

The unique status of Auroville is its protection An interview with Dr. Karan Singh

On September 8th, the Auroville community, in a public gathering at the Unity Pavilion, bade farewell to the members of the Governing Board whose term of office ends on October 28th. Auroville Today spoke to Dr. Karan Singh, who, except for a seven and a half year intermission, has been the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation from its inception.



The members of the Governing Board (GB) and International Advisory Council (IAC) at the community gathering at the Unity Pavilion on September 8th. From left: Dr. Kabir Shaik (IAC); Julian Lines (IAC); Dr. Vishaka Desai (IAC); Dr. Aster Patel (GB); Dr. Mallika Sarabhai (GB), Sir Mark Tully (Chairman IAC), Dr. Karan Singh (Chairman GB), Mr. Y.V.Y.S. Murty (GB), and Mr. Shaunka Rishi Das (IAC).

Auroville Today: You have chaired the Auroville Foundation from the beginning, with two intermissions when Dr. M.S. Swaminathan and later Dr. Kireet Joshi were Chairman. How do you assess the perception of the Foundation in the community today?

Dr. Karan Singh: It has greatly evolved. Earlier, there were two sets of tensions. One was between the community and the Auroville Foundation; and the other within the community itself. Regarding the first, I believe that successive Governing Boards have managed to make people realise the importance of the Auroville Foundation. We have not been trying to impose our views, but we have been able to provide an envelope of stability, safety and security. We also managed to improve the relationship with the Indian Government, which led, amongst other things, to Auroville getting a visa policy which is unique in India. The Foundation with its so-called 'external' elements of the Board, International Advisory Council and Secretary has become accepted as an integral part of Auroville. I am not saying that the cooperation is complete; but definitely it is much better than it was before.

Regarding the second set of problems, we have managed to iron out many difficulties within the community, such as, for example, the problems around the manifestation of the Matrimandir. This too, I think, has helped create awareness of the usefulness of the Foundation.

In your long tenure as Chairman, you have also had your personal ups and downs with Auroville. Would you like to comment?

I wouldn't call them 'personal ups and downs'. I never faced any personal

Due to problems with the printing press, the September issue went out a few weeks later than was anticipated.

We apologize for the delay. *Editors*

antagonism. But the very position I was holding automatically brought about a certain amount of resentment, which of course I was aware of. I did succeed in getting over that. I may be wrong but my hunch is that today there is nothing like that left; in fact I was very moved by the way the community responded to the Board in this farewell gathering.

The remarkable thing is that you stuck to this job for a very long time. I remember you once told us that you never took the same job twice.

In some subtle way I have always been connected to Auroville. You could say that I was the first person responsible for the setting up of the Auroville Foundation. It was my speech in the Lok Sabha in the 1970s that set the ball rolling. There were all those reports about the fights between the Sri Aurobindo Society and the Aurovilians, and I urged the government to take action for the protection of Auroville. It triggered a debate. Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, who herself had a very close tie with The Mother, appointed in 1976 the Kulkarni committee to investigate, and its report led to the Auroville Emergency Provision Ordinance and afterwards to the Auroville Emergency Provision Act, 1980.

When that Act expired, I was no longer a Member of Parliament. Now it was the turn of Kireetbhai [Dr. Kireet Joshi, eds.], a great scholar of Sri Aurobindo's works and a devotee of The Mother, who was then Special Secretary, Ministry of Education. He drafted the Auroville Foundation Bill, which Shri Shiv Shankar, the Minister of Education, then introduced in Parliament. This became the Auroville Foundation Act, 1988. Three years later, the government appointed me as its first Chairman. I asked Kireet to join the Board. He agreed, but to my regret he

never attended a single meeting of the Board. I have never understood why, because he did have a high regard for me. For example once, after I had given a lecture on Sri Aurobindo at the Banaras University, Kireet came to me to tell me that he had seen Sri Aurobindo's hand above my head. He would also tell me what Mother had told him about me.

I resigned from my chairmanship of the Foundation in 1996 on the mistaken assumption that there would be a conflict of interest between my upcoming membership of the Rajya Sabha and being Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, as this could be considered 'an office of profit.' It later turned out that there was no such conflict of interest. Ten years later, the Government passed an amendment to the Parliament (Prevention of Disqualification) Act in which it is now explicitly mentioned that a legislator can hold the office of Chairman, Secretary or Member of the Auroville Foundation.



Dr. Karan Singh and his wife Yasho Rajya Lakshmi at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram after meeting The Mother in 1956. From left, Udar Pinto, Kireet Joshi, Ms. Yasho Rajya Lakshmi, wife of Dr. Karan Singh, Dr. Karan Singh, Charupada Bhattacharya, Nolini Kanta Gupta, Sisir Kumar Mitra and Arabinda Basu.

Dr. M.S. Swaminathan took over when I resigned, and three years later it was the turn of Kireetbhai to become Chairman. He held the post from 1999 till 2004. Afterwards I was reappointed. I am very grateful to have been allowed to play this role which, I believe, wouldn't have been possible without the blessing of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

Yet, you do not consider yourself a devotee of Sri Aurobindo but one of Shiva. You even built a Shiva temple on the beach nearby Auroville, and in your book 'Meetings with Remarkable Women', The Mother is not really given a special place.

I am a great admirer of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, but I am not an Aurobindonian in that sense or an Aurobindo scholar, even though I did my Ph.D. thesis on Sri Aurobindo's political thoughts. [*Prophet of Indian Nationalism, A Study of the Political Thought of Sri Aurobindo Ghosh (1893-1910), eds.*]. I have, perhaps, a psychic or spiritual link with Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

I met the Mother thrice. I first met her together with my mother and my wife, in 1956. The next time was much later, when I also met with Navajata and Frederick. I distinctly remember the third time, when Mother was much older. I knelt in front of her, and she looked at me for a long time and then said a long drawn out 'Yeeeeeeess.' But I never learned what that exactly meant. Perhaps she saw me as an instrument for Her work. If so, I hope I have been able to answer to that expectation in my work for Auroville and for the Aurobindo community in the world, which for me includes the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, the Sri Aurobindo Society, Auroville and the Auroville International Centres.

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An interview with Dr. Karan Singh

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In this regard I have been instrumental in getting many things done. I was a member of the National Committee for the Sri Aurobindo Centenary Celebrations which managed to acquire the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan in Baroda (now called Vadodara) which is the house where Sri Aurobindo had lived for fourteen years, and the Sri Aurobindo Bhavan in Calcutta in the house where he was born.

Many years later, I managed to get Sri Aurobindo's statue placed in the Indian Parliament, next to that of Vivekananda, and later a similar statue at the UNESCO headquarters in Paris. That, in fact, is a marvel. In India, Sri Aurobindo and Vivekananda are venerated figures. But UNESCO, as a rule, doesn't accept any statues in its compound.

They made an exception for Sri Aurobindo, I think not only because he was a mahayogi, but also because of his writings on the unity and future of mankind. It also helped that the General Assembly of UNESCO had passed all those resolutions in support of Auroville. I do not want to take egoistic pride in these achievements, but there is a sense of satisfaction.

Regarding my personal spiritual affiliation, it didn't start with Shiva. In Hinduism there is the concept of the *Kul Devata* and the *Ishta Devata*. The *Kul Devata* is the family deity, which for us Singhs is Sri Rama, Vishnu's eighth incarnation. Our family temple is the Raghunath temple in Jammu, dedicated to Sri Ram, which was built by one of my ancestors.

The *Ishta Devata* is one's chosen deity – you can choose which particular form of the divine you feel most connected to. For me, this started with Krishna.

I was in my early twenties when I chanced on the book *Among the Great* by Dilip Kumar Roy, to whom Sri Aurobindo has written hundreds of letters. Dilip sent me later another

of his books, *Sri Aurobindo Came to Me*, in which there is a substantial section with Sri Aurobindo's comments on Dilip's correspondence with a certain Sri Krishnaprem. I contacted Sri Krishnaprem, who was living with his disciple Sri Madhava Ashish in Mirtola, a small village near Almora. We developed a deep friendship and exchanged many letters. I would often visit the Mirtola Ashram and pray at its Radha-Krishna temple. That was my phase of Krishna worship. [A selection of this correspondence has been published in the book *Letters from Mirtola*, eds.]

The advantage of Hinduism is that there is no ultimate duality. Unlike many other religions, you can change course and change your affiliation to another deity, depending on your personal inner evolution. I turned to Shiva.

As a spiritual connect, I built in the year 2000 a small Shiva temple at the beach of Pudhukuppam, 12 kilometres north of Auroville. But it got destroyed in the tsunami of December 2004. I then asked Auroville architect Satprem Mañi from the Auroville Earth Institute to build a new temple, in the shape of a pyramid. It became the Sri Karneshwar Nataraja temple. I visit it every time I come here, including this time after the Board meeting and the farewell gathering with the community.

In your address to the community during this gathering you recalled your speech in the Lok Sabha in 1980 when you had spoken of Auroville as 'an arrow shot into the future' and that that arrow is still in flight. Would you care to elaborate?

What I really wanted to say is that Auroville is a work in progress. My concern is that so far we haven't yet started building the city. A lot of buildings have come up, but the city proper still has to begin. So the Auroville arrow is in mid-air, which really places a

heavy responsibility on the Aurovilians and on the Governing Board to see that its flight continues.

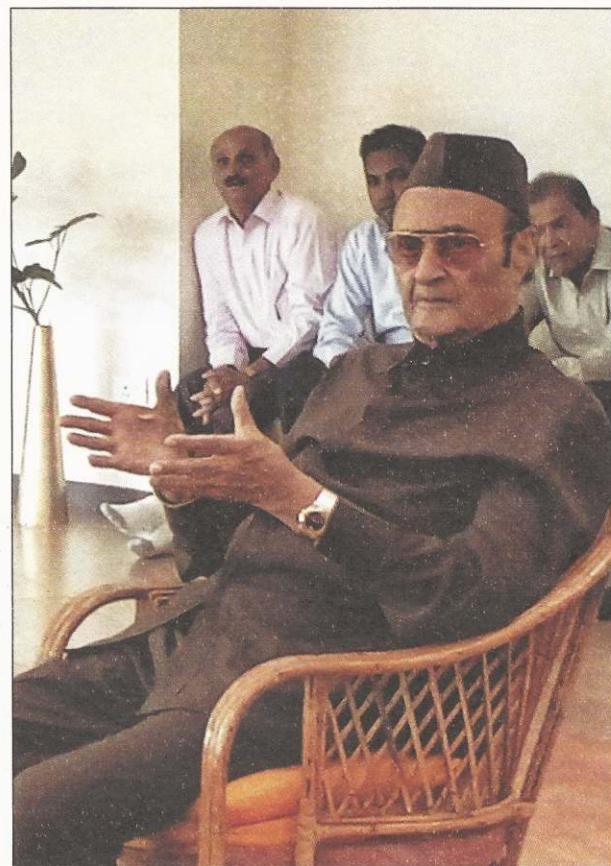
The true problem is: how to build Auroville? Building a single structure like the Matrimandir was by itself a marvel. If the Aurovilians had done nothing else, it would be considered an outstanding achievement. And the Aurovilians have done much besides. But to build a township is something different altogether. We neither have the funds nor do we own all the lands. It is not like building Chandigarh, the capital of the states of Punjab and Haryana, or Amaravati, the upcoming capital of Andhra Pradesh, where the Government provided all the lands and the funds. With Auroville, it isn't as simple. That's why we are proceeding slowly – trying to get the lands and the funds.

Auroville's unique situation is that it is called a township, but it is more comparable to a university campus: we offer learning possibilities and all the immovable assets are owned by the Auroville Foundation. That puts big constraints on Auroville's development where any institution or business wanting to come in can only do so by making donations to the Foundation to get a place to start its work.

It is an interesting comparison. I agree, you can call Auroville a living university. But The Mother's concept was that of a township, therefore we have to move towards that ideal and build an urban settlement. The Auroville Foundation Act is a supportive act, it wasn't a take-over by the Government of India, which is why Auroville is not treated and funded as a University. In fact, the unique status of Auroville is also its protection. Otherwise a big commercial or industrial undertaking could easily buy up the whole of Auroville and it would lose its autonomy.

So how do we build the city?

It's a big question. A first condition is that the community needs to agree on where it wants to go. Today, we are particularly looking at two problems. One is the Galaxy concept and the need for a town plan. One would have thought that after almost 50 years the community would have come to some kind of consensus. But there is still division on it. As I see it, the Galaxy is a general visionary plan



Dr. Karan Singh during an interaction with the community on September 8th

which will need to be adjusted to the ground realities from time to time. But it is for the community to sort this out. Perhaps it can agree on a 'Galaxy Plus' – keeping the old design, adjusted to the ground realities, perhaps with more modern earth-friendly buildings. But I do not want the Governing Board to get involved in that discussion.

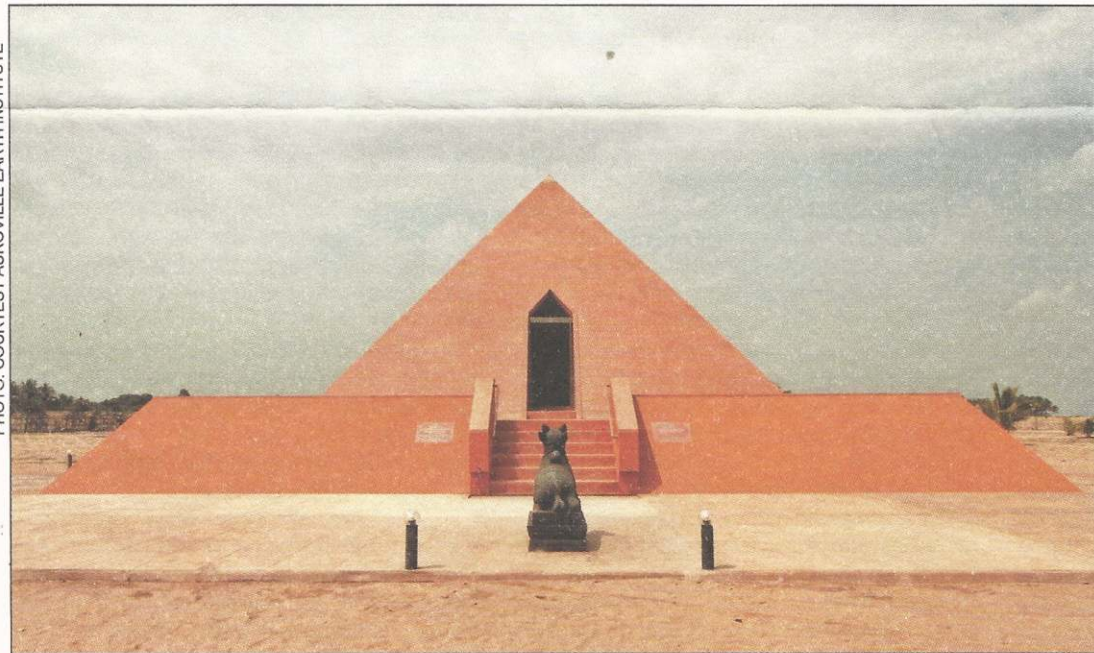
The other topic is the desirability of the Tamil Nadu government setting up an external authority, a New Town Development Authority, for the Auroville area. Here too, the Board has not taken a stand. We expect that the Secretary will steer the discussion and advise the Board on the best line of action.

A positive impact may occur because of the planned 50th anniversary celebrations. I hope that Auroville's golden jubilee can be used to the maximum to enrich and enhance the entire structure of Auroville.

This was the last meeting of this Governing Board and there are some apprehensions from the community about the next. Would you like to comment?

I know the Aurovilians are a little edgy but I can't comment, it is not in my hands. It is for the Government of India to decide on the material plane and for Sri Aurobindo and The Mother on the spiritual plane. I was touched that both the International Advisory Council and the Working Committee have recommended that I be given another term, and I will be glad to do so. But if that doesn't happen, that's all right, I will have done my part.

In conversation with Carel



The Sri Karneshwar Nataraja temple at Pudhukuppam

THE LANDS

Acquiring and protecting the lands The views of the Land Board

When the members of the Land Board took office in January 2015 they met with a dire scenario. Funds to purchase lands were in short supply, the sale of outlying lands was blocked, land encroachment was rampant, land grabs and falsifications of land documents by outsiders were discovered, and legal assistance was insufficiently available. The absence of coherent policies between the various Auroville working groups added to the problems. Now, after almost two years of steady work and with active support from the Governing Board, the Secretary, the Working Committee and the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC), the Land Board says there is light at the end of the tunnel.

Land consolidation issues

The Land Board's foremost task is to consolidate the City area of 1,212 acres. Excluding the peramboke (government owned) lands, about 120 acres still need to be acquired. "But a good 100 acres may not be available for purchase," says the Land Board, "as they are disputed and/or undivided family lands." In India, every descendant has a share in the ancestral property, but this sometimes leads to intra-family conflicts and

a barrage of court cases that can take decades to get resolved. Though many people would like to sell, they are prevented from doing so by their family situation. "We may as well forget about purchasing these 100 acres in the immediate future," states the Land Board.

The remaining 20 acres are owned by people who have no cash flow problems and hence have no reason to sell immediately. Such land owners prove to be a huge challenge for the Land Board, because they try to push up prices with threats to develop their lands into residential areas. Private residential development by outsiders within the City area would naturally be detrimental to the development of Auroville in accordance with its Master Plan.

In the Greenbelt, the area surrounding the City, Auroville needs to acquire around 1,800 acres. Here, many lands are for sale as the third generation village land-owners have moved from farming to employment to entrepreneurship. Many consider selling to Auroville a clean process, contrary to selling to outsiders which has often resulted in villagers being cheated. Nowadays, many villagers approach the Land Board for help in resolving intra-family problems or problems with outsiders. They look upon Auroville as an organisation that can assist

with law and order and provide arbitration.

But how can Auroville respond to offers of purchase? For funds are in woefully short supply, notwithstanding the remarkable fundraising successes of the Acres for Auroville and the Green Acres campaigns. These successes have led to the purchase of some essential pieces of land; but looking at the overall requirement, they are but small steps on a long road.

The obvious solution would be to sell outlying lands and use the proceeds to buy lands inside the City and Greenbelt areas. Much of the outlying lands are to the west of the Pondicherry-Tindivanam highway and were bought in 1960's as the Auroville township was originally located along the highway. The Auroville community has approved 23 outlying areas to be sold or exchanged. But in accordance with the Auroville Foundation Rules 1997, land sales require the approval of the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Auroville's nodal ministry, which has been requested many years ago. The request is still pending. This is detrimental to Auroville's development because the land prices within the Auroville township area are rising exponentially, yet the prices of these outlying lands are not increasing at the same rate.

But not all land owners in the Auroville area want to exchange their land for Auroville's outlying plots. People from the nearby villages, as a rule, do not want to exchange their land for far-outlying lands unless those lands would have a commercial value, which is the case

the city?" asked the AVI members. They were stunned by the answer: none. The Land Board is convinced that Auroville can develop and build the city for the next 10 years before there would be any standstill caused by non-ownership of a plot of land. "The non-ownership of some lands is no issue at all. The problem would only occur," says the Land Board, "if the Galaxy Master Plan would be imposed as an unchangeable yantra [a holy geometrical diagram, eds.]. If all stakeholders can be flexible, the Master Plan's three circular roads and twelve radials could all be put in place without purchasing a single acre. The circular roads would not be exact circles and the radials would not be strictly where they are planned today, but Auroville, without owning all the lands, could develop a township of 50,000 people within the city area, have four-storey buildings

The Board cites the Brihaspati land as a case in point. About half of it is located in the Greenbelt along its outer border. The other half is outside the Master Plan area, close to a highway. One part of the land is used as farm, one part for the activities of the Red Earth Riding School, and a third part is residential. The Land Board, considering the high value of the outside land, the poor quality of the soil, the lack of sufficient water, and its location close to the highway, proposed to exchange it for more fertile land within the Greenbelt area. This proposal, which would moreover consolidate a part of the Greenbelt, was objected to by the Aurovilian steward. The Farm Group, agreeing that

Protecting the lands

Another important activity of the Land Board is land protection, a responsibility it shares with the Working Committee and the Auroville Security team in relation to matters on the ground. When matters go to court, the Auroville Foundation becomes involved. The Governing Board has accepted the Land Board's recommendation to employ highly qualified lawyers experienced in land matters to protect the lands and to counter any impression that 'Auroville lands are for all to use' and speculator's views that 'Auroville is an easy and soft target'. Legal action is now undertaken by Auroville against land grabs, document forgery, and the shifting of fences. The Land Board says that high lawyers' fees are nominal in respect to the value of the land that we may otherwise lose. Furthermore,



Approximate map of Auroville and the surrounding areas. In green are all the lands owned by Auroville. In the inner circle, the city area, most lands are owned by Auroville, but this is not the case in the outer circle, the Greenbelt. Many of Auroville's outlying lands are not shown on this map.

But when the Ministry finally gives permission to sell outlying lands, much more can be done. The permission will moreover allow the Land Board to increase the cash flow by borrowing internally against future land sales. But the Land Board cautions that even after permission is granted by the Ministry, it will take at least a year to come up with an endorsed process that will ensure that Auroville land sales are compliant with government procedures for accountability.

What if the city lands cannot be acquired?

But wouldn't this block the manifestation of the city? The question was asked in the Land Board's interaction with members of Auroville International (AVI) who visited Auroville at the end of last year. "How many strategic plots not owned by Auroville prevent the development of

Exchanging farm lands

For example, quite a few plots of top-quality farm land in the Greenbelt area are currently being offered for exchange. If Auroville had clear procedures, based on measurable criteria for evaluating farm land that is proposed for exchange (such as its soil quality and the extent to which its output is benefiting the community), and compare that to the potential of the land which is offered, the process would be clean and transparent. But this is not the case. "What usually happens," says the Land Board, "is an

In the absence of comprehensive policies for land utilisation and stewardship, the Land Board feels that it is on the receiving end of a general mistrust from individuals and working groups. The Land Board wants certain questions to be answered by the community. What are the criteria for land allocation? Who decides on land allocation? What are the roles and responsibilities of the land stewards? And on what grounds can an individual or a working group object to land exchange? For without answers, trust and unity within the community on the issues of land acquisition and exchange cannot be achieved.

If we don't act to protect our own land interests, it is likely that it will be squatted. But are there ways in which Auroville can protect and develop its land that also supports its relationship with the villagers and respects their needs? This is the larger challenge in our aim for embodying a living humanity unity.

Exchange of farm land

The perspective of the Farm Group

Before Auroville was officially founded in 1968 and before the final location of Auroville was decided by the Mother, disparate plots of land had been bought in the surrounding region. Many of these plots have been stewarded by Aurovilians for many decades. In recent years, there has been a move to exchange some of these outlying plots for land in the City and the Greenbelt area. Such a move, even though it may serve a greater purpose, has not always been welcomed by the stewards. From the perspective of the Farm Group, exchanging outlying farms can be detrimental to food security.

Auroville has 365 acres of land that is managed by the Auroville Farm Group. The Auroville Farm Group consists of 19 farms, and almost half of the 365 acres of farm land lies outside the City and Greenbelt areas. The farms in the Greenbelt often comprise severely eroded laterite soil, while some of our outlying farms such as Annapurna, Auro Annam, Service Farm and Brihaspathi have more fertile soil, and thus a greater capacity for food production. The outlying farms are also much bigger in size, which leads to economies of scale that are not possible with small holdings. Certain field crops, such as grains, are best grown in large areas. These are main reasons for protecting farm land in the outlying areas.

Members of the Town Development Council (TDC) and the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) state that they subscribe to a vision of protecting farm land. In the rare cases when they do exchange outlying farm land, they seek to allocate an equal acreage of land for farming within the greenbelt area. While in theory this seems like a reasonable principle, a closer analysis reveals that land exchange has led to a decrease in the amount of Auroville farm land. Also, sadly, in the experience of the Farm Group, implementation of land exchange has always proven to be an unpleasant experience, resulting in bitterness among individuals, among working groups, and irresolvable conflicts. Even without convoluted interpersonal dynamics that tend to plague group processes in Auroville, it is debatable if an equal acreage of contiguous land in the city's greenbelt can ever be made available to the Farm Group to compensate for the lost farm, for as one farmer pointed out, there are only small parcels of land available for sale in the greenbelt. The Auroville Farm Group doesn't want to take up Greenbelt land for farming if it is less than 5 acres, for they believe that economies of



Harvesting at Annapurna Farm

land, the health of the soil and the flow of the surface water. And out of this knowledge, evolves a deeper understanding of how best to develop the land – not just where to plant the crops, but also how to catch the run-off from the land, maintain the catchment ponds, and locate needed infrastructure.

Good farmers (as well as foresters) live in a close symbiotic relationship with the land. The depth of this relationship can be hard for outsiders to fathom, because it is a living connection, born out of years of observing and understanding the land.

Given the state of ecological erosion of the Auroville bioregion, regenerating the soil and establishing a healthy, relatively pest-free ecosystem takes a few years when one starts food cultivation for the first time. It is difficult, if not impossible, to calculate the ecological value of regenerating soil or establishing a healthy ecosystem. As is true all over the world, natural capital or ecological value is easily overlooked in annual balance sheets that show only financial income and expenses. But organic farmers know that protecting and replenishing the health of the soil ensures food productivity in the long run. Food productivity can be dramatically increased in the short term by unsustainable cultivation, as India did with the Green Revolution, but in the long run, as again seen in the Green Revolution experiment, this leads to a total depletion of the soil and aquifers.

Besides cultivating soil for producing food, farmers require substantial investments into immovable assets, such as infrastructure for energy and water, cow sheds, storage sheds, nurseries, small food-processing centre, etc. In Auroville, such investments are sometimes made out of community funds, but more often out of the personal funds of individuals. When a viable farm is exchanged, additional financial resources for investments are often not planned for. If the farmer is relocated from an existing farm to a new but poorly managed farm, it basically diminishes our food production for an indeterminate period of years as the farmer struggles to invest in the necessary infrastructure, build up the health of the soil again, and re-start cultivation. As the more fertile agricultural land lies outside of the city limits, exchanging or selling outlying farms does not make any sense from the perspective of the farmer.

Exchange of farm land: past lessons

In 2010, the Funds and Assets Management Committee and the Land Management Task Force decided to exchange two outlying farms – Service Farm and Auro Annam – for land in the city area. Many in the Farm Group felt that this would be detrimental to Auroville's food security

and there were heated discussions around this. But in the end, according to Priya, a farmer and note-taker of the Farm Group, the Farm Group was not given a choice in the matter. The two farms were put up for exchange, and the stewards were told they would be relocated.

Says Priya, "Over the next few years various pieces of land were offered to both farm stewards to set up new farms. The steward of Auro Annam would not accept any of these or any offers of temporary accommodation (knowing well that permanent accommodation may not ever be forthcoming). They were either too small to compensate for the 7 acres of Auro Annam or they did not have the necessary road access. Eventually the steward of Auro Annam was allowed to continue living on a small piece of the Auro Annam land where the farm house and some infrastructure was located. This land was fenced and the rest of Auro Annam was used for land exchange.

"In the case of Service farm, the FAMC instructed the steward of the land to cease farming as soon as it decided to use the farm for land exchange. Since then, the 14-acre farm has steadily deteriorated. The steward was promised temporary accommodation by the FAMC but this was not forthcoming. The steward and her family continued living in their deteriorating accommodation and no longer did any necessary maintenance work in view of the planned exchange. Concerned by the delay in the exchange, the Farm Group requested the FAMC to revoke the decision and take back Service Farm, but this was refused as were requests to improve the accommodation. In 2012, the steward was offered 4 acres of land, which was accepted to create New Service Farm. Money was requested from the FAMC to build up the farm, but only the very minimum was provided. Auroville did not provide for an access road and for water to New Service Farm, without which farming cannot start and the steward cannot be relocated. According to the current Land Board, Service Farm is still earmarked for land exchange and negotiations about this are ongoing but are complex. Recently there have been renewed efforts to make the New Service Farm operational.

"But, all in all, given the fact that relocating stewards is such a long and messy process and still not entirely resolved after 6 years in the case of Service Farm, the farmers question if the exchange was worth the financial and human cost. In addition to these two farms, the Farm Group gave up 20 acres of cultivated farms for land exchange but received only four acres in return, on which farming is yet to begin. Sufficient investment was not provided to set up even one new farm. In short, exchanging farm land has resulted in a decrease of food production."

Exchange of farm land: current negotiations

At present, a new land exchange involving part of the outlying farm of Brihaspathi has been proposed by the Land Board. The Farm Group has asked for the original promises to be honoured and two new farms established, in exchange of Auro Annam and Service Farm, before they would consider such a request. The Land Board has replied that they do not have the authority to grant such a request, as it is the FAMC that makes such decisions. The issue is compounded by the fact that many members of these working groups have been replaced, and often there is a lack of continuity in the implementation of decisions from one group to the next. Given their past experience and their lack of trust in the working groups in granting them a fair deal, the Farm Group recently unequivocally stated:

"Given that losing farm land puts the future food security of Auroville at risk, the Farm Group will not willingly give up farm land for land exchange or any other purpose. Past experience has shown that Auroville farm land, once lost to land exchange, is not replaced. The Farm Group acknowledges that there might be exceptional circumstances in which a case could be made for giving up either a farm or farm land for land exchange. If such a case arises, this has to be agreed by the whole community. In such a case, the Farm Group expects a replacement farm to be provided. In practice this means that sufficient land be made available and resources provided in a separate account to create another farm. These resources have to be made available to the Farm Group before the land exchange negotiations begin. This will ensure that, in the future, farm land is not lost to Auroville because of land exchange, as has happened in the past."

The Farm Group's stance deserves to be discussed by the community at large and approved by other working groups. But the lack of trust is not one-sided. There is also criticism that farm land is not optimally used or a farm is not well-managed. Members of the FAMC in recent discussions voiced the opinion that when a farm is not performing well due to poor management, or if large swathes of land in an existing farm are not being utilised, then the group feels justified to exchange such farm land.

This is an extreme view. It would be better to investigate why a farm does not function optimally, and if needed, set in place processes to replace the steward. For if we truly wish to implement a vision of maximum food productivity and self-sufficiency, we need to have a well thought-out approach for protecting the viable agricultural land of Auroville. A lot needs to be done to ensure the food security of Auroville, but, as always, we first need to have a common vision regarding food production in Auroville.

Bindu

Auroville Farms		
Farm Name	AVilians & newcomers	Area
Auro Orchard	5	44.0
Annapurna	3	135.0
Auro Green	2	27.0
Ayarpady	2	21.5
Buddha Garden	4	10.6
Brihaspati	2	14.0
Discipline	4	14.0
Djalma	1	10.0
Kottakarai	2	7.5
Solitude	1	6.0
Siddharta	1	10.8
Terra Soul	3	5.5
Windarra	3	4.5
Kalpavruksha	1	9.5
Pazhamundhir	2	5.0
Bumadevi	2	6.0
Alipsa	1	6.0
Moonlight	1	3.0
Sustenance	1	4.0
Service Farm	2	14.0
Infinity	2	6.0
Auro Mushroom	1	0.7
Farm Office	2	-
Foodlink	5	-
Total	53	364.6

food production do not work on small plots. Below we examine, with reference to specific examples, some of the challenges with farm land exchange.

Land: General issues

For farmers, land is their most prized asset. Over years, with observation and experimentation, one learns in detail about the lay of the

Annapurna land issues

At 135 acres, Annapurna is Auroville's largest farm and is furthest away from the city centre. Due to lack of (wo)manpower and capital for investment, only a quarter of Annapurna is under intense cultivation, while fodder and timber is grown in the rest of the land. Annapurna is one of our most productive farms, supplying Auroville with grains and milk. And Tomas, the main manager at Annapurna, is convinced that with the right inputs, the farm could triple its productivity. Annapurna is the only farm of Auroville to maintain its IMO organic certification.

The land of Annapurna is not contiguous: the farm is divided into three parcels by a *peramboke* [government owned land, eds.] gully. In recent years, one of Annapurna's neighboring landowners has turned part of the *peramboke* gully into a road. Symptomatic of development that one sees everywhere in semi-rural India, putting in a road basically leads to a change in land-use from agricultural land to urban development, which can have negative consequences for organic farms, such as an increase in traffic and inorganic trash.

There are essentially two core land-management issues that Tomas, the Annapurna steward, faces: 1) Can one have a mixed land-use, where part of the land is used for non-agricultural purposes to generate capital for farm investment? 2) Can the farm be consolidated and protected from unwanted development?

Regarding the first issue: A couple of years ago, a reputed company, GT Electric, which was closely associated with the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology in Irumbai, wanted to lease a 5-acre plot of land from Annapurna on a long-term basis. The 5-acre plot located on the main

Vanur road was cut off from the main farmland by the *peramboke* gully. A long-term lease by a stable customer would have given Annapurna a stable financial foundation of Rs. 20 lakhs a year to maintain its operations, increase productivity, and help other farms. A grain farm, the size of Annapurna, needs machinery for farm processes such as ploughing, sowing, harvesting, and processing grains. But the significant funds needed for such investments are not available within the community. Even though Tomas was part of one of the land groups then, he failed to convince other group-members about this proposal to lease 5 acres to GT Electric, and one of the best opportunities for securing funding for the farm was lost. Sadly, as often happens in Auroville, the issue, instead of being looked at from the larger perspective of the needs of the community, was quickly personalized, and Tomas was maligned for bringing up this proposal.

Regarding the second issue: The need for consolidation of the farm and protection from unwanted development is highly important, for organic cultivation affected by any major chemical contamination through water or air pollution would render the farm inorganic. Air and water do not recognize plot boundaries, and at stake is Annapurna's certification, which internationally recognizes the quality of its organic produce, which has been obtained and maintained with a lot of hard work.

Within the larger boundaries of Annapurna, there is a private property comprising 17 acres that is held in joint ownership by a family. So far only pesticide-free casuarinas have been grown on this plot. But at present, the owners are thinking of selling the land. Given the location of the farm on a state highway and the general trend of development in India, sale of the land is likely to



result in an urban development. And as the runoff from this 17-acre plot feeds into two catchment ponds on Annapurna land, it is crucial to secure this plot to ensure that Annapurna's soil and water do not get polluted by contaminants.

The current land policy of Auroville prohibits the purchase of land outside of the city area, so securing the plot essentially means undergoing a land exchange. The owners of the private plot are open to the possibility of exchanging their land for a roadside plot belonging to Annapurna, and the Land Board is not opposed to such an exchange. But, in India, the reality is when land is jointly held by a family, the legality of the land deeds or paper need to be established, and there needs to be unequivocal con-

sensus among all the owners. Following up on such details can take an inordinate amount of time, and the Land Board, given the priority of securing land in the city-area, has far too many urgent issues to deal with to follow up on this potential exchange. Tomas, who also has his hands full in running the farm, feels that a wider support group of Aurovilians, who have the knowledge, interest and capability, could help farmers by taking up such issues. He points out that ideally policies regarding land, investment into farms, and maximizing food production, should not be the responsibility of individual farmers or even the Farm Group, but the community as a whole.

Bindu

PROFILE

Luck, love and hard work: a recipe for a life well-lived

Sumathi, who joined Auroville as a young woman, recounts her life.

I've been in Auroville since my marriage 26 years ago. I grew up in Chinnakottakuppam village on the backside of Forecomers, towards Pondicherry. When I was five years old, my father passed away. My mother started doing labor work at Cluny Hospital in Pondicherry in order to support the family. When I was in 5th standard, my mother was concerned about my education, and she spoke with one of the sisters at the hospital. The sister suggested that I should stay in a hostel and continue my studies. As my mother was finding it hard to work and raise three children, thinking of my future, she placed me in a Christian hostel in Pondicherry. I stayed there for five years until I completed high school, and went to church every day. My mother and sister came once a month to visit me, but my brother never came to see me. I missed my family.

After I finished high school, I came to my house in Chinnakottakuppam for the long summer holiday. I was going to typing classes in the evening, and I was free during the day. My aunt was working in Forecomers community in Auroville, and she suggested, "Instead of being at home, come and do gardening work at Forecomers, and help us count the nursery plants." So I came to work in Auroville when I was 17 years old.

In Forecomers I met Kumar, who was in charge of the nursery. As in many stories, it was a miracle that we fell in love with each other. I don't know how it happened so fast: we got married very quickly. My family was not happy with my decision, but his parents supported us.

I got a good husband. He is a very great person. We took a very quick decision to get married, but all this time, he's been a gentleman and always adjusted to me and been a great support. He encouraged me to do a Bachelor of Commerce degree because it was helpful for my work, so I completed that.

We moved from Forecomers to Aurogreen, where Charlie helped us a lot. My first baby Nandini was born in 1991 and the Aurogreen community took care of us very well. My son Naveen was born in 1994, and then we moved to Fraternity, where we are still today. The children grew up here. I really missed my sister a lot in those days. If I think about that, it's sad. But my husband took such good care of me, it was more than good compensation. My mother came to see me after four years, and now I have a good relationship with my family.

I started to do farming work when I was staying in Aurogreen. I helped in the shop there, where we would sell milk and food in the mornings to the neighbors. Since that time, I've been doing



Sumathi

farm-related work. My school education was completely in Tamil, so I had to learn English. Charlie and Susie in Aurogreen first taught to me read and write, and then I learnt on the job.

My family was surviving on one maintenance, which was difficult. I heard that Isha was looking for a person who could undertake communication in Tamil and English between the farmers and the Solar Kitchen, so I started to work there in 1997. The project was called the Central Distribution Centre, housed in a small room in the Solar Kitchen. Everyday I learnt a lot. Isha taught me how to do book keeping and Tally software. Now, I do all the Farm Group accounts.

My main task is to communicate between the farmers and the Solar Kitchen. The Solar Kitchen creates their weekly menu and gives it to us on Friday, advising us of the quantities of vegetables they need for the following week. We liaise with the farmers, and if they don't have the vegetables, we let Solar Kitchen know. And then we go back and forth between the two groups. It's not easy. The farmers push us to sell their produce, but customers don't always want it. If produce goes to waste, the farmers come and question us, so we get stuck in the middle.

In 2004, we changed our name to Food Link and expanded our work to include PTPS, PTDC, cafés and guesthouses. Around that time, we also started doing packaging of dry goods. Lakshmi came to help with that, and she's still here. We're always expanding. In 2011, we started distributing milk, eggs

and cheeses. All the produce from 23 Auroville farms comes here, including the milk in canisters.

We need a bigger space for FoodLink, so a new building is being made near Certitude. At the moment, we can't accept the evening milk from the Auroville farms, because we don't have enough storage room. With the new building, we will be able to store the evening milk, do food processing and manage leftover food. We can stay open there until 4.30pm, and we can really develop. I hope that people will buy more local vegetables, so that the Aurovillian farmers will grow more and people will be healthy from eating organic food.

It's not an easy job but I'm happy to do it. I cover other people's jobs when they go on leave because I know what should be done. I've been here at FoodLink for 19 years: I started at the basic level and worked my way up. Now I'm experienced at coordinating the Foodlink team (Lakshmi, Anitha, Anjali, Titu, Gnanamani and Devivanayagi). I am happy to give this service to Auroville.

It's what Mother says: come for the work of Auroville. Initially, I came because I was married, and I had no idea about Auroville. But then I realised that it is a good harmonious place, with people from different countries staying together in peace.

My neighbour Mahalingam translates the Mother's books into Tamil and he also gives me copies to read. I like to read the books in a language where the message will enter me most deeply, so I read them in Tamil. Mother's advice has helped me in many situations. Some days, when I have a lot of tension, I will think about what the Mother or Sri Aurobindo said and it's really helpful. I also read a page daily from the Calendar of quotations (from the Mother and Sri Aurobindo). I go to the ashram in Pondicherry for Darshan, and I go to the Matrimandir when I have some confusion, and then I feel relief.

My children are grown up now. My daughter has finished her Bachelor of Engineering, and is doing her Master degree now, and my son has finished his Bachelor of Technology and now he's working full-time in StemLand and Aura Auro Design. My kids dream that they will be able to help Auroville develop.

I believe in the idea of community. Auroville has developed a lot in the last 26 years. I learned so much, in terms of lifestyle, work, reading and writing.

I was really lucky! I have been lucky with my husband, and my children, who are very nice and who support me in my aspirations.

That's my life story.

In conversation with Lesley

Finding oneself: the Swadharma programme

Recently, the Auroville Campus Initiative team as part of their educational outreach programme ran an innovative course for Indian students and young professionals. It was called the 'Swadharma' programme. What made it innovative? And what was the response? We spoke to the organizers to find out more.

Auroville Today: What is the meaning of 'swadharma'?

Manoj: Swadharma is one's unique trajectory in life. It is acting in accordance with one's own deepest nature.

Is the Swadharma programme different from other outreach education programmes offered by Auroville?

Lalit: Most courses have been using Auroville to enhance the experience of the participants, but they have not tapped into the core element of Auroville, which is human unity based upon self-discovery, or the discovery of one's swadharma. The Swadharma programme tries to do this.

Manoj: Another big difference is that programmes like *Living Routes* [run in Auroville for American university students by an organization in the USA, eds.] were coming from a sustainability angle, and explorations into body, mind and soul were subsidiary. We reverse this emphasis. We put the individual's awakened aspiration at the centre.

Mike: We felt it important that Auroville has its own set of programmes, so three years ago we began looking into what we can offer in this respect. This programme is an outcome.

Do you feel you have developed approaches that are particularly 'Aurovilian'?

Manoj: We did not use a single textbook. The unique field of Auroville was the most important factor in this programme. There are so many people in Auroville who are on a journey of self-discovery and living the experience that all we had to do was bring the students into touch with them for something to be awakened in them.

That awakening is the first essential process. To stimulate this, we took them around Auroville to meet inspiring people doing wonderful things. The outward movement was balanced by giving them inward exercises to recognise personal moments of inspiration.

The next step was to help them understand mentally what was happening and to give it some direction. At this point, we helped them meet Aurovilians in similar fields to allow them to dive deeper into their field of interest. Finally, we asked them to take up and complete a micro-project based upon this new understanding of themselves.

Auroville became the fertile soil upon which we could design this programme because there is so much diversity and creativity here, and people are willing to share about who they are and what they have achieved. This would not happen on a normal campus.

Originally, the Swadharma programme was to last 14 weeks. You reduced it to four. Why? Do you feel you lost anything important in the process?

Manoj: There are two aspects to the Swadharma course. One is the discovering, the self-knowledge part, the other is the doing part. When we scaled down the programme, the first part was retained but the practical part was much reduced. Instead, we offered the students the option of staying on in Auroville to do internships in various activities. In fact, of the eleven participants who took the core course, seven have signed up for longer or shorter internships.

What worked, what didn't work?



From left: Lalit, Mike, Anita, Min, Sophie, Manoj

Sophie: Many participants said that before joining this course they had inner questions that nobody could answer. They felt very isolated. But as soon as they arrived here, they bonded as if they had known each other for a long time. This happened because they were on the same quest. Then, you could see from one week to the next that they were transforming. By the end of the month, a number of them said they had found what they were looking for; that they had some clarity about what they wanted to do and the confidence to do it. This was very moving.

Lalit: Auroville was the platform; we did not do anything, we were just hand-holders. To be part of the energy field of Auroville and to witness its action and effect upon the participants was a very beautiful experience.

What I regret is not being able to sit together with everybody individually. I think one-to-one interactions would have brought something deeper, but the schedule did not allow it.

Min: What worked well for me was how the programme was structured in the first week. To be able to equip the students with the right lens so they could see the beauty of Auroville rather than the negativity was very important. Everywhere they went they said, 'This is amazing. This is where I can give myself.' So the intention of giving was very much developed through this first week of orientation.

What did not work for me was all the effort that went into organising the logistics.

Mike: What made designing the programme challenging is that we did not know beforehand where their individual journeys would take the participants. So after the first week, all their interviews and interactions with Aurovilians had to be organized as we went along.

Manoj: But in the process we learned about the sheer diversity of Auroville. We managed to find Aurovilians with expertise in the field of whichever topics the participants were interested in – which were quite diverse!

From their presentations at the end of the four weeks, it is obvious that something profound has been awakened in many of the participants. [see box with two of the students' views]

Are you confident that this awakening will be strong enough to sustain them when they go back? Or are you thinking of providing ongoing support for them?

Manoj: They are aware that it is better to stay in Auroville for a longer period to strengthen this awakening before they return to their usual environment. This is why many of them are staying on to do internships.

Min: As more students come through this programme, it will be more challenging to keep in touch. So we need to create a forum, perhaps on our website, where individuals can share their journey, ask questions, and where peer-to-peer learning can take place.

Anita: We told this group we will be following the next three years of their journey and they welcomed this: they wanted to stay in touch.

You are already thinking about the next Swadharma programme. Are you planning any changes?

Mike: We are planning to add one week to the core programme as some of the participants found the first week too packed, overwhelming, and there wasn't enough time at the end to do their final projects.

Lalit: At the same time, the intensity is also important – they were engaged almost 12 hours a day – for something else to emerge, so we don't want to lose that completely.

Mike: Somewhere on the horizon is the question; is what we are doing scalable? Clearly, the people interested in a programme like this are far more numerous than we can handle: we already have eighty applicants for our next programme. It is a highly individual journey, so we feel that twenty is probably the maximum number we can work with at one time.

Have you thought about running a course like this for Aurovilians?

Anita: We wanted to involve Auroville youth and it was offered to them. One of them was interested but then he left.

Manoj: The design of the present course is not suitable for Auroville youth. It has to be custom-made for their requirements. But it is definitely something we are thinking about.

What was the impact of the course upon the Aurovilians involved?

Mike: It definitely had an impact upon them. Simply by interacting with these young seekers who are trying to find their place in the world I think a number of Aurovilians saw how privileged they are to be able to live here and do what they are doing. I also think it may have reminded them of their quest when they came to Auroville. In this sense, perhaps the contact with these young people revived, rekindled, something in them.

Lalit: The Aurovilians we met are very positive about this course. They can relate much more to a programme like this than many other programmes offered here as they could see it was helping people to grow from inside. There was a natural connectivity to the participants at that level.

Manoj: It was like discovering new members of your tribe!

What about the effect upon you of being involved in this course?

Lalit: This programme is also building us. It was very inspiring to be with these young people and to be able to deliver a programme like this in a collective spirit.

Manoj: It was like experiencing Auroville's own swadharma: I feel like I touched upon something of the authentic Auroville.

Mike: Very inspiring, it has added to my own swadharma.

Min: I discovered once again that when you are in that space of seeking, then magic can happen. We could observe that happening in them. This is a lesson for myself, to keep myself open to new ideas. It was also an amazing experience to encounter the diversity of skills and swadharms of the Aurovilians themselves.

Anita: For me, the learning has been on two levels. Firstly, I have learned a lot through being part of the organizing team. All six of us work in different ways, so just the fact that together we were able to make it happen is amazing.

The other learning related to the participants. When I was their age, I was also lost and looking for something different: there was something missing in my life. There are so many youth in India struggling like this, and to be able to provide a platform for people like this, to see them learning about themselves and coming together as a group, was a beautiful experience. It has really rejuvenated and revived something in me.

Manoj: In terms of vision, I see Auroville as a Nalanda of the future [Nalanda was a great Buddhist centre of learning of the past, drawing students and teachers from all over Asia, eds.]. It would not be a conventional university because the core would be a transformational experience and you would be learning in the midst of life. So perhaps what we are planting with this course is a seed for such a future centre of learning.

From an interview by Alan

For more info visit www.swadharma.auroville.org

Students' views

A new sense of direction

Aishwarya: I thought I had my whole life planned out to be a movement therapist. However, in the second year of college I found I could not stick to one thing, I became very confused and finally decided to take a gap year. This is when I discovered this programme.

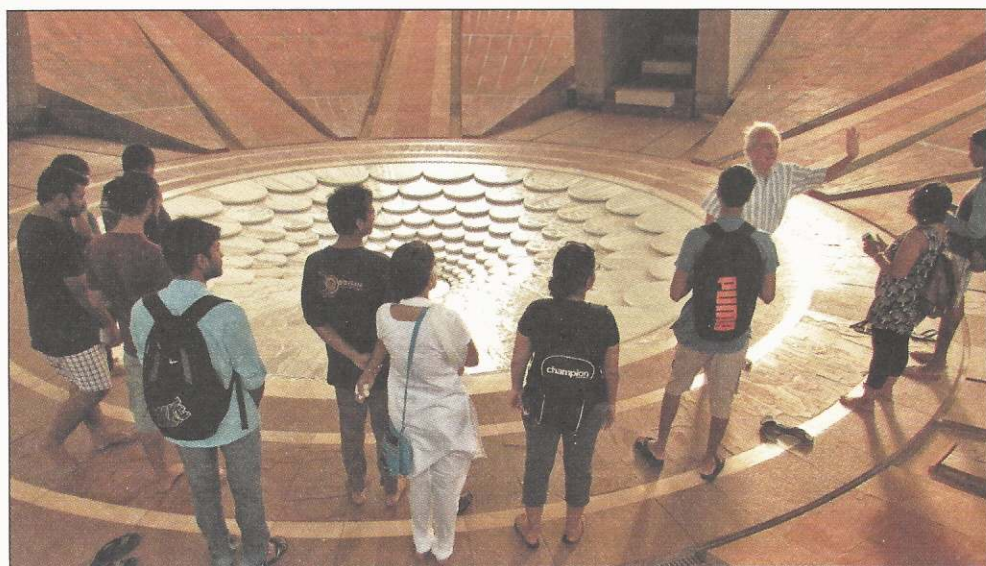
During my first week here, I was in awe of this place. I felt so at home and at peace with myself. Then, during the *ikigai* exercise, I found that my core value is to continually learn and to grow.

As part of my micro-project, I decided to curate an art exhibition at Mitra hostel. A lot of things went wrong, but I learned a lot. What I've taken from this experience is a new sense of belief in myself, in my ability to do anything I set my mind to without getting afraid. Now the idea of planning out my life has disappeared and I am open to wherever my search takes me.

Ankarjyot: I graduated in interior design but at present I am looking after my ancestral farm. Before I came here, I was seeking clarity and direction.

Auroville has been a very enabling environment for me. All of the insights came from meeting different Aurovilians and being in beautiful environments, like the Botanical Gardens. Although I come from a farming background, I knew little about sustainability. I really began to understand it here and I realise I must shift towards a more responsible way of farming.

Since coming here, I have also discovered how important it is to strengthen the bond between my inner and outer self. I have had trouble finding rhythm in my life. Now I have learned that when the bond with my inner self is strengthened, my outer life automatically finds its rhythm.



Gilles Guigan (with raised hand) speaks about the Matrimandir at the pond below

Krishna Tewari

On September 26th, Aurovilian Major General Krishna Tewari (ret'd.) passed away in his house at Auromodèle surrounded by his family and friends, at the age of 94. Krishna, a highly decorated officer, had joined the British Indian Army in early 1942. After India's independence, he continued to serve in the Indian army.

Krishna had received *darshan* of The Mother in 1972, together with his family. Shortly afterwards, he and his wife Kamla participated in the inauguration ceremony of the Matrimandir. So impressed were they that they wanted to join the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville immediately, but The Mother forbade him to do so. They joined Auroville four years later, in 1976 when Auroville was having its disputes with the Sri Aurobindo Society. It was of great significance for Auroville to have a high-ranking Indian military officer in its midst and Krishna's active presence during the resulting Supreme Court case was crucially significant and helped the positive outcome for Auroville.

Krishna had been involved in the war with Pakistan as well as the war against China and became the highest-ranking Indian officer to be taken prisoner by the Chinese. He was at the time Lt. Colonel and Commander Signals of the headquarters Eastern Command, 4th (Red Eagle) Infantry Division, which had been assigned the operational responsibility for the defense of India's borders in Sikkim. But the division was ill-equipped to fight in high mountainous regions and to defend more than 1,800 kilometers of mountainous terrain.

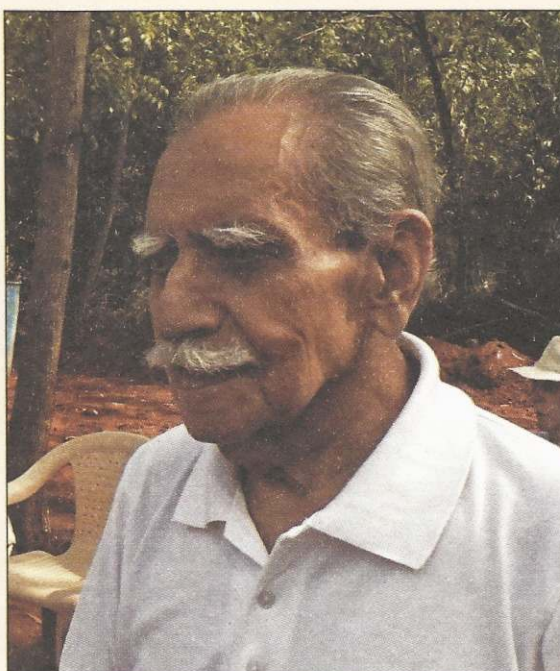
In an interview with Claude Arpi, Krishna recalled the difficult circumstances under which his division was supposed to operate, facing shortages of every kind. He also mentioned his premonition that a severe test was in the offing to

assess his faith in the Divine. "I certainly had no idea that I would be taken a prisoner of war," (PoW) he wrote in his diary. The event happened on October 20th, 1962.

After being captured by the Chinese, and suffering blows to the head that left him partly deaf for the rest of his life, Krishna and the other Indian PoWs were force-marched for three days to Marmang in Tibet, from where they were taken to Chen Ye [Chongye] in central Tibet. They spent over five months in a camp southwest of Tsetang. During this time Krishna kept his diary on sheets of toilet paper, and stitched them in the belt part of his trousers to prevent discovery by the Chinese. This was how his diary notes were preserved.

By the end of March 1963 they were informed that all Indian PoWs would soon be released. On March 29, they were driven in a bus to Lhasa and shortly afterwards flown to Sinning and were then given a long tour of China. On May 5, their ordeal came to an end when they safely landed in Calcutta. After six and a half months in China, he was back in India.

In Auroville, Krishna soon became part of various task forces and committees. He was instrumental in starting the Entry Service and took care of streamlining the paperwork for visitors and the visa work for Aurovilians with the Regional Registration Officer in Pondicherry. He also proposed to start the Auroville Archives, an idea which at the time was only lukewarm received. He was told to look at the space below the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium in Bharat Nivas, originally intended for cable ducts and air-conditioning. In an interview with *Auroville Today* Krishna recalled that the place was a dungeon full of dirt, rats, lizards and pests. Undeterred, he set to cleaning it, and by 1991 the beginning of the Archives was made.



Collecting documents was but a small part of the challenge. The major one was preserving them from humidity and excessive heat. Krishna did some successful fundraising to get a dehumidifier, an air-conditioning unit and basic office equipment. Meanwhile, archival material kept flowing in: documents from pre-Auroville days, photographs, slides, negatives, and photocopies of all of Mother's handwritten messages on Auroville, made available by the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives. Treasures such as the *Book of Births*, a handwritten book started in 1967 by Maggi Lidchi Grassi, one of Mother's secretaries, containing the details of the birth of a child, and leaving a space for The Mother to give the child's name, were handed over to him. Other

treasures are the original silk scroll with the signatures of all the people who participated in Auroville's inauguration in 1968, and the copies of the Aspiration talks of the Mother with early Aurovilians in 1971. Apart from being a depository of hundreds of reports and minutes of various working groups, the Auroville archives also video-recorded Aurovilians describing what they have lived through and contributed to Auroville. These records, said Krishna, will be made available to future researchers to study the growth of Auroville as a living laboratory of Human Unity.

The Auroville Archives gradually expanded and occupied more underground spaces at Bharat Nivas. But Krishna realised that a new and separate building would be required to house the growing collection. Once again, interest was at a low pitch, but undeterred he kept pushing the idea, with success. In 2015, the foundation stone for the building of the Auroville Archives was laid by Dr. Karan Singh, the Chairman of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, crowning Krishna's long aspiration. The building is scheduled to be inaugurated by the end of 2017.

Krishna, in private discussions with Aurovilians, often expressed how distressed he sometimes was about the situation in Auroville. But he then also would recall the reply of Nolani Kanta Gupta, Sri Aurobindo's close disciple, to his question why people were behaving so badly in this place which The Mother had created. "Nolani smiled and said, 'Wait and see'. It gave me confidence that there is a purpose behind all this."

Krishna's remains were cremated at the Adventure Farewell Grounds on September 30th.



Sharanam

Sharanam (Maria Desamparados Aznar Arce) passed away on September 1st in the General Hospital in Pondicherry after suffering a heavy lung infection. She was 69 years old.

Hailing from Spain, Sharanam first came to Auroville in 1975 and lived in Utility community. She went back to her country and worked with the Institute of Evolutionary Research to assist in translating Satprem's books into Spanish.

In the early eighties she returned and was one of the first to introduce Auroville to T'ai chi, subtle energy work and body awareness classes. She also worked in places such as the old Auroville Bakery in Kottakarai, the Laboratory of Evolution's raw food kitchen where

her 'Essene breads' were famous, and the Entry Group. In later years, when her general health condition became weak, she became more reclusive, leading a quiet life in Dana while translating into Spanish texts of Sri Aurobindo, the Mother and Satprem, and about Auroville.

Sharanam's remains were buried in Adventure's Farewell Grounds on September 5th.

Nick Klotz

Nick Klotz, an Australian newcomer, left his body on September 25th in the Pondicherry Institute of Medical Sciences. He was recuperating from a fracture sustained in an accident in July, when he developed multi-organ failure. He was 63 years old.

Nick joined Auroville in March 2014. He was an accomplished networker and worked with the MediClown Academy, the Bamboo Research Centre, EcoFemme and Wellpaper. When the Sustainable Livelihood Institute was established he became member of its faculty, teaching marketing of village products and helping village women to package, label, brand and market their products, helping scores of women launch small-scale enterprises across Tamil Nadu.

Nick's remains were cremated at the Adventure Farewell Grounds on September 29th.



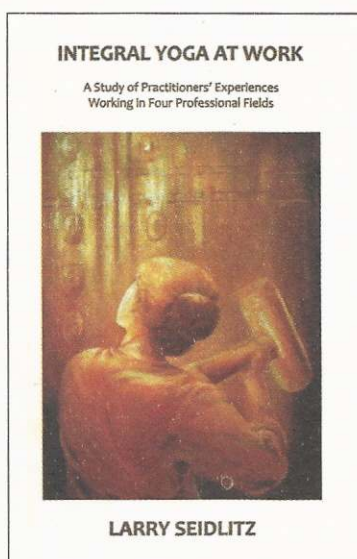
BOOK REVIEW

Integral Yoga at Work

Both Sri Aurobindo and The Mother have written extensively about the Integral Yoga. Some of this has been for general guidance; some has been guidance for particular individuals in particular situations. However, often their emphasis has been upon delineating basic principles rather than on explaining how to live them in 'real' situations.

Now Larry Seidlitz has written a book, *Integral Yoga at Work*, that aims, in his words, "to see how these principles and guidelines are being actually lived out by individuals in the present day communities of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and Auroville".

The book begins with a brief but concise explanation of the basic principles of the Integral Yoga. It then examines how individuals in Auroville and the Ashram attempt to live and express them in management, education, health care and the arts.



It then draws out the essence of the integral approach in these different areas as understood by the practitioners. For education, it means to "nurture in oneself and in others an identification with the

soul or divinity within and its expression in the outer life". For management it is "identifying with the soul of the organization and manifesting it in one's activities, which as a manager, includes leading the other members to identify with it more closely and to express it outwardly in their activities". For integral health care, the integral approach is "to be inwardly connected with the Divine and become a subtle and responsive intermediary of its healing Force". For the arts, "to become open to the creative inspiration - which, in the best art, comes either from the soul within or from the higher spiritual consciousness above the mind - and to express it outwardly through one's trained and increasingly responsive instruments of mind, life, and body in whichever modality of art one is working."

Perhaps the most interesting section is the one dealing with management as this is an area Sri

Aurobindo and The Mother have not dealt with so extensively. Here, Larry draws upon an excellent paper by Gary Jacobs, *Consciousness Approach to Business Management*, that examines in detail how various aspects of business management - money, motivation, responsibility, resources etc. - can be illuminated and enhanced by the principles of the Integral Yoga.

This often touches upon occult laws. For example, regarding the funding of a business: "It can be seen that when one is left with a few more dollars and further finance is not forthcoming, the incoming money flow awaits the spending of the last cent. If money has been improperly expended on a certain item and efforts are taken to reverse the previous act, before long further sources of funding are revealed."

Integral Yoga at Work is an important book as it aims to fill the gap between the general enuncia-

tion of the principles of Integral Yoga and their actual application in the world. It doesn't always succeed. There is still a tendency of the people quoted to fall back upon generalisations about how they work, rather than giving detailed explanations of how they apply the Integral Yoga in very specific situations. (I'm still waiting for someone to write something like Integral Yoga and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance).

Yet Larry has opened a door upon a very fecund area of research. I hope he continues his very interesting explorations in this field.

Alan

Integral Yoga at Work: a Study of Practitioners' Experiences Working in Four Professional Fields. Published by the Indian Psychology Institute, 2016. Price in India, Rs 250. Available from SABDA and, in the U.S., from Auromere.com and Matagiri.

The challenges of a young entrepreneur

Continuing the series of talks with young Aurovilians about their life in and work in Auroville, Jonas Suchanek, a young Aurovillian who has returned to Auroville recently and joined TreeCare, shares his thoughts on his life and what it means to be a young working Aurovillian today.

Auroville Today: Tell me about your history and life in Auroville.

I was born in Munich, Germany and moved to Auroville with my parents in 1990, when I was 9 months old. I went to Transition School and then to Future School, which was still in its early days. After graduating from Future School, I had the strong feeling that I didn't want to follow an academic path. At the same time, I wanted to go and see the world, and find out what it means to live outside of Auroville. At that point, I decided to explore Germany a little bit, since I am technically German. I moved to Berlin, where I also got a part-time job. As it happened, after about a year of the working life, I changed my mind about further education and decided to give it a go. I was always interested in Economics, so I moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, where I attended the University of Aberdeen and ultimately received my degree: A Masters in Economics.

What brought you back to Auroville?

During my time at University, I regularly came back to Auroville. I usually spent my vacations here and kept in touch with my friends. It was also a meeting place for all of us, each living in different corners of the world yet meeting regularly and sharing life experiences. It was a difficult and interesting period of my life. I felt torn between two worlds. In the UK I was part of a society that had quite different views on life and yet I felt the social mechanism pull me in. I had thoughts about a career and making money and I felt that my priorities in life had changed from when I was living in Auroville. Coming back to Auroville every summer for several months always gave me the anchor I needed, and the feeling of alignment. I instantly felt grounded and connected again. I felt at home and safe, but more importantly I felt how suddenly from one day to the next money was no longer the driving force or the motivator behind work. Upon receiving my degree, I felt the strong urge to move back to Auroville, a place where I felt my input, my hard work was needed and appreciated, and where the fruits of my labour are part of a bigger picture.

So how did you find your place in Auroville, and the kind of work you wanted to do?

It came knocking on my door. Anadi and Julian, who had been running TreeCare for several years, met with Virya and me to discuss the future of TreeCare. We had a similar vision and so I joined TreeCare. Shortly afterwards I was approached by Ulli who was searching for a new executive for Auroville.com. At that point, though, I really wanted to spend my energy in nature and start up a new unit rather than work in an existing one. Another motivating factor was that I greatly enjoy spending my days outside doing physical work rather than sitting in an office.

What has it been like, working in Auroville?

Working in Auroville so far has been a very rewarding experience. We have a lot of support and encouragement from fellow Aurovilians. Working as an arborist in India is very interesting. To say the least, we have found a niche market and TreeCare has grown very quickly over the past two years. At the moment, we have a team of 7 people, and we are looking to expand and hire another 3 this year.



What have been some of the biggest challenges so far?

One of the biggest challenges is acquiring the funds for investment. In Europe, I would have been able to get a start-up loan or to talk to investors. But the economic climate in Auroville is very different. This also means that growth is slow. Investment in new equipment as well as the repayment of outstanding loans has been our biggest challenge but also our biggest achievement over the past two years. We had to rely on loans from family or friends, and this was also a risky venture with a certain sense of insecurity. Apart from that, some of the biggest challenges of working in such a small team is coordination and time management. For us especially, if a member of the team falls ill or is unable to make it to work, it has consequences for the plan of the entire week. In those moments, we really improvise in order to get the job done and the customers happy. Another challenge which we perhaps had not anticipated is that since arboriculture is such a niche market in India, it is difficult if not impossible to source spare-parts, tools and also new climbing equipment. Most of our equipment is sourced from abroad as it is not available on the Indian market.

Can Auroville better support young entrepreneurs?

I think Auroville is filled with opportunities and possibilities, however there is a lack of communication. There are so many people that are doing their own thing and one doesn't hear about it. I wish we could have more collaboration, use the skills and knowledge that we have in Auroville rather than looking and hiring professionals from outside. I am aware that the price plays an important role but I also feel as though we do very little to promote our own locally-grown businesses. Abroad there is advertisement, while in Auroville we rely mainly on word of mouth and *News and Notes* from time to time. However, I think that we have reached a size where word of mouth no longer reaches everyone. To solve this, we need to find a new medium to help young entrepreneurs collaborate with one another, learn from each other, support each other, and grow together.

How would you see this happening?

I would like to see the development of a platform, a sort of directory of all things we do in Auroville, where units and individuals can share their services and products. For example, if I need to fix my roof before the monsoon, I can use the list on this platform to approach and find construction units in Auroville. There are so many amazing projects, activities, small units, and individuals that are engaged in Auroville that many of us don't know about. If such a platform would exist, I feel that it would lead to collaboration between individuals and even units that are working on similar things and could mutually benefit from being in touch, whether it comes down to sharing resources, knowledge, or even clients.

Having a degree in Economics, what is your reflection on how Auroville can become more financially strong?

Auroville has a unique economic and ideological framework. It does not make sense to compare it to the rest of the world and highlight what works and what does not work because we are trying something different here. We are not trying to improve on existing models, we are creating a different model altogether, and therefore our exercise is to think outside the box, and outside the social norms. So, we must look at Auroville in its

own right. For example, speaking of the Auroville contribution, I know many that come to Auroville and find it strange that one should pay (contribute) to be a guest of Auroville. And, although I too feel this should be abolished, we must consider that we are an island within a well-established economic framework and that change will be slow and difficult. As for contributions from businesses, I think this makes sense within the current framework, considering that Auroville has a tax exemption for this purpose. For Auroville to become more independent, we need a change in mentality. We must source locally, from our own businesses, entrepreneurs and freelancers. Instead of looking for the cheapest option when building your house, taking care of your garden, buying your food, clothes, furniture or anything else, we should take advantage of the many wonderful products and services that we have within Auroville, and only source from outside what is absolutely not available here. Having said that, the drawback is of course that Auroville products are generally more expensive because there is no compromise on quality. This needs to be looked at also. In brief, on the current maintenance system it may be difficult to make ends meet, however, if more of us allow the money to circulate faster within the Auroville economy, everyone is set to benefit. In my mind this is a stepping stone away from the monetary system and towards a collective sharing of skills and workforce within Auroville.

How can Auroville better encourage young entrepreneurs and units to contribute financially to Auroville?

I don't know. For me, the word 'contribute' has an aspect of choice and free will to it. I think it is the wrong approach to implement a policy that dictates how much one should 'contribute' because it takes away some of that free will and motivation to do the right thing. Personally, I would want to contribute because my business is economically sound and able to help build the future Auroville I live in. Having said that, I would appreciate having the choice to make the decision when and how much that contribution should be. So, for example, some months I could contribute 100% of my profits, while other months I would need to keep money aside in order to pay for my investments, for example, a new chainsaw. Having a fixed contribution makes it very difficult for start-up units to have flexibility. Also, the way we were raised in Auroville allows us to question the established rigid systems that govern most countries around the world. Although this is a good thing, it might also make us particularly sensitive and almost allergic to 'rules and regulations'. For example, I think that new small businesses should be encouraged to grow, therefore I don't think it is wise to put an additional strain of a contribution on such businesses. On the other hand, I also don't think it's good to create a policy enforcing that all new businesses are exempt from contributions for the first 5 years, because how would that make us different from the rest of the world? I feel that we should be given the free choice to decide when we are able to do so, and trust that for some it may take only one year, while for others it may take more than 5 years.

Coming back from abroad, how did you manage to find accommodation in Auroville?

I was very fortunate that 26 years ago when my parents moved to Auroville with 4 kids, they had decided to build several small houses rather than one large family house. When moving back to Auroville after my studies I settled into what used to be 'the kitchen house' and I am slowly turning it into my home. It is somewhat rundown, a work in progress, but I am grateful to have a space where I feel at home. Especially when I look at friends and other fellow Aurovilians who are looking for a space that they can invest in.

From an interview by Inge van Alphen

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