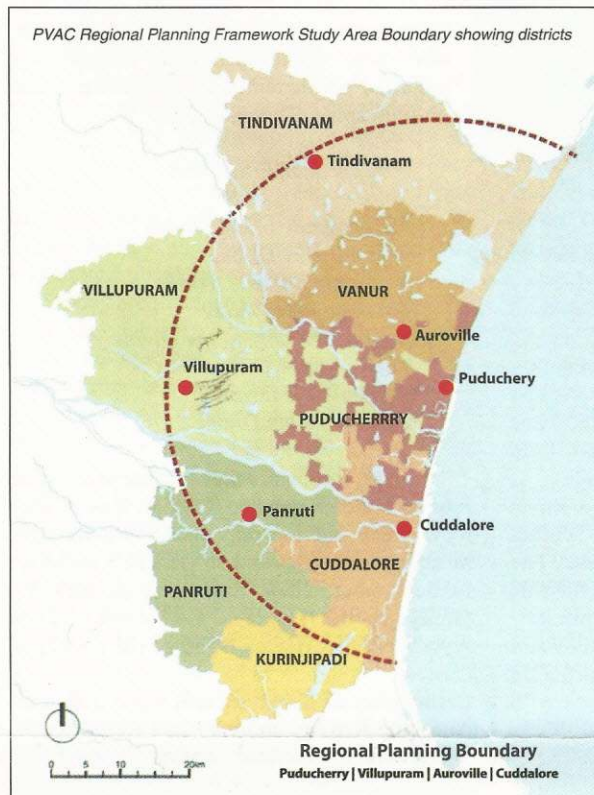
**Probir:** Water is the key thing, so we looked at shared watersheds. There are also many linkages between the various sub-regions – historical, cultural, trade, etc. On a personal note, when we were young, we used to cycle to places like Auroville, Kaveli and Bahour Lake near Cuddalore so this also represents the larger space where we feel at home.

**How new is the concept of bioregional planning in this area?**

**Probir:** We started the Citizen's Action Network, PondyCAN, in 2007 but it was only in



Images of the



**What is the difference between bioregional planning and conventional planning?**

**Lalit:** The main drive in conventional regional planning is managing growth in rural areas and facilitating urbanisation. Unlike bioregional planning, it does not place much emphasis on supporting ecosystems.

**Probir:** Conventional planning does not look at the whole: no importance is given to health, education, the natural environment and so on.

## History of bioregional planning in this area

**Sept 1986** – Letter from Joint Secretary, Ministry of Urban Development (MoUD) to Chief Secretary, Pondicherry to take up Interstate Regional Planning.

**21st Dec 2004** – Reminder letter from MoUD for the formation of Working Group for Regional planning.

**15th May 2008** – Consultation meet in Auroville "Water management through Integrated Planning and Regional Collaboration".

**25th July 2008** – Meeting held at the Chennai Secretariat with all the Secretaries by Dr. Harjit Singh Anand, Secy HUPA.

**26th July 2008** – Meeting at the Pondicherry Chief Secretariat on "Preparation of Regional Plan" attended by Secretary Urban Development, TN.

**4th Oct 2008** – Presentation to His Excellency the Lt Governor of Pondicherry Shri Govind Singh Gurjar at Rajnivas.

**5th Oct 2008** – Presentation to Chief Minister in his chamber. Others present – LAD Minister, Chief Secretary, other Secretaries and Heads of depts.

**Feb 2009** – "Sustainable Regions Collaborative Planning" a 3 day participatory workshop by JTP, Germany, held in Auroville, inaugurated by the Lt Governor of Pondicherry.

**24th July 2009** – Meeting held in the chamber of Chief Minister, Pondicherry regarding preparation of Interstate Regional Plan.

**31st Aug 2009** – Letter from Govt of Pondicherry to Prof KT Ravindran requesting him to prepare a concept plan for the Interstate Regional Plan.

**11th Feb 2010** – Brainstorming session organised by TCPO, New Delhi for the 5 southern states in Auroville on Regional Planning.

**8th Oct 2010** – Meeting at French Consulate on Bioregional Planning along with officials from TCPD Pondicherry.

**30th Oct 2010** – Meeting with Chief Secretary regarding the Pilot Project on Regional Planning funded by ADEME.

**15th Feb 2012** – Completion of Report – "Sustainable Regional Planning Framework for Pondy-Villupuram-Auroville-Cuddalore".

**24th Mar 2015** – Meeting with TDC at Auroville to discuss "Bioregional Water Action Program".

**5th May 2015** – Consultation meeting in association with US Consulate "Water Stewardship for the Sustainable Development of the Bioregion".

**2016** – Formation of the alliance "All for Water for All" with representatives from the entire bioregion.

**2nd Feb 2016** – (World Wetlands day) to 23rd Mar (World Water Day) – Water Festival for 50 days covering the entire bioregion.

**11th September 2018** – Consultation meeting on PVAC bioregion in Pondicherry.

2008 that we got into bioregional planning. The trigger was the Pondicherry port. It was causing erosion for kilometres up the coast in the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, so we thought how can we just work on Pondicherry?

With the port, we saw that the government had planned something and people only came to know about it too late when it was being implemented. Initially we campaigned against it and made protests. But then we got smart. We collected a lot of information and based on that information we began lobbying the local government and the Central Government in New Delhi. We also used the media and went to court whenever necessary.

But it was always a struggle because the project was already being implemented. So we thought, why don't we involve ourselves in bioregional planning to avoid this kind of thing happening in future?

**Yet the concept of bioregional planning has not really taken off yet. Why has it taken so long to acquire traction?**

**Probir:** The shift from thinking about one's own area to the larger bioregion is challenging. How to accept that you need to get involved in something that is happening in Cuddalore 30 kilometres away? But if you realise that what is happening 30 kilometres away could destroy your water system, you realise that you need to expand your awareness and your sphere of activity.

**Lalit:** Regional planning forces you to stretch beyond your own space. In Auroville we have not reached that larger consciousness. For example, within the Auroville Master Plan area of the greenbelt there are six villages, yet their growth needs and aspirations are not known to us. Also, bioregional planning requires a very different level of effort from local planning and we have not yet reached that level.

**Over the years it has been only a minority of Aurovillians who have been involved in bioregional outreach. Does bioregional action not suffer from the sense that we are not here for that?**

**Lalit:** It's true, I think this has been holding us back. At the same time, in the early years our first task was to take care of the land. We didn't have the capacity to do more. Yet, through initiatives like Village Action, we created a lot of goodwill locally and from this level, the next stage will evolve. Now I think the threat of the new highway has been the trigger. From now onwards, I think Auroville will be very serious about the bioregion.

**Aravinda:** Yet the early Aurovillians were intimately connected with the bioregion. The original foresters went out to the bioregion to get seeds for Auroville. And we realised very early on that to work on our watertable meant that we had to work on the whole thing, the watershed of our bioregion.

**Probir:** But for a bioregional consciousness to develop in the wider population there has to be a tipping point when a sufficient number of people are actually thinking and doing something about it in each of the sub-regions of our larger bioregion. Until that happens it will not take a form.

**Was the recent meeting in Pondicherry in any sense a tipping point?**

**Probir:** Perhaps it was. This was the first time we brought together people from the entire bioregion who had been actively working in their own spheres. When they heard what others were doing and the challenges they were facing, people realised that this is a huge support group that can help them in their own work. There was a strong empathy because people recognised there were so many common challenges, like water, of course, which is the biggest challenge for everyone.

If I am fighting my own battles and thinking I am the only one doing it, I don't know how long I will go on, but when I see all these other people fighting similar battles, there is a sense of reassurance that I am on the right path.

**Aravinda:** For me there was a strong feeling of togetherness and solidarity and a sense that, yes, it is going to happen, now is the time.

**What about inter-state cooperation? If the two neighbouring states do not fully cooperate, a lot of the key work in the bioregion will not get done. Are you more hopeful now that this will happen?**

**Probir:** It was very important that not only the Lieutenant-Governor but also the Principal Secretary of the Tamil Nadu government and the Chief Secretary of Pondicherry were at the meeting, and that they committed themselves to working together on bioregional issues. Also, the fact that the Chief Minister of Pondicherry said he was going to meet the Union Minister in Delhi and tell him that Pondicherry would be taking up bioregional planning is a huge step. This is the first time I've heard him say that.

If we can get an okay from the Union Minister, then we have made the first step in the political process.

At the bureaucratic level, inter-state cooperation on bioregional planning will only happen when there is a policy that the Tamil Nadu Government and Pondicherry Government will work together. After this meeting I am hopeful we are closer to getting this.

However, we as civil society can move and work everywhere; we are not tied to state boundaries. We can talk to the Central Government as well as local farmers and fishermen and we can keep coordinating the work of bioregional planning at our level. It is important we keep strengthening the base for bioregional action.

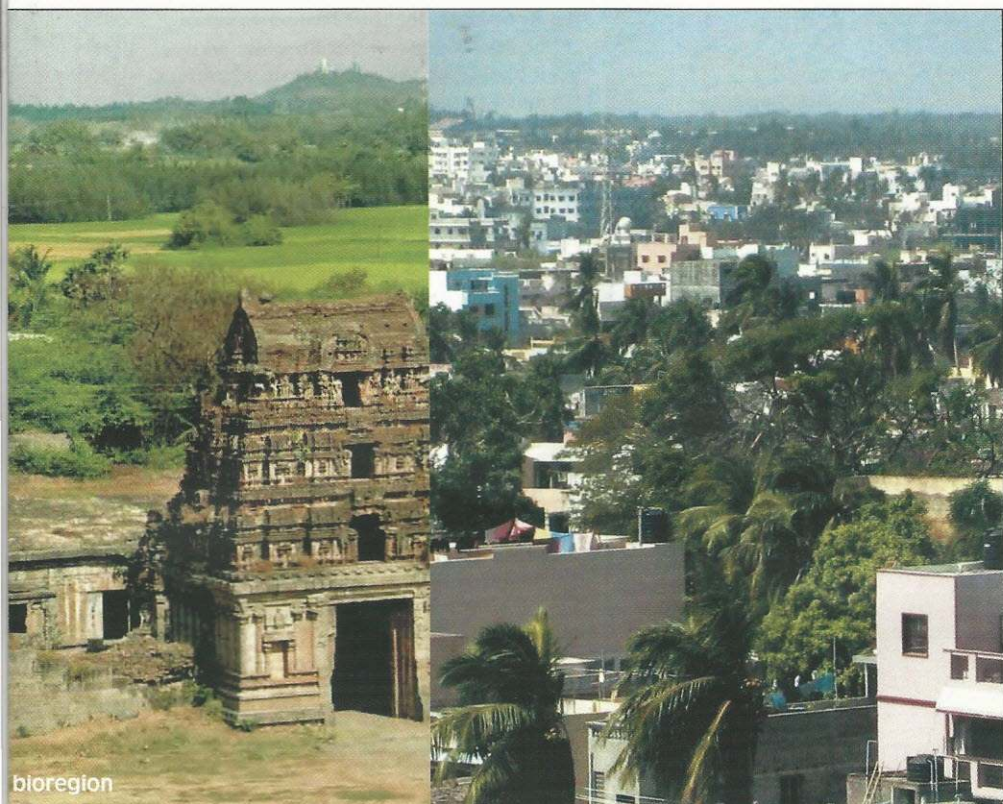
**The Principal Secretary of the Chennai Government mentioned that it was important that the people on the ground and the government find ways of working together. But aren't we talking about very different mindsets? The government is used to working top-down while the bioregional planning you are engaged in seems rooted in participatory decision-making.**

**Lalit:** You're absolutely right. By taking up these activities, you are taking on the entire political and governance system, which is a big task. So we have to be smart. While we need to educate the political class in a different way, there is a whole range of government schemes – for sanitation, education, afforestation etc. – which can be tapped into for bioregional development.

**Probir:** I think the top-down approach is not okay but the bottom-up approach is not always



# Puducherry – Villupuram – Auroville – Cuddalore



okay because wherever there is ego we have huge problems. So now we talk about the 'inside out' approach where you base yourself upon shared values like environmental and social justice, dignity, compassion, transparency and accountability. In Auroville these values are built in, but outside you have to work upon inculcating them.

**What is PondyCAN's experience of working with government agencies?**

**Probir:** Over the years of activism we have worked very closely with the Public Works Department (PWD) of the Pondicherry Municipality. Earlier we would just go and warm chairs in the corridors; they wouldn't even look at us. But now they respect us because they know we will go to Delhi, or take them to court, or go to the media to expose any wrongdoings.

Actually, they need us because they know that they don't know how to do their job well: the expertise often lies with the local people who will be affected by their schemes. But as they don't have access to them, we become the channel of communication with these people.

So while we have had a bit of a love-hate relationship with the PWD, now the ground is laid and they listen to us. In fact, collaborating on the Bahour project with them has been a joyride so far.

Bahour is an area on the southern border of Pondicherry State. It is very rich in history and has the second largest lake in Pondicherry, home to migratory birds. However, it has been very much neglected by government agencies.

While there is all this talk in India at present about 'smart cities', we framed Bahour as a 'smart village' project. We took the Lieutenant-Governor there and explained this to her and she loved the idea.

What we have managed to do here is to bring all the government departments, experts and civil society organisations round the same table to decide things together. The idea is to put all the government schemes on the table and see how we can tweak them to fulfil the needs of the people living there. Of course, some local priorities are not covered by any scheme so we have to find a way of including them. The bottom line is that everything has to be based on a shared vision and there has to be collaborative planning. Each government department has its own scheme but if someone objects, they either drop it or work together to modify it.

In the past, correct implementation of projects has been an issue, but now the contract for the work has been given to the community itself rather than to outside contractors, as happened under the old system. And the people themselves are taking photos of the work being done and circulating them on our WhatsApp group, so everybody knows what is happening.

Interesting things have happened in the process. The Pondicherry Government is bankrupt, so we decided to raise funds for the work through the Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme. A lot of local companies have now come forward.

Over the last couple of months we have achieved a lot. Now all the tanks have been

desilted and we are working with the Tourism Minister to develop alternative forms of tourism in the area, like fishing and agritourism.

**So PondyCAN has been a catalyst in this process?**

**Probir:** In Bahour there is a strong group of committed individuals but for the last ten years they had been voiceless because nobody listened to them. What we are doing is just empowering those people. They know what they have to do, they can do it, we are just giving them support and building bridges between them and the government. Now they go to meet the PWD Chief Engineer on their own and speak to him on equal terms whereas earlier they were scared to do this.

We are putting all these efforts into Bahour because we thought if we can successfully build a relationship with the government departments there, this can be a model for other areas of our bioregion.

**Lalit:** It's all about successful energy mobilization. Today we have a supportive Lieutenant-Governor and a group like PondyCAN which is taking it as a full-time job to engage with the different players: it's their energy which is making it work.

**Probir:** You need activists. The government will not move on its own. The people have to push it to get things done.

**What role do you see Auroville playing in this?**

**Aravinda:** I feel very strongly that Auroville's involvement with the bioregion is a necessity. In fact, it has no other choice. I feel what was given to us in our Charter, the ideal of human unity, has now become a need everywhere for climate change etc. is forcing humanity towards this need for oneness.

But human unity is not just an ideal. It is also a ground reality and Auroville has to start peeling off the layers which have isolated it in the past from its neighbours. For there are wonderful energies outside and we choke ourselves by limiting ourselves to one small area.

**Probir:** Auroville already plays a key role because, unlike the other areas of this bioregion, you started from scratch and created your own bioregion. So, in terms of the experience that you have gained, you are very important. What Auroville has done in terms of water conservation and biodiversity represent the shining stars of this bioregion and people come here to be inspired, to learn how it can be done. And when people are inspired, they go back and do something.

**Lalit:** For 50 years Auroville has been like a nursery for seedlings, now the wider plantation has to start. Auroville has the institutional and intellectual capacity to play a leading role in sustainable bioregional planning. Now it has to step up.

**Probir:** What is important is to identify people who are passionate. It's not about knowing about planning or planting trees. We need people to take the wheel. We need drivers from Auroville who can push this forward.

*From an interview by Alan*

## Extracts from Report on Sustainable Regional Planning Framework for Puducherry, Villupuram, Auroville & Cuddalore (PondyCAN, Feb. 2012)

The Puducherry – Villupuram – Auroville – Cuddalore (PVAC) Sustainable Regional Planning Framework is an initiative to establish an integrated inter-state growth strategy for Puducherry and its neighbouring districts in the state of Tamil Nadu – Villupuram and Cuddalore. The preliminary analysis and recommendations are organized within four key themes – Land Use, Transportation, Water, and Energy. Other themes will be addressed as part of ongoing efforts at various local, sub-regional, district or regional level as funding opportunities arise in the future.

### Key challenges in the bioregion

#### Land

While Puducherry suffers a tremendous strain on its urban infrastructure and quality of life because of uncontrolled and unplanned expansion and excessive development cramped into a limited land area, the immediate vicinity in both Cuddalore and Villupuram districts have vast tracts of land languishing from paucity of investment. Other critical concerns related to land use include: unplanned sprawling growth, lack of enforcement, loss in agricultural land, and minimal forest cover and recreation areas.

#### Mobility

The region is characterized by limited sustainable transportation choices that provide connectivity between the urban centres, towns, and rural areas. Traffic congestion, lack of dedicated pedestrian/ bicycle facilities, safety, poor quality bus service, absence of a regional airport, and multiple port developments are some of the other major concerns related to efficient movement of people and goods.

#### Food security

A significant portion of area under cultivation in the region is rapidly being converted into non-agricultural uses. The challenge is to protect the agricultural land base and to encourage its active use for food production. Also, the productivity of the current agricultural land in the region is poor owing to unsustainable practices, lack of sufficient infrastructure and loss of agricultural labourers.

#### Water

In the region, water tables are rapidly declining and its quality deteriorating, with saline intrusion affecting aquifers along the entire coastal region. Crucial, irreplaceable water bodies continue to be threatened by industrial and residential expansion.

#### Environment

Natural resources are under severe strain because neither their use, nor plans for their protection, conservation, and augmentation are coordinated among the stakeholders within the region.

#### Infrastructure

One of the biggest challenges faced in the region is the accessibility to physical and social infrastructure, especially in the rural areas. Due to this inaccessibility to both physical and social infrastructure in rural areas, there is migration towards the urban areas thereby adding tremendous stress on the existing infrastructure.

#### Livelihoods

Puducherry has one of the highest per capita income levels in the nation and it is ironically surrounded by some of the poorest districts of Tamil Nadu. From a macro-level perspective, the region's economic disparities and imbalances are a reflection of contemporary India's growth.

#### Heritage

The region is extremely rich with architectural and cultural heritage that dates back hundreds and thousands of years. Rural and urban heritage sites, cultural practices and local traditions in the entire region are under threat to development and economic pressures warranting an urgent need for a comprehensive heritage preservation strategy with government support.

#### Governance

While our region's units of government are

numerous, in order for the concept of integrated planning to materialize, there should be more collaboration between governmental agencies at all levels. At the same time, the participation of the community is a crucial part of any democracy. Both government and the citizens need to be enabled and empowered to make any governance work.

### Recommendations

#### Land

**Urban Growth boundary.** The concept essentially involves demarcating a boundary around an existing growth centre to curtail unplanned or uncontrolled conversion of agricultural lands and open spaces by developers in search of cheaper land.

The concept of designating an urban growth boundary relies heavily on the success of developing compact "complete communities" that support higher densities for a diverse mix of uses with adequate infrastructure, easily accessed through multimodal transportation facilities.

**Integrated Rural Ecosystem Greenways.** As a buffer to the development and human activities, between the designated urban growth boundaries, connecting greenbelt areas may be identified that serve as buffers and linkages between the growth centres.

#### Transportation

**Paradigm shift required.** It is imperative for the PVAC region to make a paradigm shift towards planning its transportation model.

Densely populated regions, if planned appropriately, have smaller carbon footprints per person than less dense areas, which tend to involve higher travel times and thereby higher consumption of energy.

#### East Coast Road development.

Development along the East Coast road needs to be controlled to allow only low-intensity, environmentally-friendly development for various reasons including the fact that the ground water levels along the coast cannot meet up to the demand created by such increasing development. New development can be located along the NH45 as a new corridor for development by upgrading it to accommodate high speed transportation systems such as Electric Multiple Units (EMU) or the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system.

**Promote public transport.** Make policy changes that incentivize a shift from being car-centric to more public transport driven mobility by adopting Transit Oriented Development (TOD) as a preferred model of development.

**Provide high speed transit** to connect all the growth centres in the PVAC region.

**Promote electric vehicles.** Introduce subsidies and incentives for the use of electric vehicles and alternate renewable sources of energy.

**Promote walking and cycling** across the region by providing pedestrian and cycling facilities or bicycle expressways.

#### Water

**Reduce groundwater extraction.** The water budget will stay negative even if all the tanks of the district are rehabilitated. It appears therefore urgent to reduce the amount of groundwater extracted for irrigation.

**Improve collaborative water management** in the region.

**Encourage sustainable water usage** for farming and promote organic farming for water saving techniques.

**Contain urban water demand.** Minimum charge on electricity or introduce a cap on the number of electricity units and water consumed per year.

**Introduce ground water metering.** Restrict use of bore wells to one season.

**Subsidize water harvesting equipments** and compulsory provision of rain water harvesting for individual houses.

**Water User Associations to manage tanks.** Tanks to be managed (rehabilitation, operation and maintenance) should be exclusively done by the Water User Association (WUA) only.

#### Energy

**Promote long term renewable energy plans** at the regional level.



# The more things change...

Looking at some of the old issues of *Auroville Today*, it's fascinating to see how some of the articles could have been written just last week. In fact, there's an old joke in the editorial team that we could run an entire issue of old articles and no one would know. So here are excerpts from a selection of early articles, and one editorial, that are still relevant today. Can you guess when they were written? Answers at the end. Hint: all the articles are from at least ten years ago.

## 1 Towards undivine anarchy? The Auroville housing situation

Practicality and imagination: these two strands informed Auroville's experiments with housing in the early years. The first settlers looked at what had already been done by the local inhabitants – huts with mud walls thatched with coconut leaves or straw – then tweaked it to accommodate their rather unique needs. The result? The Auroville 'capsule', an airy, lightweight hut resting on granite pillars. It could even be moved from place to place.

Yet, from the very beginning, this 'indigenous' line of development was paralleled by a 'visionary' line. The sweeping concrete curves of Last School, the soaring cantilevered wing of the Bharat Nivas auditorium, the fluid forms of Auromodèle – all these, in their attempts to herald the new, the futuristic, paid little attention to traditional materials and conditions.

Today architecture has clearly shifted away from the visionary and towards the practical end of the spectrum. Most of our institutional architecture is bland, and many Aurovilians live in somewhat featureless houses and apartments. These changes reflected a number of factors: changes in occupation (computer work replacing land work), an increased desire for security, cleanliness and comfort, a new wave of Aurovilians arriving with different expectations and desires regarding housing. The 'gentrification' of the capsule was also an expression of Aurovilians' deeper connectedness to the land, the flip side of which was an increased sense of proprietorship: 'my house', 'my land'.

Newcomers were encouraged to buy into the new city housing projects. Not all of them jumped at the chance. The apartments were not cheap, nor were they designed for children, while many of the new medium-density communities smacked too much of the urban landscapes Newcomers were fleeing in the West. As the population increased, and the land available and the possibility of constructing one's own accommodation decreased, the screw tightened further. At the mercy of rapidly increasing construction prices, bounced between rather different agendas of the Entry Group, Housing Service, architects, developers and Auroville communities, house-hunters could be seen wandering disconsolately backwards and forward like disembodied souls.

The losers in all of this are those who, like some Tamil Aurovilians and Auroville youth, have nothing to sell or rent and don't have the means to purchase or rent the accommodation on offer. The choice for them seems stark: stay here and live like second-class citizens in sub-standard accommodation or leave to earn the necessary funds elsewhere. As for those young Indian students, full of energy and idealism, who would like to become Newcomers, the message seems to be at present, 'Come back when you've made your millions'.

## 2 Coming together to protect the coast

Erosion of the coast close to Auroville is now catastrophic. Almost thirty metres of Quiet beach has disappeared over the past six months and neighbouring fishing villages are also badly affected. Concerned by the scale of the erosion, which affects both the Pondicherry and Tamil Nadu shoreline, a local citizens' network (PondyCAN) organised a consultation meeting in Auroville that was attended by senior officials from both States, coastal management experts and non-governmental organisations working on the coast. The aim of the meeting, co-organised by the Auroville Coastal-Area Development Centre (ACDC), was to agree upon a plan to protect and restore the coast.

The experts began by pointing out that on a coast like ours, where there are frequent storms, strong currents and oblique wave action, sand movement (known as littoral drift) is a natural phenomenon which can result in erosion. However, there seemed to be general

agreement that building two breakwaters for a small harbour to the south of Pondicherry Town in the late 1980s had made matters much worse, as these had disrupted the littoral drift.

The results of this disruption soon became clear. Sand piled up to the south of these breakwaters, the Pondicherry beach disappeared, and beaches further north eroded. The Puducherry administration responded by constructing sea walls and proposed to build a groyne field in an attempt to protect coastal villages which, having lost their protective beaches, were threatened by the waves. As the erosion moved north, the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu also began constructing sea walls and groynes along its shoreline.

Was the meeting a success? Probably not for those who wanted to see agreements being made about specific courses of action within specified time-frames. However, since it was billed as a 'consultation meet' this expectation may have been unrealistic.

## 3 Showing Promise?

A proposed four-lane highway threatens the future of its school and some of its housing. Its location outside Auroville's Green Belt makes it vulnerable to being sold for commercial development. Each year Pondicherry gets closer. Can Promesse survive and prosper?

Promesse was a place of first experiments, a place for future Aurovilians working on the town's early stages. The land was bought from the Customs Department in May 1965. It was convenient, being on the main road, and it had existing customs houses which could be converted to provide accommodation and other facilities.

The community faces many issues: the planned widening of the road, the possibility of Promesse being sold to enable plots closer to the centre of Auroville to be purchased, the maintenance of good relationships with the village next door (which is both spreading and generating more traffic), the presence of asbestos in the roofs of some older houses, the inexorable advance of Pondicherry, and the obtaining of funds to carry out essential work and improvements.

The Master Plan for Auroville suggests a use for Promesse as a service node. If Auroville decides to regulate visitor traffic it will need a place on its boundary for visitors to leave their vehicles and transfer to non-polluting transport within the town. Businesses within Auroville may also have large storage requirements which should be located on its boundaries.

Promesse has never been short of plans for its future. Few have come to fruition. On a report card, "Shows promise" is generally shorthand for "can succeed if the will is there". It's a long shot. Can Mother's "small place, with a pretty garden and trees" find a workable niche in tomorrow's Auroville? Will the next report read "RIP" or "Exceeds expectations"?

## 4 Evolving the Matrimandir gardens

What does the larger community feel about what is happening right now in the Matrimandir gardens? There seems to be widespread support for the fact that, at last, something is being manifested. As to the actual designs, when Paulo and Roger presented their differing concepts for the twelve gardens some time ago, they generated considerable, often heated, discussion. Now that the gardens have been given over to individual designers, there's more a sense of 'wait and see'.

As ever, Matrimandir is a remorseless lens, throwing into sharp focus our unresolved issues regarding authority, the interpretation of Mother's vision, even the nature of the 'new' spirituality. What exacerbates these tensions at present, however, is a lack of information regarding exactly what is manifesting on site, and why.

There is suspicion that the larger community is viewed by the executing group as an obstacle rather than a possible source of creative input in the manifestation of the Matrimandir gardens. While there may be some reason for the executing group's stance – the community has often proved itself incapable of charting a clear and intelligent course – the net effect of the present situation is that everybody involved becomes locked in self-reinforcing positions: as the walls go up, the shouts from without grow louder which, in turn, push the walls even higher.

Perhaps it is this negative spiral of mutual distrust, rather than any issue of individual

design, which is the real challenge we have to surmount if Matrimandir is finally to be a living symbol of human unity.

## 5 How to govern Utopia

Over the years, many Aurovilians have worked hard on sensible proposals for collective decision-making. These tend to get shot down – often with maximum hostility – by this or that section of the community. The surprising thing is that anyone has the energy to try again.

Auroville's long march towards effective governance has taken us through some twisted paths and byways in the last few months. The destination may be as far off as ever, or it may be just around the next bend. But at any rate, the journey has recently been quite interesting.

If "Self-Governance in Auroville" were a piece of classical music, we would hear two main themes always playing against one another. One represents a system in which Aurovilians directly participate – by whatever means – in shaping their government; the other represents rule by a responsible, enlightened elite. Each tune has its own beauty. But they are in different keys and different modes, so that they clash horribly with one another. This is Dissonance.

Perhaps a time will come when our aspiration to be a different (and better) community does not conflict with our practical, everyday needs as a society. On that day, there will be Harmony. Until then, we must struggle on as best we can.

## 6 The material problems of ageing

Auroville is well ahead of most communities in its wide range of activities, spiritual, mental and physical which encourage well-being and personal growth. But what happens when one can no longer ride a bike or drive a moped or scooter?

Social isolation can be a problem. Erica lived here for many years but in her eighties began to feel increasingly isolated and lonely as she found it difficult to move around and was becoming dependent on visitors. After a couple of exploratory visits to Germany, she decided to move back to her roots and live near her son. "Auroville is not a particularly friendly place. Most people do not speak your native language or can share your history. Many are new here and involved in establishing themselves. There is little social life or visiting, or just dropping in for a cup of tea. It often lacks heart," she says.

This issue seems to be more starkly evident when people have difficulty leaving their homes without assistance. There is growing need in Auroville for more community-run transport, small vans or buses, not just to take seniors to work but also for social outings, shopping trips, medical visits, attending classes and courses and for getting around Auroville generally.

Continued participation in community life also requires that all those with decreased mobility can still access important buildings. But Auroville's most significant building and its soul, the Matrimandir, is virtually inaccessible to those who cannot climb its steep ramps. Concentration in the inner chamber is closed for those less mobile or with heart conditions. Only the petal chambers remain available to them. For many, this is a sore loss.

## 7 Meeting the basic needs

In recent years, the development of Auroville's economy has taken a turn which is quite common and accepted elsewhere in the world, but which does not reflect Auroville's aspirations. Two groups have developed: the 'earning side' (productive units) and the 'spending side' (community services etc.) And with the development of these two groups, strong differences emerged, both in income and attitudes. Each group has a major objection to the other, which roughly comes down to the following:

'Spenders' say of 'earners' that they do not contribute sufficiently to the collective and if they do, they wish to decide for themselves where the money goes.

'Earnings' say of 'spenders' that they do not work sufficiently for the collective, and do not trouble themselves to organize their units in such a way as to reduce spending to a minimum.

One clear conclusion was that a decent basic minimum should be guaranteed for each

Aurovillian, that this basic maintenance should be related to work for the collectivity, but that it should be independent of where one works and what kind of work one does, so that one can really choose one's work from within.

## 8 Growing food for the township

There is enough land in Auroville to serve many interests, but the land is being used and developed too haphazardly. There needs to be more designation of the purposes for specific parcels by residents, or by some recognized and respected authority, so that land is not abused and so that past investments are not neglected, destroyed, or privatized. In particular, land that has been improved for agriculture needs to be preserved and protected so that Auroville can feed itself in the future.

If Auroville decides to produce more of its own food, something will have to be done to reduce the risks being borne by Auroville's farmers. A laissez-faire or free market approach to food production will not serve the public interest unless it includes a regenerated landscape and freedom from the ironic phenomenon of hunger despite bumper crops and food surpluses. Presently, many of Auroville's farms function because of the personal financial investment made by individual Aurovilians. Production is risky. If a crop doesn't yield or sell, the farmer takes a monetary loss. Auroville could encourage and increase production by identifying qualities of food that will be needed in community kitchens and by food processors, and then guaranteeing a fixed level of payment for such produce. Again, such a policy will require more conscious cooperation and coordination.

## 9 Towards a township

Here's a conundrum. Auroville, as the name suggests, is intended to be a town. Yet, years after its inauguration, it is still little more than a scattering of settlements with a few outposts of urbanization. This summer Auroville schoolchildren were invited to imagine the city of the future. What did they draw? Nothing resembling a city but rather an Auroville of rivers, forests, reindeer, snowmen and giant ferris wheels (and, of course, Matrimandirs) over which rocket-powered Aurovilians flit like dragonflies.

Why is it taking so long not just to build, but even to imagine the town? Perhaps the key element in the failure to materialize the original vision was the fact that Mother was no longer physically present. In March 1972, she told Satprem that for her plan for Auroville to succeed not only would she have to remain in her body, but she would also have to become strong. If the city was to be built fast – and she repeatedly told him she wanted it to be completed within 15-25 years – it had to be centrally planned and built. Only Mother's authority would have made that possible. When she left it became inevitable that subsequent development would be more piecemeal, more 'organic'.

## 10 Do we need guidelines?

For more than one year, members of the Entry Group have been coming together in a study group to work on guidelines for Auroville residents. The term 'guideline' as opposed to 'rule' or 'regulation' had been adopted in the early '80s as a recognition of the fact that Aurovilians generally lack the means to enforce any rules, and that Auroville's society is an evolving one and there are fears that (rigid) rules might stifle rather than help the process of its development, or be misused.

The proposals of the group were discussed in a Residents' Assembly. Interestingly, the discussion centred almost immediately on the usefulness of guidelines at all. Were guidelines not the invention of those who endeavoured to manage Auroville after Mother's passing in 1973? Should Auroville not go beyond guidelines? Had Mother not spoken about a divine anarchy? Why have guidelines if you lack the power to enforce them? These were some of the arguments raised by people who consider that Auroville can do very well without guidelines of any sort. Others stressed that it was Mother herself who had created rules and, when asked why, had answered that "perhaps Aurovilians have not yet attained the level of consciousness expected of them." The fact that there are so many different types of people living in Auroville was used as an argument in favour of guidelines.



# ... the more they stay the same

"We cannot ask newcomers to do what we, Aurovilians, do not do. How can we expect newcomers to have continuous good faith if they are always being slapped in the face by the attitude of Aurovilians?" said one member of the Entry Group in answer to a question.

## 11 Transcending differences

PhD students of the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS) have chosen Auroville as a site for a 'cultural synergy' project. The students split up into three groups, and one of the groups focused on the bioregion. The bioregional group identified numerous 'tensions' or points of difference between the villagers and the Aurovilians. They also observed that many Aurovilians, when confronted by the problem of the villages, tend to acknowledge the problem but then take a step back, "go inward", or have the expectation that "Mother will take care of things", rather than becoming actively engaged in changing the situation. This was particularly difficult for some members of the group to accept as they worked as social activists in the US.

But the major concern of the group had to do with something else. Is Auroville exploiting the local people? Is Auroville yet another colonising power? Are Aurovilians racist? The questions were more than academic, for three of this CIIS sub-group were African-Americans who had experienced racism in the US. One of them was concerned because all over Auroville she had observed that people with dark skins were in the role of servants, that the concerns of the local people were not fully understood by non-Tamil Aurovilians, and that within Auroville itself the Tamil people did not seem to be much involved in decision-making.

## 12 Guests and visitors: evolution or dilution?

"New place on earth", "This place is pretentious and farcical", are just two of the comments on Auroville from the visitors' book at Auroville's information centre. Obviously, guest and visitors perceive us and relate to us in many different ways. But how do Aurovilians respond to the tidal wave of visitors and guests that floods through Auroville every year between January and March? And what are the lessons we are being asked to learn? To open up more to the world? To be more discriminating? To live more fully the ideal?

Visitors and guests have been coming to Auroville for years, but recently the dramatic increase in their numbers has caught many Aurovilians off-balance. Consequently, while some Aurovilians welcome the influx for financial reasons or as a confirmation that Auroville at last "belongs to the world", others are concerned that Auroville's integrity will be weakened, diluted by an onslaught of 'trippers' seeking a kind of spiritual Disneyland ... or just a few weeks in the lazy South Indian sun.

So what's really going on? Evolution or dilution?

## 13 What do we celebrate?

"There's no joy here, you don't know how to celebrate together." We hear it quite often from visitors. They come expecting to find a New-Age kind of caring and celebratory community, but instead encounter stone-faced Aurovilians, jaws forward, hurtling along dust roads or crashing the line at the Pour Tous counter in their hurry to get to their next appointment.

Are Aurovilians incapable of enjoying themselves, of celebrating together? It's not through lack of opportunities: bonfires in the Amphitheatre, fairs, cultural events, parties, picnics, full moons at the beach, Deepavali, Christmas are all occasions when something joyful, something other than the jaw-jutting attitude is evoked. Yet it's also true that many of these events happen infrequently, and none of them - not even the bonfires - attract all 'flavours' of the community. Maybe there's some truth then, in those visitors' perceptions. Maybe Auroville is not a 'celebratory culture', at least not in any immediately identifiable sense.

## 14 No more business as usual?

On the second day of the seminar, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis of Auroville businesses was presented. The perceived strengths included a unique environment and socially- and ecologi-

cally-conscious managers who share a common vision. A mite of wishful thinking? The description of the weaknesses, however, seemed spot-on: lack of quality standards and common marketing strategies, inadequate management skills and a culture of competition rather than collaboration.

And the opportunities? Auroville could be a model for a post-industrial campus (a what?). We should set up an institution for management and business consciousness.

That a spirit of unreality had somehow infected the morning was confirmed by the next presentation: establishing a 'brand identity' for Auroville businesses. This involved a vision statement (The Dream), a mission ('To build the city the Earth needs'), a 'signature' ('building human unity') and a catchy sound-bite ('Many dream of building a new life on Earth. Some are making it happen.') And then, of course, there was the all-important logo: the Auroville symbol.

Amazingly, the ensuing discussion was all about improving the Auro-sell. Nobody questioned the ethics of using our ideals as a means of selling more candles and jam.

## 15 In search of an Auroville economic model

For several years, Auroville had been groping around for the right economic model. Although some economists think that this field of human activity possesses its own universal laws, the best ones also think that economy is 'embedded' in society, and that it can work well only when a society is living in tune with its values.

Like anywhere else in the world, two tendencies have been at work in Auroville's economy. Some believe it should be centralized and put in the hands of a representative body accountable to the community. Others think that a freer play of individual initiative - in work, investment and consumption - would be far more beneficial to the whole. But both models are imported clichés, and not an emanation of Auroville's special experience and genius.

Money seems to be the very breath of economy, its animating power, inducing work and consumption to finally resolve itself again in purely monetary terms as the surplus or profit to be invested and circulated again in the great game of life. So, is an economy without internal circulation of money possible? Some of us think so ...

## 16 Why so little kindness?

I recently attended a series of General Meetings at which the land crisis was discussed. At the end I went away feeling depressed. This is nothing unusual for me after such meetings, but this time it had a particular focus. For I felt that that the group which had been working on intractable land issues for many months had been unfairly treated: instead of appreciation for the hard work they had put into drawing up their proposal, there was widespread criticism.

Now, heaven forbid that we have to accept everything that any group brings as a proposal to a General Meeting. But it seems to me that the manner in which we work out our disagreements in crucial - perhaps even more crucial than the final agreement. And one of the things we lack in the way we treat each other in our public forums is, for the want of a better word, kindness.

I may be wrong here, but when I observe the emotional charge which some people bring to community meetings, I get the impression that many of our discussions and conflicts are not primarily about the issue we appear to be debating, but about ourselves. About our personal dissatisfactions, insecurities, frustrations, about our doubts concerning Auroville and our place here, about what we have or have not achieved. And all this manifests not in honest self-examination, but in dogmatic espousals of high ideals or in attacks against authority, against the 'other' whom we claim is oppressing us or leading us astray.

## 17 Are we succumbing to dogmatism?

It is amazing, when one thinks about it, that in all these years of its existence, there are very few social or anthropological studies of Auroville. We were pioneers in researching sustainable technologies in India, we have tried out numerous alternative economic models, experimented with our internal organisation, with educational methods, documented our

success in environmental regeneration, and yet, when it comes to studying ourselves, Aurovilians as a sub-species of homo sapiens, we are strangely silent.

Sure, there have been isolated attempts to explain the way we function. Within the community, amongst ourselves, we freely use labels such as "green-belter," "city-wallah," "old crocodile," or more recently, "rich newcomer," to denote certain prevalent patterns of thinking or action, and yet, there are no objective studies to research and explain the social behaviour of the community. One of the reasons for this, I believe, is that Aurovilians tend to hold themselves a cut above the rest of the world. Aurovilians see themselves as practitioners of a new yoga, the Integral Yoga, that goes far beyond other spiritual traditions, and hence they are too easily dismissive of other traditions of knowledge. Yet, even a superficial observation indicates that Aurovilians often exhibit the same behavioural patterns as elsewhere in the world. One such behavioural trend is the need to judge other's actions through the measuring rod of "religion." What I mean by "religion" in this context is a dogmatic adherence to one's spiritual beliefs. To me, religion connotes a mental (as opposed to transcendental) understanding and expression of one's beliefs. The danger of such an attitude is that it is infra-rational, below the reasoning powers of the mind, and if allowed a hold, it could drag the community backwards.

## 18 From suburb to community

Auroville stands sociologically as an example of values taking precedence over individual material interests. The individual relationships with the divine and the recognition of the divine working in a collective context give meaning to words like human unity, freedom and individual development - a far cry from the value placed on competition in the capitalist world. Yet Auroville is part of a world capitalist system which increasingly includes even the communist nations. It can therefore be no surprise that Auroville itself is taking on a normal capitalistic development pattern: free enterprise, the internal exchange of money, wage-labour, and the loss of an ethos of sharing and trust.

## 19 You cannot remain charmed

'The first impression of Auroville's architecture is the multitude of highly individualized expressions and it is really charming to see that. Coming from more structured situations, the breath of freedom and creativity is refreshing; but as you know Auroville longer, and try to develop an overview, you realize that there really is no overview! Auroville has some beautiful structures, most of which, however, don't speak or relate to one another. For architects this is a disaster, because while something may be beautiful in itself, its meaning comes from its context - from its being the right thing in the right place. When one sees this overall incoherence in the buildings, you cannot remain charmed... Then it seems clear that more architects are necessary, architects in the Indian sense of 'master-builders', those who have, above all other skills, the overview, working from the 'whole' to the 'part'.

How can we realize the present town plan, which seems so futuristic to many Aurovilians?

When you compare the town plan to the present day reality, you see the big steps that have to be taken. What is not so clear is how new patterns can be introduced with smooth transitions, so that they can work in co-existence with the older concept. The higher and more futuristic our ideals, the more important it is to design the transition, the practical steps to take us from here to there.

## 20 They like us when we do our yoga!

Why should Auroville concern itself with the villages?

Dee: We in Auroville are committed to achieving human unity. The villagers represent our greatest challenge because the gap between us and them is so immense. Auroville is like the world - we are a small elite representing the powerful rich of Western society surrounded by thousands of villagers. Three quarters of the world's population lives in villages! So if we're really serious about human unity, our challenge is to bridge that gap. We should also see that closing our eyes to the villages won't make them go away. Even from a self-protection point of view, we should concern our-

selves with them, because if we do not share and care, how long will they be willing to cooperate with us?

The vast majority of Aurovilians know very little about the villages. Why is this?

I think it's a clear case of us rejecting our shadow side. We project onto them what we don't want to look at in ourselves, everything that we wish we were not. We do this individually and collectively. And the villagers are so convenient for this projection. Yet I believe no villager does anything that we don't also do.

It's our work, our yoga, not theirs, to look at this and acknowledge this. Then the compassion will flow and everything will look different. If we begin, the villagers will help by appreciating and supporting us. If we don't do it, we'll never achieve human unity. In this sense, the villages are our great opportunity.

## 21 Editorial

So how have we done? Concerning the 'here and now', we've provided regular coverage of key topics like the economy, environment, education, Matrimandir, building the city and relations with the villages, making Auroville Today an invaluable - in fact, unique - history of Auroville's development over the years. What we hadn't anticipated, however, was how many issues we couldn't cover, either because they would show the community in a poor light, or because discussions were at such a sensitive stage that we didn't want to jeopardise the outcome through insensitive reporting, or because as most of the team are technically 'foreigners' with few rights in Indian law, we were only too aware that we could receive quit notices if we were perceived to be making statements offending sensitivities. For Auroville Today is read not only by Aurovilians and friends and supporters abroad: it is also read in government offices and foreign embassies in India and Indian embassies abroad.

All this meant we were nudged further into the conservative section of the reporting spectrum than the team would prefer. This tendency has been reinforced by our second goal: for in our wish to provide a meeting place for understanding different perspectives it was important that we were perceived to be unaligned, or at least to be able to grasp the larger picture. This has its drawbacks, notably in our sometimes having to sacrifice the 'edge' which spices journalism the world over (the edge has been further blunted by our policy of allowing interviewees to read and change their articles before publication). Increasingly over the years, however, we've been willing to talk about not only our successes but also our failings as a community, and to ask hard questions as a means of stimulating debate.

If we're honest, we don't really know what we are doing with Auroville Today. We embarked on a voyage with a clutch of promises, but once the coastline faded, we've had to chart a course as much by intuition as by sextant. More than once we've thought of abandoning the whole enterprise, but we kept sailing on because of the enthusiastic support of our readership and because we feel we still have something unique to offer in the hunt of that elusive species, *Auroville Today*.

## Answers:

- 1) October 2002;
- 2) December 2007;
- 3) April 2008;
- 4) August 2005;
- 5) September 2003;
- 6) August 2008;
- 7) January 1989 ;
- 8) April 1995;
- 9) December 2003;
- 10) November 1995;
- 11) February 1996;
- 12) May 1996;
- 13) December 1996;
- 14) April 2006;
- 15) December 2006;
- 16) June-July 2007;
- 17) May 2002;
- 18) January, 1989
- 19) December, 1991
- 20) February, 1990
- 21) November 2003



# From stones to seeds: co-creating with nature

**P**ebble Garden, situated on the way to Koot Road west of Auroville, was begun as a reforestation project by Bernard and Deepika in 1994. Over the last 25 years, it has been transformed not only into a dense and vibrant indigenous forest, but also a widely recognised seed conservation centre for endangered vegetables. We spoke with Bernard about their journey from pebbles to trees.

## How was Pebble Garden born?

**Bernard:** I come from the countryside. My childhood was spent in trees and ditches and rivulets and planting has been a passion since I was a child. I remember discovering, when I was seven, that a branch cut off from my neighbour's Willow tree could take root and grow into a whole new tree. I was mesmerised! I started planting willow trees everywhere! My first forest, in fact, was in an abandoned tram station behind our house where I planted as many willow trees as I could!

When I came to Pondicherry in 1975, however, I came with the idea that I would work to build a city, to construct buildings. And it was only after two years of working in Matrimandir that I returned to my childhood dream of planting trees. For several years I worked in various farms in Auroville. In 1994, while working on Jurgen's reforestation project in Mathur, I realised that this piece of land, where Pebble Garden stands now, belonged to Auroville. That year Deepika and I started to look after it.

## And it was desert then?

Yes. When we started working here, the land was severely eroded and deserted. The soil was highly acidic clay. Moreover, this land was 60% pebbles – the remains of a river that ran here 20 million years ago. In spite of Peter Clarence-Smith's great reforestation efforts in 1983, very few trees survived here. In the tropics, once you lose the protective tree cover, the soil deteriorates

We made a clear decision from the start to work sustainably, employing only resources that were naturally available to us.

We wanted to allow the soil to recover naturally rather than bring in compost from outside. This was important for us because if you import soil from somewhere else you destroy one place to repair another. As India has 194 million hectares in the same condition as ours, it becomes impossible to follow such a method. We did not want to buy compost from the village as the village farmers needed this for their own field. We also wanted to work ourselves without hiring labour. This meant that we have had to devise simple, labour-efficient practices and work with resources that were available on the land.

We started by broadcasting *acacia* and *dodonea* seeds collected from neighbouring plots across the land. These fast-growing species have proved to be very effective pioneer trees for our conditions. The monsoon rain is all it takes for them to germinate and take root. Thereafter, they provide in a very short span of time a protective layer under which more hardy, native varieties can grow. They also produce a great deal of biomass, indispensable for restoring the soil's fertility.

Our other trusted resource is the activity of the termites. Not only do they aerate and let moisture into the soil through their networks of underground tunnels, the earth they bring up has four times more nutrients than the original soil, thanks to the excreta and saliva. We use this soil to plant our saplings. And we make sure to plant just before the first monsoon rains are expected. This way, in years when the monsoon arrives on time, the seedlings need to be watered minimally or not at all.

## Many reforestation projects strive to recreate the original indigenous ecology. What is your perspective on this?

In the past, I was very strict about planting only indigenous species of trees. Now, however, with climate change, I think that plant varieties in a



Bernard in the vegetable garden

vegetables led to the creation of the vegetable garden with the specific aim of the conservation and multiplication of seeds.

Over the centuries, hundreds of local vegetable varieties were traditionally cultivated by people in their farms and kitchen gardens. Unfortunately, due to the onset of monoculture farming and GM seeds in the last decades, several of these varieties were lost. Several others, though they survive, are grown only in private gardens for personal use and many are on the verge of extinction. This has deeply compromised the nutritional profile of the food that reaches the average household.

Our work in seed conservation coincided with a national movement towards the revival of traditional, indigenous foods. Some years ago the Seed Festival Group began organising events across the country where farmers sold and exchanged rare, local varieties of seeds. In the beginning, though, it was primarily the seeds of grains that farmers were bringing to these festivals. Deepika was one of the first people to start making vegetable seeds available. In those early years, she sold all her seeds within half an hour of opening her stall.

## From where did you source these seeds?

Deepika has been collecting seeds from farmers locally and when she travels. When farmers and seed activists from other parts of the country visited us, they brought seeds from their region, sometimes of endangered species. We have vegetables from Karnataka, Orissa, Assam, Madhya Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, of course. In some cases we had seeds of vegetable varieties that were no longer grown in their place of origin. In this case we have been instrumental in returning these varieties to their original ecological and culinary habitat! This work has been appreciated very much. It has been Auroville's contribution back to the country.

The Seed Conservation Centre currently supports more than 120 varieties of endangered traditional vegetable varieties from all over India, root crops, herbs, wild food crops, medicinal plants and flowers. We have 25 varieties of Brinjal, seven or eight varieties of Lady's Finger. You see, there is still a highly specialised and varied culinary tradition in India. Each brinjal, for instance, is prepared in a different way. One is roasted, another is stir fried, still others are used for pickles. It is the same with gourds. While we ate some, others were used for making different string instruments. One variety was even used to make floaters for children to learn swimming with!

## For the vegetable garden too you have devised innovative practices that have enabled you to remain self-sufficient.

Here again we have tried to develop easy, sustainable and labour-efficient practices, using natural resources that are already available to us. For example, to make the vegetable beds we don't dig the land as is conventionally done. Instead we build beds from the ground up by layering *acacia* leaves with silt from natural depressions in the land. The rainwater that flows into these reservoirs brings the termite earth with it. Frogs and fish brought by egrets, defecate here. All this combined with the algae that grows in the water produces a rich, nutrient dense silt.

We layer *acacia* leaves with silt and charcoal to create the beds. Then in order to recreate the biodiversity of the tropics we first plant green manure

seeds by mixing different types of plants – grasses, oil seeds, legumes. When these have grown for a month or two, the green biomass they produce is pulled out and mixed back into the soil. Then the soil is ready for planting vegetables. The diversity is necessary because it activates a variety of microorganisms. In this way, in three months we can go from stones to tomatoes and brinjals!

## You also have a charcoal production unit. How does that work?

As we have a lot of wood on the land, especially from the *acacia* trees, we began to convert it into charcoal. Using charcoal for farming is an ancient technology. It was used by indigenous people in the Amazon forest to grow food during the Spanish invasion. It has been used here in Tamil Nadu in the mango and coconut plantations.

Charcoal is a very useful soil amendment. In the tropics, it is in the monsoons, when the highest concentration of nutrients is released into the soil that, due to overcast skies, photosynthesis in plants is greatly reduced. This means that when maximum food is available, plants have the least capacity to absorb it. With heavy rainfall, these critical nutrients leach out and go below the root zone of vegetables. It is here that charcoal becomes very useful. Acting as a temporary storehouse, it absorbs the nutrients on behalf of the plants until they recover their full metabolic capacity. Then, with the aid of small fungi, called *mycelium*, the plants' roots recover these nutrients from the charcoal. The charcoal then becomes empty until the next rainy season. When charcoal is inoculated with nitrogen from human urine it also becomes a very valuable fertiliser.

## What has been the impact of your work in Pebble Garden?

The seed conservation work at Pebble Garden has been appreciated for its contribution towards preserving and reviving the diversity of our traditional vegetable food sources. 'A Garden for Everyone' is our outreach initiative to share these hardy plant varieties, which have performed well on this wasteland, with home gardeners and subsistence farmers throughout India. Today, several farmers are multiplying and distributing seeds of indigenous vegetable varieties.

Over the years, farmers, city dwellers, activists, students and professionals have visited Pebble Garden and appreciated the transformation that has been achieved here. Some of these people have come with the intention of building a forest. Others have left with that seed planted in them! In the recent past, we have had visits from three different groups of young people, from the neighbouring village and from Chennai, who are joining resources and working communally to buy land and grow organic farms and forests. Many young people are returning to the land. This is very heartening to see.

As a forest that has been regenerated internally, without importing any resources from elsewhere, and without any expense, Pebble Garden is living proof of the restorative power of Mother Earth. Our role is that of co-creators. If we are attentive, attuned and can take a deep dive, heart and soul, into Nature's realm, we can interact, in a constructive manner, in her unfolding.

Anusha



Deepika with a red cabbage

very fast. The combination of heavy rain and long dry periods washes top soil away in massive quantities.

But this has not always been so. In fact, the name of these districts, North and South Arcot, is derived from 'Ara Kadu' or 'six forests'. These forests were inhabited by the Siddhars, and were dense with immensely valuable timber trees – ebony, teak and rosewood. When François Martin bought land on behalf of the French from the Nawab in 1703, these trees were cut and sold in France to raise money to build Pondicherry. And let's not forget, Pondicherry was destroyed and looted three times by the British. Each time the French recovered it, more forests were cut to rebuild the city.

During the First World War, farmers in this area were asked to grow peanuts, which were a valuable resource in the war as it was much easier to cook with peanut oil than with lard. And the residue, the peanut cake, made good horse feed. So, the secondary forests were eliminated to grow peanuts. Now, in many parts of this area, the peanuts have been replaced by cashews.

## Pebble Garden is a successful model of forest regeneration with minimal resources. What strategies did you use?

region are bound to change and it is artificial to remain in any strict paradigm. Also, it has been found in reforestation projects in Brazil, for instance, that the introduction of new, exotic species actually improved and brought new dynamism to the whole plantation. Indigenous trees grown here include *Pterocarpus santalinus*, *Hardwickia binata*, *Diospiros melanoxylon* and *Ximenia americana* and *Acacia*. We have also introduced tree species from other places in India, such as *Soymida februfuga*, as well as *Pterocarpus indicus*, and *Dalbergia melanoxylon* from other parts of the world.

Our original vision was to grow timber trees in Pebble Garden. It was clear to me that to build Auroville we would need trees and we can't always contribute to the deforestation. But very few of our first plantation of rosewood survived and we realised we needed to follow a different strategy. Now, though we still have plots of land dedicated to timber trees – ebony, rosewood and teak – what we have is primarily a mixed forest.

## How and when did the seed conservation centre start?

While both Deepika and I have been very interested in seeds and had been collecting seeds for years, it was in 2000 that Deepika's interest in



# Glimpses into Tibetan medicine

In early November, the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture hosted Dr. Tsewang Tamdin, Visiting Physician to H.H. the Dalai Lama. With over 37 years of clinical experience around the world, Dr. Tamdin is one of the most experienced doctors at the Tibetan Medical & Astro Institute (TMAI) in Dharamsala and is Chairman of the Academic Council of TMAI.

While he was here, Dr. Tamdin gave individual consultations and a talk on Tibetan medicine. He also spoke to *Auroville Today*.

## How does Tibetan medicine differ from conventional allopathic medicine?

Western medicine is often not able to diagnose the deeper reason for disease. For example, when allopathic doctors are treating arthritis, they do not know the real cause factor: they simply try to alleviate the pain. But in Tibetan medicine we understand that arthritis is of many different types with many different causes.

For diagnosis, allopathic medicine depends upon technology, like blood tests or MRI, while we use pulse reading and checking the urine. We can tell by the pulse whether a person has high or low blood pressure, a heart problem, fatty liver, hepatitis, diabetes etc.

In Tibetan medicine, we say there are three principal energies or humours in your body, *rlung*, *mkhrispa* and *badken*, which are there when you are born, and they need to be in balance to allow you to function properly, both physically and mentally. If the balance is disturbed this may manifest, under the influence of factors like diet, age, lifestyle, behavior and the season, as a disease. The Tibetan doctor seeks the specific cause for each individual.

Medicines will act differently on different people according to the predominant nature of the individual. We divide people into seven different natures. In Tibetan medicine, we give the medicine according to the predominant nature of the individual.

In fact, each individual reacts to an external stimulus in different ways. A disease may not give the same response to the same treatment in two different patients. This means that each individual patient is unique and, therefore, the doctor must treat each patient in a very individual manner. This is also very different from the allopathic approach.

In other words, the Tibetan approach to treatment is holistic and penetrates to the underlying causes of disease. This approach gives a very good response, and it is why many diseases which are untreatable in the West can be treated by Tibetan medicine. However, at times it can be useful to use technology, like machines that check for blood pressure, blood sugar, etc., if there are doubts or to confirm an initial diagnosis.

## What about the role of the mind in illness?

We believe that the mind is the number one cause of many illnesses because the state of the mind determines what happens in the body. Tibetan medicine, like Buddhism, teaches that the mind is the creator and destroyer. It can cause both disease and health, depending on the thoughts and emotions that are predominant in one's experience.

This is another major difference from allopathic medicine which is only now beginning to acknowledge the influence of mind upon body.

There is also the influence of karma. We believe you have been a human being many times before, and the karmic action, or consequences, of what you did before will manifest in later lives. So karmic action combined with an imbalance in the energy in the body can also cause sickness.

## How do you recognise a 'karmic' disease? Can it be treated?

A karmic disease will not respond to any treatment. The doctor can help by reducing the intensity of the suffering to a certain extent, but the patient has to suffer until it is over: there is no escape. The Buddha said you have to suffer the consequences of what you did and learn from it.

There is also a karmic relationship between the doctor and the patient. Sometimes a doctor can be wonderfully experienced but can do nothing with a patient, while another can do a wonderful job because of a positive karmic relationship.

**Tibetan medicine is obviously deeply-rooted in Buddhist philosophy. If the patient is a non-believer does this affect the efficacy of the treatment?**

We heal by science not by spirituality. We call it *Sowa-Rigpa*, the "science of healing". Every Tibetan doctor has to undergo a rigorous training before he qualifies. It takes six years to attain the first qualification, a degree equivalent to a MBB but 30 to 40 years to complete the full training, although, of course, one continues to learn for a lifetime.

Every doctor learns how to diagnose, and how to treat the patient through astrology, herbal and mineral remedies and to use what we call external therapy. This can be moxibustion, compression, massage, purgatives etc. He will also learn about proper diet and lifestyle because in Tibetan medicine we say proper diet and lifestyle are the two major ways of maintaining health and prolonging life.



Dr. Tsewang Tamdin

But there is another very important aspect to being a Tibetan physician. It is not necessary to be a monk – I'm not a monk – but in your heart you should be a monk, meaning that you should have compassion and kindness towards all. When we learn medicine, the aim is not to become famous or get a lot of money. The prime intention of the Tibetan doctor is to serve people who need help through kindness and compassion. Moreover, as the Buddha says, it is important to be a good example yourself before trying to heal others.

This is where our mentality is quite different from that of many allopathic doctors.

Ultimately, however, the main requirement is for each individual to know how to preserve their own health. You should not have to rely upon doctors giving you a remedy every time you fall ill.

**You have worked extensively with Western as well as Tibetan and Indian patients. Are there particular health problems associated with Westerners?**

Definitely. Mind problems like depression, anxiety, and nervousness are very common with Westerners, as well as heart problems, liver and digestive problems, MS, Parkinson's, diabetes and high blood pressure. Some of these problems, like depression, have no real remedies in

Western medicine.

The Western emphasis on the individual, the 'I', gives rise to strong egos. The ego always desires something more and is never happy with what it has, and this creates stress and anxiety. This causes disturbances in the body.

## How do you treat such problems?

We say you should learn not to keep putting yourself first. This can be a particular challenge if you are young and have no trusted adviser to stop you going in the wrong direction, which is often the case with Western youngsters who leave home around 17 or 18 years old.

In Tibetan society, even when you are 40 or 60 years old, you still live with your family and your family supports you. And if you are doing wrong you are expected to listen to the advice of your elders and to act upon it.

Tibetan society is not such an ego-driven, individualistic society as the West as having good relationships is very important to us. In the West, when people retire they often get depressed because they no longer have any meaning in their lives. But when you retire in Tibet you feel happier because now you have more time to take care of your grandchildren and parents, and you can do more spiritual activities.

**What about the younger Tibetans who have grown up in India? Do they have different health problems from the older ones who were born in Tibet?**

Yes. Those who have grown up in India are more Westernised and have more diseases because their food habits are very bad: they do not eat organic food, they don't eat or sleep at the right time and, generally, they are very anxious. The older ones who were born in Tibet are more patient. If they fall ill, they say it is karmic action and bear it with less anxiety. Also, sometimes they recite mantras or do prostrations, which can be very helpful for these individuals.

**You are a visiting physician to H.H. The Dalai Lama. Why does such a spiritually-evolved individual need a doctor?**

It is true that he is an enlightened person spiritually but as a human being his body is composed of the same five elements as the rest of us, and, like the rest of us, eating, drinking, sleeping and the environment all affect his body. He has a human form like others so he can suffer like us. However, he is very knowledgeable about preserving his health and if we give advice, he always listens and is very cooperative.

From an interview by Alan

## PASSINGS

### Roza Tuh

On the early morning of 5 November, Roza Tuh, from Moldova, left her body at the age of 77 in her Citadines apartment. She had been suffering from Melanoma (skin cancer).

Called by her love for Mother and Sri Aurobindo, Roza arrived here in 2007 and became Aurovilian two years later. Her main fields of work were the Matrimandir and Savitri Bhavan, where one would invariably find her at the gallery of Huta's paintings on *Savitri*. Throughout the years, her connection with the spirit of the place grew and made her start painting as well. Each year on February 28th, Roza would organise a gathering of Russian speakers from Auroville, the Ashram and abroad. In this context emerged the 'Brotherhood Pavilion' name for the common space of the Eastern Europe – Russia – Caucasus – Central Asia region in Auroville's International Zone, as well the push for its realisation. In later years Roza started, with help from the Russian community, translating Huta's book "Mother, You Said So..." into Russian, which may come out one of these days.

Roza's remains were cremated at the Adventure cremation grounds on November 8th.



### Jan Weber

On November 3rd, Jan Weber peacefully passed away in the arms of Roswitha, his mother, in a hospital in Karlsruhe in Germany where he had been treated for system failure caused by a Hantavirus which he contracted during a cycle tour. He would have been 40 at the end of this month.

Jan, a qualified programmer, joined Auroville in 1998 and lived here till 2006. During that time, he helped set up Auroville's first browsing centres in Kuilyapalayam and at La Terrace, from where many will remember him. He then worked in Aurelec, preparing the first Auroville website. From there he moved to Penta Services doing hardware as well as software work. Jan was an ardent cyclist, always helpful and those who knew him loved and appreciated him.



## Matrimandir Calendar and Planner 2019



Auroville's 50th Anniversary celebration is reflected in the Matrimandir desk top Calendar 2019. It has 12 calendar pictures with quotations of The Mother and quotations from Sri Aurobindo's *Savitri*. Months and days are printed in 4 languages: English, French, (spoken) Sanskrit, and Tamil. Darshan days and other important days as well as full/new moon days are indicated. Price Rs 170 excluding postage.

The Auroville Planner 2019 has 12 colorful photos depicting a variety of daily life in Auroville. Each photo carries a quote by The Mother or Sri Aurobindo. A double photo page appears after each full month. Darshan days, holidays and full/new moon days are indicated. Price Rs 230 excluding postage.

The profits of the sale of the Auroville Calendar and Planner will be donated to the Matrimandir. For more information contact [tine@auroville.org.in](mailto:tine@auroville.org.in).

## Clarification

In the profile of Prasad in the October issue ('Mother's foot soldier'), Prasad reported Patricia as saying that "what we should be doing in Auroville is creating a Gnostic society". Patricia wishes to clarify that she did not say that. Rather, that she told him she would like "before I leave this incarnation, the opportunity to live in a gnostic community."



## Birding from my bedroom

I was looking at the fluttering ribbon outside my bedroom window and thinking about *Stray Feathers*, a journal started by Allan Octavian Hume, the greatest ornithologist of the 19th century. But it wasn't a ribbon at all – it was the tail of a white male Asian Paradise-flycatcher! I had never seen one from such close quarters and the bird looked absolutely stunning. The rufous male also visits often and has an equally long tail.

When we first came to Auroville, we didn't expect to do much birding. What could you find in a new plantation forest other than some babblers and mynas? There was also a bit of birding snobbery – we had just spent some years in the

forests around Jim Corbett National Park and seen such exotic species as the Blue-winged Minla and the Chestnut-headed Tesia. What could Auroville offer that we hadn't seen before? Turns out we were wrong by a long shot.

The view from the window starts just before the crack of dawn, when three Spotted Owlets come to drink water from the bird bath. With their large eyes, they can see us much more clearly than we can see them. They don't seem to mind being watched. Later in the day, the bird bath is the favourite of the White-rumped Munia, the Rufous Treepie, and the Oriental Magpie Robin.

Below in the undergrowth, the Orange-

headed Thrush is fearless and comes within inches of our window. And once in a while, the White-breasted Waterhen will come visiting.

On the other side of the house, near the lily pond, the White-throated Kingfisher is a daily visitor, getting its lunch from the pond. This is also where you are likely to see the Blue-faced Malkoha, one of the most beautiful of the larger birds in our neck of the woods.

And then there's the Purple-rumped Sunbird, the White-browed Bulbul and the Coppersmith Barbet. With winter approaching, the Indian Pitta should be back soon. The number of species we keep finding in our little garden in Auroville is difficult to explain. We like

to think that the birds like us and come to visit.

But not all bird encounters at home are pleasant. The Common Hawk Cuckoo sometimes keeps me up at night with its shrill and manic call. I was sitting with Rauf (whose grand-uncle Salim Ali took over *Stray Feathers* and professionalised it) on his terrace a couple of years ago and somehow the conversation moved to annoying birds. I asked him what I could do about the crazy cuckoo. "I throw chappals at them," was his response. When I said that the bird was really high up in the tree, he gave his trademark lopsided grin and said, "I've lost a lot of chappals."

Manas



Spotted Owlets



Orange-headed Thrush



White-throated Kingfisher



Asian Paradise-flycatcher



White-rumped Munia



Blue-faced Malkoha



White-breasted Waterhen



White-browed Bulbul

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