

'Is this the end?'

On February 19th, a remarkable performance took place at the Sri Aurobindo Auditorium of Bharat Nivas. Inspired by the poem 'Is this the end?' by Sri Aurobindo, the Surya Performance Lab took the audience on a journey of two individuals who try to coexist and share in the experience of displacement, confronted by the harsh realities of a changing world. The theatrical and musical dance performance was directed by Philippe Pen and performed by Huong Pham, Gopal Dalami and Thierry Moucazambo, with music and sound by Zan David. An impression by Lili Dreikhausen.

Is this the end of all that we have been,
And all we did or dreamed,-
A name unremembered and a form undone,-

Is this the end?
A body rotting under a slab of stone
Or turned to ash in fire,
A mind dissolved, lost its forgotten thoughts,-

Is this the end?
Our little hours that were and are no more,
Our passions once so high
Being mocked by the still earth and calm sunshine,-

Is this the end?
Our yearnings for the human Godward climb
Passing to other hearts
Deceived, while smiles towards death and hell the world,-

Is this the end?
Fallen is the harp; shattered it lies and mute;
Is the unseen player dead?
Because the tree is felled where the bird sang,
Must the song too hush?

One in the mind who planned and willed and thought,
Worked to reshape earth's fate,

One in the heart who loved and yearned and hoped,

Does he too end?
The Immortal in the mortal is his Name;
An artist Godhead here
Ever remoulds himself in diviner shapes,
Unwilling to cease
Till all is done for which the stars were made,
Till the heart discovers God
And the soul knows itself. And even then

There is no end.

Sri Aurobindo



PHOTO : FREDERIC MARTIN DUCHAMP

I was transported. Back to the shocking events that have taken place here, in our home and our haven. I was also transported out of myself, out of this context and this situation.

You, as performers, achieved what it is that I believe art DOES. You carried me and every audience member out of myself, out of ourselves. You showed us what is happening in the world and in our community and in ourselves. Words are not necessary. The language of movement, the power of sound, the creation of a story through image and expression.

I breathed with you and wept with you and your screams were mine. Your silence was mine, too. Your death upheld the part of myself that died a bitter suffocating death in the disappointment in our elders, our community, our home. And then we walked again, found our voice, found our feet.

You leap, show freedom, delicate, gentle, loud expression. Today they may try to silence us. They may try to take our voice, try to stunt our outreach, to manipulate, threaten and bribe. I know who I am. I know the home that I want to create for myself and for the youth that never ages. I know the life that I create.

Art is an extraordinary tool to comprehend this world. It is the healing, the strength, the eyes and the voice. It is the body that moves.

I will go back again and relive this evening. Discover it anew. Be moved. Once again.

If you are in Auroville, I suggest you join me. There is power in the freedom of expression. Come. Witness. Be moved.

INTERNAL ECONOMY

The Budget Coordination Committee interacts

In January and February, Auroville's Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) conducted a series of public meetings with the community. One purpose was to clarify the budgetary allocations; another, to help the BCC understand to what extent those allocations serve the needs of the community. Auroville Today spoke with five of its members: Suryamayi, Mahi, Inge, Aurosugan and Hans – three of whom are second generation Aurovilians.

“The BCC manages the Auroville City Services (CS) budget, which is the collective budget of Auroville,” explains Suryamayi. “Our job is to ensure that contributions from Auroville’s income generating units are collected; to allocate and disburse funds from the CS budget to various community beneficiaries; and lastly, we guard that the City Services Reserves are not depleted.”

The work is far from easy. Because of the economic impact of COVID-19, the BCC faced a 12.2 % decrease of internal income in the last financial year (2020-2021). “We had to cut our disbursements accordingly,” says Mahi. “And we would have had to cut even more if it wasn’t for a saving grace, the unprecedented financial support Auroville received from many people outside Auroville. The income from external contributions was 253% higher than in the previous year!”

The total income was Rs 2,170 lakhs, of which

Rs 1,939 lakhs came from within Auroville (Auroville’s commercial units, Auroville’s financial services, other services, guest houses and guest contributions, and donations from individual community members) and Rs 231 lakhs from external contributions, including the Government of India grant for educational research, and donations from abroad.

The total disbursement was Rs 1,882 Lakhs. This included maintenances, the recurring monthly expenses of Auroville’s services, and non-recurring expenses such as urgent building repairs or gratuity settlements for non-Aurovilian employees. “We reduced our expenses: the service budgets were cut by 30% and the non-recurring expenses by 38.4%. The Aurovilian maintenances, however, were not touched. And unlike earlier years, because of the economic uncertainty caused by the COVID 19 pandemic no new budget requests were invited,” says Suryamayi.

To the surprise of the BCC, the reserves at the year’s end showed a substantial increase. “We started the year with a reserve of 620 lakhs and ended with a reserve of 907 lakhs. This reflects the great efforts made by community services to work within the reduced budgets and using their own reserves where required, and by income-generating units to continue their contributions as much as possible. In addition, great generosity was shown from within and without Auroville with extra contributions pouring in. In April 2020, we posted an appeal for funds and quite a few Auroville units responded. We received 20 lakhs from inside Auroville and another 20 lakhs from outside, from individuals and Auroville International Centres. We also asked the Aurovilians who receive a maintenance if they would be OK to receive a smaller amount and contribute to the general pot. Many individuals responded positively. There was a lot of goodwill,” says Inge.

The commercial units

One of the responsibilities of the BCC is to ensure that the income generating units contribute to the CS budget in accordance with the minimum levels approved by the Auroville’s Funds and Assets Management Committee (the FAMC).

“The commercial units are supposed to contribute 33% of their profits to Auroville,” says Hans. “One of the problems we face is that the 33% contributions that are payable this financial year are still calculated over the profits / turnover of the previous financial year.

Chartered accountant Manuel Thomas from Chennai and Prof. Dr. Henk Thomas from The Netherlands, who in 2013 published the monograph on Auroville’s economy “*Economics for People and Earth*”, had already warned against this practice. For the unit might not have sufficient liquidity in a bad financial year to pay the 33% of the profits generated in the previous year.

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Contributions to Auroville City Services

Total Contributions ₹2,170 Lakhs

Income to Auroville's communal fund comes from various sources within and beyond the community. Contributions from within Auroville are made according to community guidelines, and reviewed by the Budget Coordination Committee's Finance sector (BCC Finance).

Internal Contributions ₹1,939 Lakhs

89.4% of the total contributions to City Services
6.1% of the total income generated by Auroville in 20-21.

Internal Contributions are made by Auroville's Commercial Units, Financial Services, Other Services, Guest houses and Guest Contributions, and Individual Community Members.

Internal Contributions were 12.2% lower than previous year, due to the economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic.

External Contributions ₹231 Lakhs

10.6% of the total contributions to City Services.

External contributions regularly include a portion of the Government of India grant for SAIER (intended for educational research), as well as (primarily foreign) donations.

External contributions were 253% higher than previous year due to the outpouring of economic relief donations for the coronavirus pandemic.

Services ₹219 Lakhs

'Other services' are contributions from Auroville Services that have generated a profit over the past year.

Guests ₹102 Lakhs

Contributions from Guest Houses (which are expected to contribute 20% of their turnover to City Services) and from Guest contributions.

External ₹231 Lakhs

External donations to City Services include only those donations made 'unspecified' to the central fund, for the BCC to disburse according to current needs. Auroville as a whole receives significant other donations, specified to particular projects, infrastructure or services.

64% GOI Grants for SAIER
24% Other Contributions
12% Foreign Contributions

Individuals ₹248 Lakhs

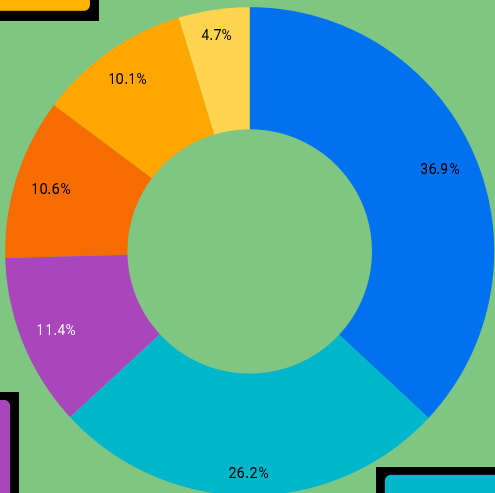
Monthly individual contributions made to City Services by Aurovilians, and any additional contributions made (as was the case during this economic crisis). A contribution of Rs. 3470 is expected monthly from all adult Aurovilians. This is waived for those receiving a City Services Maintenance and other Aurovilians in financial difficulty, and often paid for by income-generating units on behalf of the Aurovilians working there.

Commercial Units ₹802 Lakhs

The biggest contributors to Auroville's central fund are the community's income-generating units, or 'businesses'. These are expected to contribute a minimum of 33% of their profit to City Services.

Financial Services ₹568 Lakhs

Financial Services is the second highest contributing sector to Auroville. These contributions are returns on the investment of Auroville funds (individual and unit holdings, and donations to Auroville) deposited in the Financial Service and Unity Fund.



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For the CS it would be better if profits are calculated and paid on the basis of the expected profit of the current year, with the difference adjusted afterwards, as is done by the Income Tax. But this is an issue of the FAMC – they make policy, the BCC only executes.”

A separate unit of the BCC, called BCC Finance, is responsible for these calculations. “Here we faced another problem,” says Mahi. “The accounts of the units do not follow identical data entry systems; we have to spend a lot of time calculating what the unit has to pay to Auroville. This will change when the standardized accounting system, introduced by the FAMC, is finally operational, hopefully by the next financial year.” Once the BCC Finance has made the calculation, do the units pay promptly? “Most of them do,” says Mahi. “A few unit executives have difficulty understanding that in this financial year, which is a difficult year for many units, they have to pay 33% of the sometimes large profits they made in the previous financial year. So we have quite a few requests for exemption.”

“It is a careful job,” explains Hans. “We deal with the units as integral parts of Auroville, not as mere money suppliers. We are not aiming at ‘getting their money’ – their contributions are not a tax. The challenge is to make the unit executives want to pay a happy and necessary contribution to Auroville, instead of them feeling that they ‘have to’

pay.” Is the BCC successful? “We have been to a large extent, judging by the extra contributions that were made during Covid-19,” says Mahi. “But amongst the larger units, many could be contributing a whole lot more than 33%, but there are not many who do. Most pay up to the exact paisa.”

The maintenances

The vast majority of the BCC’s disbursements, 66.6%, are towards maintenances. Maintenances are allocated to Aurovilians working for Central Services and to those unable to work and support themselves financially. A full time adult City Services maintenance in 2020-2021 was Rs. 16,020 / month. Part of the maintenance is allocated as credit for specific uses (for lunch Rs 1,870, for the health fund Rs 450, in kind Rs 1,700); Rs 6,000 as ‘kind’, which can be used anywhere in Auroville; and Rs 6,000 in cash that can be used within or outside of Auroville.

“We are very aware that the maintenances are too low,” says Hans. “When, in January this year, many salaries of Auroville’s non-Aurovilian employees were increased by 5%-10%, we did not follow that with an increase of the Auroville maintenance. Last year, as an inflation correction, we had made a minor increase of the maintenances, the lunch scheme and the in-kind scheme (from a monthly total of Rs 16,020 to Rs 17,000). But this is not enough, especially as inflation is rising. The Covid-19 pandemic forced us into a very

conservative budgeting as we had no idea what was going to happen. But as the income was higher than expected, and the reserves went up, we have now a bit more space to think about increasing the maintenance.”

“We had a few meetings only about the maintenance, and how to improve it,” says Aurosugan. “We studied the cash/kind structure, we studied the children’s maintenance and we looked into the reasons for allocating a maintenance.”

Some changes were effected. One is that, earlier, a person had to explain what he or she was doing in order to qualify for a maintenance. “This we changed,” says Aurosugan. “Now we have a policy based on trust. If you ask, you get, for we assume you need the maintenance. Of course, this could be misused. But we do not want fear of abuse to be the basis of our maintenance policy. We are working on basic trust, instead of basic mistrust.”

“Another change is that we increased the children’s maintenances,” says Hans. “In the past, one CS maintenance gave the right to one child maintenance; we have changed that to ‘all children of Auroville are eligible for children’s maintenance’. This was a major step for families.”

“We also looked into the possibilities of giving higher subsidies to community services so that they can become cheaper and eventually free for all Aurovilians. That also goes towards the ideal of ‘no exchange of money within Auroville’,” says Suryamayi. “We have increased the budgets of the Solar Kitchen, Pour Tous Water, the Puncture Service and the Eco Service .” In the process, the BCC has also been looking at services that could be managed better. The purpose,” says Hans, “is to help their functioning, not to control them. Our interest is only financial. If there is a conflict situation which is affecting the management, we will take the matter to the Auroville Council.”

Towards a basic income?

Are all these changes steps towards Auroville providing a basic income to each Aurovilian who works for City Services? “We haven’t really discussed the basic income concept in depth, nor if we want to move there,” says Hans. “It might be attractive – but we still are far away for realizing such a system. For the time being we would be happy if we can increase the level of the maintenances, and also the number of CS maintenances Auroville can provide.”

“We are looking into the possibilities of increasing that number as there is a true need,” says Mahi. “For example, many people working for Auroville’s working groups do not get a maintenance for that specific work. In the BCC itself only

members who work full or half time in the BCC Office receive a maintenance. The others attend meetings and carry out work in subgroups but have to get their income from somewhere else. But increasingly, more Aurovilians are applying. We would be happy if we would be able to give more maintenances, but that’s not yet the case.”

Income inequality

When we talk about maintenance, we are only talking about people working for City Services,” says Aurosugan. “People working elsewhere, for example in commercial units, do not receive a CS maintenance and are not subject to the CS maintenance limitations. The approved limit for people working for commercial units is a maintenance amount of Rs 20,000 /month. This amount can be deducted as an expense; but they can take more from the 67% of profits of the unit that do not go to the community. But this is not a topic for the BCC; it is a policy matter to be decided by the FAMC.”

“The inequality exists,” confirms Mahi. “The unit holder can use the 67% of the profits in the way he or she wants. Many use it to pay for the education costs of their children. Some make specified or unspecified donations to the scholarship fund that helps cover the educational expenses of Auroville youth. But I feel that the entire question of loans and higher education has to be addressed by Auroville. The inequality is felt by many people working in services. And donations from the scholarship fund are only available for studies within India, not abroad. It is a very diverse and complex issue and should be a topic of in-depth discussion in a general meeting.”

The community budgeting process

This, and many other issues, led the BCC to initiate a community budgeting process: to explain to the community what the BCC is doing, and to get the community’s ‘feel’ about the budgetary priorities and the way forward. “Today’s budgets are marked by history and the community has never really looked into these allocations,” says Suryamayi. “Post COVID is a good time for reflections, to define priorities, to identify key sectors to be funded and study our economic uncertainties.

“We had two sessions: the first as primary information sharing on what the BCC does and what budgets we are allocating to what sectors of community activity. This included a lot of contextual information: what kinds of services are active in each sector, what do these services do, who do they serve, and how many people are working in them? The second session went into details: people had an

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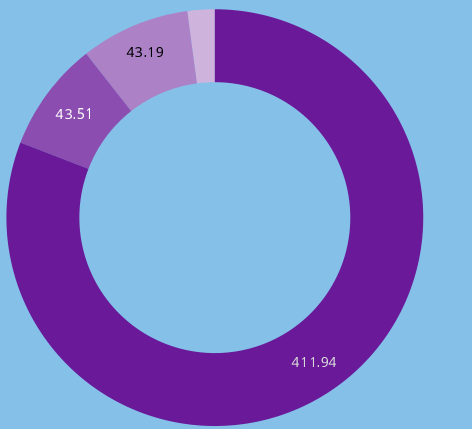
Total Budget from City Services

₹509 Lakhs
24% of Budget

Auroville's education budget supports youth within the community and surrounding villages, as well as continuing education for adults, and the manifestation of the community's founding ideal of being a place of 'unending education' (Auroville Charter).

This budget is partly financed through the Government of India grant to SAIER (148 lakhs out of the total of 509 lakhs, or 29%).

This sector – outreach activities in particular – receive significant financial support from other sources.



Education Centre... Other Services Admin Apprenticeships

The education budget

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opportunity to discuss each sector in small groups, with a BCC member and a sector representative present to answer specific questions. The next step will be about prioritization and also if there are missing services in our landscape. So we are not only looking at the historical budgets, but also at the way forward. That includes a reflection on the sources of income, so that we have a clear view on both the income and the expenditure and if we are happy with the proportions or if it is felt that this should be changed.”

The impact of large GOI grants

In this context, Aurosagan mentions the possible impact of large Government of India donations as mentioned in the minutes of the Governing Board of its meeting in November last year [see AVToday # 390 of January 2022, page 3, eds.]. “We understood that such grants will only be used for capital expenditure. But it appears that no thought has gone into the question how the connected running costs will be covered. As a rule, such costs are not carried by GOI grants. So those costs will fall on the BCC, and so on the income that is generated by the units. Those large grants will boost our infrastructure and housing, but Auroville’s own income generating capacities will not be sufficient to carry these costs. Our internal economy has to grow to support that. But no new commercial units have come up to help sustain such expenditure. We fear that with our present economy, such large investments will not be sustainable. Moreover, if more people join Auroville, where will they find employment? And if that employment is in the non-income generating sector, won’t it add to the difficulties of maintaining all these people at an adequate level?”

These questions, says the BCC, will need a lot of community reflection.

In conversation with Carel

The first session of the community budgeting process can be seen at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_lbg2Wjv24. A presentation of the outcomes of community budgeting sessions held with randomly selected Aurovilians can be seen at <https://youtu.be/HNe-SQbD1N0> The BCC website can be visited at budget.auroville.org.in

Total Disbursements

₹1,882 Lakhs

Budgets are allocated by Auroville’s Budget Coordination Committee, and include Maintenances for Aurovilians (see below), Recurring Budgets for Auroville’s services (for monthly expenses), and Non-Recurring Budgets for annual or singular expenses (such as repairs or gratuity settlements for non-Aurovilian employees). Contributors to City Services can also make additional ‘specified contributions’ to be disbursed by the BCC to specific services or projects.

In regular years, new budget requests are invited by the BCC. Due to the economic uncertainty caused by the covid-19 pandemic, this was not the case in the financial year 20-21. The BCC reduced budgetary expenses to the minimum required for services to operate. This resulted in Recurring and Non-Recurring budgets being significantly lower (30% and 38.4%, respectively). Although the Maintenance budget is the highest, it was not decreased at all.

Sector Name	Disbursed (In Lakhs)
Education	510
Social Support	405
Municipal Services	280
Health	139
Forests	126
Organisation	101
Arts, Culture and Sports	72
Farms	59
Outreach	50
Land	36
Matrimandir	23
Housing	18

Another 64 lakhs was budgeted for contingencies (to cover unbudgeted requests made throughout the year)

Please note that services within these sectors may have sources of financial support other than their City Services budgets shown here.

Maintenances

₹1,254 Lakhs

Maintenances are meant to support Aurovilians’ basic needs, in conjunction with Auroville’s services. They are allocated to Aurovilians working in the community and/or those unable to work and support themselves financially.

The total budget for services corresponds to:
-Rs. 4,800 monthly per Aurovilian (including children), or
- Rs. 6,000 monthly per Aurovilian adult

The total amount of a monthly full time adult City Services Maintenance in 2020-2021 was Rs. 16,020.

Maintenance Allocations	
Cash	₹6,000
Kind	₹6,000
Lunch	₹1,870
In-Kind Scheme	₹1,700
Health Fund	₹450

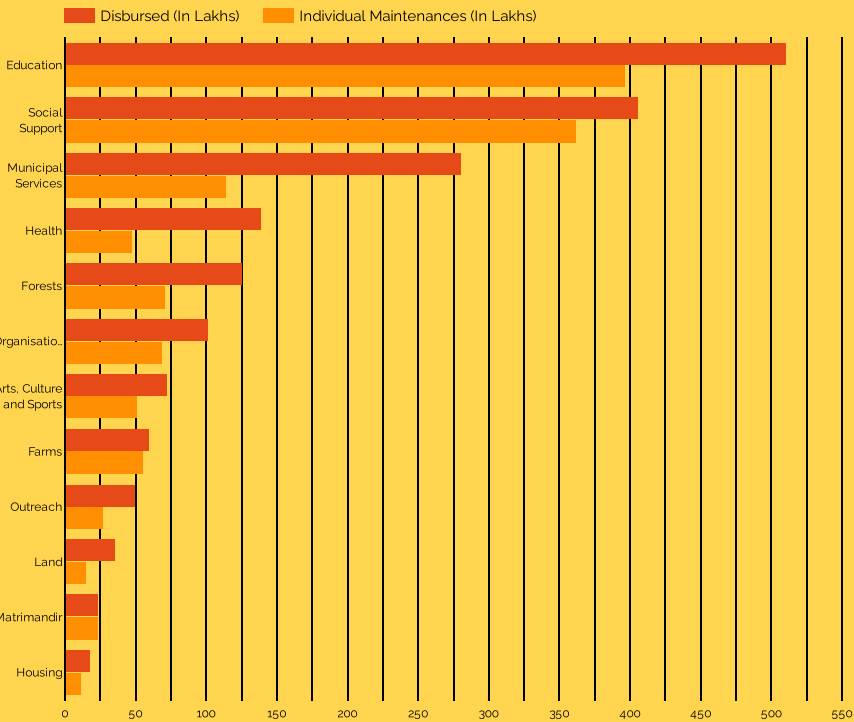
Part of the Maintenance is allocated as credit for specific uses (lunch scheme, health fund, grocery outlets), part in ‘kind’, a Rs. value that can be used anywhere in Auroville, and part in cash that can be used within or outside of Auroville.

Auroville’s population as of March 2021 (end of FY 2020 - 2021) was 2602 adults and 671 children (total of 3273). The below chart shows the Maintenance support disbursed to community members through City Services:

City Services Maintenance Allocations		
Category	Disbursed (In Lakhs)	Individuals
Adult	1,069	626
Apprenticeships	11	9
Children & Students	175	490

Auroville’s income-generating sector additionally supported a total of 677 Full Time Equivalent Adult Maintenances and 140 children and students in the same financial year.

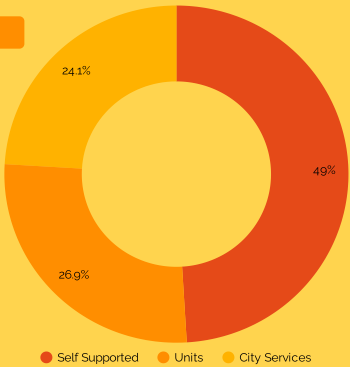
Disbursements from City Services



Human Resources make up the vast majority of Disbursements. Maintenances alone account for 66.6% of all disbursements

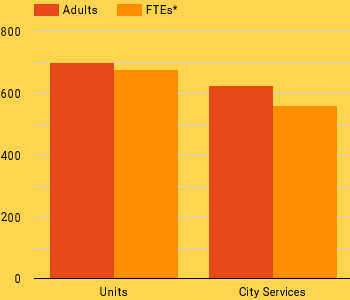
Sources of Support for Aurovilians

Category	Adults
City Services	626
Units	700
Self Supported	1,276
Total	2,602



Adults supported vs FTEs*

Category	Adults	FTEs*
City Services	626	561
Units	700	677
Total Supporte...	1,326	1,238



*Full Time Equivalent Maintenance amount. The number of FTEs is lower than the number of adults receiving a Maintenance, as both Full Time and Half Time Maintenances are disbursed by City Services.

REFLECTION

Changing the narrative

A narrative is a story we tell ourselves, or we are told or absorb from our culture, to make sense of who we are and how we relate to the world.

Narratives are very powerful in both positive and negative ways. They can make us resolute, like “When the going gets tough, the tough get going”, or they can be destructive when misapplied, like the Biblical narrative that tells us God gave mankind ‘dominion’ over the Earth. There are cultural narratives, like stories about how the world was created and how a group or nation came into being, the ‘imagined realities’ which Yuval Noah Harari believes to be crucial for cooperation between large numbers of people. And there are personal narratives in which we explain to ourselves why, for example, somebody dislikes us (“She’s jealous of my success”), or why we keep failing (“Everybody’s against me”), or why we are successful (“I’m more talented than the rest”).

Narratives help us function in a complex world, but some narratives can trap us into a narrow way of thinking. For example, the present Governing Board – along, it seems, with some Aurovilians – appears to think that Auroville has failed because after 53 years we have not yet manifested the city. But this discounts, or fails to take into account, our very considerable achievements over this period.

Or take the present Crown controversy. At the moment there are a number of narratives relating to

it. One is that the speedy completion of the Crown according to the Master Plan is an absolute prerequisite for the construction of the city. Another is that the Crown must be a perfect circle, as this has spiritual significance. Another is that the community has already approved the Master Plan, so there is no need to revisit it. Yet another is that the Master Plan has destroyed the original Galaxy concept.

Such narratives make it easier to frame the present Crown conflict in polemical terms, pitting ‘foresters’ against ‘city developers’, or those in favour of progress versus those who favour the status quo. Such framing is not only highly inaccurate. It undermines our unity and limits our understanding of each other and our possibilities of generating alternative scenarios.

One way to avoid a particular narrative limiting our vision is to generate many alternative narratives.

At the moment, for example, the dominant narrative of the Crown is that it is primarily a road, with all the negative associations of speed, noise, pollution etc. But the Crown is not clearly a road in the original Galaxy plan – where it is largely defined by built structures. And if we substitute ‘Crown way’ (or, to use Roger Anger’s terminology, ‘circulation space’) for ‘Crown road’, suddenly the options multiply. For, as a means of linking the different Zones, a ‘way’ could be a footpath, cattle track, cycle path, canal (which actually featured in one of Roger’s early plans for the Crown), rail, elevated cableway, treetop walkway, or even a

metal strip in the ground, as suggested by one Aurovilian. And the means of transportation could be cable car, train, boat, tram or segway, as well as the electrical vehicles Mother spoke of.

Clearly, depending upon the nature of the linkage, the form, or forms, of transportation chosen, and the degree to which climate and natural features as well as socio-economic factors are taken into account, the dimensions and look of the ‘way’ would be very different, and the routing could go through, round, over and/or under buildings, plazas and natural features.

Interestingly, some of the Dreamweaving archi- tects are already exploring some of these options.

Another way to avoid the limiting of our vision and options is to devise narratives which are as wide and inclusive as possible. In this context, one of the most useful narratives we could reaffirm at present is that there is nothing inherently contradictory between ecological wellbeing and consciously-con- ceived city development.

In this context, the Crown could be conceived as a path of integral unity, a manifestation of unity in diversity in which different materials, forms and natural features are united by a common language or held in dynamic balance; a place to be manifest- ed not only by planners and builders, but also by foresters, artists, children; a site for diverse activities like street theatre, rollerblading, fairs, debate (cf. Speaker’s Corner in London), film shows etc. In other words, a social space as much as a circulation

space, a place where we could all feel at home.

Ultimately, however, the need is to move beyond narratives altogether – for even the best of them are mind-based and limiting – to embrace a wider, more dynamic vision in which ‘truth’ is not static but an aspect of a wider, evolving process.

But this would require a much more flexible stance, based upon the acceptance that none of us possesses the truth in its entirety, as well as sensitiv- ity to the unfolding of the moment rather than an adherence to specific narratives and fixed out- comes.

Mother described such a process when clarify- ing to Satprem how the Ashram had developed.

It’s the consciousness constantly at work, not as a sequel of what was there before, but as a result of what it perceives every instant. In the mental move- ment, there is the consequence of what you’ve done before – it’s not that, it’s the consciousness which CONSTANTLY sees what has to be done. It’s extremely important to understand that, because that’s how it’s still working—for everything. It’s not at all a “formation” whose development you must look after: it’s the consciousness which, every sec- ond, follows – follows its own movement. That allows everything! It’s precisely what allows mira- cles, reversals, and so on – it allows everything. It’s the very opposite of human creations. It was like that, it continues to be like that, and it will always be like that so long as I am here.

Alan

All by my Lonesome

In our big Auroville family, just like everywhere else, loneliness affects all generations and backgrounds, from the misunderstood teenager to the senior in a retirement home, including single parents and people suffering from disorders. “Nowadays, we live in a society where we can survive alone, so it’s easier to become independent,” said Indra. Matthieu added: “The trend is towards a culture of spreading: youth leave their family earlier, they leave the village, they move away. Familial and communal unity is dissolving.” External happenings and other means of socialisation provide an apt distraction from tedium and humdrum routines. Some people feel bored when these diversions are taken from them, whether or not they are surrounded by friends and/or family. What determines the shift from boredom or solitude to loneliness?

Around twenty or so people from all corners of Auroville agreed to answer a few questions, whether or not they actually suffer from loneliness. Some preferred to stay anonymous, most felt comfortable sharing their identity for the purpose of this article. It is not an easy topic to broach as it can be extremely painful and traumatic, almost taboo, so the purpose was to try to raise awareness around this topic and understand it better.

Loneliness

How does one recognise a lonely person? Do they talk about it openly? Unfortunately, they mostly do not, and it can only be seen by observing the behaviour of others.

The people who withdraw from society and hide their suffering are less visible. “This pattern creates a vicious circle: because they suffer from loneliness, they don’t really want to talk about it, which makes them even lonelier because they don’t feel like they can ask for help; to reach out feels like they’re showing a weakness, a vulnerability,” as Virya described.

The opposite coping mechanism is to seek attention and compassion, either in person or via email or Auronet, just looking for ways to communicate. The neediness of those people can often-times be terribly overwhelming.

The pandemic and repeated lockdowns certainly did not help with regard to loneliness, as it obliged everyone to socially distance. During the pandemic, some avoided all and any social contact by getting everything delivered right at home, without talking to anyone.

As Véronique J. explained: “Sometimes, loneliness can be the result of repeated patterns, whether self-inflicted or from others, that can even lead to a pathological state of mind. If you don’t then go through some psychological work on yourself, you stay in those patterns. The very first step is to become aware of it.”

Gnothi seauton, know thyself

Throughout life, we interact with different people or groups of people, and we go through various phases of growth and self-discovery.

At a young age, our life revolves around our parents and they determine a lot of what it entails. In a society that expects the parents to start working again quite soon, the child (and parent) can go through separation anxiety. If handled with care and compassion (by parents as well as professionals), the situation can be dealt with gracefully, avoiding attachment disorders or other linked problems. Thankfully, Auroville provides several options with fun and inspirational places for both children and parents, especially if the latter want to take on a more active role in their children’s upbringing or provide alternative schooling methods.

During adolescence, friendships assume a more crucial significance. As adolescents become more independent of their families, they depend increasingly upon friendships to provide emotional support. At this point, being socially active and accepted becomes of paramount importance. Being rejected is a much bigger deal. During this phase of life, introverted youth will suffer the most from loneliness, because they have the most trouble reaching out and making friends. Indeed, the image of the lonely elderly person is actually just a stereotype: numerous studies and surveys worldwide have shown that loneliness rates are higher in youth and young adults than in the senior group.

Many youth suffer from loneliness: as they are still searching for themselves, they are not comfortable being alone and therefore suffer most from FOMO (fear of missing out). “Younger people don’t really know what they need or want (and don’t want) in their lives. They also have many barriers, which we deconstruct as we grow older, like concerns about what people think about you and what you do,” said Matthieu. As we start knowing ourselves better, we start appreciating alone time.



Solitude or loneliness?

The focus turns inwards, towards our selves, asking ourselves why did I (re)act this way? What am I feeling? Why?

For Véronique, “compartmentalisation truly contributes to loneliness in Auroville. People don’t go to certain places because only different age groups hang out there.” Indeed, as per the adage “Birds of a feather flock together”, humans too have a tendency to limit their meetups to groups of the same interest or age, which directly impacts inter-generational interaction.

Many social constructs dictate that individuals need to find a partner, get married and have children. Numerous people who come to Auroville do so without their family, and some really suffer from leaving their family behind. For some people who never had children despite wanting to, this void can take the form of regret and loneliness.

Despite loneliness being an ailment that affects all generations, ageing itself is a factor that can lead to loneliness: the decline in physical function seriously handicaps some seniors. They can suffer from chronic illness, hearing loss and decline in strength, making them less active and thus more prone to social isolation. This can put them at risk for dementia and other serious medical conditions.

Sometimes, some elderly people choose to push close ones away too, knowing what the end will inevitably be and somehow hoping their passing might be less noticed or less painful (for others) this way. In this case, solitude is their choice; it is “the last thing that remains within their power”. However, as Indra pointed out: “Whether you’re the one who pushes other people away or other people push you away, you end up being alone. That can turn into loneliness if that situation is not embraced or accepted.”

However, some of them choose to not give in to the fear of sickness and death, and decide to be consciously involved in the process of ageing, interestingly watching the process, marvelling at the changes in their body and at the miracle of life.

Part of the yoga

As Enea explained: “Loneliness is a state tied to the ego and the persona we have created. It is part of the relationship we have with ourselves, and the only cure is the discovery of the Self beyond the illusion of self, which is surely not a lonely experience but rather a unifying one.”

Thus, some people choose solitude voluntarily due to a yearning for a yogic life. As Sri Aurobindo put it: “The soul that can live alone with itself meets God”. One interviewee likened the life she chose for herself to the way people live in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry: as simple as possible, aspiring towards higher spiritual spheres. Some believe that this absence of socialisation in their life is part of the sadhana they are going through, or even that longing for human contact is something to

be shunned. Abstinence.

This creates for some people the perfect base or gateway for self-work because it is only in their own silent space that they can really be complete, and BE. “All in all, it seems to me that solitude is a yoga in its own right that allows you to distinguish the true from the false,” said Vaïya. Virya added: “Part of the reason we are here is to work on ourselves, and we learn to deal with ourselves through our past experiences. It is important to know and understand yourself better, to be more conscious of your reactions to things, and to work on detachment, because then feelings of depression or loneliness are less triggered.”

Most of the interviewees are of the opinion that if one accepts oneself and appreciates one’s being, one can be alone without suffering from it. However, psychologist Juan Andrés warned against this type of attitude: “This relatively tough approach of ‘deal with it’ seems to imply that there are problems with one’s personal development. Sometimes other elements can also strongly affect a person’s wellbeing, such as genetic factors, being brought up a certain way, trauma or history, and even limited resources. Some people struggle with their spiritual and psychological evolution, and simply being humble enough to admit that they have limitations and accept their own personal growth process goes a long way. The process of knowing and accepting oneself can surely be beneficial while embracing solitude if done in a holistic and conscious way, away from judgment and comparisons to a supposed ‘right way’ for progress or how others may do it. There are resources, such as psychotherapy, that can help with this inner discovery, growth and work.”

With regard to our communal commitment in the broader sense, Jaya observed: “Auroville is about individual and collective, hand in hand, inseparable. So when you distance yourself from the collective, that aspect may be more difficult to work on.” For several interviewees, living in a community fosters feelings such as love, interaction and contact. Juan Andrés added: “This interdependence should not be seen as an element of weakness but as a place of balance between both the individual and the communal.”

Alone but not lonely

Being alone and loneliness are not synonymous. Indeed, someone surrounded by many people may feel lonely, while a person who prefers to be alone actually likes it that way and does not seek social interaction. “To be alone or to feel sad about being alone is a choice. Different people experience different feelings by being alone. Some are happy or excited to be alone, others feel pain or become depressed,” explained Yuval. “So what makes people choose the way they feel about being alone? Their different needs? Their belief

systems? Their self-image? Their level of sense of Self determination?”

All the interviewees agreed on the point that loneliness is actually just a state of mind, as Theo described: “It’s like a concealed weapon which only hurts yourself.” Additional factors are one’s mental state and environment, as well as strong changes in routines (e.g. death of a close one, Corona lockdowns). “To get out of this,” explained Virya, “you have to want to help yourself. Often, it is easier to stay in the role of victim, because changing position involves a risk, it implies leaving one’s comfort zone; change always leads to something unknown, and if you’re not ready to take that step, you have got to accept where you are at. If you don’t, then you are miserable.”

Overall, the seniors who helped write this article do not actually suffer from loneliness, and one of the main explanations behind this phenomenon is Auroville itself. “Thanks to an enlightening discussion I recently had with my very close friend Bhaga, I understood that help will always be here when the need arises, as life in Auroville is amply filled with love, kindness and good will,” said Vaïya. “To the extent of their capacity, everyone in the wider Auroville family is attentive to others, which allows us to remain positive and grateful. It feels like a constant miracle and gives the extraordinary feeling of living Out of Time, or ‘timelessly’.” Indeed, our small and closely knit community provides a safe environment for most people to be able to reach out and ask for help when the need arises.

Another reason behind this is that most of our seniors are still very active, even at a late age. They continue working, they exercise, they spend time with family and friends, they meet neighbours and acquaintances in public or communal spaces. All in all, they would even appreciate more alone time!

For those that are less or not active anymore, they appreciate this slowing down of rhythm. Even those who initially rued that kind of life when it did happen finally learnt to appreciate the solitude.

Auroville initiatives

In bigger cities, meeting new people through common interests is relatively “easy” because one knows where to find fellow enthusiasts. As Indra explained: “The cultural fabric of Auroville is non-existent. For example, in Europe, if you like football, you can go to the pub, sit in front of a match and connect quite fast with other football fans. Over here, it’s less easy to find that common point of interest because our society is very new and small, very different and diverse, because we come from all over the world. Finding someone that has the same interest as you is less easy here.”

Yet Auroville actually offers quite a large spectrum of activities. There are many things that are nourishing, such as attending cultural events like the cinema, concerts, exhibitions, theatre. Learning and

Transformative healing

training activities abound too: various reading or discussion groups, workshops and classes of all kinds, whether artistic, literary, linguistic. There are also many options to work on one's psychological well-being through dance, exercise, massages, sports, yoga, walks through the forests, parks or Matrimandir gardens. Even bonding with other people through social events seems quite available, with maybe a noticeable void when it comes to spaces dedicated to dating or meeting other single people.

Overall, Auroville offers many more activities and help systems than any place of this size in most developed countries, as Matthew observed: "Auroville is getting better and better at addressing emotional issues that we all face. We only have to see how many of us have had some kind of therapy to see how far it has come over the years. We have great people here to help, such as the therapies offered in Matram for example."

Ever more options

Nevertheless, despite being spoilt for choice, there are always some people who will not partake in any of these activities because it is not quite their cup of tea.

Other initiatives, like inviting children to spend some time in Mahalakshmi Home, are received with either bubbly enthusiasm or complete rejection. Véronique explained a down-side of seniors' homes: "Very often, the elderly do not want to go into a seniors' home because they feel like they're just being conveniently stored out of the way until their death. One solution is to create living spaces for two single people: one youth and one senior, with shared common spaces, like a mix between Humanscapes and Mahalakshmi Home."

Over the years, several people - including interviewees Matthieu and Véronique - have wanted to set up a "social club", managed by people from all generations. This dedicated space would host a number of activities (books, games, arts and crafts) and offer themed evenings (like board games, collective games, improvisation theatre, live music), for a multi-age public. It could also be used for meetings or simply to hang out. Matthieu explained: "This space could serve as an introduction to something new with a structure and thread to follow, not specifically to fight loneliness as there is obviously an intense social stigma around that topic."

Most interviewees agree that every person can help when it comes to reducing loneliness in others, by simply giving neighbours and acquaintances a few minutes of their time and energy. As Indra said: "Sometimes, we try to come up with drastic/big solutions and organise things, but often it's just a question of accepting things that come our way naturally, like investing just a little bit of energy, a few moments, in people with whom you have a little more connection (like your neighbour for example). It can go a very long way with regard to having a healthy society. Everyone giving just those extra few minutes would help the community at large and at a bigger scale." To do that, people need to slow down a little, as Véronique commented: "One notable way of helping oneself and others with feelings of loneliness is to slow down: instead of whizzing around on our motorbikes or cycles, go walking when you can. This gives you and the people you are crossing the time to interact in a meaningful way." This would work most effectively if it stemmed from a sense of goodwill, care and compassion. "It shouldn't be a 'duty' for people to take care of their neighbour. We need to learn to nurture a social spirit and cultivate a sense of community to be less individualistic," added Matthieu.

At some point, we - the larger community - will need to cultivate better communication, trust and sharing, to be able to understand everyone's needs better. As Jaya observed: "We have some very good things in place; now we are more people and communication should be more open about needs, such as home visits, group activities or evening walks. Listening and acceptance are often enough and a great start of things. We can do anything; we have such freedom."

Divya L.

Since the shocking events of early December, a few people have been working to transform and facilitate the trauma and emotions that were triggered. They have been offering differing therapeutic, movement and other modalities.

From 10 December until 31 December, Rosa and Francesco offered 21 days of exercises themed 'Peace through the body'. Rosa had read some of the young people's posts on Facebook and realised "how traumatised they were, unable to sleep, unused to violence in our community". She decided to offer something from her Awareness through the Body (ATB) training. Initially she presumed it would be one to one sessions, but when she enquired with Pitanga, Andrea suggested a wider group offering to the community. The one-hour ATB session focussed on the witness consciousness - to deepen the ability to hold another viewpoint when upsetting events are happening. Then Yoga Nidra to deeply relax and release, and finally an invocation to peace where the group came together in a circle.

In the midst of volatility, it allowed a peaceful and unified energy to be part of community life. After that course at the end of January, Rosa began new weekly ATB classes on the theme of emotions, to help people to deepen their awareness and, "to watch and embrace emotions, yet not let it take decisions for them".

Rosa notices that there is currently in Auroville "a lot of distrust, judgements and labelling happening which is stopping our connection and oneness." Fundamentally she has faith that Auroville is "a laboratory of human transformation. Anything that happens in the world is also here and we need to respond to it to be transformed. There is a lack of trust going on in why Mother put us all together."

She notices what she calls the divine's humour - that the pandemic's name is 'corona', another version of 'crown' - and here we are, in this laboratory of evolution, with a serious dispute over a crown way at the same time as there has been two years of global polarisation as we struggle with the corona virus. She senses an opportunity for deeper change if we can start here in Auroville which can spill over into the world. Rosa comments that she loves ATB as "it's a way back home, to the body, and it can help us to change".

When the Youth Centre was torn down in early December, Dariya spent a few weeks volunteering, repairing, rebuilding and cleaning up. She returned to her existing holistic activities but wanted to support the youth and others whose trauma she witnessed. Previously her Aquatic Bodywork sessions in Quiet was only for groups, but in January she also gave individual sessions to "people who have been active or engaged in this drama", mainly youth and a stressed-out working group members. She offered to help the youth "make community, with actions plans, communication skill development so that they could move on collectively. However, the truth is that there is so much insecurity, so it's a bit like dri-

ving with the foot on the brake and the accelerator at the same time."

With her partner Daniel she also offered regular breathwork sessions, the Quantum Light Breath, to help our emotions move through deep breathing. Initially the idea was for young people but as they were not interested she offered it to others who have needed the time to breathe and "help move some of those feelings."



Sharing a hug in the debris of the former Youth Centre

Every Monday at 5.30pm in Cripa, Dariya leads a dance class. She noted that she has been dancing here for "twenty plus years and for me dance in general is a real regulating awareness practice. Since December this is one possibility of how we can ground the trauma through the body". When asked what she noticed was different in the dances now, she replies that the "energy was obviously so built up in

community, there was more intentional shaking and releasing in that way. In dance the family sense is there, a full community scene, it can be so beautiful."

Singing circles were offered which Dariya felt were "giving a voice... every time it's like a prayer that again brings certain kind of balance, personally and collectively."

Dariya lightly suggests an "old joke of aquatic body workers, that if the Working Committee or Council members could meet after a watsu session, it would be very different, as the 'us and them' would be finished. There could be so much potential". She holds the vision that an Aquatic Body Centre will be built in the centre of Auroville to support this.

Rosa, Daniel and Dariya were all part of a blue t-shirted greeting team who offered hugs to all who arrived at the recent Residents Assembly Meeting, which arose out of a Youth Centre meeting on taking the next steps.

There were many other offerings from the community. The Peace Builders, initially a dozen people, met around the peace table in Unity Pavilion. As they described it in News and Notes, "The meeting had the aim of bringing together Aurovilians to try to find concrete proposals together to overcome this difficult moment, starting from listening to the heart and wisdom of each one. The atmosphere in the room was peaceful and collaborative. All agreed on the need to bridge the disagreements by using compassionate and peaceful courage to bring everyone back to their true centre, which perhaps got lost in the painful events. Collaboration is the only way forward." This led to an initiative to meet on Sundays at 5pm at the Matrimandir to call for peace.

The pool of Silent Presence Keepers offered an opportunity for people in their homes to participate in a collective meditation every evening at 8.30pm for 30 minutes. "We would like to support everyone's efforts to calm down after very agitated days and to create a silent space for the Divine consciousness to land in us and act. Anyone can join from wherever you are in that moment."

Chandra gave a concert with her Bansuri flute in Darkali, in December by the water catchment. To reach the venue, people walked through the recent forest clearance and then the untouched forest. Her music allowed a peace, depth and soothing connection to nature which supported our inner nature to be present.

On 19 December there was a 'come-unity' celebration of the unity in diversity of our human culture on Bharat Nivas' Bhavishyate roof terrace.

There are no doubt plenty of others who offered an open heart, a listening ear, a hug, or a reaching out to people who in this instance are nominally on a different side. These are some of the quiet steps going on right now to transcend and move on together in an integrated way through the divisiveness of recent events.

Peter Lloyd

LETTER

"Nobody is ever right against anybody" Collective working and what The Mother said

Dear Auroville Community,

I am an avid follower of the Auroville community and its developments, and am a well-wisher for its success, even though I have never lived in Auroville. I have been a subscriber to the 'Auroville Today' for about 10-15 years and every month I read, almost entirely from cover to cover, each issue. Indeed, Auroville being an incredible experiment with all of you a part of it, the world outside Auroville looks forward to, and prays for the success of the Auroville experiment. Every step forward you take, augurs well for the rest of us, for humanity.

I have been following the discussion on the 'Right of Way of the Crown' and the 'Auroville master plan'. While it was clear to see the deep differences and the schism that has temporarily formed in the community, it was nevertheless heartening to see the balanced presentation of both points of view in 'Auroville Today', and the attempts at looking within, seeing the larger meaning, the lessons to learn and already to see the efforts at the way forward.

At these critical junctures it helps to remember what The Mother said on what should be our approach to collective efforts and on working together. There was a wonderful piece that was narrated by MP Pandit in his talk on 'The Psychic

Being', that many might not have heard, or have forgotten, and I felt that it would be a good reminder for each of us.

I have transcribed the part of the talk that I felt was relevant, and could be important for the community to hasten the healing and forward movement.

I quote below from the speech of MP Pandit:

"When working with somebody on a project or solving any problems on any level, mainly the physical; and the little guiding voice or light, the psychic being, points the way: How should one proceed when the other party will not listen to another way of doing it some other way. Until now I only waited, and quietly and persistently kept pushing until accepted. It is difficult to explain, and more difficult to do. How can one do it otherwise? Now, this is a question that faces many of us who are involved in a collective effort, a collective working. It is always flattering to believe that I am always right. I thought I should refer the question to Mother. And I read it out last week. And The Mother said very empathetically:

"*Nobody is ever right against anybody. One can never impose one's own conviction, one's opinion, one's feeling on another. The right way for a seeker or for a worker in such a situation where there is difference of opinion is not to believe that he is right, and the other one is wrong*

but to submit the problem to the Divine in a spirit of surrender and trust. He can submit his own conviction. He can submit the whole problem and wait for the answer. In the measure of his sincerity, whether the other one is aware of it or not, the response does come and things do work out in the way they should, not necessarily as I believe to be right."

That disposes of the question. We can never be sure that we are right. We can never be right against anybody. Naturally when one works by oneself, one works for the best of one's lights. There is a growing perfection there is a growing light. And what I felt yesterday to be right I may not feel to be as much right tomorrow. But in a collective endeavour the right attitude is to concede the freedom of others to follow their own convictions. Where there is conflict, where there is difference to submit it to an overseeing power and await silently with trust on its guidance.'

With warm regards

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Sri Aurobindo, Life and Times of the Mahayogi – The Pre-Pondicherry Phase

Manoj Das, who passed away on 27 April 2021, was an inmate of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and a well-known Indian author who wrote extensively in Odia and English. His novels, short stories, travelogues, poetry and his writings on history and culture won him many rewards, amongst which were the Padma Shri, India's fourth-highest Civilian Award, in 2001, and in 2020, the Padma Bhusan, the third highest Award, both for his contributions to the field of literature and education.

Manoj was also active in the field of historical research. In 1971, a few months before Sri Aurobindo's 100th birth anniversary, he received permission from The Mother to travel to England and Scotland to research in the archives of London and Edinburgh the confidential correspondence about Sri Aurobindo between Lord Minto, the Governor-General and Viceroy of British India (1905-1910), and Lord Morley, the then Secretary of State for India.

His research, published under the title *Sri Aurobindo in the First Decade of the 20th Century*, brought to light some little-known facts about India's freedom struggle led by Sri Aurobindo. But even though his work was appreciated by The Mother, Manoj wasn't really happy with the result. As he wrote, "the biggest weakness of the work, apart from its amateur character, was its incompleteness." And over the years, his conviction grew that much about Sri Aurobindo in the first decade of the twentieth century remained untraced.

The mahayogi

This led him to compose the present 716-page book about the early life and times of the Mahayogi. "I am not speaking about Sri Aurobindo at Pondicherry, the Seer of the Supramental future, but of Aurobindo Ghose if you please – of Vadodara, Kolkata and of the British India as a whole," he wrote. And he justifies his view that Sri Aurobindo was already a Mahayogi in those early days with extracts from published and unpublished archival documents and personal diaries.

He quotes Dinendra Kumar Roy, who travelled with Sri Aurobindo from Kolkata to Deoghur: "In a day or two I realized that Aurobindo's heart was devoid of any earthly meanness or nastiness ... he had not the least worldly ambition or human selfishness. As I passed days and nights sharing his abode and came to know him more and more closely, I realised that Aurobindo was not a mortal human, but a god descended under curse. Only the Divine knew why he was made a Bengali and exiled to India." Rabindranath Tagore lauded Sri Aurobindo in 1907 in a poem that started with the line, "Rabindranath, O Aurobindo, bows to three, O friend, O country's friend, O voice incarnate, free, of my country's soul!" Even people who were 'utter materialists' observed something special. As did A.B. Clark, the Principal of the Baroda College, who said to someone: "So you met Aurobindo. Did you notice his eyes? There is mystic fire and light in them. They penetrate into the beyond." And he added, "If Joan of Arc heard heavenly voices, Aurobindo probably sees heavenly visions." Or Subhas Chandra Bose, the future Netaji, who wrote, three years after Sri Aurobindo had left Bengal for Pondicherry, "When I came to Calcutta in 1913, Aurobindo was already a legendary figure. Rarely have I seen people speak of a leader which such rapturous enthusiasm and many were the anecdotes of this great man, some of them probably true, which travelled from mouth to mouth."

So is this yet another hagiography about Sri Aurobindo? "I do not know the right word for a biography where the author records, quite objectively, the impressions and experiences of others for whom the subject indeed had proved to be their supreme ideal," writes Manoj. "If this too is hagiography, then the word deserves greater respectability."

But the aim of this book is not to describe "the unparalleled awe and wonder that Sri Aurobindo's personality inspired," but an attempt to construct a biography of Sri Aurobindo's life up to his arrival in Pondicherry, and to give a historic insight of India's freedom struggle in the first decade of the previous century. The attempt to write a

biography, writes Manoj, is fraught with the dangers of incompleteness and inaccuracies, as Sri Aurobindo himself had warned that nobody could write about his life because it had not been on the surface for men to see. This caveat notwithstanding, Manoj gives a detailed account of Sri Aurobindo's life in England, Baroda, and later Kolkata, which includes his family life and what is known about his spiritual development and experiences in that period.

Politics in the early 1900s

A large part of the book deals with the political developments in the period 1900-1910. Many books about this period of Indian history barely mention Sri Aurobindo – he only participated in the struggle for a brief time. "But those historians forget to record that it was the ideals popularised by him – *swadeshi* [the movement to boycott foreign goods and encourage the use of domestic products, eds.], non-cooperation, autonomy – which became the driving force," writes Manoj. This serious omission is set right in this book. Manoj mentions that the aims of absolute independence and autonomy were for the first time ever pronounced in the pages of the magazine *Bande Mataram* in 1907, in an article written by Sri Aurobindo.

These views were opposed by the Moderates, the moderate section of the Indian National Congress, who accepted British rule and wouldn't dream of the British ever relinquishing their hold on India, notwithstanding the increasingly harsh realities of a ruined national economy. They wished India to become part of a federation led by the British. But the section known as the Nationalists or the Extremists, led by Tilak and Sri Aurobindo, wanted absolute independence and autonomy. Manoj describes how the conflict in the party climaxed in December 2007, in what has become known as "the split in Surat", where the Nationalists broke up the Congress in a historic scuffle, on the orders of Sri Aurobindo. Writes Manoj: "Today's historians barely mention the consequences of this split; but it was more than a landmark in the history of the National Congress; it was a landmark in the history of the nation, and was decisive to convince the Indian people that they must be liberated from foreign rule."

Bande Mataram

Manoj dedicates a special chapter to the origins of *Bande Mataram* (*Hail to The Mother*), the national song of India that is considered "the most enduring gift of the Swadeshi movement and the uncrowned national anthem of India". Sri Aurobindo called it a mantra, and wrote "The Mantra has been given and in a single day a whole people had been converted to the religion of patriotism. The Mother had revealed herself." Manoj describes how this mantra fired India and became a greeting amongst friends and an invocation at political and social meetings, much to the annoyance of the British who banned it by a Government circular. "The more widespread this practice became, the more active became the merciless lathis wielded by the police, breaking thousands of limbs over hundreds of processions. Students were fined, flogged or expelled from schools for shouting *Bande Mataram*, houses were set on fire because the slogan ringing inside did not stop despite threats."

A major part of the book is dedicated to the attempts of the British authorities to convict, expel or incarcerate the leaders of the budding Indian independence movement, such as Bal Gangadhar Tilak of Maharashtra, called by the British "The father of the Indian unrest", who advocated "Swaraj (self-rule) as his birthright", and who was later punished with a six-years jail sentence in Burma; Lala Lajpat Rai of Punjab, who was deported to Mandalay after taking part in political agitation in Punjab; and Bipin Chandra Pal of Bengal, a man Sri Aurobindo

later referred to as 'one of the mightiest prophets of nationalism'. Together they formed the triumvirate popularly known as Lal Bal Pal, which changed the political discourse of the Indian independence movement.

Four newspapers

Sri Aurobindo gave his full support. To implement his objective of converting the whole nation to the ideal of independence, four newspapers were started: *Bande Mataram*, *Sandhya*, *Yugantar* and *Navashakti*. All persistently preached the need for Indian independence – in outspoken or more veiled language. These papers had an informal common editorial board with Aurobindo at its head. On August 16, 1907, he was arrested on the grounds that the *Bande Mataram* was spreading sedition through its articles. But he was acquitted as the evidence was inconclusive.

The British once again arrested him in 1908 for his alleged participation in a bomb attempt to kill the Chief Presidency Magistrate of Kolkata, Douglas Kingsford. The attempt failed but led to the inadvertent killing of two innocent ladies. The British administration was convinced that Arabinda, as he was known, was behind the attempt. "There was a terrible fear at the top brass of the British Indian Administration of Arabinda Ghose", writes Manoj, quoting a letter of Sir Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, to Lord Minto, the Governor-General of India, urging him to deport Arabindo forthwith.

Much of the Indian press, however, took a different stand. While regrets were expressed that two guiltless people had died, there was sympathy for the young anarchists who had made the attempt. Some newspapers even made angry protests that Aurobindo Ghose had been arrested and had been refused bail, and stated that the anarchism was the outcome of the refusal of the British cabinet to grant self-government of India and revoke the partition of Bengal.

The Alipore Bomb Trial

Manoj describes the proceedings at the Alipore Bomb Trial in great detail, including the memorable concluding statement by his defence lawyer, Chittaranjan Das – "... long after he [*Sri Aurobindo*, eds.] is dead and gone, he will be looked upon as the poet of patriotism, as the prophet of nationalism and the lover of humanity. Long after he is dead and gone, his words will be echoed and re-echoed not only in India, but across distant seas and lands. Therefore I say that the man in his position is not only standing before the bar of this Court, but before the bar of the High Court of History."

Manoj writes how, on the day of the verdict, people thronged the courts, the grounds around and the highways. And he gives a verbatim account of major parts of the judgment itself. "The point is whether his writings and speeches, which in themselves seem to advocate nothing more than the regeneration of his country, taken with the facts proved against him in this case, are sufficient to show that he was a member of the conspiracy. I am of the opinion that it falls short of such proof as would justify one in finding him guilty of so serious a charge," wrote judge Beachcroft, acquitting Sri Aurobindo. But many of the others accused were convicted, including Sri Aurobindo's younger brother Barin who was awarded capital punishment (which later was reduced to transportation for life). Sri Aurobindo meditated while Mr. Beachcroft read out the judgment...

Manoj recounts how Aurobindo experienced his incarceration at Alipore Jail as a spiritual boon, citing from his *Tales of Prison Life*, his *Uttarpara Speech* and as well as from the recollections of his fellow prisoners. "His eyes seemed far away, though they were not vacant, as if he dwelt in some far off twilit region ... At

night the warders would come and tell us, 'Aravind remains standing the whole night'. They did not disturb him." And when the Governor of Bengal came to visit the ward, he found Sri Aurobindo suspended with his head on the floor and feet in the air. As Sri Aurobindo casually revealed in a conversation with a few disciples, "In Alipore Jail I found once after my meditation that my body had taken a position which was physically impossible: it was actually raised a few inches above the ground, there was what is known as levitation."

The Aurobindo Ghose who was released from prison was a different man. In his own words, "During this period his view of life was radically changed; he had taken up Yoga with the original idea of acquiring spiritual force and energy and divine guidance for his work in life. But now an inner spiritual life and realisation which had continually been increasing in magnitude and universality and assuming a larger place took him up entirely and his work became a part and result of it and besides far exceeded the service and liberation of the country and fixed itself in an aim, previously only glimpsed, which was world-wide in its bearing and concerned with the whole future of humanity."

The realizations

By that time, he said, "he had already realized two of the four great realizations on which his Yoga and his spiritual philosophy are founded: the realization of the silent, spaceless and timeless Brahman; and that of the cosmic consciousness and of the Divine as all beings and all that is. To the other two realizations, that of the supreme Reality with the static and dynamic Brahman as its two aspects and that of the higher planes of consciousness leading to the Supermind, he was already on his way in his meditations in the Alipore jail."

The last chapters of this remarkable book describe Sri Aurobindo's involvement in two new publications, the weekly newspaper *Karmayogin* and the Bengali *Dharma*, and his attempts, now that many of his party's leaders were no longer active or had been expelled, to rekindle the patriotic spark and unite the scattered revolutionary groups. The British administration took notice and started exploring every possibility to deport or imprison him. By the end of July 1909, Sister Nivedita warned him of the Government's plan to deport him, and advised him to lead the movement from outside the country.

Manoj presents correspondence from the highest echelons of the British administration showing its efforts to find legal grounds to stop the activities of Arabinda Ghose. On February 25th, 2010, the decision was taken to prosecute him for sedition; but as he was nowhere to be found, a warrant for his arrest was issued on April 4th. For Sri Aurobindo had left. As he later recounted, "I suddenly received a command from above in a Voice well known to me, in three words 'Go to Chandernagore'. Chandernagore was a French possession, one of the five scattered enclaves that made up the French settlements in India. He boarded the boat on February 20th, and for a month and a half remained in hiding in Chandernagore, engaged in sadhana, stopping his active engagement with the two newspapers. Afterwards, under the same 'sailing orders', he left Chandernagore and reached French Pondicherry on April 4th, 1910.

"The records and impressions of events in the external life of Sri Aurobindo till he reached Pondicherry as presented in this book probably constitute one-tenth, if not less, of the events in his life," concludes Manoj. This cannot be seen as a shortcoming. Manoj has left us a major work on Sri Aurobindo's earlier life and times. If the book has a shortcoming, it is only the absence of an alphabetical index.

Carel

Sri Aurobindo, Life and Times of the Mahayogi – The Pre-Pondicherry Phase

By Manoj Das

Published by the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education

Available from SABDA

716 pages

Price in India Rs 750

In the land of majestic giants

In early February, Ashwin Ezhumalai presented his photos of the Himalayas at an exhibition in Citadines Centre d'Art. Taken over six years during different treks with other Aurovilians in rarely visited valleys and passes in Himachal Pradesh, they capture the different aspects of this stark yet magical high altitude landscape: deep valleys, rock-strewn glaciers, grassy uplands, sacred lakes, immense starscapes, and stunning snow-capped mountains playing hide-and-seek with clouds. Ashwin points out that while physically the challenges are immense at such an altitude – making the quality of the photography all the more remarkable – “in the presence of these tranquil, majestic beings full of life and energy, it became an inward journey, a journey of getting to know myself and discover who I was and who I was becoming: and at the end of the trek the outcome outweighed all the demerits and left me with a profound experience, a sense of feeling whole and alive!”.

Above all, the exhibition was an experience of the vastness, purity and unearthly beauty of a landscape in which we humans seem awkward interlopers, dwarfed by something which transcends our limited vision. It was both humbling and refreshingly liberating.

Alan



PASSINGS

Sanjeev Aggarwal

On February 24th, Sanjeev Aggarwal passed away at the age of 70 in JIPMER, after a cardiac arrest.

Sanjeev came to Auroville at the end of 1981, cutting short a successful career as a High Court lawyer in New Delhi. He was, with his legal background and formation, the right person to continue, as its administrative head, from 1992 onwards the immense challenge of bringing to further fruition the Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research (SAIER), which had been set up in 1984 by Kireet Joshi and Alain Bernard. The Institute now oversees the many schools and other educational projects in Auroville and the bioregion. Sanjeev was its main pillar of strength throughout the years. His focus on Auroville's Udavi school in Edaiyanchavadi village made the school expand enormously.

His greatest joy was in enabling young people to discover their goal and potential in the context of Auroville. He loved the concept of the Gurukul and brought up four girls in his own house.

His other passion was Auroville's organisation. He was a member of three Working Committees and took up innumerable other administrative functions and, with them, the accompanying complexity and tension. With his strong-willed character and deep dedication towards the development of Mother's Auroville, Sanjeev took part wholeheartedly in Auroville's communal meetings and debates. In the last years, he curtailed his administrative work due to medical problems.

Sanjeev's remains were cremated at Auroville's burial and cremation grounds on



Dakshina Vanzetti

Dakshina Vanzetti, a ballet dancer, artist, entrepreneur and co-founder of the Lodi Ashram, California, passed away on February 17, 2022 at the age of 65. She had been suffering from cancer.

Dakshina was a dear friend and a spiritual sister to many. Her spiritual path first brought her to the Atmaniketan Ashram, but later to the Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham in Lodi, California, where all those who, in The Mother's words, “wish to serve the Divine” could offer themselves in all their parts and activities in a collective sadhana. She started ‘Auromere’, a commercial undertaking which sold books, shampoo, incense, toothpaste and more and donated 10% of the



proceeds to Auroville while the balance supported the Ashram. She also served on the Board of the Foundation for World Education and built Mother's House for guests visiting the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. “Her dedication and discipline and love of beauty was an inspiration to all who knew her,” wrote Julian Lines. “The last days of her life and her moment of departure were calm, graceful, and filled with the presence of the Divine,” recounts Govinda. “She lived out her final days in the beautiful atmosphere of her own room, and a profound peace enveloped the entire ashram.”

A short video about Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham can be seen at <https://youtu.be/-zbfmJQpfGBk>



Kamala Tiwari at the Health Center, at the Matrimandir, and at CSR with Aurosatprem. The funeral of Saraswati's remains took place in France on 16 February. Her Auroville friends bade her farewell during a silent gathering at the Matrimandir Banyan tree.

Saraswati Champaloux

Saraswati Helene Champaloux, an early Aurovillian, passed away on February 5th 2022 in France after a long struggle with cancer. She was 75 years old.

Saraswati received her name from Champaklal in 1991 and joined Auroville two years later. During her time in Auroville, Saraswati researched the several levels of the energetic patterns that surround living beings and earth and she developed a deep emphatic connection with the world. She was working in connection with the Angelic Entities and she was painting them in Auroville when they allowed her to reproduce their energetic pattern. She had an Angel's theme exhibition in September 2000 at Pitanga art gallery in Auroville. These art works were deeply inspiring and with a wonderful presence. Apart from being an artist, she worked as an assistant to Dr



Aamit Bawa

On February 18, 2022 Amit Bawa passed away due to cardiac arrest at the age 48.

Hailing from Srinagar, Aamit came first to Auroville in 2008 and became Aurovillian in 2011. With his friendly, outgoing and ever-smiling nature, he was a welcome figure in the various Auroville services to which he contributed, such as Deepanam School as learner and facilitator, as member of the Matrimandir Access group at Matrimandir and the Visitors'

Centre, as active participant in children's school camps, and more. In later years he oversaw Swagatham guesthouse in Bharat Nivas, where he lived peacefully with his cat family and transformed the gardens into a true flower paradise. His dedicated and cheerful presence will be sorely missed. Aamit's remains were cremated at the Auroville mandapam on February 20th.

Auroville Festival 2022

As part of the Auroville Festival to celebrate The Mother's birthday and the foundation day of Auroville held from February 21-28, various events have been organized, amongst them were a number of zoom conferences on the themes of Mother's Birth Anniversary and Charter of Auroville and Auroville as a Future Model for the World; Savitri, Cradle of the Overman; research on the Soul of Nations and National Pavilions; the practical manifestation of the city and the role of UNESCO and GOI; the spiritual significance of Auroville; the Five Dreams of Sri Aurobindo; and Towards Spiritual Education. Many eminent speakers have agreed to join the celebration, including: His Excellency Shri R.N. Ravi, Honorable Governor of Tamil Nadu and Chairman of the Auroville Foundation; Dr. Karan Singh, former Chairman of the Auroville Foundation; Dr. David Frawley and Ms. Dena Merriam, members of the Auroville International Advisory Council; Ms. Ameeta Mehra, former member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation; Dr. Jayanti Ravi, Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Dr. Soumitra Basu, Dr. Alok Pandey, Dr. Ananda Reddy, Anu Legrand, Manoj Pavitrana, Dr. Vladimir Yatsenko, Aurelio, Dr. Don Salmon, Matthew Andrews, Janak Khandwala, Chandresh Patel, Pashi Kapur and others.

Many Auroville residents, however, felt that the 'Auroville Festival 2022' is inappropriate at this moment due to the current and ongoing upheaval. Instead, some have been calling for a 'Silence Festival'.

Sri Aurobindo's Gayatri mantra live streamed

The Auroville choir and instrumental ensemble live streamed a performance of “Om Tat Savitur”, a composition by Holger on Sri Aurobindo's Gayatri mantra, on Thursday 17th of February. Visit <https://youtu.be/Jm7ujTigsQA>

Visa recommendations restricted

The Secretary Auroville Foundation, who has been authorized to issue letters of recommendation up to periods of five years required for obtaining a visa or stay visa extension, has started to issue recommendations for one year only, including for long-term foreign residents who have received 5-year recommendations earlier without problem. No reasons have been given.

Auroville Tomorrow

OutreachMedia, the unit which has been taken over by the Secretariat of the Auroville Foundation, has launched the first one-page issue of 'Auroville Tomorrow'. For more information contact outreachmedia@auroville.org.in.

AV Council report

In the latest Auroville Council report, the Council wrote that it is exploring new ways of organising itself. As a first step, it intends to create two specialised subgroups comprised of Council members and resource persons, one to manage all conflicts, the other to oversee the creation, harmonisation and observance of Auroville mandates, policies and guidelines. The Council noted that after the ATDC had expressed concerns late last year about the Appeal Process and questioned the need to adhere to it and to the RA decision, the FAMC have also recently informed the Council that it will no longer cooperate with any appeals until the Appeal Process is reviewed.

Becoming and being a Shifu (master)

BnB Shifu is a one-year intensive course in skills of electronics (VLSI) and programming, competencies and inner capacity for the youth started in 2021 by Dr. Sanjeev Ranganathan and his team at C3STREAM Land Designs (C3SLD). The project is administered through STEM land, the sister educational arm under SAILER. Graduation for the first batch took place on February 1, 2022 and the new graduates looked thrilled to have completed the course. The graduation ceremony was a little different from usual ones with each graduate sharing their learning and growth and their individual mentors giving their own feedback about the growth of each student. Auroville Today talked to Dr. Sanjeev Ranganathan and to Sivaraman, one of the graduates, about the programme.

Auroville Today: Why did you name the programme BnB Shifu?

Sanjeev: ‘Shifu’ in Japanese means master. We are looking at mastery in skills, in the ability to use skills to shift culture and also mastery of the self. The youth need to ask themselves: Am I willing to invest a year for my own growth? Not for a certificate but to develop myself integrally.

And the second reason is that ‘Shifu’ was the name of my dog. She was very sick for two weeks at the end of her life. I paused all my busy doings and was with her. The pause also gave me time to still myself and to think about how we could add value as a team to ourselves and our community. The idea for this project became concrete during that quiet time. In a way it was to honour this time she gave me as her last gift. Becoming represents the process and practice needed to BE a Master. BEing also represents the need to continue these practices learned for life.

I am told that no fees are charged for doing this course. How do you fund the programme?

One of the volunteers at the NGO ‘Asha for Education’, which I am associated with, was keen to set up a scholarship fund in memory of her mother, Smt. B. V. Kameswari. Her family wanted to create a corpus so the interest could be used for the scholarship of one youth. After reading about the Shifu programme, the family decided to give the entire amount for this programme. Due to this seed fund, we were able to offer the programme free of charge.

Further, it is a ‘pay it forward’ fund and when the youth graduate and join work we ask the company to replenish the funds used for their programme. The expenses are primarily food and stay and come to between INR 4000 to 5000 per student per month. The students take up roles to run the programme to keep the expenses to a minimum. The investment for infrastructure for the programme came through donations from Aura Semiconductor Pvt. Ltd. and Quilt.AI.

Why are there so few students in the programme?

We have space for nine men and nine women. Last year, around twenty people applied and we selected 8 of them as we felt they were serious and would benefit from the programme. Three of the students left mid-way, though one of them has joined again this year. The applicants have to fill up a very detailed application form and then there is a written examination and a series of interviews.

We have kept the programme open even for those who were inclined immediately after 12th standard, but only got applicants who had completed a bachelor’s degree. The number of people who are willing to invest in themselves and learn rigorously for a year is very low. Everyone wants a degree. And after getting a degree, even though they may have no skill, the general attitude is that if I have completed my degree, I need to get a job. I don’t need to learn.

For the next batch, we have already selected



The graduates of the BnB Shifu programme. From left to right Arun, Sri Bhavani, Santosh, Sivaraman and Narmadha.

five people. We have designed the Shifu course as a running programme and people can join at any time of the year. We may have more people joining as we find more suitable candidates. It’s much better this way as there is an overlap and the interaction of old and new students supports peer learning.

I understand there is no classroom teaching in this programme?

It has turned out like that. We had initially planned it, but we found that the method of individualised learning with mentors is far more powerful and effective.

One of my friends, Sanjay Tumati, had moved here because he thought we would be teaching the students. And then we both realised that the students were learning well enough without ‘classes’ from us. He ran a lab for them which spilled over to children who wanted to learn electronics!

How do the students learn?

A lot of learning right now is peer and mentor supported online learning. We have a tie-up with Navgurukul that allows the youth to do courses on Coursera and also get certification. The online courses for programming are quite rich. We have identified some courses that really support development of programming with project based learning. The electronics part of the course is more guided. Here they are doing laboratory experiments or they are working closely with a mentor.

Each student has a mentor who supports and tracks the progress of a student on a one-to-one basis.

How does mentorship work?

Each student gets a mentor based on what they are working on for at least one semester. The mentors are practitioners who are working in the area the student is learning and who are willing to invest in the growth of the student. All students reflect at the end of the day. Mentors start with reading their reflections and are available for them to have a conversation, give guidance and clear their doubts. This supports self-directed learning where a person is learning on their own and help is available when needed.

Where do the youth get employed?

We provided an opportunity for all the graduates to join us at C3STREAM Land Designs at the end of the programme. They have all joined us and,

like each of us, they also commit to volunteering to support youth and children through STEM land.

Why do you have only two streams, programming and electronics (specifically VLSI)?

It’s because these are our skills. We can only ‘teach’ what we practice. Actually, one of our students started a new stream which we hadn’t even thought of. It is VLSI automation with electronics and programming together. This stream seemed more suitable for this student, given her interest and skills. We can always create something new, depending on the inclination of the students.

How does inner growth take place for the students?

We decided we will include what helped us grow. This included Vipassana Meditation, the Radical Transformational Leadership (RTL) programme, yoga and sports. Also the whole programme is framed for reflection. We have created an online portal where they reflect on ‘what I did well today’, ‘what I learned today about myself’ and ‘what will I do differently because of what I learned today?’ If they’re working on improving their English, then they will write about what happened today and they will send it to me, and I will correct it and send it back.

Every morning, the students join us for a ten minute practice of Anapana meditation where we observe our natural breath (it is a part of Vipassana meditation) and that helps us be calm and concentrate the mind. We organised a ten-day residential Vipassana retreat for the students on the premises and most students do a one hour sit before meeting

us. They also did a RTL programme last year and every couple of weeks we do one hour of RTL refresher in the morning. RTL tools are self-awareness team building tools and we apply these on a daily basis.

Tumati related how one of the students benefited from the daily Anapana meditation. She had a problem in maths which she was unable to solve. She meditated for 10 minutes and immediately after that she could easily solve the problem. Thus, the concentration developed by meditation was helping the students in their work.

Are you coming up with anything new in the future?

We are hoping to start a three year Bachelor of Vocation (B.Voc) course (after 12th grade or equivalent) in ‘Applied electronics and Chip Design’ and ‘Programming and Machine Learning’ this year, along with the Auroville Institute of Applied Technology (AIAT). Last month, Auroville tied up with Pondicherry University for this. B.Voc are new programmes introduced as part of the 2020 National Educational Policy (NEP) that are meant to be practical and industry oriented. We would like to be in-line with integral development of skills, competencies and inner capacity, as happens on the BnB Shifu programme, with Pondicherry University taking care of the certification. It is hard to transform old programmes like BTech or BSc bit by bit. The hope is since we are starting from scratch we can do something new that is really needed for the youth.

As told to Archana

Sivaraman, one of the graduates recounts his experience

I joined this course after doing a four year engineering course but I learnt very little or rather nothing in those 4 years of engineering. We used to memorise and then take the exams. We could not apply anything. Even our teachers could not help us apply as they too had learnt from textbooks and did not know how to apply. But in this year I have learnt so much. Here we learn things and then we apply them. I learnt programming and then I made software and developed games. I learnt embedded programming and I applied it in hardware or in software communication. I play with it and get confidence in using it. Some nights I did not sleep because I was enjoying so much what I was doing that I did not want to stop. I was able to see the results instantly. I didn’t take any leave during the last year and I didn’t even feel like going home during the Covid lockdown as it was so interesting for me.

We would get up at 5.30 am, brush our teeth and then go together for a 30 minute morning jog. After we come back, we will do the yoga practice of *surya namaskara* for another half an hour. Then we freshen up and we do a 10 minute practice of *Anapana* meditation and then we start our work. We start it with a morning meeting with the whole team. We work till 5 PM and then I go and work out in the gym. Most importantly, I learned how to learn during this programme.

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