

Auroville Today

DECEMBER 2013, No.293

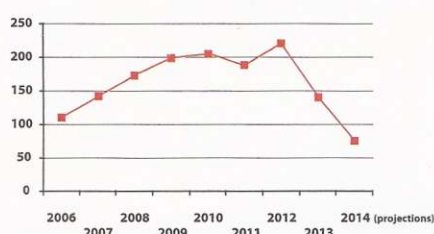
Auroville's monthly news magazine since 1988

Auroville's economy hits stormy weather

Lyle is one of the Aurovilians who keeps a close watch on the development of Auroville's economy. Being a member of a former Budget Coordination Committee (BCC), he was recently asked by today's BCC to present a brief on the future of Auroville's economy. The prospects, he says, are bleak.

The warning bells starting ringing late. In October this year, the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC), which is responsible for managing the incomes and expenditure of Auroville's Central Fund, noticed that the Central Fund's buffer stood at 138 lakhs. The buffer had nose-dived from October last year, when it stood at 220 lakhs. This year's expenses of 113 lakhs exceeded last year's of 88 lakhs; this year's income was 77 lakhs as against 71 lakhs last year. The expenses had increased by 28%, while income had only increased by 8%.

Central Fund Reserves on October 2006-2014



"It's a very worrying development," says Lyle. "Our projections suggest that we will see the buffer going further down to 60 lakhs or less within a year, possibly faster. The community will have to be prepared. This year, the BCC increased the budgets by an average of 10-11% to keep pace with inflation – as it has done in the past. But contributions to Central Fund are not likely to keep pace. By next October, if contributions do not pick up, we will be in a very vulnerable position. Then, community services might not receive an increase in their budgets that matches inflation; it might even be significantly less than the inflation rate. Inflation in India, currently around 11% this year, does not give signs of abating, so these people will then have to cope with a maintenance that buys them less. It will be hard, especially for the poorer members of the community who fully depend upon the community for their income."

Commercial units in difficulty

How did this all happen? "If you look at the graph, you'll see that up to 2012 we were actually doing quite well," says Lyle. "The world financial debacle in 2008 did not affect Auroville's Central Fund. We had been projecting doom and gloom, but it did not happen. Income and expense kept a parallel increase. And up to 2010 the buffer increased. It now seems the weakness of world markets finally caught up with Auroville."

Some of our most important export-oriented businesses are facing serious difficulties. Filature, one of Auroville's major garment units, has closed, and Auromode Atelier, another major garment unit, has diminished activities. Both have been depending on one major client, and that client is now changing direction. Most critically, a third unit, Maroma, is facing the possible loss of a major client and is in difficulties. It was, and still is, the largest unit contributing to the Central Fund. But it has decreased its contribution by 1.5 lakhs per month. Its difficulty has also affected Lumière, Auroville's screen-printing unit, which was mainly depending on work provided by Maroma. Lumière had to lay-off many of its workers. Another unit, Bijou, has just closed and had to lay off its employees. Their closing doesn't affect the Central Fund as much as the others – it only received around Rs. 36,000 a year from them – but the closure is yet another indication of our worsening position.

Today we are projecting that income from commercial units will fall from an average of 13% in the years 2004-13, to only about 2%, if we are lucky. If our income does not pick up to keep pace with inflation, we will have to cut even more into our reserves and eventually reduce our expenditures.

While these developments dramatically affect the Central Fund's income from commercial units, luckily it does not affect the Central Fund's income from interest of the Financial Service, as none of these units parked much of their reserves with the Unity Fund. "That has historic reasons," says Lyle. "The Unity Fund was created with the aim to centralise all reserves of Auroville. At the time, the then Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, Mr. Ramaswamy, attempted to gain control over the community's finances. He was ultimately rebuffed by the Governing Board, but his attempt didn't go well with many units, which still refuse to park their reserves in the Unity Fund."

City Services Income and Payments 2004-05 to 2013-14

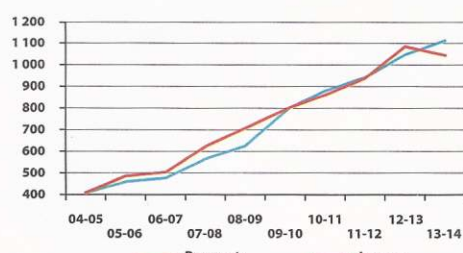


PHOTO COROLAN

Some of Auroville's garment units are closing or sizing down

Halting the decline

Can anything be done to halt the decline? "It's difficult," he says. "The BCC will have to be more vigilant and go to the commercial units that are not contributing adequately and ask them to meet their obligations. We did that exercise some years back, and we collected quite a lot of money – a few unit executives grumbled, but most complied. Some even paid up their arrears for two or three years. We also checked the books and found some cases of incorrect accounting, such as a holiday trip booked on the accounts of the unit. Of course, doing this work isn't exactly a popular exercise. But given the circumstances, the BCC should not avoid it."

"The problem here," he says, "is that the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) rarely shows its teeth. They have never come up with clear criteria for business management, including which kind of expenses are acceptable and which are not. Always, when the issue was brought up, a kind of fog would settle over the discussion and the issue was never resolved."

There is another work to be done by the FAMC. "Auroville is drowning in self-created bureaucracy. We have now two government audits a year, and an internal audit initiated by the Secretary's office. This is too much, especially for the smaller units, which are at a disadvantage as compared to businesses elsewhere in India that are not

subjected to this kind of accountancy control. If the units are struggling to survive, the last thing they need is to cope with increased costs created by this bureaucracy. The FAMC needs to design a more flexible structure that takes into account unit size."

He mentions the experiment with Auroville Activities. "We created this unit some years ago to give a legal umbrella to the work done by many individual Aurovilians – work that has a very limited financial scope. We also thought that this would encourage them to start donating to Auroville. But it hasn't really happened. The accounting fees represent a substantial percentage of their total profit and their contributions to the Central Fund have not really increased."

Another work has to be taken up by the Auroville Board of Commerce (ABC). "Manuel Thomas and Henk Thomas have made some substantial recommendations [see next page]. These should be studied to see if they can be implemented. Take, for example, their suggestion to start a think-tank on business development; or on creating a central marketing organisation promoting the products of a number of units to diminish costs. These recommendations have to be evaluated. Here, the ABC has to take the lead."

And the services? "Experience has taught us that it is very difficult for them to consider budget cuts," says Lyle. "But they should be prepared to do the painful exercise. Austerity may be closer than they think."

Carel

Auroville's different economy

Auroville's economy is known to be fundamentally different from those around us. What exactly are those differences?

Aurovilians frequently say that we aim for something different. A key arena of this aim is its economy. There is vast disagreement amongst Aurovilians regarding the ultimate or even evolving shape of our economy: it is an argument that straddles the age old tension between individual freedom and community responsibility with an additional twist of spiritual aspiration. What is indisputable is that Auroville's economy is fundamentally different from those around us.

This difference begins with the mixture of precepts and aims set out by the Mother, some of which include:

- Auroville belongs to nobody in particular.
- All industries belong to Auroville.
- All surplus profits should go to the Central Fund.
- There will be no taxes, but each will contribute to the collective welfare in work, kind, or money.
- Ideally, inside Auroville money will not be exchanged amongst Aurovilians.
- Everyone's material need should be

met, not according to notions of right and equality, but on the basis of the most elementary necessities.

- Once basic needs are met, everyone must be free to organize his/her life, not according to monetary means, but according to inner capacities.
- Individual merit should have greater importance than value accrued by material wealth and social position.
- Work should not be a means of gaining one's livelihood, but the means to express oneself, develop one's capacities and possibilities, while doing at the same time service for the community.

These concepts, some of which are in effect and others in process, have resulted in an economy that is radically different from western capitalism. Land and fixed capital assets are owned by the collective via the Auroville Foundation. Individual Aurovilians own neither the land they reside on nor the houses they steward. Although Aurovilians are generally expected to purchase the houses they steward, inheritance rights are denied, nor may Aurovilians sell the houses they steward to others, not even to fellow Aurovilians.

Aurovilians who establish units are expected to risk their capital, but they may not sell the unit, nor can they derive vast fortunes if successful. The primary beneficiary of success is supposed to be the collective. This naturally slows the growth of the township because many people who might aspire to the ideals of human unity and the integral yoga are unprepared to undertake the financial risks required to join Auroville.

But the different economy envisaged is not always easy to implement.

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12/25/2013

Economics for People and Earth – The Auroville case 1968-2008

Finally it happened. After 15 years of assiduous research, on October 2nd, 2013, Prof. Dr. Henk Thomas from The Netherlands and Chartered Accountant Manuel Thomas from India presented their book *Economics for People and Earth – The Auroville Case 1968-2008* at the Town Hall.

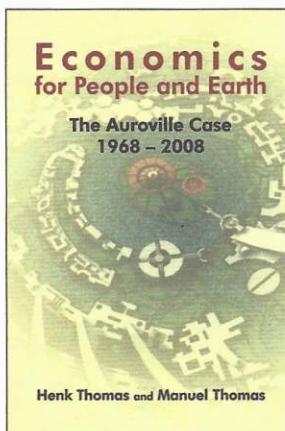
The conference room was overflowing with Aurovilians and guests. The chief guests were Mrs. Sheela Rani Chunkath, Additional Chief Secretary and Chairperson and Managing Director of the Tamil Nadu Handicrafts Development Corporation and Mr. Mohan Verghese Chunkath, Additional Chief Secretary, Environment and Forests, Tamil Nadu Government. Guy and Harini, who had been part of the research team, moderated the book launch.

"Henk first visited Auroville in 1991," recounted Guy. "At that time he was Chairman of Stichting De Zaaier. He soon became very intrigued by Auroville's economy, particularly as he had in the past studied the Mondragon Cooperative Society model in Spain and had co-authored an economic analysis on it. So it wasn't surprising that six years later, when Henk had become familiar with Auroville, the

then Economy Task Group and the Funds and Assets Management Committee invited him to do a study of the Auroville economy. Henk accepted, without realizing what he was in for."

"Actually, I was totally puzzled by what I found here," said Henk. "I had not expected such a complex economy consisting of so many commercial units and services. I soon realised that a comparison with Mondragon didn't work at all. A small team of former Aurovilians Stuart and Mukul and I, started collecting data from the Auroville Archives, from Auroville units, and from some obscure cupboards hidden in the Bharat Nivas compound. In all, we collected about 3,800 balance sheets, dating from 1968 up to the year 2008."

"I was brought in by Mukul in 1998," adds Manuel. "There was this huge number of balance sheets and we were wondering how to make sense of them. They had been made by various auditors using different formats and were not easily comparable. The first



thing we had to do was to make a uniform format and convert each balance sheet into that format. This took an enormous amount of time. Then we assembled them into a database so that we could analyze them. Afterwards, we included the years 2001-2008. To compare data, we introduced an inflation correction, so that the data base became integrally consistent and the data could show how the economy had grown in real terms. It became a very interesting work and I became more and more involved with the research and with Auroville."

The work resulted in the presentation in 2002 of the preliminary *White Paper on Auroville's Economy* [see *AVToday* issue # 161 of June 2002] focusing on Auroville's commercial units. "Then they were asked to also include the service sector," says Guy. "This was taken up as well and they decided to cover Auroville's economy over the first 40 years of its existence. The result is the present book."

Guy then gave a brief summary of the aim of the book. "The aim is to present a study of Auroville's economic ideals, its institutional set-up to deal with its economy, as well as present an overview how Auroville's economy has developed in the first 40 years of its existence. The book does not analyze the development of other aspects of Auroville, such as the creation of 'ecological capital'."

After the authors gave a brief presentation on the book and answered questions, Guy concluded the book launch. "This book is the result of a voluntary, labour-intensive work and of a persistent dedication over a period of 15 years," he said. "It's a labour of love and a gift to Auroville from two people who also in other fields have been enormously supporting of Auroville. We are extremely grateful."

Carel

Economics for People and Earth - The Auroville Case 1968-2008, is published by the Auroville Social Research Centre (src@auroville.org.in) and is for sale within India from Prisma (prisma@auroville.org.in) and in Indian and Auroville bookshops. For information on e-book and print-on-demand copies outside India visit www.theaurovilleeconomybook.com.

The content of the book

After a brief summary in Chapter 1, Chapter 2 introduces some biographical notes on Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, along with an overview of the Mother's vision on Auroville's economy. Then a brief history of the complex Auroville institution building follows in Chapter 3. Chapter 4 examines aspects of work by members of the community and of employment of workers from nearby villages. A selection of case studies is presented in Chapter 5, which describes the development of a number of commercial and service units.

The core of quantitative research forms the content of the following three chapters. Chapter 6 describes the macro-characteristics of Auroville's economy; chapter 7 deals with the economic performance of the commercial and service domains; and chapter 8 details the Central Fund and its carrying capacity. These chapters provide the results of the number-crunching work and give an overview of the development of the commercial and service sectors as well as of the importance of grants and donations in Auroville's first 40 years. The concluding Chapter 9 offers a synthesis of the different phases of Auroville's economy; gauges Auroville's economic system in the light of the principles and guidelines given by its founders; and assesses Auroville's sustainability and its coherence as a model for durable socio-economic development.

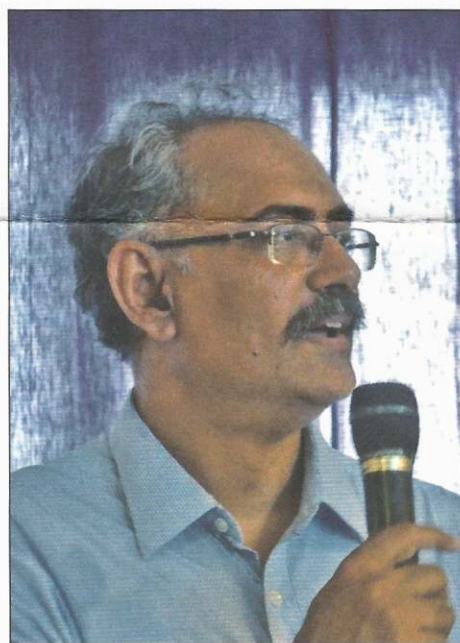
Economics for People and Earth: an interview with the authors

"Auroville is known for its work in environment and alternative energy, for the quality of its products and, in certain circles, for its spirituality. But Auroville is far less known for its social and economic ambitions," says Henk, explaining the uniqueness of the study. "In this book, we have highlighted those ambitions that follow from the Dream of the Mother, which is one of the guideposts she made for Auroville, and which the Aurovilians have been struggling to reach. We show that it has been, and still is, a learning process, with disappointments and successes."

Manuel: But we can't stress enough that the spiritual dimension is the cohesive part of the Auroville experiment. If someone would like to duplicate it elsewhere, there would need to be a similar 'glue' in one form or another. In Auroville, it is the spiritual dimension and the dream of humanity living in harmony in an international township which brought people together.

Henk: We chose the title of the book considering the special characteristics of Auroville. The focus is not narrowly on economics, or on business, or on economics of the environment, but on economics for people and the earth. The Auroville case is an example of how it can be done differently. In most places in the world, people have been living in the 'I, I, I' times for the last two decades. But there is no doubt that now we are entering the 'we' period. Auroville, like Mondragon in Spain, is an inspiration. There are not many of these kinds of experiments – too often they die out after 5 or 10 years. Auroville is now 45 years old; and it is remarkable that we have something to study over such a long period.

Manuel: Auroville is a forerunner for a study of alternative economics. You can look at Auroville and gain certain answers. Auroville is also constantly experimenting; it is a work in progress. The experiment as such may not easily be copied, but some of Auroville's achievements

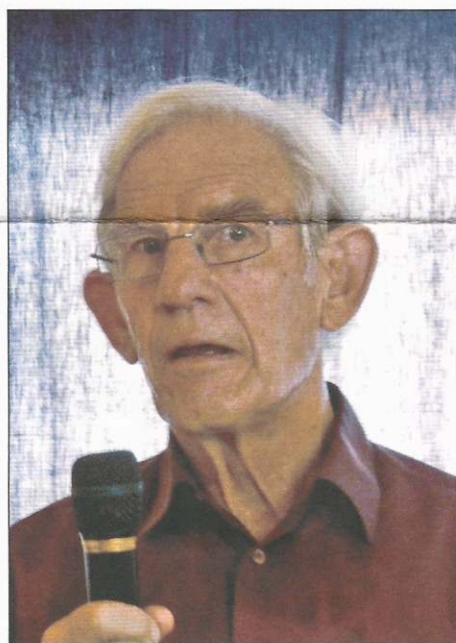


Manuel Thomas (left) and Henk Thomas responding to questions from Aurovilians

may have answers for economics for people and the Earth.

Auroville Today: Can you briefly highlight the main differences between Auroville's economy and other economies?

Henk: The first one is ownership and motivation. There couldn't be a greater contrast between the world at large and Auroville. Almost everywhere, ownership controls economic decisions. In Auroville, ownership rests with the community. An Aurovilian does not own immovable assets or 'his' or 'her' business or service unit or the funds generated by the unit. But this has had no influence on the motivation. Auroville's entrepreneurs, like many Aurovilians working in the service sector, are highly committed people. Dedicated to the ideals of Auroville, they are doing their bit to real-



ize the Dream. They told us that they hadn't come here to be part of the rat race. They have all the hardships of setting up businesses and service activities and running them, and hardly any of the benefits which are the norm elsewhere. Their maintenances are very minimal, more or less at par with the other Aurovilians. Many make also substantial contributions to Auroville. The absence of the profit motive for personal gain and the non-ownership of immovable assets have not been a barrier to economic development.

Manuel: In fact, they are true social entrepreneurs. Auroville has been doing social entrepreneurship for decades, long before it became a fad elsewhere in the world, in response to the very unethical behaviour of big business. Auroville's entrepreneurs are caring regarding their employees and the environment and they are modest in their own rewards. In chapter five of the book, we high-

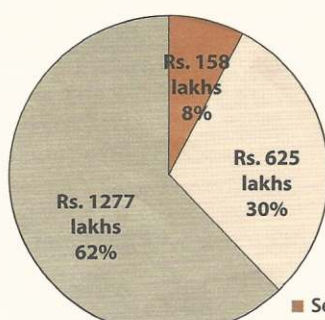
light this approach, not only in the field of business, but also in the service sector.

Henk: The second difference is the attempt of Auroville to have no money circulation within the township. The most visible achievement has been the practice of granting free or subsidized access to as many goods and services possible, such as education, health, sports and cultural events, even though the range is still quite limited. We have compared Auroville's attempts to initiatives around the world which are searching for alternatives to money circulation. More than 200 such experiments in 76 countries have been identified by university researchers. They concluded that these systems only work if there is a complementarity with "fiat" (normal) money. As Auroville purchases most of its requirements from outside Auroville, a system of pure no-money circulation will not work. Auroville's introduction of the debit-account system, which avoids the use of cash within Auroville for purchasing goods and services is, of course, not to be understood as an absence of money exchange.

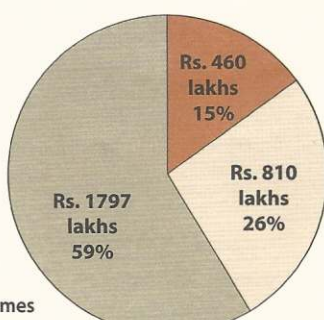
Manuel: In this context we also discussed Auroville's agricultural sector. This sector was almost neglected till about 2000. Afterwards, there was more appreciation of it, also because of the requirements of the Solar Kitchen and the need for a more structured food supply. But Auroville, to a large extent, is an urban community; unless you have an agriculture produce which covers 60-70 % of your basic needs, there is no point talking about self-sufficiency. It will take many years and large investments before the agricultural sector can become a cornerstone of Auroville's economy. And that, by itself, will prevent the development of a no-money circulation system.

Henk: The third main difference is the theme of work and employment, which are core phenomena to understanding Auroville's development. The availability of workers from nearby villages during the early decades provided an indispensable input for Auroville's productivity and development. Today, Auroville has started to

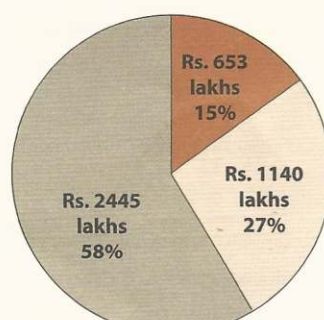
Overview of the development of the incomes from the commercial domain (beige grey) service domain (red) and grants and donations (beige). Figures corrected for inflation 1995/96 = 100



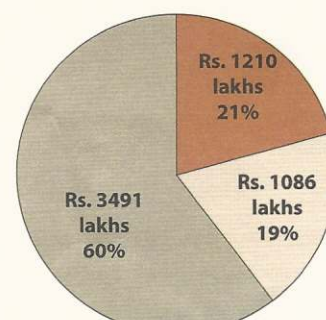
1992-1993



1997-1998



2002-2003



2007-2008

experience difficulties in recruiting workers from the immediate environment, as the wages offered are not always sufficient to meet their rising demands. Today people are employed who come from much farther away.

Manuel: This will become a major issue for Auroville in the future, when Auroville will no longer be able to pay the increasing labour costs. This is already happening in other urban areas in India. Moreover, in the immediate surroundings of Auroville you will see an increasing number of villagers setting up their own units, modelled on Auroville's. But this development also goes to the credit of Auroville! Auroville's growth has been a very good example of inclusive growth, taking the bioregion along. Everywhere else in the world you see the villages being vacated and people moving to the cities; here the local areas are being strengthened by the employment given by Auroville. One chapter of our book deals with the issues of employment and work in and around Auroville.

You identified some areas of concern for Auroville's development.

Henk: Quite a few, in fact. A major issue is that change in Auroville, though impressive, is slow. The world around is moving incredibly fast but Auroville's commercial undertakings do not seem to have found suitable responses. One concern is that Auroville's units do not team up, which is the trend all over the world, as conglomeration is a key to success. Forming clusters has shown to benefit the units. Most Auroville units are micro and mini, not even medium leave alone large, and if they don't want to cluster, we predict problems.

We also suggest that Auroville start a commercial think-tank to discuss these issues and plan for the future of Auroville's business sector. Auroville entrepreneurs have been doing very well in substituting the Indian market for the diminishing exports, but competition is rising. Many units will need to diversify their products and start mechanising their production. For in 10-20 years, the Auroville commercial units will have moved out of the labour-intensive economy.

The think-tank should also help units to start training people to fulfil essential functions. For most commercial units consist of one or two Aurovilians working with a number of employees; there is no succession planning and there are no pension plans for Aurovilians. If these issues are not

Leading Firms and Total Net Profits > Rs. 5 lakhs per annum			
1992-1993	1997-1998	2002-2003	2007-2008
Rs. in lakhs	Rs. in lakhs	Rs. in lakhs	Rs. in lakhs
Maroma 98	Maroma 160	Maroma 157	Maroma 52
Aurosarjan 76	Auromode 32	Auromode 52	Auromode 25
Filaure 57	Auromics - sweater division 21	Maroma - USA 19	Aureka 22
Auromode 33	Radiance 16	Boutique d'Auroville - AV 12	Filaure 22
Altecs Energy Systems 7	Lumiere 8	Aurore Systems 11	Auromode 20
Shradanjali 6	Shradanjali 8	Filaure 10	Atmarati Architects 11
Auromics 6	Flame 8	Aureka 9	Kalki II 11
Total 283	Altecs Energy Systems 7	Auromics - sweater division 9	CADD Studio 10
The table of leading units shows the variations in profitability over the years			
	Filaure 7	Naturally Auroville 9	Miniature 10
	Boutique d'Auroville - AV 6	Mereville Trust 8	Aurore Systems 10
	Total 275	Aurore projects & services 7	Auromics - sweater division 9
		New School Crafts 7	Aurore Systems Pondicherry 9
		Aurorachana 6	Maroma USA 9
		Editions AV Press International 6	Mereville Trust 7
		Kalki 5	Auroville Papers 7
		Mira Boutique 5	Pitchandikulam Forest Consultants 7
		Total 335	Flame 7
			Inside India 7
			Natuellement Auroville 7
			Boutique d'Auroville - Pondicherry 7
			Mandala Pottery 6
			Eco-Pro 6
			Aurorachana 6
			Gecko 6
			ADPS 6
			Boutique d'Auroville - AV 5
			Total 302

being addressed, units will go down. And the liabilities will be shared as the default of one unit will affect the whole.

Lastly, the think-tank could organize lunch seminars with interested Aurovilians and invite people from outside as speakers to help Auroville develop its economy.

Manuel: Institution-building, the conscious grouping of people to achieve something for the collective, has been a main strength of Auroville. We discuss this in the third chapter of the book. There was the creation of For All / Pour Tous in the early years, and there was always some kind of 'governing' institution under various names. Also different financial groups came into existence. Many of these survive till today. Without these institutions, Auroville would just have been another development project. But planning Auroville has so far been confined to planning the township. Now planning the economic development has to follow. This includes finding ways to provide loans to commercial units as, so far, Auroville's units have developed almost without any recourse to banks or funding and have never used the huge opportunities available outside to finance their business expansion.

Such an institution should also ensure that units introduce depreciation schemes to create sufficient savings to be able to continue production and make technological advances in future. We have seen that some commercial units give to Auroville far more than they are asked for, sometimes up to 70% of the money available – but this would be called suicide by any economist, as they do not save for the future.

In this context one might expect you to discuss the role of the Auroville Foundation, as it owns all immoveable assets and could be instrumental in securing loans. But you didn't.

Manuel: Yes, we have left that out. We consider the Auroville Foundation to be the guardian of the assets of

Auroville, and as such it is not prone to play a promotional role but rather a guiding one. This is also the position that has been taken by successive Governing Boards and Secretaries. They could have been very heavy-handed – but this has never happened. They have left the development of Auroville to the Aurovilians through the various institutions, such as the Residents' Assembly, the Working Committee and the Funds and Assets Management Committee. I think this is the correct approach. Any use of immoveable assets for guaranteeing loans should be decided by an Auroville economic planning group which then could work out the modalities with the Secretary.

In your 2002 White Paper, you introduced the term 'carrying capacity', indicating how many adult Aurovilians could work in the services and be maintained at a modest living standard from the surplus income generated by the commercial units. What is the carrying capacity today?

Henk: Now we have widened the term to include the surplus income generated by the service units and from fundraising. In 2002, we concluded that the carrying capacity of the commercial sector was insufficient. In 2008, this has not changed – in fact, there has been an alarming trend of falling productivity in the commercial domain – but we see an increasing importance of the income generated by the services and from fundraising. In 1992, 62% of the money coming into Auroville's Central Fund was from commercial units; 30% came from grants and donations; and 8% from the service sector. Over the years, this has shifted. In 2007-2008, the commercial units' contribution remained at 60%, the income from the service units went up to 21% while that from grants and donations diminished to 19%. Today, we are far more optimistic than we were in 2002 – we see that more developments have

taken place, which have strengthened the socio-economic structure. We hope that, because of Auroville's inherent strength, new perspectives for further expansion of Auroville's population will open up.

Manuel: A positive trend is the beginning of the development of the knowledge economy, with units such as Auroville Consulting. But in this area, Auroville units still need guidance and mentoring about how to interact with the outside, especially when doing projects for the State or Central Government, so that, even if their final product is appreciated, they don't end up with losses after a harrowing time. This has happened to one Auroville unit, but it shouldn't happen again.

What are the other concerns?

Henk: In many places in the book we have mentioned that further studies would be required. But we have been careful in our conclusions. There are a number of issues we would like to discuss in meetings with the relevant Auroville working groups, which we have not spelled out in the book. Ideally we would like to do a workshop or a few sessions on Skype in 2014 with concerned working groups, when the members have had time to study the book and have started a debate on the concluding chapter.

Manuel: We also hope that Auroville will commit itself to continuing the work which we started. The computer programmes are all ready and available, and it should not be much work to integrate the data from the years 2008-2013 and later the subsequent years. This should be the duty of the economy planning group, and will be necessary for them to understand the development of Auroville's economy.

So you are not continuing?

Manuel: No. This was an extremely rewarding and interesting work, but after a fascinating 15 years, it is time for others to take over. We have provided the means for Auroville to do so.

What are your expectations for this book? Is it for Aurovillian eyes only?

Henk: Absolutely not. This book meets with high standards of methodology, chapter by chapter, using all the tools of economics to present the Auroville history. It is a study of a model of a durable socio-economic development. It could well be included in any academic course that aims at studying alternative economic systems in the present world economy.

If you compare the economics curricula of business schools around 2010 with 1980 it is shocking to see how narrow they have become. Nowadays, business schools focus on the kind of economy as it exists. It is only very recently that the concept of ethics in business and aspects of institutional development have been included. For those who are interested to break away from the trends of the last 30 years, we hope that this book will make a significant contribution.

In conversation with Carel

Auroville's different economy

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When transferring houses within the community, the housing service assesses the value of the property and any difference in value between houses may have to be covered by the Aurovilians, not the housing service. The housing service has been known to expect a contribution for "advancing" funds if a person moves into a new house before an occupant is found for their previous residency. And while inheritance rights cannot be claimed, inter-generational transfers have been allowed. Thus, while ownership is denied, practices that assume ownership are sometimes adopted.

The remuneration

Labour relations in Auroville also are vastly different from capitalist societies. Even the term 'labour relations' is foreign here. Aurovilians are officially volunteers, not employees, compensated with a maintenance (a stipend), which, in many cases, does not wholly cover their needs. We are not bound by contracts; we do not work for salaries; and remuneration for work is not based upon age, competence, qualifications, number of years at a job, or even responsibilities assumed.

As one Aurovillian said, remuneration levels in Auroville are vastly 'compressed' compared to the outside. The official difference between the lowest and highest maintenance in Auroville is less than five times. The difference

between the average CEO's salary and the average worker's salary in America is 350 times, while very conservative figures in India show differences of about 45 times. The ceiling on maintenances imposed by Auroville subsidizes managerial talent. This dampens costs, but inhibits people with such talent from joining the community.

The remunerative divide between Aurovilians working in commercial units and Aurovilians working in City Services (municipal services such as schools, security, forests, and cultural activities) is probably much greater on average than economies in developed countries. This is possibly a result of two directives that are easy to understand in principle, but hard to manage in practice. Auroville is supposed to cover only basic needs, but has not clearly defined what constitutes a basic need. And Auroville does not collect taxes, but encourages contributions. Internal monitoring mechanisms for enforcing unit contributions – currently set at 33% of net profit – are weak. Remarkably, Auroville units as a whole contribute approximately 40% of their net profit.

Absence of centralised authority

While Auroville's economy is significantly different from most capitalist states, it is also different from socialist states. There is no centralized authority making financial decisions on the community's behalf. There is no five-year

strategic plan or even general areas of work where Auroville has determined it should maintain or develop a strategic advantage. Unit executives are largely free to determine aims, objectives, strategies, and investment decisions, with one significant exception, which is also a significant difference from outside economies: units are prohibited from acquiring external debt. This difference limits Auroville's exposure to investment risk, but simultaneously slows commercial growth opportunities.

The exemption from income taxes enjoyed by Auroville's units, because they are part of the Auroville Foundation and profits are churned back into Auroville's local economy, contributes toward Auroville's growth. This advantage is partially offset by two significant factors: the overwhelming accounting supervision that start-up units are subjected to because they fall under the Auroville Foundation; and Auroville's flat contribution policy whereby start-up units are expected to contribute the same percentage as large, well-established units. How evenly these various factors balance each other is moot.

Neighbourhood relations

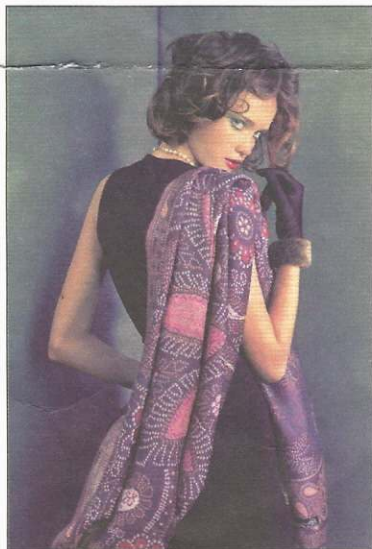
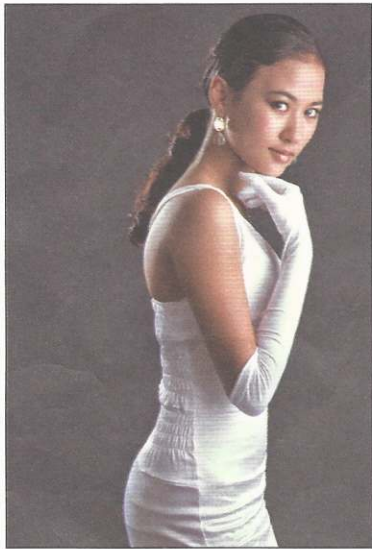
Auroville's relations with its immediate neighbours is perhaps different from most other municipalities of similar size in India. Typically, Auroville contributes 10% of its municipal budget toward activities (education primarily) that directly benefit neighboring villages. Overall, 14% of its income last year went to bioregional development outside Auroville. One local

Aurovillian notes that relations with domestic workers is clearly more friendly than outside Auroville. Many Aurovilians have paid for workers' education, the education of their children, and helped them to purchase land and houses. The establishment of the Small Employer's Welfare Administration (SEWA) has contributed to better benefits for domestic workers than in neighboring areas. However, Aurovilians, unlike their neighbors, tend to accept poor construction contracts that do not penalize companies for delays or shoddy workmanship. This sustains levels of incompetence instead of fostering meaningful improvements in local capacity.

The service concept

The concept of service in Auroville is vastly different from outside economies. In Auroville, the term 'service' cannot be separated from the aim of being a willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness, and then of serving the collective; while in external economies 'service' generally refers to customer satisfaction. Thus, the aim of many of Auroville's services and units is to serve the greater good as opposed to serving shareholders or maximizing profits. This does not mean that Auroville's units are not profit oriented; rather profits are a means to survive, to increase productivity and wealth, which in turn are not defined in monetary terms, but as social and spiritual values such as human unity and peace. The glue binding us is not a legal, contractual obligation, but a shared vision and a shared hope.

Lyle



MiA Studio

Twenty-four interest-raising photos of Aurovilians enjoying a bite decorate the walls of the Auroville Bakery – a gift from MiA studio.

Auroville has excellent professional photographers. But it was only a couple of years ago that three of them and a non-Aurovillian agreed to work together in a commercial photo studio named MiA. Coriolan, who together with his partner Marta is the driving force behind MiA, explains that each of the four has unique talents. "Luca Chilesotti specializes in fashion and still-life. He lives in Italy and comes to Auroville whenever required. Ireneo Guerci is a master of street life and studio photography; and Shiraz Panthaky is great in architecture photography." "And Coriolan," adds Marta, "is the brain behind complex studio lighting, and specialises in product, industrial and wedding shoots." Their tools of choice are Canon 5D Mark III cameras, Broncolor lights, Apple computers and Eizo screens. They are helped by a team of 9 part-time Aurovilians that includes post-production specialists, a marketing strategist, make-up artists, stylists and three Auroville painters. "All are committed to making MiA one of India's leading photo studios," says Marta.

It's a tough challenge. But the list of clients is already impressive, including Volkswagen India, Satya Paul Sarees, Enamor Lingerie, Ganga Hospital, the Kerala tourist department, JK Tyre, Bhima Jewellers, the CGH Earth group of hotels, and many more.

Their first client was Valentine Jewellery in Jaipur for whom MiA created a product catalogue. Through them they got an assignment from Mehraons for photographing its jewellery collection and making an advertising video for cinema and TV. "This led to other commissions," says Marta. "That's how it works; we do our best to make our clients happy and then they introduce us to people in their network."

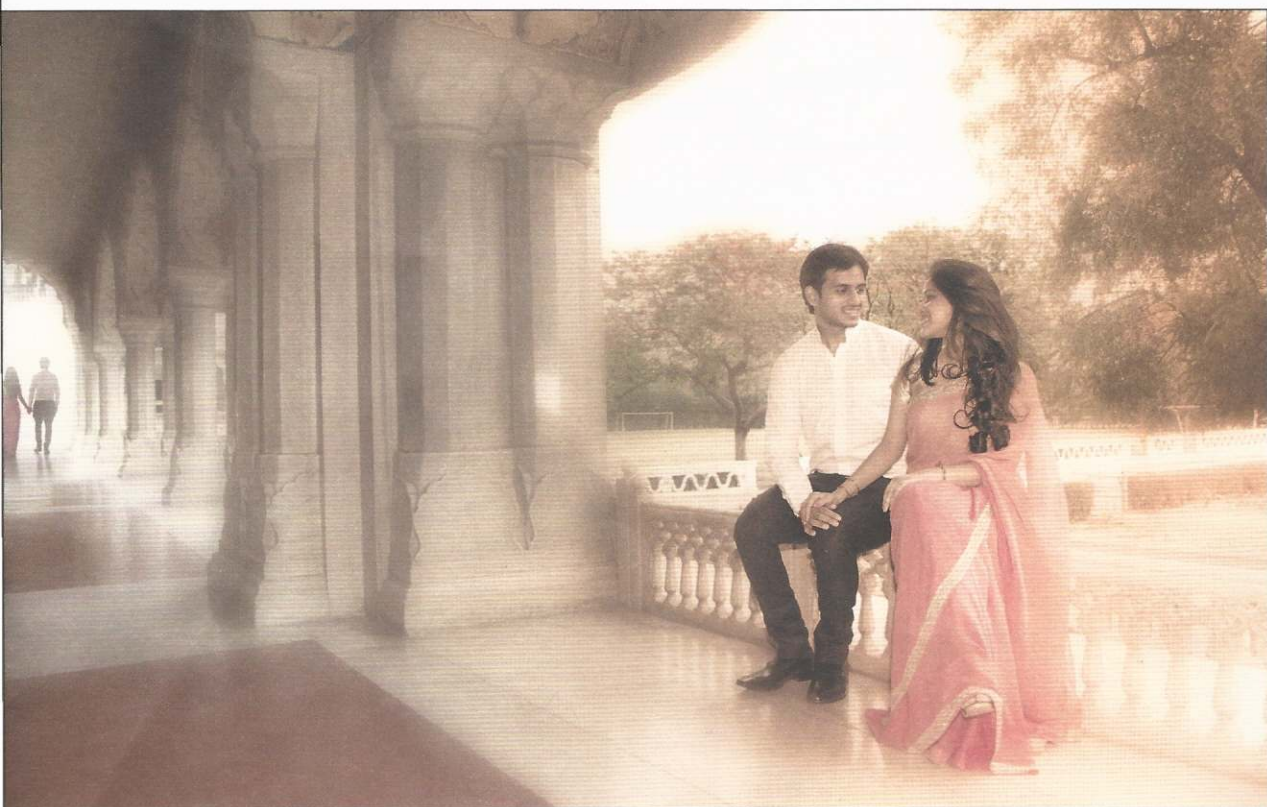
"Our clients are often curious about us and why as foreigners we chose to live in India," says Coriolan. "They are intrigued by Auroville, which many people

have heard of in one way or the other. We are always happy to oblige them with explanations about what the Auroville project stands for and the ideals that are the basis of our work." "But we have noticed that Auroville is not alone in attempting a more conscious approach to business," says Marta. "We discovered that in many Indian businesses, maximizing profits is no longer the leading motivation." She gives the example of Shingora, the largest shawl manufacturer in Asia, which hired MiA for an industrial shoot and for covering their national fashion campaign. "We have now been working with them for the past three seasons," says Marta. "In the process, we discovered Shingora's commitment to exceeding the national norms of water recycling, energy consumption, air cleanliness and employee welfare." Another example is Valentine Jewellery which runs a school for 1,500 unprivileged rural children. "We were so impressed that we shot this work pro-bono," says Marta.

Yet, it isn't plain sailing. A major drawback is MiA's location in Auroville, far from the big cities where the clients live. "It adds to the costs," says Marta, "and that is an additional difficulty when competing with local photographers." But there is no aspiration to move out of Auroville. "We balance participating in the community, raising a child and having a commercial activity that takes us all over India. It's a tightrope of sorts, but very rewarding," says Coriolan.

That they often get assignments notwithstanding the higher price is not only due to the quality of the photographs – "the photos of local photographers are often far inferior to ours," says Marta – but also to their attempt to think out of the box and to challenge established fields. "Advertising typically relies on a Lolita doll like sex-appeal. We move beyond this basic approach and try to look at the product and the model, paying attention to the subtleties of the message that have to be communicated, the mood and the lighting," says Coriolan. "For me,





photography is about showing the extraordinary in the ordinary. Many of our clients find this a big advantage compared to traditional photography." "It pays off. MiA's work has been published every month the last one and a half years in *Elle Magazine* and *Femina*," says Marta.

Photographing Indian weddings has become another speciality. "This is great fun," says Coriolan. "Indian weddings, North Indian weddings in particular, usually last five or more days. They provide us with wonderful opportunities for photo shots." He has recently been shooting at a very high-end wedding at the City Palace in Jaipur, with former Indian royalty present. "This was very impressive. We photographers had full freedom to walk around, but we had to make the right shot at exactly the right moment – and without planned studio lighting." He explains that at traditional Indian weddings, photographers light-up the entire scene, "but that gives the impression of being photographed under a dentist's light: the photos lose the evening mood and are all undifferentiated." Any distinct impressions? "We have been privy to very intimate moments at weddings which showed us the strength of Indian family bonds – something which Auroville could benefit from."

The final product is offered in eco-leather bound coffee table books. "This is the work of our post-production team," says Marta. "They do an exceptional lay-out." Their pride is not misplaced. From over 21,000 entries, Coriolan was nominated Wedding Photographer of the Year 2012 by India's largest photography magazine *Better Photography* after submitting a photo essay of ten wedding photos. "It has an effect," says Marta. "We already received two more assignments for high-end weddings."

MiA also does event photography. In August, at the request of the Kerala Tourism Department, MiA covered the Malabar River Festival, South India's first international white water adventure competition. "It was tough, in a harsh environment and almost constant rains. Nevertheless, we managed to come up with a great set of photos which have been well-appreciated by the kayaking community in India," says Marta. Some photos were published in the international magazines *Kayak Session* and *Himalayan White Water*."

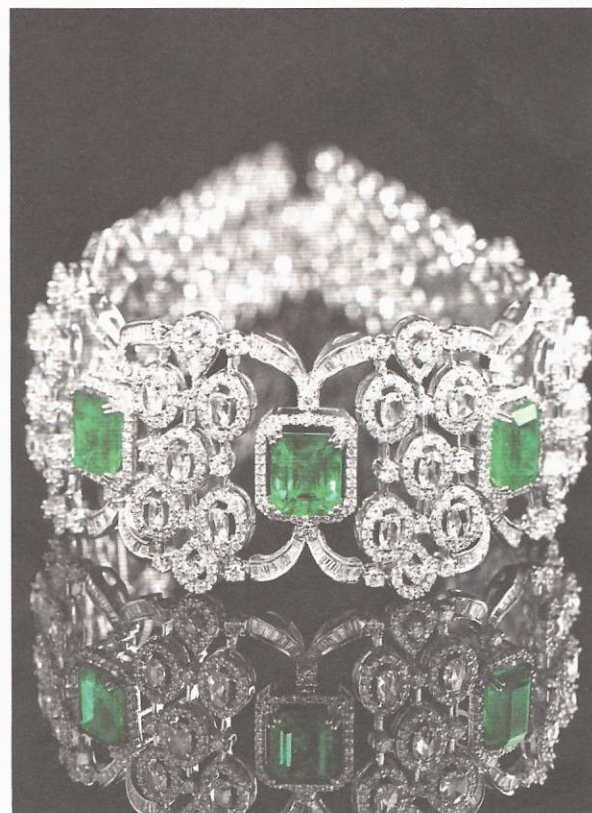
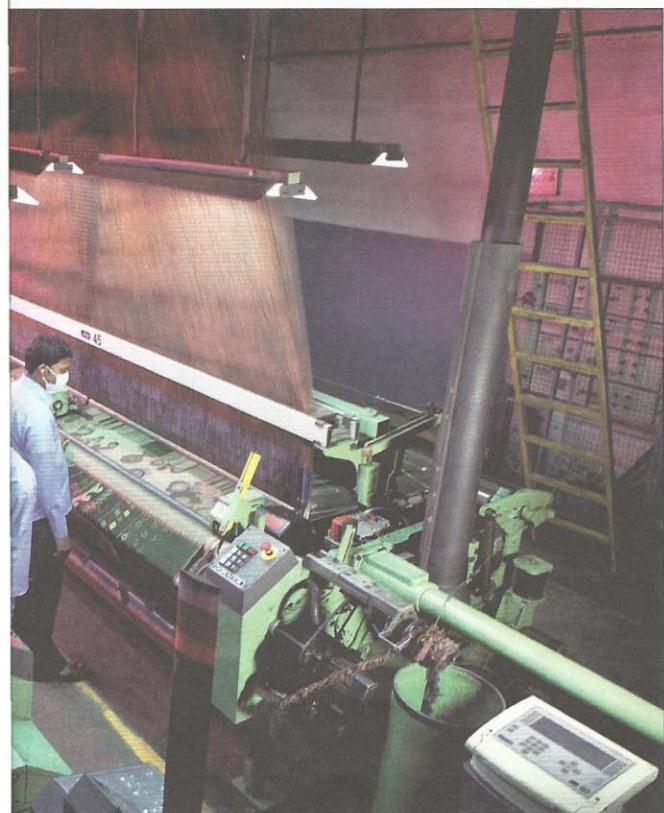
MiA Studio is located in a modest apartment in the Auromodèle community. "It is the first, and as far as we know, the only green photography studio in the country, running entirely on solar," says Coriolan. "Here we shoot studio photographs, we process them and also train Aurovilians in post-production techniques. We have offered three parallel courses of one-year duration, with one or two sessions a week, free of charge. For those who have an artistic background or are gifted in perceiving forms and colours, this is a great way to work and make a living."

Another aspect of Mia's Auroville work is portraying Auroville's aspiring models. Though there is a lack of people in the 20-30 age group, as young Aurovilians often go out for higher studies or to gain work experience, MiA has managed to create around 100 portfolios. "For assignments, we use Auroville models, if available," says Marta. "Some clients are looking for models with Indian features but with European-colour skin, and there are few of those in Auroville." MiA also helps Auroville youngsters start a modelling career. "All that work is done for free," says Marta. "That includes time spent selecting poses, the make-up work, the stylist, hair dressing, lighting, shooting and post processing. We then gift the shots to the models who use them to promote themselves." If the youngsters are below 18, a parent has to be present during the shoots.

An article in *Auroville Today* on the work of Auroville's on-line store *Auroville.com* [see *Avtoday* # 290 of August 2013] mentioned that bad photography is the main cause of a product going unsold. "That was an eye-opener," says Marta. "We are now offering to shoot Auroville's products at highly-discounted rates, so that the units can present themselves better and, through increased sales, contribute more to Auroville." To show what is possible, MiA did a pro-bono shoot for the Auroville bakery. "We made a portfolio of 24 Aurovilians, each in the process of eating a different bakery product, and added a few complex and sophisticated still-lives. The Auroville community loved it," says Coriolan. "That's the best way to describe our work – to show our pictures. For us photographers, we communicate via images."

Carel

The work of MiA can be seen at www.miastudio.in



From November 7-9, the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation held their half-yearly meetings in Auroville. Attending members of the Board were Dr. Karan Singh, chairman, Ms. Aster Patel, Mr. B.V. Doshi, Mr. Y.V.Y.S. Murty and Mr. Amit Khare. From the Council, Mark Tully, Vishaka Desai, Shaikana Rishi Das and Julian Lines attended. The meetings started with Dr. Karan Singh inaugurating the new SAIER building. Apart from meeting with representatives of various Auroville working groups, there was also a concentration under the Banyan tree for safeguarding the Auroville lands. On one evening, Dr. Karan Singh also gave a talk entitled *Vedanta Today*.

New SAIER building inaugurated

When Sanjeev, the administrative director of SAIER, asked Sonali to design a new building for SAIER and the Archives, one of the first things she did was to consult Roger Anger. "As the site was allocated in the administrative area near the Auroville Foundation office, I wanted to get his views on the correct urban design and on how it should relate to the Town Hall, Multi-Media Centre and Foundation buildings. He said the present urban design was becoming monotonous and suggested designing an L-shaped building and setting the building back from these other buildings to break the rhythm."

Sonali also wanted to discard the gentle curvilinear forms of the facade of the existing buildings as this would make it easier to install sunshades on the south-west side. However, when she showed this design to L'Avenir's Board of Architects they said she had to respect the curvilinear form. She agreed, but designed the spaces inside in such a way that a visitor would have a very different feeling in this building than in the Town Hall or Multi-Media Centre.

The brief she had been given by SAIER (the Archives part of the building ultimately did not receive building permission) included the requirements that the building be very easy to maintain, that no artificial lighting be needed during the daytime and that the ventilation be natural in order to minimize running costs. So she designed a long and narrow building which would maximize the natural light and cross-ventilation.

As Sonali had assisted Anupama on the design of the Town Hall and Multi-Media Centre, she knew those buildings intimately and was determined to learn from the mistakes and omissions made there. For example, the south facing offices in the Town Hall become intolerably hot in the full sun, which is further exacerbated by the lack of cross-ventilation. The SAIER building, on the other hand, has large perspex sunshades on the southern elevation and its narrowness and higher ceilings achieve better ventilation. To



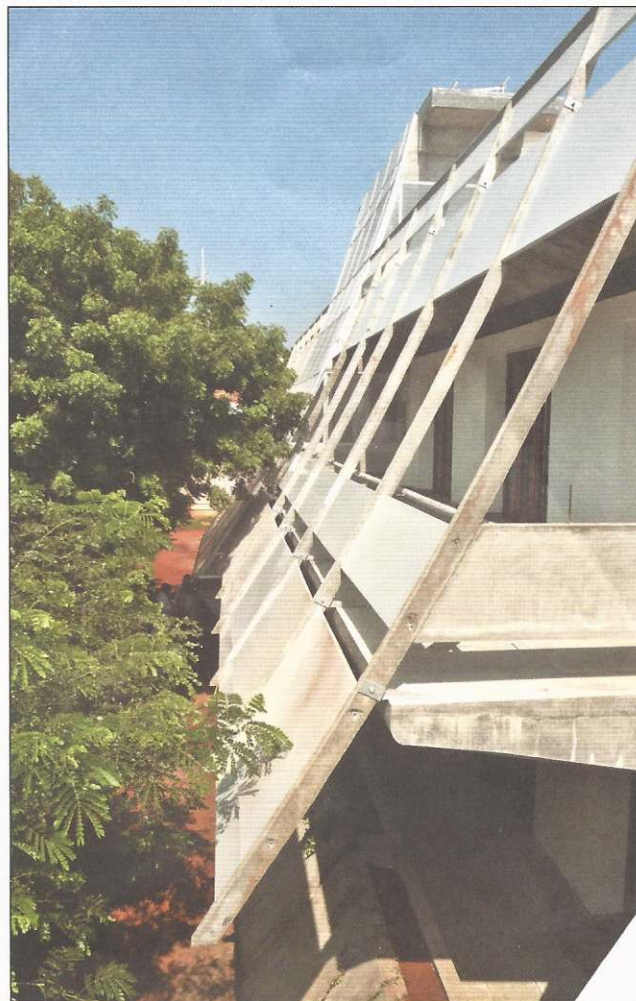
The staircase of the new SAIER building is a feature in itself

improve cross-ventilation further most of the work space is open-plan.

Shade and reduction of glare is provided by verandahs on both sides of the building, as well as by the neem trees have been retained on the southside. However, these partially obscure the view of the frontage. Don't architects usually like their buildings to be seen? Sonali laughs. "The façade was getting a little bit too bold for me, and I was a bit scared how people would take it, so I'm happy it gets seen, but not completely."

Contrary to the Town Hall, which nobody would describe as 'cosy', the SAIER building has a warm, even welcoming, feeling inside. "We achieved this by using wood in a major way, at Sanjeev's request. The rest of the elements are very low key or simple with very neutral colours." The wood is primarily old teak and kalimarathu, sourced from around Auroville: "we wanted to use cyclone wood from Auroville, but by then most of the wood required for the building had already been bought and the Work Tree timber was not sufficiently cured." The wooden furniture and the partitions for the cabins were designed and made especially for this building by OVOID in Pondicherry. Supriti, one of the chief designers of OVOID, had previously worked with Sonali on the Multi-Media Centre, and their close association continued with this building.

Sanjeev is keen that the building hosts artwork of Aurovilians. Michèle has already designed and installed an artwork in the form of a window upstairs, Veronique will paint a wall at the entrance of the conference hall, and there are paintings by children on other walls downstairs. There are also plans to have regular rotating exhibitions by Auroville artists.



A side view of the building showing the perspex sunshades

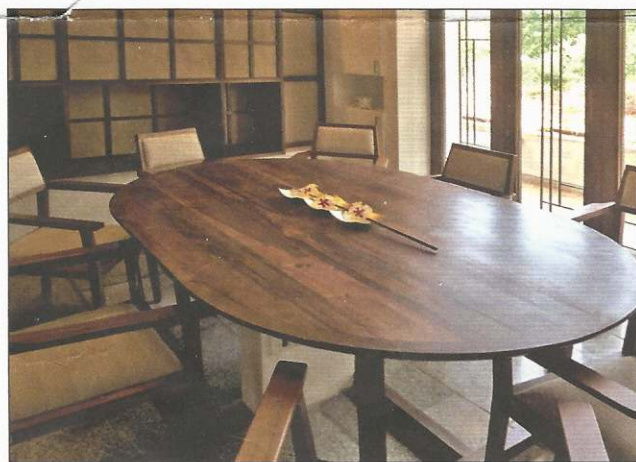


Architect Sonali

The central staircase which spirals up from the lobby is a feature in itself. "Since the building was taking longer than expected to complete, I didn't want to compromise on design elements which bring a warm feeling into the interior spaces," says Sonali. "The staircase is one of these features. I'm happy with it because it breaks all the straight surfaces in this building, while the dark wooden steps contrast with the sunlight filtering in." But the staircase has received some reactions. "Jean-Francois came with his energy meter and told me that the anti-clockwise direction of the staircase was not good for the energy," she says, "although the rest of the building, he said, is fine."

Isn't this approximately Rs 3 crore building rather large considering SAIER's present small office staff? Sanjeev points out that while the SAIER staff will be occupying the ground floor, the first floor will be given over to other SAIER-related and higher education activities, like the new teacher-training initiative. He, like many others who visited it on the inauguration day, is happy with this elegantly understated, yet functional, building. "I think it will give our work with art, education and culture a stronger base."

Alan



A meeting room

PHILOSOPHY

Vedanta Today: a talk by Dr. Karan Singh

Dr. Karan Singh opened his talk at Bharat Nivas on 7 November by saying that we live in age of great tension and turmoil, poised between a disappearing past and an indeterminant future. The old social structures are collapsing and new ones are struggling to be born. In his travels around the world meeting with people from different walks of life, he finds everywhere a craving for certainty and for Light. Many people are looking to the ancient scriptures, not to return to the past, but for wisdom to face the uncertain present. Among the religions of the world, Hinduism has the richest storehouse of scriptures, and the greatest of them are the *Upanishads*, representing both the end of the *Vedas* and their high water mark. Dr. Singh laid out six of their seminal concepts that are especially relevant for our present times.

The first of these is the unity of all existence, the all-pervasiveness of the *Brahman*, the Divine. Whatever exists or has existed or will exist in the future is inhabited by the same Divine Power. This magnificent universe in which we dwell is pervaded by the *Brahman*. Dr. Singh says that the *Upanishads* are life-affirming, not life denying like they are supposed to be by some. "To say that this universe is *maya* or unreal or futile is absolutely outrageous."

The second major concept of *Vedanta* is that there is a reflection of the *Brahman* in each human being, which is known as the *Atman*. Although there are slight differences in meaning, *Atman* is close to the Western concept of the soul. It exists in every individual regardless of race, culture, nationality, caste or gender. It is the spark that makes the human being extraordinarily perceptive and gives him the opportunity for growth. Fanning that spark or flame into divine Realization is *sadhana*, spiritual practice, our life's real work.

The third concept is joining the *Atman* with the *Brahman*. Dr. Singh notes that the word "yoga" comes from the same root as the English word "yoke," to join. It is the philosophy and the technology of joining the *Atman* and the *Brahman*. There are four main paths of yoga in the Hindu tradition. *Jnana Yoga* is the way of the mind; it concentrates on clearing the constant clamour of the mind so that *Brahman* may be reflected in it as the sky in a still lake. *Bhakti Yoga* is the way of the heart; its method is to open the heart in pure love for the Divine. *Karma Yoga* is the way of dedicated works; it is the offering of all our activities to the Divine. *Raja Yoga*, the royal way, is the way of various psycho-spiritual practices such as *pranayama*, a set of breathing techniques, and *hatha yoga*, a set of physical postures and movements. These practices lead to the awak-

ening of the *kundalini* energy which moves up the spine and energizes the *chakras* or energy centers in the subtle body. Dr. Singh emphasizes that these different yogas are not mutually exclusive and that Sri Aurobindo's Integral Yoga brings them together and, in this way, addresses the entire gamut of physical and psychic elements within the human being.

The fourth concept Dr. Singh identified is the idea of the world as a family. He says that it is extraordinary that thousands of years ago, when it was difficult to move more than 10 or 12 miles in a day, the Vedantic seers had formulated this concept. It is only now that science has given us the instruments to become a global society. But while we have the technology, we lack the wisdom and compassion. Indeed, technology has given us not only the ability to create a global society, but also to destroy it. Dr. Singh says that "Unless we develop the wisdom and understanding that ultimately we are a global family, we very well may destroy ourselves. To avoid this, it is essential that we work together to build a sane, just and harmonious society."

The fifth concept emphasized in *Vedanta* is the essential unity of all religions, that there are multiple paths to the Divine. In the *Rig Veda* it is said, "Truth is One; the wise call it by many names." Dr. Singh says, however, "that more peo-

ple have been tortured and killed in the name of religion than any other. This is no longer acceptable in a global society." This idea is the basis of the Interfaith Movement of which Dr. Singh has supported, a movement to try to bring people of different religions together. "This is something essential for the survival of the human race," he says.

The sixth concept is the welfare of all beings. There is an ancient saying, "May all beings be happy. May all beings be free from pain. May all beings be able to live a healthy and meaningful life." "These hymns refer to all beings" Dr. Singh says, "not only to human beings. If the natural environment is destroyed, the human race will also be destroyed." We have made tremendous technological progress, but there has been a negative side to this progress as well. All these negativities are surfacing today, and therefore we have to stress the welfare of all beings. "To offset this negativity, we need a coalition of those who are committed to spiritual growth, those who are committed to environmental protection, those who are committed to all that is great and noble in human civilization, and above all, those who are committed to move towards a divine life." These six great Vedantic concepts embody the soothing and uplifting message that is so urgently needed in our world today.

New member of the Governing Board

The meeting of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, held in November in Auroville, was attended by Mr. Y.S.V.S. Murthy, its newest member.

Mr. Y.S.V.S. Murthy was appointed a member of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation in December last year, to fill the vacancy caused by the demise of Mr. Ajoy Bagchi. Mr. Murthy worked for 34 years as a Lecturer in Physics at the P.R. Government College, Kakinada, a coastal city in the state of Andhra Pradesh, and at the Government College in Rajahmundry, before retiring in the year 2000. After retirement he served on the Guest Faculty of P.R. Government College for another six years. "Mr. Srinivasamurthy, the Finance and Administrative Officer of the Auroville Foundation, was one of my students," he says.

This was his second Board meeting. "My first one was in April, when I got a first-hand acquaintance with the issues Auroville is dealing with." Yet, he is no stranger to Auroville and its ideals. "I am essentially a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. I discovered the writings of Sri Aurobindo in 1972 in the library of the P.R. Government College, when I was seeking for a meaning to life. They made a deep impact. A few years later, in the summer of 1977, a friend and colleague of mine, Mr. B.V.Raja Rao, visited the Ashram and Auroville. He stayed in Pondicherry and cycled to Auroville to work on the Matrimandir. He came back full of enthusiasm.

Together, on the 15th August 1977, we started the Sri Aurobindo Centre in Kakinada, to make Sri Aurobindo and The Mother better known. It is a branch of the Sri Aurobindo Society."

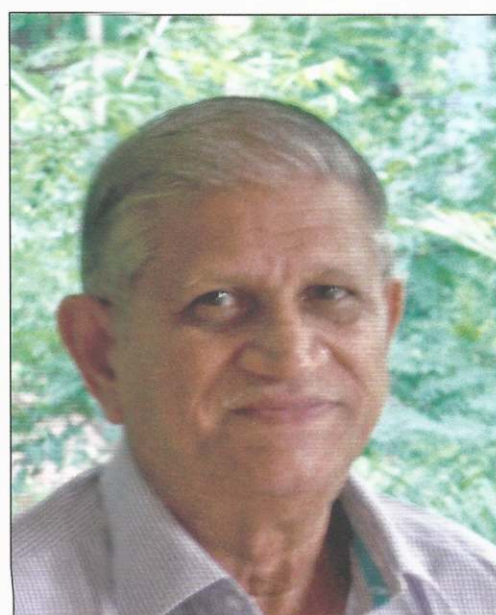
His first visit to the Ashram followed soon afterwards, on The Mother's Birth Centenary on February 21st, 1978. "After darshan we visited Auroville and participated in the sand filling at the Matrimandir. On subsequent visits to the Ashram, we used also to go to Auroville, sometimes on a bicycle from Pondy to meet the communities and get some firsthand information about the work being done."

Talking about the work of the Sri Aurobindo Society branch, he mentions that it acquired some land 12 kilometres away from Kakinada. Due to lack of infrastructure like roads, electricity etc., construction work has moved slowly and only two rooms have been built. But the branch is active. "We have held four State-level workshops for youth and hosted the State Conference of the Sri Aurobindo Society. We also started some eco-plantations and are planning to build a Dhyana Mandir. As I am deeply impressed by the work of the Auroville Earth Institute, we invited a few years ago its director, Satprem Maini, to visit us and advise on the construction using earth blocks. He gave expert advice, but the building hasn't yet started."

Was he ever involved in the dispute between the Sri Aurobindo Society and Auroville? "No, that had nothing to do with us. The conflict was between the SAS office bearers in Pondicherry and Auroville. We were never asked to support any stand nor ever did so."

Asked about his impressions of Auroville, Mr. Murthy points to the great work Auroville has been doing, such as in combating land erosion, developing alternative building technologies, promoting alternative energy, and the work in the surrounding villages. "But above all is the fact that you have built the Matrimandir." He applauds the strict visitor's regime. "I am very happy with the arrangement you've made. The atmosphere in the Inner Chamber is extremely strong, and it would do great harm if you would just allow anybody to enter. This is how it should be. Ideally, you should not even give special treatment to VIPs, but I am aware how difficult that is in India!"

Commenting on the role of the Governing Board, Mr. Murthy observed that the Board is restricted in what it can do. "It is the



Shri Y.S.V.S. Murthy

Aurovilians who are running Auroville. The Board can help and direct, but should only intervene if there is a deadlock." Asked for his views on the issue of consolidating the lands for the city and greenbelt area, he replies that, as Auroville cannot expect to get a government grant for land purchase, land exchange seems unavoidable.

In the near future, Mr. Murthy would like to bring college students from Kakinada to experience Auroville as he feels they would greatly benefit from such a trip.

Carel

"This place is about people"

Dr. Shaunaka Das is a new member of the International Advisory Council of the Auroville Foundation.

Dr. Das is a lecturer, broadcaster and Hindu Chaplain to Oxford University where he heads the Centre for Hindu Studies. His particular interests are inter-faith dialogue and comparative theology.

Auroville Today spoke to him at the end of his recent visit, during which he attended his first IAC meeting.

Auroville Today: You were born in Ireland into an Irish Catholic family, yet at the age of 18 you joined a Hare Krishna ashram in Dublin, and for many years you have been a prominent member of the Krishna Consciousness movement. How did that transition come about?

From the age of seven I only wanted to be a priest: it was a very simple thing about wanting to serve God and man. Then, at the age of 13, I began to make a conscious spiritual search, reading the Bible and other books. My father revealed that at my age he had also made a similar search and he had ended up becoming a stronger Catholic. He told me that I may or may not become a stronger Catholic, but I had to find my own way; I had to find principles that were good and important and stick to them for the rest of my life, because then I would respect myself and others would respect me. In the very conservative environment of 1970s Ireland, that was very broad-minded of him.

So he gave me his blessing to go forth and find the truth for myself, and it was in that Dublin ashram that I found myself. It's ironic. I was actually looking for a way to become a better Christian and there I found people from a totally different religious tradition who were practising Christianity (although they didn't call it that) to a



Dr. Shaunaka Das

higher standard than any of the Christians I knew!

But in Hinduism you also discovered a very different spiritual philosophy.

Yes. What attracted me to Hinduism was the concept of the *atman* – the eternal transcendent self – which leads me to believe that I am a spiritual entity on a journey adopting identities which are useful at a certain time.

The idea of the *atman* is the game-changer in Hinduism; it makes Hinduism unique. When Krishna tells Arjuna in the *Bhagavad Gita*:

Certainly never at any time did I not exist, nor you, nor all these kings, and certainly never shall we cease to exist in the future.

It transforms how we look at the world and our relationship with God. If we exist eternally, and God exists eternally, there is the possibility of an eternal relationship. If we were never created, if we were not created by God, then we are not beholden to Him

and we can choose to love or not to love Him. That offers the possibility of real love, whereas if God is the patriarch whom we have to love, that love is a form of compulsion.

This new perspective was mind-blowing for me; it transformed my Christian idea of God.

But I continue to hold both Christianity and Hinduism dear. I could very easily be called an Irish Catholic Hindu!

How did you become involved in the inter-religious dialogue movement?

One of my mentors in inter-religious dialogue was the Rev. Kenneth Cracknell, a Methodist, who was the president of the Cambridge Theological Federation. He taught me one principle of dialogue that really helped me. It's not about churches meeting churches, or scripture meeting scripture. It's about people meeting people.

The idea of such a dialogue is that you want to share the wonderful things you believe in with people from other faiths. And you want to listen to them, to be in a relationship with them, even though you know they are not going to change their religion. So there has to be a basis of respect. Actually, I have no issue with fundamentalists – extremists are another matter. When I meet a fundamentalist Christian or Jew or Muslim or Hindu I know exactly where they stand, I know what their principles are, and that allows me to trust them.

Someone with weak faith will hide behind scripture and cloth and ritual, and can't be engaged with. So when you are meeting with people of strong faith, you need to have strong faith yourself and be willing to declare it.

Often this leads me to discover that I have strong similarities to people of different faiths, and then I wonder what is so special about my faith. This inspires me to look into my own texts with completely different eyes and, in the process, what I had seen before as Truth, with a capital 'T', becomes a much broader concept.

What are your first impressions of Auroville?

So far I've got a very good impression. I've met some really good people whom I will have ongoing relationships with. My biggest impression is that this place is about people, not about the project. It's not the people for the project; it's the project for the people. The project is there to serve the need of bringing people together to focus on spiritual goals. In the past, the building of Matrimandir did this; it brought people together and created bonds lasting a lifetime. What's the project now? I feel it has to be the building of the city, but we have to ensure that everybody is enthused to get on board.

Where does Auroville fit on this personal journey of yours?

This is a spiritual community, there's a spirit about this place that I really identify with. I try not to get involved in things that I'm not going to give my heart to. We are here to serve, we live to serve, and now my service is here. I am a devotee of Krishna, so I'm going to try bring something of that heart quality, and you are going to teach me many things on my journey.

Perhaps my special interest will be to see if you are making decisions based on your own principles. If you are not following the spirit of your own principles then I will be concerned, and I will voice that concern. I think this is an important service I can do.

From an interview by Alan

Brief News

Residents' Assembly votes

For the second time in its history, the Resident's Assembly has taken a decision by voting through email and the ballot box. The voting process was overseen by the Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) which also announced the results. From a total number of 1969 adult residents 409 people voted, 147 by email, 262 through the ballot box.

No decision was reached on two of the three issues tabled, that of initiating a vast land exchange and of accepting a Newcomer as Aurovillian. A majority voted in favour of the third issue, approving the Regulations for Entry and Exit. The voting was not without objections. The Auroville Council objected to the Working Committee and RAS about making the topic of accepting a Newcomer as Aurovillian subject to a community vote, as the case has been extensively studied by many previous and present working groups. Also objections were raised that, apart from voting 'yes' or 'no', a third option could be ticked, "I need more information to decide" as extensive information had been made available before the voting, both for and against the proposals.

Entry and Exit Policy approved

The Governing Board, in its meeting in April 2013, reviewed the draft Entry and Exit policy. It requested the section on appeal to be re-phrased, to the extent that the Special Committee to consider appeals should consist of three residents nominated by the Residents Assembly and two members of the Governing Board nominated by the Chairman of the Governing Board. [see also AVToday #287-288, June-July 2013]. It also requested the views of the Residents' Assembly on the revised policy. A majority of the Assembly has now approved the draft.

Tamil Nadu accepts solar net-metering

The Tamil Nadu Electricity Regulatory Commission (TNERC) has approved a solar net-metering policy allowing for surplus energy generated by small-scale grid-connected solar photovoltaic energy systems to be exported to the public grid, and the shortfall getting imported from the grid. Auroville Consulting, which has played a key role in providing the TNERC with inputs for the new policy, says that Auroville's eight pilot projects will benefit.

Repos closed

Due to severe erosion, several houses in the Repos beach community have collapsed. Repos has been closed for any activity.

Passing Shantikar Reddy

Shantikar Reddy, a much loved friend to many Aurovilians, passed away on Sunday 17th November at his house near Ousteri Lake after returning from a long hospitalisation. He was 58 years old. The Tibetan Pavilion had been lighting candles for Shanti during his hospitalisation and for 41 days after his passing.

Landscapes and Gardens of Auroville

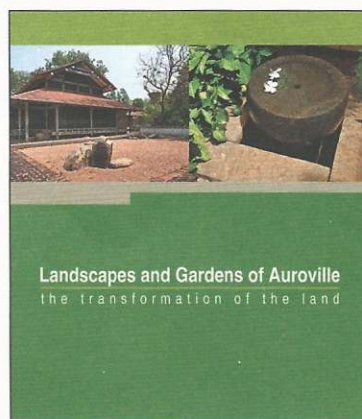
Prisma has published a sumptuous new book on the landscapes and gardens of Auroville. It contains many photographs of the most beautiful gardens in Auroville, as well as explanations of their work by garden designers like Poppo and Kireet.

But this book is far more than a celebration of their work. It also contains essays on creating a contemplative garden, on Auroville's afforestation work and the water challenge facing the community, and the first 60 pages are a treasure trove of early photographs of the early Auroville landscape.

"My first idea," explains Franz, who initiated this project, "was just to make a publication on the gardens, but then I began to wonder,

how was it at the beginning? What did the land look like then? There is no proper documentation of this, which is why most people new to Auroville are ignorant of our beginnings and take the present environment and level of development for granted. So it became important for me to document this process, to show how the land has been transformed and how nature responds when individuals put all their energy, love and aspiration into making something beautiful."

Does he feel that there is such a thing as a typical 'Auroville garden'? "No. The gardens in this book are very clearly expressions of the people who made them. Even the Matrimandir gardens, which are also featured here, are very much an expression of the people who are



working on them at present. And because gardens are a living thing, they are always evolving and need constant love and care. That is why, when the creator moves on, the garden often falls apart."

Many of the gardens in this book are clearly influenced by Japanese garden design. This is partly due to Mother's interest in Japanese gardens, partly because Japanese gardens are so popular with garden designers. But it is also because Poppo, the most prolific garden designer in Auroville, is very influenced by Japanese design. One of the first principles of Japanese garden design is that the design should be invisible. As Poppo puts it, "We have to collaborate with Nature and not impose".

"I think gardens have a very specific history in India," says Franz. "The first gardens were designed by the Moguls, then came the British with their gardens. I think these are the two major influences on gardens in India. However, the gardens in

this book are something very new for India. I hope this book helps their influence radiate out beyond Auroville because in India today not much attention is paid to garden design.

"This is a shame as beautiful gardens can have a profound effect upon individuals and communities. In Auroville now we can go to the Matrimandir park and I can feel how being there changes our behaviour. We, like the rest of India, need more such gardens and parks to bring us to a different space."

Alan

Landscapes and Gardens of Auroville - the transformation of the land, is available from prisma@auroville.org.in, Auroville bookshops and auroville.com. Price in India Rs 650

FREE ELECTRICITY DEBATE

Free electricity for Auroville?

In its October issue, Auroville Today carried an article on free electricity for Auroville, to be provided by a unit of the Auroville Foundation, Varuna-Auroville. A number of Aurovilians have responded negatively to Varuna-Auroville's objectives. One group published the letter below on the AVNet and asked AVToday to publish it. This group also asked the FAMC to review the order under which Varuna-Auroville has been constituted as a unit of the Auroville Foundation.

Varuna's costly gift

Varuna Auroville, an Auroville commercial unit that sells wind generated power to the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board, has recently sent letters to Aurovilians on a maintenance, informing them that Varuna will henceforth fully pay their electric bills without limits.

One of Varuna's ultimate aims is to provide free, unlimited electricity to all of Auroville. On an individual level this appears to be a generous gift without concessions. The cost, however, is significant. In exchange for this electricity Varuna insists on the following:

- 1) Varuna-Auroville will not contribute 33% of their net profit unspecified to City Services as other commercial units are required to do.
- 2) Unlike other commercial units, Varuna-Auroville will not channel funds that support maintenances and City Services activities through City Services.
- 3) The executives of this unit, and not any group constituted by the community, will determine the level of support that Auroville and Aurovilians shall receive for an essential service.

The cost of this free electricity is the subversion of groups constituted by the community to oversee and manage contributions and especially the allocation of maintenances and funds for an essential service. Costly indeed.

Auroville aims to be the "city the earth needs". In today's world, this means creating a relevant and replicable model of sustainable development, one that uses energy most efficiently. By offering Aurovilians heavily subsidized electricity, Varuna threatens this aim. Varuna claims that because it generates green energy, Auroville's inhabitants are free to use as much of it as they please. But the electricity we consume is largely derived from lignite coal deposits in Nevelli. When burned, only 12-15% of this coal is converted into energy; the rest is released as carbon dioxide, a greenhouse gas. This will not change even if Varuna wheels its power directly into Auroville. The energy will still move through the Tamil Nadu Electricity Board's transmission corridors and we will remain on the feeder that is hooked to the Nevelli power plant. Thus the carbon foot print

of the energy we consume cannot be justified by the energy we produce.

Varuna claims that Aurovilians will be responsible, more responsible in fact than the rest of humanity, and we will not succumb to the feast that they place before us. We disagree. Energy subsidies are considered by economists and environmental experts as terrible disincentives, which threaten the welfare of humanity. From the electrical subsidy given to farmers in Tamil Nadu to petrol subsidies in Gulf countries, these subsidies have contributed towards the abusive use of resources, adversely affecting the environment and threatening the long-term viability of local economies. On what grounds should we therefore undertake an experiment on energy subsidies which has already proven to be irreproducible in the rest of the world? Further, the so-called experiment proposed by Varuna has no methodology, no clearly stated purpose or hypothesis. This is not merely a technical detail. Varuna executives expect consumption to increase, perhaps by as much as 20% as a result of their subsidy. At what level is the experiment therefore a failure or a success? They have not said.

Instead of embarking upon a poorly conceived experiment, the generous Varuna contribution could be put to better use. The funds could be spent on strengthening the electrical infrastructure of the township, replacing old, outdated and inefficient equipment like fridges, pumps, fans, etc. with more efficient technologies. There are farms and forest communities with only solar energy. Many of the persons in these areas struggle with very basic electrical infrastructure. Some capital support should be provided to them to enhance their lighting and energy loads. Services, schools and public spaces supported by Varuna should get an energy audit done with these funds, and plans for greater energy efficiency should be developed and implemented. Such investments are reproducible models for other townships and cities. Thus, Varuna's gift would not simply satisfy wanton desire, but would in fact bring us closer to our aim: a city the earth needs.

Chali, Divya, Fabienne, Hemant, Lucas, Lyle, Monique, Suhasini, Suzanne

Response of Varuna

We disagree with the views expressed by the authors of the open letter published opposite. The following points have to be considered.

1) The ideal of providing free electricity to Auroville follows from the Auroville ideals as promulgated by The Mother, "There won't be any exchange of money in Auroville." They are not a fancy of Varuna-Auroville. Over the years, Auroville has been granting free or subsidized access to as many goods and services as feasible, which included subsidizing the costs of electricity. Varuna-Auroville has continued and extended the existing policy of the BCC.

2) Varuna-Auroville was started with the approval of the Working Committee, the Funds and Assets Management Committee and the Auroville Board of Commerce including the condition that it would donate all its profits (and not just 33%) as a donation to pay for Auroville's electricity. This condition has been laid down in the executive order issued by the Secretary of the Auroville Foundation, by which Varuna-Auroville was constituted.

3) Varuna-Auroville has not yet made any profits. In the financial year 2011-2012 it had an income from electricity sales of Rs 34.8 lakhs while it donated Rs 57.7 lakhs to Auroville for paying electricity; in the first six months of 2012-2013, the income from electricity sales was Rs 46.6 lakhs, and the donations to Auroville amounted to Rs 50.9 lakhs. Apart from these donations, Varuna-Auroville paid for its running expenses. The shortfall is covered from additional donations. If Varuna-Auroville would have opted to pay only 33% of its profits, Auroville would have received no donations.

4) The costs of most of Auroville's services are carried by the community. Auroville pays their budgets, which include an amount for electricity. Because of Varuna-Auroville's donations, the Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) no longer needs to make provisions for payment of electricity. The BCC now enjoys a savings equal to the donations of Varuna for these services' electricity. The BCC can put these savings now to other use in the community, such as for supporting maintenances and City Services activities or other renewable energy initiatives.

5) The alleged invalidity of the green aspect of Varuna's electricity, due to the fact that the wind-generators are not close by Auroville, is incorrect. Local solar-panels and distant wind-generators fight only one pollution, that of CO2 emission. The pollution of CO2 acts globally, not locally. It makes no difference, neither for the global climate nor for the climate in Auroville, where the wind-generators of Varuna are situated. Moreover, the idea that an electricity consumer always consumes the electricity produced by the nearest electricity feeder into the grid, is incorrect. All consumers of electricity of a particular grid consume the electricity of all producers which are connected to the same grid.

Before Varuna started making donations to Auroville, Auroville consumed 34 lakh KWh of conventional electricity per year and around 2 lakh KWh of self-produced green solar-energy. Today, Varuna-Auroville produces around 25.6 lakh KWh green wind-energy and Varuna Ltd. 28 lakhs, while Auroville consumes 36 lakh KWh of energy. Including the 2 lakh KWh of Auroville self-produced green solar-energy, the total volume of green energy is 55.6 lakh KWh. So due to the Varuna wind park, Auroville has reversed its carbon balance, and from a polluter has become a green energy-positive entity.

6) We do not agree with the views that the average Aurovilian consciousness is comparable to that of farmers in Tamil Nadu etc. as we believe that people have joined Auroville to pursue higher aims that include being conscious of their energy consumption. To check if this assumption is correct, Varuna and Auroville Electrical Service are developing a computer programme to monitor electricity usage. In cases of over-consumption, the matter can then be discussed with the individual.

7) Varuna-Auroville has already committed itself to help fund Auroville's electrical infrastructure, such as underground cables and transformers. We have also agreed with the BCC that Varuna will pay for energy audits, which will be done by Auroville Consulting, starting with the major electricity consumers such as the Town Hall and the Solar Kitchen, and, according to the advice Auroville Consulting, will fund the required modifications like fridges, pumps, fans etc., to the extent that funds will allow.

For Varuna, Arjun, Carel, Michael Bonke, Toby, Ulli

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