

Between the Gold and the Blue

On the evening of 29th February, Deepti Tiwari gave a much appreciated talk, the fourth and last in a series, organised by Cinema Paradiso, on the theme of consciousness which have been given by different Aurovilians. Here are some selections from a much longer talk.

The title of this talk *Between the Gold and the Blue* is taken from Sri Aurobindo's poem *A God's Labour*.

*I have gathered my dreams in a silver air
Between the gold and the blue
And wrapped them softly and left them there,
My jewelled dreams of you.*

Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had these wonderful dreams. If we're here it's because of their dreams for this material world we inhabit, this earth: Auroville exists because they dared to dream these extraordinary, impossible dreams that no one before them dreamed....

In India, you find the idea of the Avatar, one who is a sort of 'living mould for the supreme descent', a Being who pushes evolution forward to a new stage. Sri Aurobindo and the Mother have remarked that the Avatar, that is the One who comes to 'open the way', is bound to realise that which has to be realised regardless of material conditions. But if the Avatar's intention is nothing less than the transformation of the Earth Consciousness, then necessarily a collectivity – a critical mass of people who come together and aspire collectively to create a broad enough receiving and holding environment – is needed to manifest this change.

This idea of a conscious collectivity is something that occurs repeatedly in Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's writings. In terms of the Integral Yoga, the Ashram was the first such collectivity, and the work done on the consciousnesses of the sadhaks was exacting and minuscule.

In 1956, however, there was the great consummation of their work and an entirely new consciousness manifested upon Earth. The birth of Auroville appears linked to this.

What does 'manifestation' mean in terms of the yoga? It is when there is a kind of flooding out into external life, into the *dharma* of the Earth consciousness, of something that was there before, but in essence, as a potential. This is what happened on 29th February, 1956, when Mother saw herself in a form of living gold, bigger than the universe, before a huge door that separated our world of mind, life and body from this world of Gold, the Supermind, the next plane beyond the mind, a plane of Truth Consciousness. She struck a blow that shattered it to pieces. And then, she reported, "the supramental Light and Force and Consciousness rushed down upon earth in an uninterrupted flow".

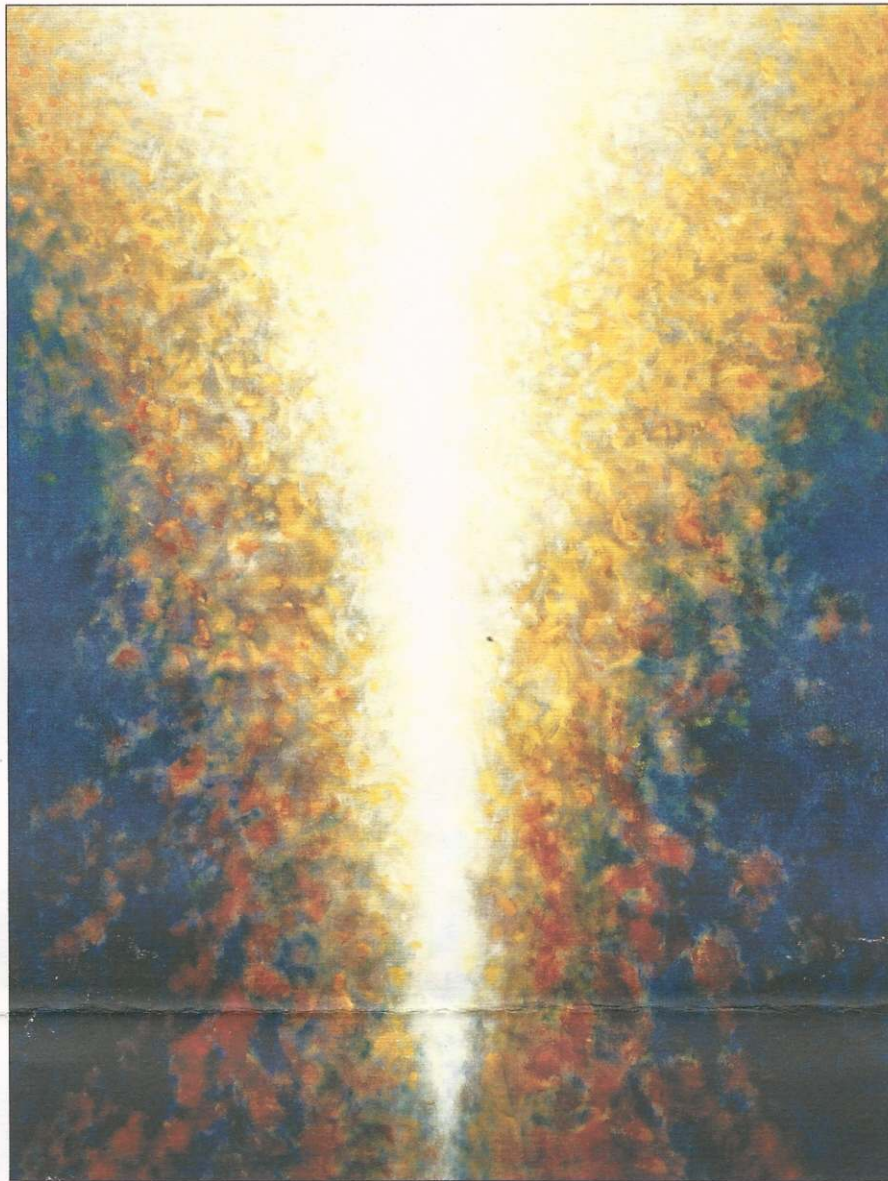
The golden light is now here, pervading matter. As the Mother said, "a new world is born". While the old world may still appear to be all-powerful, fundamentally the laws that have governed it till now, have changed.

Rapidly thereafter, the Mother describes a series of developing experiences.

In 1958, Mother speaks of a powerful experience that brings about a change in the relationship with Material Nature. Nature, she says, understands and accepts that this new consciousness is not a threat to Her. So this eternal and universal executive force, who dominates the plane of matter, agrees to collaborate wholeheartedly with the new creation. It would follow, therefore, when we see how this desertified plateau was greened, not taking anything away from the work of Aurovilians, that perhaps we must acknowledge the collaboration we have received from this Force.

Then, in 1962, Mother has a fabulous experience where she talks about 'pulsations of divine Love' flooding the earth consciousness. We gather from Sri Aurobindo and the Mother that Divine Love is the one aspect of the divine consciousness that had not been active on Earth before. It had been kept back because Love does not permit that which is not love to exist. Yet now Mother experiences these pulsations of Divine Love flooding the earth, changing something fundamental in the Earth consciousness. (Sri Aurobindo has described this power of supreme divine love as the Mother of Ananda, a supramental power that has been till now unmanifest in the earth consciousness).

In 1966, 2 years before its physical birth, Mother remarks that Auroville is going very well – that she sees it already formed, organised, on a certain plane of consciousness. If we recall, this is a period



Soif de Cri Lumineux CXLI, 1990, Oil on Canvas, by Stanulis

in the world where there is a generalised fear of a Third World War. Countries are stockpiling weapons of mass destruction in response to their pervasive sense of insecurity. But, she remarks, people do not understand that when you build something, you give it the power of self-realisation. It is in this regard that Mother is given a revelation: it is precisely to counterbalance this great error that she has been made to create Auroville. In Auroville, the energies of people will be brought together on a different basis, one of working with each other to build unity. An amusing definition comes to her: Auroville is a "Tower of Babel in reverse". Consequently, in the messages she gives about Auroville at this time, it is the aspiration towards human unity that is in the forefront.

In 1968 she has another revelation. Looking at its present condition, she observes that India, the land of spiritual light and knowledge, has become so much the contrary of what she should be. And then Sri Aurobindo 'dictates' something to her. "India has become the symbolic representation of all the difficulties of modern mankind. India will be the land of its resurrection, the resurrection to a higher and truer life. And that is why you made Auroville."

So Auroville is now also tied up with the condition of India. It is meant to give a living form to the spiritual truths of India and perhaps also to experiment upon possible solutions to the problems she confronts. This is a great part of Auroville's work, its responsibility, not only locally but also nationally. We should be doing everything we can to bring change within ourselves and in all we touch around us.

On the 28th of February, 1968, Auroville was born. On that day, Mother gave Auroville its Charter. It is a wonderful mantric document that touches almost every aspect of human endeavour, starting from willing service to the divine consciousness and ending in an effective human unity. The Charter is the primary guiding force she has gifted Auroville. Her approach in the next years will be to offer this experiment very little else in terms of prescriptive guidance. Her response to questionings is that she is applying what she calls the 'pressure of Consciousness'. It would appear that because the New Consciousness is here, holding the space, things

can be allowed to naturally emerge.

In early 1969 she has her third revelation. She speaks about something that becomes an insistent presence, something that seems to be a universal being, but personified. She describes how this being, whom she calls the "surhomme", the intermediate being between the human consciousness and the supramental, insists she write something down. And what she is made to write is, "We will strive to make Auroville the cradle of the Superman."

But why "we" she asks. The Consciousness replies, "because the attempt will be to get those who will live in Auroville to collaborate".

So this appears to be Auroville's most profound work: to collaborate in making Auroville the cradle of the next step in spiritual evolution. There is a tendency in Auroville not to recognise this, to say, for instance, that we are here for an ecological experiment. But, however laudable and necessary this is, it's limiting ourselves. Auroville is the ground upon which there is the possibility to manifest collectively this new consciousness.

After this experience, Mother repeatedly gives messages to Auroville that are very strong. In particular, she talks squarely about the need for the Aurovilians to get rid of the ego. Later she also formulates the 6 points that constitute what she calls the 'aspiration of Auroville' – 'To be a True Aurovilian' – the last two points of which speak again about Auroville wanting to 'hasten the advent of the new species'.

It has always seemed to me that Sri Aurobindo's yoga, in contrast to traditional Indian yogic paths, is, from one point of view so light and easy. It can be a sunlit path because all you have to do is awake, aspire and will. You must light the mystic fire of the psychic in your heart; then open yourself like a flower and offer yourself to the Divine. The yoga will be done in you. For the key point of Sri Aurobindo's yoga, the yoga of transformation, is that it cannot be done by a limited, egoistic, human consciousness. We have first to become apt receiving instruments by abolishing the ego, annulling ourselves, for this change to be brought about in us.

In one of his last writings, Sri Aurobindo describes one of the consequences of the action of the Supermind. "Whatever group of human beings aspire as united in an endeavour at a perfect individual and collective living or aspire to the divine life, would be assisted towards the attainment of its aspiration: that at least the Supermind would make its minimum consequence..."

In other words, we have help but we have to play our part. We have to become the ground upon which this new consciousness manifests; we have to keep polishing ourselves, perfecting our instruments. We are very ordinary human beings, but if we can do our work not for ourselves but for something higher and truer and deeper, if we can offer our work to That, Auroville will happen regardless.

In fact, it is inevitable, this is the guarantee that has been given us by the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, and it is a wonderful thing to be collectively working for this.

And the promise?

I will end with the concluding words of the Supreme to Savitri in Sri Aurobindo's epic poem.

*A divine force shall flow through tissue and cell
And take the charge of speech and breath and act
And all the thoughts shall be a glow of suns
And every feeling a celestial thrill.
Often a lustrous inner dawn shall come
Lighting the chambers of the slumbering mind;
A sudden bliss shall run through every limb
And Nature with a mightier Presence fill.
Then shall the earth open to divinity
And common natures feel the wide uplift,
Illumine common acts with the Spirit's ray
And meet the deity in common things.
Nature shall live to manifest secret God,
The Spirit shall take up the human play,
This earthly life become the life divine.*

Deepti

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Golden Day thoughts

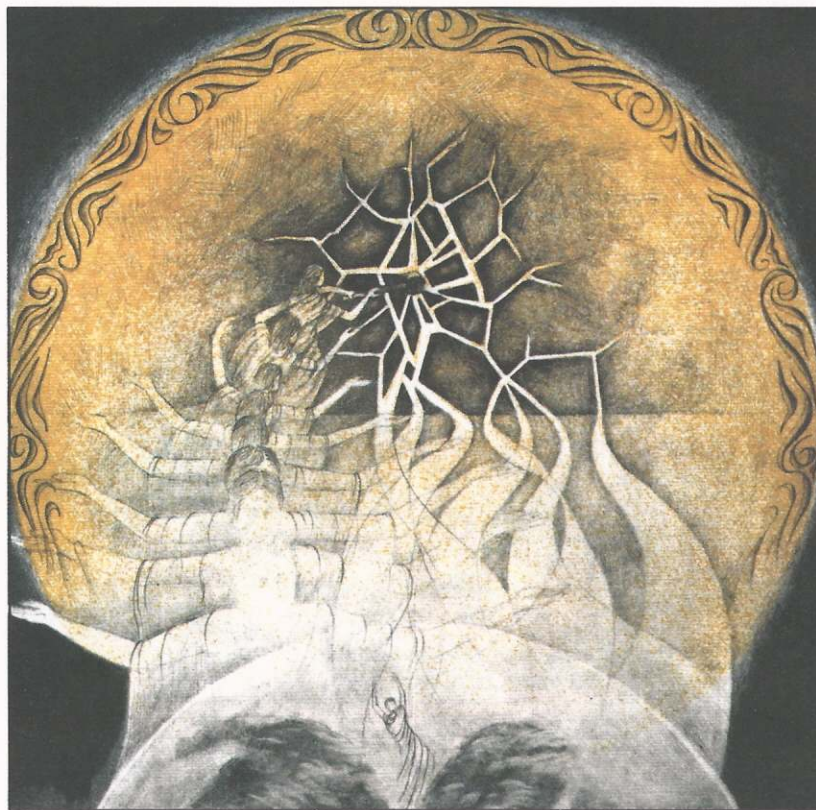
Great breakthroughs are often little understood or take many years to be absorbed into the collective consciousness. In 1905, Einstein formulated his Special Theory of Relativity and in 1916 his General Theory of Relativity. They postulated an entirely new way of perceiving the universe yet, beyond the scientific community, it is doubtful how many people comprehend this even today. Similar breakthroughs in western art and music, also representing new ways of perceiving, in the early years of the 20th century have still not filtered through to the general public.

What happened on 29th February, 1956 was a breakthrough moment in the spiritual history of humanity, yet even in the so-called Aurobindonian community it is doubtful how well its significance is understood. Mother explained that a "new world" had been born, and that all the old determinations – including that of death itself – were no longer absolute. However, She warned, the old world remained powerful and we would continually need to choose which 'reality' we wished to inhabit: the new one that promised, ultimately, the divinisation of life on Earth, or the old one dominated by the forces of death and falsehood.

In Auroville, She gave us plenty of guidance about how to make the right choice. Beyond the key requirement to abolish the ego, she gave very specific advice about the proper use of money, and about the forms of governance, education and collaboration we should be pursuing to call in that new world.

However, we have not always managed to follow it, often because we argue that we are not yet ready. But if we continually act as if we are not yet ready, we achieve a self-fulfilling prophecy: by continuing to embrace the old ways, we exclude ourselves from the new forces at work in the world, and so guarantee that we will remain in the old.

And getting into contact with that new world may not be as difficult as we believe. In *The Agenda* of October 7th, 1964, Mother talks about a turning point



DRAWING BY ROLF LIESER

This evening the Divine Presence, concrete and material, was there present amongst you. I had a form of living gold, bigger than the universe, and I was facing a huge and massive golden door which separated the world from the Divine.

As I looked at the door, I knew and willed, in a single movement of consciousness, that "the time has come", and lifting with both hands a mighty golden hammer I struck one blow, one single blow on the door and the door was shattered to pieces.

Then the supramental Light and Force and Consciousness rushed down upon earth in an uninterrupted flow.

The Mother, 29 February 1956

in her work on the cells. She had asked them why they wanted to preserve the present aggregate in her body, and they replied that they favoured the present combination because it allowed them to remain in conscious contact with the higher force, which was the only thing they cared about.

Speaking more generally about the crucial need to make that contact, she observes, "The best one can do is not to have any prejudices or preconceived ideas or principles... If one can be like this, open – truly open in a simplicity... you know, the simplicity of ignorance that knows it's ignorant... like this (*gesture, hands open*), ready to receive all that comes... then, perhaps, something will happen. Naturally, the thirst for progress, the thirst to know, the thirst to transform yourself, and above all the thirst for Love and Truth – if you can keep that, then you go faster. Really a thirst, a need, you know, a need... All the rest doesn't matter, what you need is THAT..."

And she warns, "To cling to what you think you know, to cling to what you feel, to cling to what you like, to cling to your so-called needs, to cling to the world as it is, that's what binds you hand and foot. You must undo all that, one thing after the other... No more bonds – free, free, free, free! Always ready to change everything, except ONE thing: to aspire. That thirst."

At the end of Graham Greene's novel, *The Power and the Glory*, the renegade 'whisky-priest' sits in a cell awaiting his execution. In the hours remaining to him, he looks back over his life and makes an important discovery.

"What an impossible fellow I am, he thought, and how useless... He felt only an immense disappointment because he had to go to God empty-handed, with nothing done at all. It seemed to him, at that moment, that it would have been quite easy to have been a saint. It would only have needed a little self-restraint and a little courage."

It is an immense privilege to be part of this unique experiment. Mother provides the ideal conditions and gives us all the help we need to make the right choices. Do we want to miss inhabiting that New World because we, like that whisky-priest, never had quite enough courage to be That which our souls brought us here for?

Alan

Celebrating Tamil culture

Auroville recently hosted a two-day festival to celebrate Tamil heritage and culture – a first of this scale and vision. The brainchild of Balu from Mohanam Cultural Centre, and Meenakshi from Auroville's Tamil Heritage Centre and Ilaigarkal School, the festival brought together artisans, performers, farmers, VIPs and visitors for festivities on Auroville land.

Fifty stalls displayed the contemporary and traditional crafts of local artisans and nomadic tribes, including metal, wood and stone crafts. Performances included storytelling, street theatre by local artists, a puppet show and traditional folk dance. Children participated in drawing games, and girls played "checks" (a game similar to hopscotch). Young women took part in a kolam drawing competition, tracing their elaborate designs in white powder on the red earth. The traditional games of breaking pots and lifting heavy stones drew large crowds. "In the old days, if a man could lift the stone, the village would offer a girl in marriage," says Meenakshi. "One person at the festival said, 'Now I'm ready for marriage!' And lifted up the stone!"

Visitors were invited to eat and drink local specialties, such as a delicious fermented ragi porridge drink, and local woman took part in a traditional food competition. Many locally grown millets were on display, including ragi, kombu and samai. Meenakshi recounts how one farmer brought his collection of 100 varieties of paddy seed, all displayed with their traditional names. "We could see immediately

Meenakshi, who is a celebrated poet in the Tamil language and an expert on Tamil culture.

Balu appeared slightly stunned by their achievement of bringing together so many different bodies in the planning phase. "The festival brought together three village panchayats, the Auroville Foundation, the Government of Pondicherry, Aurovilians and local entrepreneurs," he says.

He and Meenakshi were motivated to organize the festival because of their positive experience of staging a smaller event during the Pongal festival in January, when they served the traditional pongal dish outside Solar Kitchen to 1000 people. Their Pongal event promoted 34 local vegetables that are not generally used in Auroville, and included a display stand with the vegetables and information about local crops. "Many people kept coming back to taste, three or four times," says Balu. "The young generation was very impressed – it was educational. Every time we do something with akka [sister, referring to Meenakshi], it's enjoyable, and we learn from her. She's the one holding lots of wisdom about Tamil culture here." Meenakshi chimes in, "Many people wanted to buy the vegetables, but I had to say, 'It's a display!'"

After the success of their Pongal festival, Balu and Meenakshi became aware that the Pondicherry Government was providing grants for cultural festivals in rural areas. They submitted and received approval for a concept that would bring together the artists of the region in a celebration of traditional heritage in a two-day festival on Auroville land in the Isaiambalam area.

Meenakshi was keen to include a nomadic tribe that is trying to settle on land outside Auroville, to give them a chance to express their own culture. "Traditionally, they are professional beggars," she says. "They used to go from door-to-door with instruments and a well decorated bull and say nice words, such as 'This house will flourish', 'Good news will come', 'More crops will come', 'You will be blessed by the Lord'. It's called *nala*. The women make gift bags with waste material from tailors' shops. They also do quilling [decorative paper work]." The festival included a stall displaying the tribe's beautiful and finely detailed paper decorations, and Meenakshi's Tamil Heritage Centre continues to work with the tribe and supports the children's education.

Balu and Meenakshi say that their promotion of Tamil heritage, arts and crafts is a response to the rapid loss of knowledge about local traditions in recent decades. Meenakshi points out that most of the traditional arts and crafts are associated with agrarian culture, and as people swap agrarian life for urban jobs or sell their land, they become distanced from traditional craft practices. "For example, mat



Acting Secretary Mr. P. Srinivasamurthy, Meenakshi and Shri Rajavelu, Minister of Tourism, Government of Puducherry, inaugurating the festival

weaving needs grass and water, and if there's no water, there's no weaving," she says. "For pottery, you need a particular soil. Pottery has lost its charm and use, as people are now using materials such as aluminium, stainless steel and plastic. Pottery still has great importance for religious ceremonies, so now people only use it for Pongal and ceremonies. Our region was also known at one time for *Koothu*, our special Tamil theatre, which uses stories from the Mahabharata and Ramayana. Now people like to go to movies and watch TV instead."

While the festival received good attendance from dignitaries and coverage in the local media, Meenakshi expresses some disappointment that more Aurovilians did not participate. She acknowledges the marathon took place on the same weekend, but they planned a two-day festival in order to give people plenty of opportunity to visit. "The mainstream of Auroville is not participating fully," she says. "They think, 'It's Tamil.' But Tamil culture has a universality. I'm sure

Mother and Sri Aurobindo chose the Tamil land as the place to come down and put their *siddhi* because we are open to receive that force. It's there in the soil, the water, the people, the various layers. We have a lot to share regarding the universality that is already existing in Tamil heritage, culture, literature, history. The motto of our Tamil Heritage Centre in Auroville is 'All our habitat, all our kith and kin, we are one.' So the universal love is there in the Tamil *metta*. We want to express this to everyone through these functions and festivals."

Lesley



Appreciating the kolams

that we have lost this knowledge", says Meenakshi, referring to the shift in local dietary habits towards the consumption of mostly polished rice. "The top officials who attended were flabbergasted by the display of the traditional varieties," says Meenakshi. "They said, 'we should have one festival just for this!'"

Traditional sports and martial arts were played, such as *kabaddi* (in collaboration with the Auroville Kabaddi team), *kho-kho*, *sillat-tam*, *kotipul* and *thayam*. A *Siddha* medicine doctor took visitors' pulses and prescribed traditional remedies. "Even the attending MLAs went to the doctor for a checkup," laughs Meenakshi. A selection of heritage books was on display, reflecting the passions of



Women running the stalls

Breaking down caste distinctions

With frequent news regarding atrocities towards Scheduled Caste members, honour killings, and the recent suicide of a Dalit student in a university in Hyderabad, the media constantly reminds us of the presence of caste discrimination. According to the 2011 Census of India, Scheduled Castes/Dalits, who, historically, have been the most disadvantaged section of the community, constitute 20% of Tamil Nadu's 72 million population.

The Indian Caste system is historically one of the main ways that socially differentiates people through class, religion, region, tribe, and language. This closed system of stratification dictates that a person's social status is defined by which caste he or she is born into. This became the basis of unequal access to income.

Traditionally, India has four castes, also called *varnas*. The Brahmins, who were priests and scholars, are at the top, followed by the Kshatriyas who were political rulers and soldiers. Next were the Vaishyas, or merchants, and the fourth were Shudras, usually the labourers, peasants, artisans, and servants. At the very bottom are those that were once looked upon as untouchables and outcasts, a practice that is now outlawed under the Indian Constitution. In the Constitution of India, this group of historically-disadvantaged people has been given an official designation which is termed Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe, and have also been given a Reservation Status that guarantees their political representation. The various disadvantaged groups fall into one or the other of the two categories, Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe. The term 'Dalit' is commonly used to designate a group of disadvantaged people that fall in the Scheduled Caste category.

Because it is not obvious in our immediate surroundings, it is easy to forget that this quiet segregation based on caste differences is a salient feature of many people's lives around us. In our bioregion as well, although members of the relatively higher castes now share many occupations, in most cases members of the lowest caste continue to eat separately from the rest, as well as reside in separate settlements. Dalit settlements in our surrounding villages are situated in the low-lying areas, and they have their own temples and water tanks. Importantly, despite not being permitted to be part of the mainstream village community, Dalit people offer services that are essential to the health of a community, such as garbage collection. When it comes to our area, only Dalits kill and sell beef.

Although discrimination based on caste has been outlawed in India, practically, caste distinctions are a part of daily life. When buying a house in Pondicherry, real estate brokers will advise or warn a higher caste purchaser about the areas where Dalits are numerous. Marriage invitations also often print the fathers' names with the caste status attached. Besides occupational restrictions, another familiar characteristic of caste segregation is endogamy: in other words, every member of a caste or sub-caste is required to marry within their own caste. Any violation of this traditionally results in excommunication from one's family and caste.

As a consequence, over time it became normal that members of different castes no longer interacted with each other, and besides the occasional inter-caste love story gone wrong, any hardships suffered were suffered in silence.

Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) exchange programmes

As mentioned earlier, in Tamil Nadu backward classes have a certain safety net in the form of reservations. This measure attempts to ensure that members of the lower castes have an equal chance in school, college or professionally, but it does little to integrate the segregated communities. In a state in which caste distinction is commonplace, Auroville Village Action Group is one of the Auroville outreach organisations that has done a lot of work to break down hostility between different castes. As such, since 1995, the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) has been building solidarity among women, in spite of differences based on caste, religion, or economic status. During seminars and cluster meetings in AVAG, women from different villages already worked on understanding and getting to know each other. Building on this, AVAG started to plan exchange programmes between different caste groups. At such exchanges, people who previously would never share a common space, let alone a meal, interact with each other and actively break down barriers.

In 2014-2015, AVAG organised 34 exchange programmes, and such programmes continue today. The exchange programmes are planned in such a way that participants get the opportunity to visit something new and unfamiliar. In order to bring understanding and create solidarity between these different groups of people, the most important element of the exchange programme is that the groups who visit each other belong to different castes. For example, members of a caste from a coastal village will visit a different caste in an agricultural village. Dalit members visit higher caste



Women from different caste getting to know one another



One-to-one interactions



Women from different caste at play



A handshake transcends caste

groups, and these groups take them to all the meaningful places in their village, including the temple. They cook and eat together – something that normally would never happen – play games, and see the projects undertaken by the women in the village.

Anbu, the co-director of AVAG says: "In one exercise they pair up, take some time to get to know each other and then introduce each other to the rest of the group. Even after such a small exercise, the women begin to call each other 'sisters', 'mothers', and 'aunties' and begin to form friendships. By sharing their perspectives, some of them better understand the challenges that the lower castes face on a daily basis. Afterwards, they continue to maintain the relationship over the phone." She adds: "Before mobile phones, they used to write letters to each other and our staff used to take them. There was even a special post box on the AVAG campus for this."

Glimpses of success

In the late 1990s, a boy and girl from two different castes fell in love, a story which led to violence and even murder.

After that, the two villages had no interaction for many years. In 2004-2005, two groups of women from these two different caste groups became part of AVAG's outreach work. The two groups of women hadn't sat next to each other for five years. After a few years, the higher caste came forward and suggested to participate in a programme with a Dalit group in a neighbouring village of Auroville. The staff of Village Action remained sceptical about any potential success, and even planned a backup programme in case of a failure. However, when the higher caste visited the women of the other caste, Anbu recalls that, to everyone's surprise, both groups participated with full commitment and enthusiasm and subsequently even organised their own exchange programme in their own village.

In another village, AVAG also arranged an exchange programme between a caste group and a Dalit group. Under normal circumstances, members of another caste cannot visit a temple that is restricted to one caste group. On that occasion, one of the Dalit women asked to visit the temple. No one refused and for the first time in their lives, Dalit women entered another caste group's temple.

Lakshmi, a woman who has participated first-hand in many exchange programmes, shares: "Exchange programmes between castes have become special, almost like a function. On these occasions we wear new sarees, garlands, and put flowers in the hair. When we get into the bus to visit another village, it's full of dance and songs. We eat together, we learn the best practices from each other, and take up activities to improve the villages. At the end of the day, we exchange phone numbers. There are also cases when we separate that we start crying. Even though the women are from a different caste than mine, after a programme we became friends." If you ask her whether she is still in touch with her new friends she answers: "Yes, and we even attend each other's family functions!"

Mangai, who has organised several exchange programmes as part of AVAG's outreach work mentions another aspect of exchange programmes: "If we are from the same caste in one village, we may be reluctant to share our issues with each other, so it is a relief to express them to another person. Although we are of a different caste, we become open to each other. Then we show the special features of our village, like the banyan tree and ponds. At the end of the day, we get each other's phone number and use it, for example, to wish each other happy birthday."

As a proof that a friendship really has been formed between women of different caste groups, during the recent floods the AVAG field staff received many inquiries from women about how other villages were affected and whether their new friends were safe. Regardless of caste, the new friendships have flourished. Along with this, questions have been raised about why these groups were segregated in the first place.

Inge

The Ministry of Social Justice & Empowerment oversees the interest of the Scheduled Castes, and intervenes in critical sectors through various schemes. One such scheme is the Schedules Castes Sub-Plan (SCSP) that ensures the flow of targeted financial and physical benefits from all the general sectors of development for the benefit of Scheduled Castes. In this way, States and Union Territories earmark resources to implement a Special Component Plan (SCP) for Scheduled Castes. Besides the implementation of acts that protect the civil rights of the Scheduled Castes, the Ministry has also developed the affirmative action strategy known as reservations.

Exploring Auroville farming

From November to March it's always busy in Auroville, with the community hosting performances, workshops and exhibitions and welcoming the outside world. This year, adding to all the other activities, were farming and agriculture-related programmes. These included 'From the soil to the plate' (at Buddha Garden), Permaculture courses, Sunday Farm Walks, Krishna's Circle Garden Project (at Solitude Farm), Joy of Learning sessions on Farming (an Auroville Campus



A visit to Discipline Farm during the Farm Festival

Initiative), the Auroville Farm Festival 2016, the Pongal fest display by Meenakshi and her friends, an Annapurna Farm visit (with over 100 participants) and the revival of the Saturday Markets – to name but a few.

The Auroville Farm Festival, organized by the Farm Group (FG) and its distribution unit, Foodlink, took place around Pongal, Tamil Nadu's traditional harvest festival. The Farm Festival was intended to remind the Aurovilians of Mother's vision that, as far as possible, Auroville should become self-sufficient in food, and that with 21 farms and just about 50 Aurovilian farmers, aided by countless volunteers and hired hands, the farming community struggles to step up to this challenge [also see Auroville Today # 310, May 2015].

Vivek, the FG coordinator, points out that these days, unlike in the past, most of the community members do not know from where their food is sourced, or what it means to eat 'locally'. Few, indeed,

know where their organic red rice or millets such as varagu are grown. They are not aware of the multi-faceted aspects of farming in Auroville, and how this affects their life. Community dining spaces such as the Solar Kitchen and other farm cafés are often the only links between the community and its farmers.

Farming with thought

Auroville farmers aim at providing organic food. But there's more to it than just ensuring that the shelves of the Pour Tous Distribution Centre and Foodlink are stocked with an assorted variety of organic vegetables and fruits. For years, Auroville farmers have been trying to promote ecological sustainability and not just demand-based production. At Charlie's dairy farm (Aurogreen), cows are retired rather than being sent to the slaughterhouse; Bernard and Deepika's Pebble Garden is a showcase of organic seed conservation efforts; Stephan's seed centre at the Auroville Botanical Garden provides first-quality organic vegetable seeds. These and many more Auroville farming practices have been recognized as important in farmers' networks across the country.

In the months ahead, the Farm Group aspires to achieve much more. There is a need for a standardised certification process for the products of all Auroville farms, including the smaller ones for whom certification is often less viable. The problems of surplus production, storage and lack of distribution space need to be addressed; and there is the problem of a lack of demand for traditional local crops and the need to change the Aurovilians' food tastes. "In Auroville, despite the community's varied tastes, the farmers often choose to grow what they think suits the local weather and soil conditions", says Vivek. "The farmers, moreover, decide the prices based on their production cost, and so do not suffer from market or seasonal fluctuations as do other farmers."

When production costs all over the world have increased, especially in organic farming, the Auroville farms have done remarkably well. They have managed to reduce their costs by using on-farm composting techniques. "The only costs that have gone up are the costs of labour," says Vivek.

How organic is organic?

But while the Auroville farms make increased efforts to supply 'organic' products, the meal on one's plate in an Auroville food outlet may be less organic than one thinks. "Many products in Auroville outlets are still sourced from outside markets, from surrounding villages or from Pondicherry. Some have been labelled 'organic', but their quality is questionable. 'Organic' includes proper soil preparation, the use of natural fertilizers and pesticides, and organic seeds," says Vivek.

To promote this, the Farm Group has set-up a Participatory Guarantee System (PGS) programme to evaluate the quality of



Children from Nandanam Kindergarten at the Farm Festival

organic farming both in Auroville and in the bio-region. Guidelines for raw and processed organic food are being drafted, with Auroville intending to label the products that are truly organic.

Much more documentation is needed of all the on-farm research that has been taking place in Auroville farms, covering farmers' experiments with new and innovative ways of 'green' farming as well as how to cook unfamiliar foods. So far, only a few books have been published. For example, Buddha Garden's work is described in the book *How my Garden Grew* by Priya Vincent. Her book *Eating with the Seasons* will be downloadable soon [see below].

Community Supported or Community 'Run' Agriculture?

All over the world, community supported agriculture (CSA) activities are springing up to solve the farm's demand-supply-distribution issues, such as the Farm folk City folk initiative in Canada, and Sapney Farm's Heal the Soil CSA in the neighbouring village of Kottakarai. CSA takes farmers' markets one step further: it makes the community members stakeholders in the farming. People invest in a farm and get back dividends in the form of farm produce either weekly or at the end of each harvest. But more than just providing markets, CSA inspires faith and confidence and creates personal relationships with the farmers. However, Auroville farmers have not yet had much success with this approach.

Auroville farmers have done much during the past few years to promote farming in Auroville and create more community awareness of the food we eat. Most of these have been independent efforts. What we perhaps need is an Auroville 'model' of CSA which creates space for collaborative and participatory approaches in farming within the community, while working towards the vision of a self-sufficient city.

Shradha

What else is going on with farming in Auroville?

Connecting people to nature: the Auroville urban farming project (City Center) phase 1



Krishna teaching farming

The Auroville Urban Farming project was started by Riccardo, a long term volunteer studying Food Security in Auroville, with the aid of Luigi in late 2014. Since then the team has grown, and today includes Giacomo, Mira, Ion, Valentina and Redvan, youth at *La Maison des Jeunes* (along with Jaiakash, the gardener) and Martin from Auroville Consulting.

The Urban Farming group is experimenting with promoting the idea of community involvement and integral sustainability in the City Centre area of Auroville and involving the youth in farming activities.

The farming activities are mostly done in the 'green corridor' areas of the City Centre, as laid out in the Master Plan. It has also been expanded to the rooftops of Citadines and the backyard of the Mitra hostel. The group has successfully planted papayas, bananas, and rucola. On Sundays, they run an 'open day' for people to come to plant the beds prepared by the team, in the hope of getting them to begin food farming in their own gardens. Participants are given the farm produce as takeaways.

The group is working on creating knowledge resources, including an inventory of local plant varieties, medicinal plants, 'spontaneous' farming and so on, in collaboration with other groups. The

young team aspires to 'foster friendships around farms' and is on an active lookout for more Aurovilians and Newcomers to be a part of this movement.

For more information visit <https://www.facebook.com/urban-farmingav/> or email urbanfarmingcitycentre@auroville.org.in.

Earth to Eating: all things related to growing, cooking and eating healthy food

Earth to Eating is an initiative of Buddha Garden and covers a range of activities related to the growing, preparing and eating of local healthy food in Auroville. These include:

- The creation and maintenance of Buddha Garden as a sustainable organic farm.
- A range of educational activities, such as courses like 'From the Soil to the Plate'. This will help participants explore growing and cooking local organic food. Other educational activities will include school projects and hosting school groups and research students.
- Setting-up a permanent exhibition about all things related to food in Auroville and beyond. This will include historical information about food growing and production as well as exploring cultural attitudes towards food and artistic expression.
- The website earthtoeating.org, which has been launched this month. This online presence will support all of Buddha Garden's activities. The website offers free downloads, such as the book *Eating with the Seasons* (which includes information about how Auroville farmers grow organic food in the local climate; details of what is available in different seasons; and where local Auroville food can be obtained); the poster *Eat With the Seasons* which provides an easy reference about what is available and when during the year; and an interactive database of recipes using local ingredients.

Rooftop hydroponics by Akash and Monica

Monica and Akash started their rooftop hydroponics unit last year, inspired by their visit to hydroponics farms in climates similar to Auroville. After almost giving up due to an initial failure, they met a lady who shared the designs and resources used in her hydroponics experiment. This led to positive results and the couple are now keen to try out different experiments with their rooftop unit, like growing salad varieties of lettuce and rucola that can thrive even in the summer, and trying to set up an automated way of regulating pH,



Rooftop hydroponics at Akash and Monica's

temperature, water and nutrient levels etc. in their hydroponics unit, which is based on Nutrient Film Technology. In the beginning they had to import most of the equipment like the seedling bed foam and nutrients, but they have now managed to find local agencies that supply most of it. "There has not been much research in Auroville around hydroponics, even though it's a promising method for urban environments," says Akash. "A stigma attached to it is that it uses chemicals, but the chemicals used are the raw nutrients found in the soil. The only difference is that while plants normally absorb these nutrients from the soil, here they absorb it directly from the nutrient charged water. The most important thing is that our produce is entirely pesticide-free."

But is it very labour-intensive? "Right now, Monica and I have taken this up as a hobby, but it does take up more time than a regular hobby. On average, the unit takes 2-3 hours of work twice a week, while setting it up with the current design takes around 2-3 days of work. We still don't know if we will continue doing this as a personal experiment or work on offering this to others as a partially-automated rooftop kit, especially if more people are passionate about this option. I'd be happy to help in something like technology transfer or consulting." The unit costs around Rs. 1 lakh to set up, something which might not be an entirely viable option for most households.

Monica and Akash are currently studying how the unit will perform during the summer season, and the possibility of growing various crop varieties in their rooftop unit.

Shradha

"Landing Auroville – the time is now!"

On February 7th, the 'Landing Auroville Celebration' held at the Unity Pavillion was an encouraging success. Organised by the joint land fundraising teams of Acres for Auroville, GreenAcres and LFAU, the event's central message was the sacredness of the land, and the need for an intense collective effort to acquire land in Auroville's Master Plan area now.

The tone was set by a Bharat Natyam dance in gratitude and devotion to Mother Earth and Nature, beautifully performed by the young dancer, Soundarya, followed by a prayer from the Upanishad for the well-being and harmony of all beings, and an affirmation expressing our deeper relationship with the land:

"For Auroville and all of us, Land is not an economic commodity. It is the living body of Mother Earth. It is sacred, as it has always been in the Indian tradition. It is sacred for building the Mother's vision of an international township based on spiritual principles.

It is sacred, so that the Auroville Dream will continue and grow for future generations."

Three new documentaries, all dedicated to Auroville's land, were premiered at the event. 'Landing Auroville' is an inspiring 8-minute film, produced by Rakhal and the Auro-Image team, to support land fundraising events. It had first been shown at last August's joint AVI-AUM Conference in the USA, while its French version, 'Un Corps de Terre pour Auroville' had been presented in Paris by AVI-France.

'Early Days Land Pioneers' interweaves

extracts from interviews with early Aurovilians Frederick, Narad, and Joss on Auroville's land development under the Mother's guidance, and moving reminiscences by Dayanand of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, whom the Mother had put in charge of acquiring the land in the beginning of Auroville. His immense work remains a pivotal element in Auroville's manifestation. He negotiated the purchase of over a thousand plots, more than half of the Auroville's present land.

The third short film, 'Irbumbai – A Bridge between the Past and the Present', presented the vital farmland around Irbumbai lake, the large, traditional irrigation tank in the Greenbelt. This rich "rice bowl" of Auroville is crucial for food production and for preserving and teaching sustainable agriculture for the region. The film stresses the importance of acquiring critical plots of land in this key area, which are now of great value for Auroville.

There was also a sharing of facts and figures concerning Auroville's greenwork and water conservation work over the years. These included:

- 3 million trees have been planted, including hundreds of indigenous medicinal plants;
- 15,000 plant species collected in the Auro Herbarium;
- many kilometers of bunds and swales constructed;
- many acres of catchment ponds dug for monsoon rains.

This immense effort has resulted in making the huge monsoon rains of last year a gift of life for Auroville, in contrast to the devastation suffered in some other areas of Tamil Nadu – on average, an 11.5 meter rise in the water level has been recorded in Auroville since the rains.

At the celebration event, Julian Lines (IAC member) represented Auroville International, the initiator of the 'Acres for Auroville' land campaign. He spoke of the dynamic action of the AVI centres in bringing a strong wave of fresh energy for the land and presented the campaign's new promotional PowerPoint on behalf of Acres for Auroville (A4A) co-organizer Mandakini



Auroville art for sale at the art auction for the land

(AVI-France). After the acquisition of a key plot near the Matrimandir in Acres for Auroville's (A4A) first 10 months of its campaigning, A4A has expanded the fundraising target to the entire City Area, and its success continues.

Its sister campaign 'GreenAcres', initiated by Sigrid, is dedicated to the acquisition of 20 key lands in Auroville's Greenbelt, as prioritised by the Land Board. Her informative PowerPoint presented the Greenbelt as a unique eco-zone hosting a wide range of sustainable practices, research and educational activities in farming, afforestation, natural resource management, water conservation, biodiversity, and renewable energy. However, Auroville owns today only a third of vital Greenbelt-designated land.

Divya made a review of the Land Board team's intensive work and concrete accomplishments since January 2015 in land acquisition, surveying, database updating, legal work, and land protection. Aryadeep, longtime pillar of 'Lands for Auroville Unified' and its fundraising activities, spoke of the relevance of land as the basis for Auroville's manifestation as an 'oasis' and inspiring universal community.

Jaya called the community to rally its collective force in support of land purchase, if possible by individuals signing up for a regular monthly contribution, whatever the amount. "It is tiny drops of water that gather into rivers and finally make the ocean!"

The information aspect of the meeting was

beautifully complemented by 'Moksha', an Odissi dance rendered by young Yaroslava, and by Meenakshi's poem 'Banyan Tree', read in Tamil and English. There was also a banquet of almost exclusively Auroville-grown, organic food contributed by Auroville units and farms.

The new 'Art for Auroville Land' initiative was also inaugurated, with over 70 artworks donated by Auroville artists and those from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram for an on-line auction in benefit of Auroville's land. During the first evening offers were made for several works totalling over one lakh rupees.

As we honour the land, we recognize with gratitude the pioneers who gave their all; the landowner families inspired by the Mother's Dream; the foresters and farmers who have rendered the land green and fertile; architects and all those who have built upon the land to create a unique township of beauty; and all those who have devotedly raised money for growing Auroville's land base.

Now is the time to move forward and further – for fully 'landing' Auroville at last.

The Landing Auroville Celebration' and Land Fundraising teams

For further information contact: LFAU contact lfau@auroville.org or visit www.colaap.org

The new videos on Auroville's land can be viewed at <https://vimeo.com/154672005> and <https://vimeo.com/143531655>



Ceramic artists also donated their works to the art auction

FOOD

Food is very much in the news these days. Recently, the Joy of Learning team presented two sessions on farming in Auroville, where the issue of Aurovilians' food tastes, and how this impacts the farmers by determining what and how much organic food they grow, was an important topic. The farmers pointed out that purchasing and eating Auroville-grown food was not only a healthy alternative to food sourced from outside markets, but it also makes sense to support activities that enhance the environment rather than, as in conventional agriculture, deplete it. They strongly suggested that Auroville food outlets should do more to promote Auroville-grown food.

The Joy of Learning sessions were followed by a survey of seven Auroville food outlets, conducted by the Residents Assembly Service (RAS) in which over three hundred people participated. Most of the participants (68%) specified that the Pour Tous Distribution Centre (PTDC) in the Solar Kitchen complex was their main place to get food products. Pour Tous Purchasing Centre (PTPS) in Kulpalayam was the main outlet for 24%. All the other outlets, like HERS and Foodlink, were visited much less often.

Interestingly, the motivation for people using the main outlets differs. Most of the people who use PTPS do so because of the wide range of products it stocks, whereas the most common reasons for using PTDC were its central location and the principles upon which it is based.

When respondents were asked what they would like to change in specific food outlets, they said that 'junk-food' items, multinational brands and non-recyclable packaging should be reduced at PTPS, while making Auroville farm products available throughout the day and giving clearer information about the items (like prices) should be prioritised at PTDC.

Participants were also asked more general questions like, should there be a central purchasing service for all Auroville outlets as, at present, each outlet does the purchasing for itself. An overwhelming majority (93%) were in favour of this.

They were also asked if another food outlet in Auroville was needed. 42% seem to think so, while 58% do not. Interestingly, among those who think there should be an additional outlet, only 15% feel it should be run upon purely commercial lines. Most participants favoured either a self-supporting cooperative or a subsidised cooperative model, on the lines of PTDC.

Food on the mind



The general meeting organised by Auroville's Residents' Assembly Service was held in Mahalakshmi Park

The survey was not without its critics. It was pointed out, for example, that it was comparing apples with pears as the Pour Tous Distribution Centre is a cooperative focussed upon providing essential items (including meals) to its members, while all the other outlets in the survey operate as conventional food shops. And the questions tended to focus upon Aurovilians' shopping experience and how to improve it, rather than upon how well we are progressing with the aim of providing all Aurovilians with access to the basic necessities, as was envisaged in *The Dream*.

In fact, there are surprisingly different perspectives, which often harden into dogma, surrounding food in Auroville. For example, some people believe that an Auroville food outlet should provide whatever the Aurovilians ask for, while others believe that outlets should provide a more limited range of 'non-luxury' necessities that are primarily sourced in Auroville. Again, some food outlet executives are happy to charge market prices even for Auroville produce, while the executives of PTDC feel strongly that Auroville food units should not make profits off Aurovilians for the provision of essential

food items. (PTDC offers all it provides at cost price and the Auroville Bakery also provides basic bakery items at cost price to Aurovilians.)

Aware of these differences, and keen for a wider discussion of the results of the food survey, the RAS decided to call a General Meeting on the topic. Prior to the meeting, they had met with the executives of the major outlets to explore the idea, which received such popular community support, of centralised purchasing, and the executives agreed they would explore this further.

In preparation for the meeting, the RAS also released further information they had gleaned from the executives of the major food outlets. This included the fact that, in a price comparison of twelve commonly purchased items, PTDC was consistently the cheapest and PTPS the most expensive outlet (although PTPS point out that they offer a number of items at between 2–10% of the recommended retail price). Interestingly, all the Auroville food outlets, with the exception of Ganesh Bakery, claim that a majority of their products originate from Auroville or the immediate bioregion.

The General Meeting took place in the amphitheatre of the Mahalakshmi Park on 10th February. Some people had predicted a stormy discussion because of the different policies and priorities of the food outlets, but in the event there was a surprising degree of agreement concerning how

we want to go forward. Collective purchasing was one priority. And when Anandi, executive of PTDS, articulated her wish that, one day, all Aurovilians would be provided with the necessities irrespective of their means, and that there would be one account for all, there was general assent.

Other ideas mooted included reserving the centre of Auroville for outlets and activities that do not require money exchange and that seek to care for Aurovilians collectively, while shops that run in the conventional way can be located on the periphery. And it was suggested that the energy-sapping 'shopping' dynamic could be reduced if more ready meals were provided for Aurovilians at food outlets as well as at community kitchens.

The food debate is not over. But on the basis of this meeting, there is a real will to move towards a food distribution system that is more in tune with those challenging words of *The Dream*: "The needs of the body will be provided for equally in the case of each and everyone".

Alan

Crossing an Invisible Boundary

David Hutchinson has been deeply involved with the Integral Yoga for 35 years. He has been a member of the Sri Aurobindo Association in the U.S., co-editor of the magazine *Collaboration*, organizer of AUM conferences, and moderator of several online lists on yoga. Recently he made a brief visit to Auroville for the first time in twenty years. Here is an edited version of his reflections.

Auroville exists outside – of India, time, place. Passing the gate, a low canopy of trees springs up abruptly; you pass through an invisible boundary; one step, and all is green and red. As we stopped at the intersection of one dirt road with another, the driver uncertain where to turn, a familiar face rolled up, Satyavan, with his young daughter on the back. The first face met, though not the last! In a few minutes, I was walking through the red garden gate at Paula's and sitting down to a cool breakfast of fresh mango, musli, curd, followed by practicalities and a couple of hours conversation in the garden.

The blaring crowds of Thanjavur lay a thousand miles away; even the quaint seaside resort of Pondy feels metropolitan. Auroville is a blend of Le Guin, Tolkien, Huxley, and Asimov. Buildings are curved, people are known by their first names, tropical birds sing out "Here and now! Here and now! Pay attention!" Consciousness is in the air and on the tongue, large ventures are imagined against formidable odds, a forest springs out of the desert, tradition is honoured and broken in the same breath by the same person, meals are a polyglot babble in a restaurant at the end of reality.

Wandering into Solar Kitchen, an unknown face known for years approaches, Mauna, who quickly arranges all the needful in the efficient Town Hall, where a dozen whirring desktop computers and dutifully tapping staff register, process money, and hand out Aurocards so that one can function in the moneyless economy.

The dome of the Matrimandir looms through breaks in the trees, golden, strange, beautiful, a promise and a challenge, a symbol and a centre. The inner chamber will have to wait for another day, after chits are stamped and permissions granted...

The residents of Auroville have set themselves a formidable task these last forty years, and are still struggling to give it birth. They want to live in the future, in a culture without culture, guided by the unknown, in a society that has yet to come into being. They are surrounded by the leviathan of India, several villages on the doorstep with tens of thousands, the politics and struggle of a developing nation at the start of 21st century exponential change...

Matrimandir: Spiraling upward, the twin flames of two oil lamps mark the beginning of helices on which one slowly ascends, like some organic molecule searching for the lock to match its key, as numberless forms arise in the mind. A golden cell, the seed of an infinitesimal species magnified through warped dimensions, bursting from the earth, almost floating free on electrical forces also magnified ten thousandfold; a ship from future time, landing softly, raising ripples in

the land thanks to its dense neutron star mass; the emergence of a new form of matter, dreamed into being through spiritual force, worked on by legions of precursor beings, themselves not yet of this matter even though they have carved its outer form, poured its concrete struts; a point of light visible from hundreds of light-years away, to which future generations of space-faring thoughtwisps are drawn, the disembodied minds of whole planets pulled slowly at the speed of light into the single beam, passing through the portal, into a crystalline globe, there to gaze out with bodiless eyes and quick smiles at the silent circle of humans meditating upon their light and souls.

All true; for all that can be thought has a reality in some realm.

The Matrimandir defies individual description, history, explanation. It was several decades in the making, having been finished only in the first years of the 21st century. Numberless meetings, designs, contracts, scaffolds, rupees, arguments, agreements, sweat, bonfires, celebrations. A steady stream of disciples and tourists, Hindus and Christians and agnostics and skeptics, believers and builders, forerunners and latecomers.

Sitting in the inner chamber as a ray of light pours down through the central opening to land on the crystal, silence and cool air, columns rising, a pure white essence of concentration. The collective aspiration and visions through the years, descent of consciousness, the breaking of barriers. Peace and strength, tears and knots, the flow of energy carrying these molecules further, further up the spiral toward an unknown future.

Pausing at the portal between outer and inner, passing your hand over the intricate granite, passing into opalescent light and slowly falling water, the letters of higher reality beckoning, bliss, consciousness, reality, anandamayi, chaitanyamayi, satyamayi, aum, the three who are one and play in many worlds.

Sitting in a petal budding from the mother cell, the soul's warm flame of aspiration opening a portal above, catching a ray of spiritual light glinting from an incorporeal sun.

Walking the perimeter, feeling the blazing sun on face and arms, the cell-ship still rising, still landing, still emerging. Beyond thought, not of this century, apart from culture, a work of art that transcends, transcendence embodied in a massive physical presence.

Later, sitting with those forerunners who lifted buckets of monsoon mud, scaled the scaffolds, glued tiny scales which became the discs catching the sun, calling to thought-wisps, transforming the dreams of later generations.

Under the canopy of the central Banyan tree, the rays of Tamil Nadu's sun caressing my back, a villager sweeping leaves from the tile path while a

few residents sprawl on the grass chatting, and the sibilant splash of water gives a background to morning birdcall.

Auroville wakes and works. Gardeners are laying sod on the south quadrant, where a thirty-foot hole reveals the deep red clay upholding the city.

In the space of a few days it is impossible to get a feel for this place or its people. In one sense it is like an outpost of the United Nations: at a restaurant there are snippets from every European language, and at many tables heads are in deep discussion of projects, policies, obstacles, compromises, goals and directions.

At the intersection near Solar Kitchen, workers are laying cobblestone roadway, and new signs have gone up for tomorrow's marathon, as well as useful ones indicating the path to the Visitors' Center. Twenty years ago, the lack of road signs drove me bonkers; it is marginally better now with indicators giving the names of major communities, but navigation is still chancy unless you know the roads by heart. Beware going out at night unless you want to spend it under the stars or in the forest.

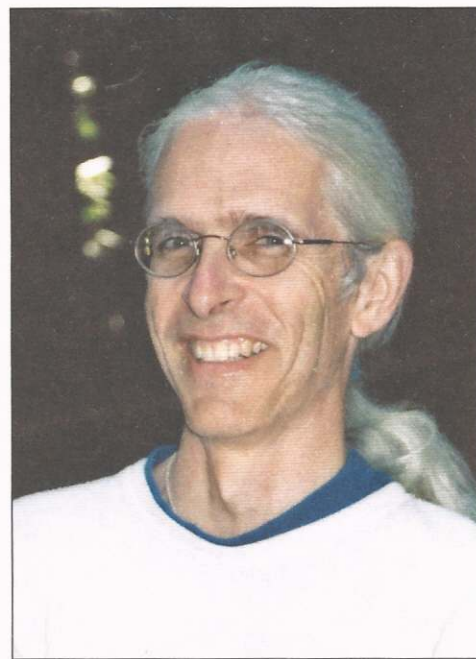
The topics of heat and weather come up frequently. May to October is brutal, it is said, with maybe a few days break during the summer monsoon. Air conditioning is available in the newer apartment blocks, but older houses were built with open windows and doorways; they would require extensive retrofitting. Even so, Auroville is probably five or ten degrees cooler than Pondy, due to the city's heat island effect...

Last night Paula, the friend with whom I am staying, described Sita's role in the Ramayana story: she will be telling this soon to local teenagers. Sita, whose name means furrow, is a child of the Earth, Prithivi. She is abducted by the ten-headed demon Ravana, rescued with the help of the devoted and resourceful monkey Hanuman, and has to walk through fire to prove her virginal innocence.

Most of us live far from such mythic encounters; we feel our lives caught up in the minutiae of daily events, answering mail, making appointments, driving from one place to another, shopping, cooking, taking care of the body. Do we simultaneously live in a larger sphere, engage in heroic endeavours, vanquish gigantic foes against terrible odds?

Of course we do! How dare you even ask! We are voyagers on an infinite and eternal journey, with a thousand discoveries ahead of us, unimaginable complexity, epic colloquies, as Ashvpathy reminds us in *Savitri*.

Perhaps our view is limited by the close forest canopy, so that only a few steps on the path are visible ahead, and our awareness is cramped in a time-bound personality built up over a few decades



seemingly through chance. In reality, though:

*In every hour loosed from the quiver of time
There rose the song of new discovery,
A bow-twang's hum of young experiment.
Each day was a spiritual romance,
As if he was born into a bright new world;
Adventure leaped an unexpected friend,
And danger brought a keen sweet tang of joy;
each happening was a deep experience.*

The challenges that Auroville faces are not those of groundwater, electrical capacity, mass transport, housing, or the environment. Known practical solutions exist for all of these. Nor is it a question of resources; abundance is all around, whether one is looking at physical energy or money.

Appropriately enough for a "laboratory of evolution" where the experimental object is humanity itself, the issues are those of human nature. More specifically, in the context of Integral Yoga, the challenge is for residents to practice and manifest the triune qualities of the highest consciousness: unity, mutuality, harmony.

Unity in the sense of looking beyond differences of opinion in day to day interactions, starting from a point of a shared goal and reality, and moving out from there to the things to be done. Mutuality in the sense of a give and take on every level. Harmony above all; bringing a practical blending of the different tones, shapes, colors, energies – with structure where it is needed, flexibility to let go of past habits when they are non-functional, forging new patterns as they become necessary.

Red ants are racing over the bench in search of food, and a centipede waves across the flagstones. A fever bird ratchets up his manic call from the branches of the Banyan tree above. Time for a walkabout, time to get lost in the city of dawn...

Dave

LETTER

Leaking roofs, lack of privacy, plenty of sound pollution

Correction

The last line of the article 'Leaking roofs, lack of privacy, plenty of sound pollution', which appeared in Auroville Today # 319 of February 2016, disappeared due to a lay-out error. The last paragraph should have read: "A monitoring system, then, should include the vetting of architectural designs by peer groups, interior designers, acoustic experts, and possibly, a user's group. For questions of privacy and sound pollution can no longer be ignored. They need to be addressed if Auroville is not going to build the slums of the future." The article was written by Carel.

Letter

Dear Auroville Today,

I'm quite disappointed to see the article about 'Leaking roofs ...' in the issue of February 2016 No.319. I'm a regular reader of AV Today and look forward to know about the efforts and achievements of the community as an Aurovilian. Although the disclaimer says 'Auroville Today does not necessarily reflect the views of the community as a whole', it does create an impact on its readers through the topics it focuses on. While using this platform, enough research of all the aspects is necessary if one wants to highlight a sensitive issue which may have manifold angles.

This article does not do justice to the subject it's talking about. Financial sustainability of residential buildings and their maintenance is an important issue and much needs to be done about it at social, economic and planning level.

The article mentions only three projects described being

undertaken by Housing service in recent years while such matters have occurred in many past and contemporary projects. Out of the three projects, Maitreye was neither funded by GOI grant nor undertaken by Housing Service. I happen to be the architect of Inspiration and Maitreye 1 - whether this is a coincidence or a deliberate choice is debatable. The choice of the case study is surely a prejudiced approach and fails to convey the facts at the community housing level.

The context of the projects is not explained at all which will give the overview to the readers e.g. Inspiration project has 11 single bedroom of 45 sqm and 2 double bedroom apartments of 90 sqm spread over 4 residential blocks of ground + 2 stories. Accessible by a single staircase each floor houses 3 apartments in two wings. The ground floor includes a common hall and a laundry and the top floor has a common roof terrace. The total cost of the project is Rs. 213 lakh, including the infrastructure at the cost of Rs.17,750/- per sqm for 1200 sqm of built up area. The project houses 15 inhabitants.

Without such information, it will leave the people disillusioned about the very essence of the article.

Experimentation and innovation are important aspects of architecture and building in Auroville. In continuation of the research in building, Maitreye 1 involves many passive design features in building technology and was designed as a low cost housing at Rs. 12,000/- per sqm. Building Auroville remains a complex and challenging task over the years and the team which takes up this job can best explain the hurdles and constraints of the process.

The views of the same are missing in the article while the interview of a single resident in each project – who seems like

handpicked – is described as free expression allowing him/her to make statements without confirming the realities. This not only lacks deep understanding but also is unfair to the people and the funding agencies who have put in a lot of energy and hard work in the realisation of those projects.

Surprisingly, the interviews fail to clarify what proportions of funds have been spent in maintaining the buildings and what steps are taken by the appointed caretakers for meeting the running expenses. This could have been the crucial link and would help the future projects to reserve some funds or create spaces which can cover these running costs. Instead the petty points like switches and toilet heights given as a list of complaints become the prominent part of the information. Moreover it is very disturbing to hear that the residents who signed up for communal living, while rejoicing in usable space at this prominent location where land is an important factor, are not ready to interact with the neighbours even on the common passageways, designed for enhancing the interaction among the residents.

Care needs to be taken while announcing statements like these which can be motivated and targeted with some personal vendetta and surely a monthly publication like Auroville Today need not be misused as a medium for the same.

Overall, a valid topic of discussion which can educate the community and prepare our working groups if well described with facts and figures, remains nothing more than the subjective opinions of certain individuals and leaves the readers more confused and dissatisfied.

Thanks and regards

Sonali

Three months in Auroville, or why I think Auroville is perfect

When I first arrived three months ago, I imagined I was going to learn about new governance and economic structures, a new way of making decisions and managing money. What I discovered was different. I realized that the gap between the dream and the reality was not due to the impossibility of materializing the dream but to something else. Possibilities in Auroville are almost endless (especially compared to other countries in the world with all their regulations) and that is what makes it a laboratory. Aurovilians have the space to innovate, discover, try and fail to finally arrive at the most suitable system. So what is preventing Auroville from becoming the dream? What follows is what I discovered as I tried to understand Auroville from the inside and how my experience of Auroville changed my vision of myself and the world.

During my three months stay, I had one goal: to try to understand the economic and governance systems of Auroville as much as possible. I first started to volunteer for the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) and at the same time for Auroville Today and Eco Femme. I chose to volunteer in several places in order to have an encompassing vision of how different aspects of Auroville worked independently and together. I rapidly understood that everything is connected in Auroville: if I try to have a vision about one topic, I have to explore all the directly or indirectly connected topics. As my focus was on governance and economy, I also participated to the Active Residents' Assembly (ARA) meetings and started volunteering with the ARA preparation sub-group.

At first I was lost in all the Aurovilian current issues, the different working groups, the acronyms, the debates. Volunteering for the RAS was, for me, a great way to learn about Auroville because I focused on a specific topic, food and commodity distribution, and also because the RAS is the main communication platform between the working groups and the Residents' Assembly. As my volunteering experience proceeded, I discovered little by little the different challenges that might slow the realization of the dream.

The first challenge I encountered with the food and commodity distribution project was to determine which information we were looking for and how and where to gather this information.

I realized that each Aurovilian has a different vision of Auroville and thus has a different opinion on what is important to discuss. The second challenge was even more demanding as we then had to gather the information. I realized how hard it is to get the information needed in Auroville, either because of the necessity of choosing one's words carefully in order to avoid conflicts or because of the lack of transparency. This lack of transparency became one of the main topics I discussed with Aurovilians as it seems to be a recurrent problem linked to either a fear of being criticized, or of creating a conflict, or of not getting the support of Auroville in terms of administration and bureaucracy (such as permissions, financial help etc.)

Many individuals seem to have an agenda, some interests, to defend and they try to do so by choosing which information to publish. I did not see a wish to create a harmonious and connected community. I saw fear based on past experiences, in which some people had been judged and criticized, leading to unwanted consequences. Therefore, getting the right information at the first attempt was almost always impossible.

The third challenge was linked to the second one: how to present the information gathered in a neutral manner, respecting the vocabulary considered as "appropriate" in Auroville. Certain words are not to be used because the community aspires for something higher, but it seems that even if the vocabulary has changed, a new system based on higher ideals has not been set up yet and the habits and mindset remain the same. I noticed this paradox when I saw the reactions of Aurovilians when I used the word "shopping". It seems that it is a "taboo" word because Aurovilians are not supposed to shop any more but only "get necessary items according to their needs". However, in reality, Aurovilians still pay for products and many still choose these products according to their prices. Therefore, in my opinion, they still 'shop'.

I have encountered other interesting issues when volunteering for the Active Residents' Assembly (ARA). I clearly perceived a desire from the residents, at least the ones coming to the meetings, to change the basis of the system in place in Auroville, and not only the vocabulary used to describe it. I understood a willingness to change the way meetings were organized and the way people thought about and reacted to issues, opinions and disagreements.



Gaëlle

When I attended the first meeting of the ARA, I had not been to any General Meeting (GM) before. I thought that all GMs started with silence and quotes in four languages and that each time someone requested silence he/she could have it. I understood at the end of the meeting that it was not the case because someone said that, for once, he felt safe to express himself. For me it reflects something crucial I have learnt during my months in Auroville: the need for good facilitation not only to reach consensus but also to create a space in which Aurovilians feel safe to express themselves.

The second step the ARA took was to start working on specific topics in order to apply this new way of meeting to practical and complex issues. One of the first topics this assembly started working on was the decision-making process.

Even if I sensed a desire to go forward, instead of trying to think about what a completely new system could look like the group wanted to use already existing systems: consensus and voting. What I understood from this is that as Aurovilians aspire to a system based on higher values, they do not want to use already existing systems. But at the same time, they have difficulty in inventing completely new systems.

I understood that in order to get to this eagerly sought-after consensus, key things have to be taken into account. Firstly, how to inform

Aurovilians when they have to make a decision? How to communicate in a community in which not everyone has access to a computer or internet and not everyone goes to the same places? Then, among those residents who could be reached, how to motivate them to participate in order to include as many points of view as possible? And how to help a group of motivated residents with ideas to come to conclusions and, finally, make decisions? This is what Auroville is about for me: how to be heard, how to listen, how to collaborate and how to realize the power of the collective when it interacts harmoniously to realize the dream of Auroville.

The experience of living in Auroville for three months allowed me to discover who I was and what I was capable of: my potential and my limits. Indeed, Auroville allowed me to apply what I knew and what I had learnt in university and throughout my life. Aurovilians not only gave me the space to express myself and participate in discussion but also took into account my opinions and ideas. Even if I did not have the diplomas needed to give my opinion on both communication (in the RAS) and decision-making (in the ARA), I was welcomed and listened to. The possibilities and diversity of interactions with people from around the world offered by Auroville also broadened my perspective of the world and reminded me of the freedom I have, as a human, to fully be myself if I acknowledge it. I think Auroville gave me the confidence I needed to take initiatives and participate in the work of an organization anywhere in the world.

What I will also remember from Auroville is its flexibility. Even if rules, policies and mandates are written, Auroville is constantly moving. This means that by writing down my vision of Auroville right now it already becomes obsolete.

For me, even if all sorts of obstacles prevent the dream from fully becoming reality, the dream is there. This dream brings together people from all over the world and makes them work together for it. I think this is the most important lesson I learnt in Auroville: even if the dream is not yet materialized, most Aurovilians are linked by this desire for a new world based on the dream. This is why I think Auroville is perfect: it is the unity of humanity in each Aurovilian meeting the diversity of human beings Aurovilians are.

Gaëlle

NEWS IN BRIEF

Auroville's 28th birthday



PHOTO: TIME

Auroville's birthday, on February 28, was celebrated with the traditional dawn bonfire. For the first time in the history of Auroville, the attendance of over 5,000 people exceeded the Amphitheatre's capacity with many people standing on the rim, listening to Mother's reading of the Charter of Auroville and its translations in English, Sanskrit and Tamil.

Auroville Marathon

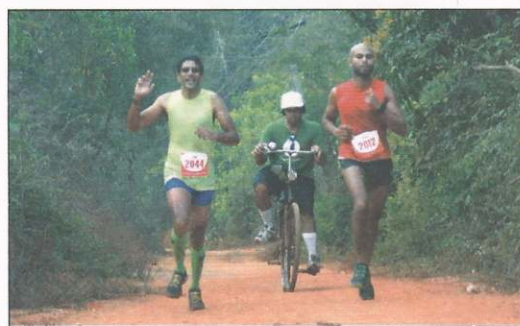


PHOTO: MIMI CHAKRABARTY

The ninth Auroville Marathon, held on February 14th, drew over 3,000 participants from across the country. The community opened stalls at the Visitor's Center for people to interact and know more about life at Auroville.

Bamboo Centre intensive course

The Bamboo Center organised a three-week intensive hands-on training course for bamboo crafters. Areas of training in this residential



programme included jewelry, furniture making and construction.

Upcycling exhibition at Udavi



Artists Ok and Orly and Mark from the Upcycling Studio exhibited 'upcycled products', or products made from waste, at Udavi School. The exhibition showed what can be done with tetrapaks (used in making stools and in building construction), with waste plastics (used in cushions) and discarded audio tape (used for making bags and hats). The exhibition aimed at sensitizing people towards the growing problems of consumption and waste management.

Expressive arts therapy

A symposium on expressive arts therapy took place at the Pavilion of Tibetan Culture and the Sankalpa Art Center on February 19-21. The gathering drew almost 40 art therapists, counselors, psychologists, and teachers from across India and abroad, as well as interested villagers from Kottakarai and Edaiyanchavadi.

PASSING

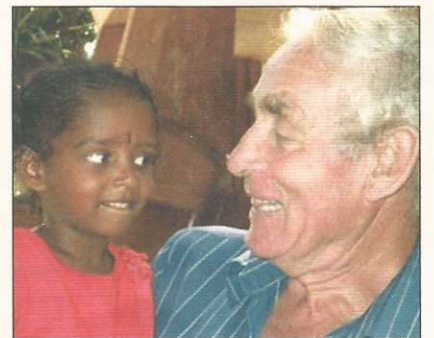
Roy

On the evening of February 29th, Roy (Alistair Wicks) of New Creation passed away in his UK home in the presence of his daughter and son, due to kidney failure. He was 92 years old.

In 1989, Roy, a retired British police sergeant and school welfare officer, visited Auroville after the demise of his wife and was approached by André Tardeil, who at the time was setting up extended training at New Creation for village youth and needed someone to coordinate the educational efforts there. Half a year later Roy returned and started funding and establishing New Creation Bilingual School, which is now the well running CBSE-accredited Aikiyam School. Throughout the years, Roy's house in New Creation became an organised and educative boarding for pupils of the school who had no relatives to take care of them. 'Roy's Boarding' has been a caring home from where many youngsters from the village have been guided into the world with love, an institution which survives today as 'Malarchi', efficiently run by two of Roy's pupils who grew up in this home.

In 2001, suffering from a serious knee infection, Roy left for the UK, and was not able to return. He has been always in contact, via email and skype, with 'his children', whom he dearly missed and vice versa.

Roy, thanks to his enormous work, will be remembered with love and gratitude by numerous youth from the village who thanks to him have found a solid place in society.

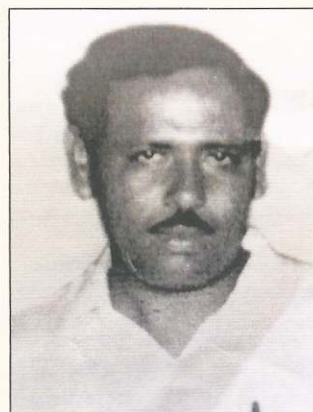


Mani

On the afternoon of Tuesday, February 16th, Mani (P. Munian) who lived in the Pump House near Bharat Nivas left his body at Trichy Hospital due to kidney failure. He was 58 years old.

Mani was known as a friendly, goodhearted person who began his Auroville life at Forecomers in the early eighties, as a foreman of the workers there. In 1988 he joined Auroville and moved to the Pump House a year later. For many years he was involved in the Land Service.

Mani's remains were cremated on February 17th, in Pondicherry.



The Joy of Learning experiment

The Joy of Learning is an experiment in collective learning which addresses a wide range of themes associated with life in Auroville. It tries to (re)familiarise the residents with important issues in a stimulating and respectful learning environment, and is supported with funding from Stichting de Zaaier.

On 2nd March, the eighth Joy of Learning session took place, on the topic of mobility. Previous sessions have focussed on the Auroville economy, on food and farming, the Master Plan and on water. The next one will be on the Auroville Maintenance system.

But what is the idea behind the Joy of Learning? And how successful has it been? Auroville Today talked to members of the organizing team to find out more.

What was the inspiration for the Joy of Learning programme? How did it begin?

Mike: Lalit came up with the idea. We had been working on further learning programmes, but he pointed out that nobody was looking at major issues affecting the community and we needed to do something on that line.

Min: During a meeting with the Governing Board and International Advisory Council, we shared with them what we wanted to do in terms of developing further education. And they told us, "You guys want to teach the world but you should be trying to learn some things yourself". It really sank in that we had to do something for our own learning.

The original idea was that we would follow the TED talk format and there would be some emphasis upon coming up with solutions. But then we realised that the job of solving problems belongs to the community, so we decided the best approach would be for us to do the information part and, if a community decision needed to be made, the RAS would organize that process.

Alan: The information part is crucial because often in our community decision-making meetings important information is missing, so we make decisions based on very partial knowledge. And often when we have to decide upon an issue, it's an emergency situation and people tend to be very reactive or want to force through their opinion. So we decided to try to lay the informational groundwork on important topics in a more relaxed space where people could absorb information without having to immediately act on it.

Mike: As soon as we had the first potential presenters around the table, they started expressing their perspectives and opinions: it felt a bit like a General Meeting. And I think we all realised that this was not the way we wanted to go; that we wanted to focus on facts to raise awareness rather than on pushing personal agendas and opinions.

Alan: The process is fascinating. Whenever we start a new topic, the resource people come with their personal perspectives, which may be very different. But then, just by sitting round a table and listening to others, something changes in them.

Mike: For me, this is the best part. We ask them, what do you really want to tell the community? What do you think the community needs to know in order to understand your work better? That's where the shift happens.

Alan: Also, when resource people understand that others not only have a huge amount of knowledge too, but are very dedicated I think it helps dissolve the differences. Then they start listening to each other and building upon each other's insights.

Min: It's a process of collective co-creation.

Alan: The whole training part is also fascinating. We help the presenters pull out the essence of what they want to say. I think that because of this, the general level of the presentations has been high.

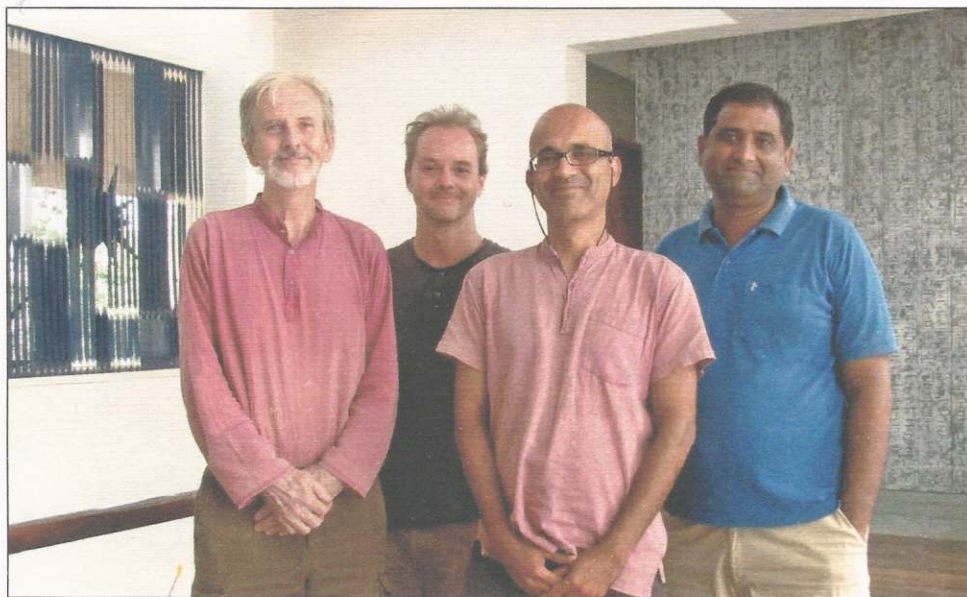
Mike: We always want to ensure the best presentations, but this takes time and energy. When we started, we thought we could do one session a month but we soon realised this would be impossible, simply because the process of getting the right people together, developing a common understanding of what we are trying to accomplish, and jointly creating a coherent synthesis of all contributions is very time-consuming.

How are the topics chosen?

Mike: The topics would emerge from something that was around, like issues that were already being thought about or worked on by the Residents Assembly Service or a major working group.

Why is it called the 'joy of learning'?

Min: It is about finding ways to learn in a more joyful, entertaining manner. To achieve this, we have tried varying the format from the usual lecture type presentations. We made a farm visit, for example, which was very successful, and we also talked about doing a session at the Visitors Centre where we would combine humorous skits, a talk



From left: Alan, Mike, Min and Lalit

show, music etc.

Alan: I think we've been less successful than we set out to be. We have fallen back into the old mode of PowerPoint presentations which, I think, address only one level of understanding or area of the brain. This probably reflects the way that we, the organizers, learn but it may not appeal to those who absorb their information in other ways.

Mike: Learning for me is always a joy! But I agree that we can be a little bit more playful.

I think part of the problem is that a lot of the material we are dealing with is academic in nature, so it is a challenge to translate it into something else without losing important information. Maybe we should consider always running two sessions on an issue, where the background information is given in the first session and then there is a more experiential follow-up, just as we did with farming.

Is there any way to assess the impact of these sessions?

Min: Immediately after the presentations, many people have come up to us and said this was very useful.

Mike: Some of the experts are missing more of the in-depth information but, overall, the feedback has been quite positive. And if you measure success in terms of the numbers of people who have attended, we have not done badly. Over ninety people attended the last session on farming.

Clearly, what we had been doing in these sessions was appreciated by some people because we were asked to use a similar approach to gather information from the community in preparation for the Auroville Retreat.

Min: For me, the most interesting change has been in how people react in the question and answer session after the presentations. In the beginning, we would have people expressing strong opinions and this would quickly turn into a debate, but now generally people ask questions for clarification; and those questions and answers energise the session rather than dampening it. People behave differently now

because they have realised we're not trying to make people decide on things but that we are trying to expand knowledge about an issue.

Mike: It would be great if we could translate what happens in the small preparation meetings, where the learning is really happening, on a larger scale, but as yet I don't know how to do this.

Do you feel that the Joy of Learning approach is part of a larger movement in Auroville, a shift away from the old adversarial approach to issues to one of cooperation and discovery?

Min: I think that a culture of communication and collaboration is developing. For example, Slava who helped us with the Retreat saw what we were doing and now he has become one of the key people in the Residents Assembly Service, taking responsibility for collecting and disseminating information.

Alan: I sense the Joy of Learning approach may be part of a wider movement in the community. The Residents Assembly Service ensure there is a much bigger information component in our General Meetings now, the three day selection process for members of major groups builds upon the collective

wisdom of the participants, and other groups are working independently on improving meeting process with the intention of coming together in more respectful, collaborative ways. It's subtle, it's not easy to quantify, but I think an important shift is happening.

Have you been changed through this process, have you learned things?

Min: I have learned a different way of working in terms of exchanging points of view and working together in a harmonious way. That's why I look forward to the sessions: they energise me.

Mike: The common thread that runs through all the presentations is the famous 'human factor'. In other words, the solutions always seem to involve us. We, I, have to be ready to change to make possible the larger changes.

Two things have happened for me. Seeing the amazing work some of these people have done over such a long time and how much knowledge they have acquired has brought me a new level of trust in our human resources.

The second one relates to the amount of information that is out there. We have to make a selection for the presentations, yet if we look at the number of studies that have been done on topics like mobility, water and farming, it is quite amazing. For every topic, I have learned a lot.

Alan: For me, what came through more than anything was the dedication and enthusiasm of the presenters. You may forget some of the information they have given but you don't forget the way they are giving it, the dedication and love for what they are doing.

Min: I remember the closing slide of Deoyani's presentation on soil. She brought it to another dimension by connecting together the various aspects of water and soil by reference to the attributes of Sri Lakshmi. I was very moved.

From an interview by Alan

AUROVILLE INTERNATIONAL



In February, members of Auroville International held their yearly meeting in Auroville

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