

## With a lot of help from our friends

Over the years, Auroville has received much support from outside.

**A**t times, Auroville has been perceived as a self-absorbed bubble which has little interest in the larger world. This is clearly untrue. Auroville's borders are very permeable, both physically and spiritually – this, after all, is the place that welcomes all people of goodwill – and over the years, many Aurovilians have shared their skills and experience with the larger world, while Auroville has benefitted enormously from the numerous individuals and organizations which have supported it.

So where does the 'bubble' accusation come from? Well, there was a time in the early years when Aurovilians might have been seen to be less than welcoming of outside assistance. One of the pioneers, Toine, recalls a quandary that faced the Aurovilians digging the pit for the Matrimandir as narrated to him by Alain G, who was coordinating the digging work. At the rate they were proceeding it was estimated by Alain that it would take them 20 years to excavate it, yet they felt that only Aurovilians should do the work as only they had the 'right' consciousness. Finally, three options emerged. Hire a large scraper with the driver operating it from outside the excavation; hire a bulldozer which would operate inside the pit; or, hire workers from the local villagers to do the work. This last option was considered by some as undesirable as according to them the work needed a special consciousness!

Mother was asked to decide and, of course, she chose for the workers! A little later, she further confounded the pioneers by recommending that an outside contractor rather than the Aurovilians should build the Matrimandir. In the end, this didn't happen for various reasons. "But it shows how keen Mother was to get the Matrimandir built as soon as possible," says Toine. "And once it was there she promised to fill it with her force."

So who from the outside ("outside", of course, is purely geographical: many of them are Aurovilians at heart) have taken part in Auroville over the years? The big names – J.R.D. Tata, Kireet Joshi, etc. – are well-known, but there are thousands of others, "a telephone book full" as Tency puts it, who have contributed. "If we made a film of the history of Auroville," says Toine, "the credits alone would run for two hours!"

### Constructing Matrimandir

Matrimandir has benefitted hugely from outside help. Aurovillian Piero played a key role in supervising the construction, but he was assisted, among others, by the structural engineer, T.K. Santhanam, from the Structural Engineering Research Centre (S.E.R.C.) in Madras. Piero would send his drawings to Santhanam who would check the static calculations.

This was no easy task. The Matrimandir is a very complex structure, subject to many stresses and strains. In those days, the only computer available for the work was at IIT Madras. "However, to begin with there was no computer programme to do the calculations," says Piero, "so Santhanam had to write it himself. It was a huge programming project which took him one to two years." In other words, he was probably doing the complex early calculations for the foundations with only a slide rule and a calculator.

"Santhanam was a genius who could explain complex things in simple terms," says Toine. He recalls a discussion about whether the ferro-cement outer skin would require expansion joints. "We had various opinions from different experts and didn't know what to do. Finally, we asked Santhanam. He had a very simple solution. He said that as the Matrimandir was a globe it was very difficult to calculate the stresses of the skin as it would 'breathe', so to begin with we shouldn't put any expansion

joints. We should initially put a low-cost water-proofing and after a year or so the building would tell us where it wants to expand because there will be cracks. These cracks would need to be repaired and become the site of 'expansion joints'. It was brilliant in its simplicity."

Santhanam was not a devotee of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, "he was devoted to his work" says Piero, but clearly his relationship with the Matrimandir was much more than commercial. "He became a member of the team, somebody who we could always call upon," says Toine.

Another individual who played a key role at a certain moment was Mr. S.N. Meattle, the man who manufactured the carpet for the inner chamber. Meattle had a factory in Agra. The person asked to contact him went to his house and found him reading *The Life Divine*. Meattle was asked if he could provide a carpet of pure white wool that was unbleached. He said it was impossible but agreed to come to Auroville to look.

Inside the Matrimandir office he looked at samples of wool the Matrimandir team had collected from all over the world. "None of this is good enough for The Mother," he pronounced. "Moreover, what you want can't be done." Pause... "Except if I do it myself!"

He carefully selected the wool and created two special looms upon which to weave the carpet. Then he came himself with a small team to cut and lay it. "When it was finished," says Toine, "this man who flew all over the world providing carpets and furnishings to the rich and famous, began crying. He said, 'I have seen so many carpets in my life but this is the most beautiful carpet in the world'."

The manufacture of the disks was another area where outside help was crucial. There were several options for the fabrication of the disks themselves but the big question was how to provide the gold finish. The owners of a firm in Paris which gilded most of the Parisian monuments using gold leaf were contacted. Their estimates were high even after they agreed in principle to train Aurovilians in the process. There was also an apprehension that pigeons would scrape off the gold leaf as already had happened with a few sample disks.

Michael Bonke had been asked to explore the possibility of procuring gold leaf directly from manufacturers in Germany. When he heard about the bird scratches with the first option, he remembered he had seen Buddhist temples in Thailand where gold was sandwiched between two glass tiles. However, this method was not good enough because there could still be corrosion: glass can corrode. So Michael developed a special system which created a vacuum and melted the edges of the glass so there would be no corrosion. "This became the final solution for the gilding of the disks," says Toine, "and this is how Michael became a key member of the Matrimandir team."

### Raising funds

Of course, all these experiments as well as the ongoing construction required funding. This is where the hundreds of donors who have kept the work going over the years have played such a vital part. "They include," says John Harper, "the devotees in the U.K. who paid for the crystal and the lady in Mumbai who paid for the marble for the floor of the chamber. Originally, the idea was to have a simple flooring as it would be covered by the carpet. But when this lady heard about this, she said, 'But I've got marble on the floor of my kitchen. How come you are not going to use it for the chamber?'"

John also recalls that a devotee paid for all the Agra stone used in the Amphitheatre and surrounds, and Auro-Engineering, a local firm also run by devotees, manufactured and paid for the heliostat designed by Piero. "They had originally undertaken

## President of India visits Auroville



PHOTO COURTESY OUTREACHMEDIA

**T**he Honorable President of India Shri Ram Nath Kovind visited the Matrimandir on the evening of 23rd December 2019 with his family. Accompanied by the Lieutenant Governor of Pondicherry Smt. Kiran Bedi, he was received by Thiru D. Jayakumar, Minister for Fisheries and Personnel and Administrative Reforms of the Tamil Nadu Government; Shri V.K. Siljio, Director Unesco Division of the Ministry of Human Resource Development; Prof Sachidananda Mohanty and Shri Madan Gopal Madabhushi, members of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation, and Mr Srinivasamurthy, the Acting Secretary of the Auroville Foundation. The visit was also attended by members of the Matrimandir team and the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly of the Auroville Foundation...

The Honorable President spent half an hour in the Chamber and afterwards exchanged a few words with Thiru Jayakumar and the members of the Governing Board and Working Committee. The President enquired about the status of proper public transport access to Auroville, and members of the Working Committee indicated the need for suitable land protection for Auroville.

The photo shows the President (left) with Governing Board member Prof. Mohanty at the Matrimandir entrance.

to manufacture and pay for the symbol that supports the globe, but there were problems with the gilding and this was finally made in Germany."

Matrimandir does not usually name its donors or fund raisers. However, one in particular needs to be mentioned. Madanlal Himatsingka was a devotee who lived in the Ashram. At one time, Madanlal wrote to The Mother, that "I feel that if we 4-5 persons sincerely work to bring and/or earn funds for Matrimandir, it can be built before Thy Centenary." Mother called him and said, "I am very happy, very happy with your proposal. My full force will be with you." Madanlal took this as a mandate, along with another of her messages, that the Matrimandir should be completed as soon as possible.

"He kept a low profile, but a lot of the money that came to Matrimandir was raised by him," says Toine. It was Madanlal who raised funds for the marble, the completion of the chamber, the skin and

so much more. Mother said that donors should not be asked directly for money but should be made aware of the work going on and what was needed. So Madanlal would bring potential donors out in his little van and show them the Matrimandir and explain what still needed to be done. The funding discussion would often happen on the return trip.

Toine remembers that in 1989-90 Matrimandir was facing a funding crunch. Madanlal's Matrimandir connection had been broken for some years because of the conflicts but John Harper and Toine went to see him. They invited him to come and see how the work was progressing. He came. Afterwards he visited Toine and Meenakshi in their house. "During the discussion at home he had asked how much it would take to finish the chamber. I told him that it was estimated to cost Rs. 25 lakhs. While leaving, he opens the car window and says, 'Toine, the Chamber is underwritten. Go ahead.'"

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Over time his 'underwriting' also covered the petals and ultimately the whole project."

But Madanlal was more than a wonderful fundraiser. He also had an extensive network of contacts which proved very useful. At one time no cement was available in the whole of south India and it looked as if work on the structure would have to stop. However, somebody in his network knew the owners of a large cement business. Madanlal managed to make an agreement with the family that shipments of cement would come directly by lorry from the cement plant to the Matrimandir.

"What I admired in him," says Toine, "was this incredible focus. He felt committed to The Mother to work full time for Matrimandir and so when he met somebody he would see immediately if they could be useful in that regard."

"The people who have helped Matrimandir over the years are endless," says John. "In addition to the Aurovilians, there are the donors, the villagers who sold us the land, the hundreds of paid workers, as well as the outside consultants who have offered their expertise. At the moment there is a whole team of outside consultants waiting to come forward for the test pond and lake. And now we have launched an international competition for the design of the next Matrimandir gardens, for which we have received thirty-five proposals from all over India. So once again we are welcoming outside support."

#### Renewable energy

Madanlal was a great support in the manifestation of Matrimandir. A similar figure in a different field is the devotee and scientist, Dr. Chamanlal Gupta. "For those associated with design, architecture, energy, engineering and sustainability at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and in Auroville," writes Suhasini Ayer-Guigan, "Chamanlal-jji is a beacon, guiding us in our practice, prodding us to understand the physics of solar energy and how to integrate and work with it... As the principal scientific advisor for the applied research projects in renewable energy in Auroville, he never restricted himself to just guiding us; he would be the first to roll up his sleeves and work in the field, coming up

with ingenious solutions for those pesky application problems that would inevitably pop up during implementation."

Chamanlal's association with Auroville began very early. In 1972 he set up a meteorological station and later was the consultant on Eco-House in Certitude, which was fully solar powered and also incorporated water harvesting. While Chamanlal did not think it was a success, it was the first eco-house in Asia and for many years people would come from all over the world to see it.

In 1974, along with Tim Rees and Frederick, he set up the Auroville Centre for Environmental Studies to receive the first Government research grants. In fact, through his association with the Tata Energy Research Institute (TERI) and the top scientists in his field, who greatly respected him, he was able to funnel a lot of outside expertise and funding to the fledgling community. For example, when John Harper started work on a small solar bowl project, Chamanlal helped. "In those days there were only two similar projects in the world," remembers John. "He brought the man in charge of the large French project to visit Auroville and see our 3.5-meter solar bowl, for which Chamanlal had raised funding through TERI."

Tency's first contact with him came when he wanted to present a biogas project to the Department of Non-Conventional Energy Sources (DNES). "Chamanlal was one of their senior scientific advisors and came to Auroville to see it. He supported the project and it was accepted."

Through Chamanlal's help and facilitation, the project enabled the freshly started Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) to develop the necessary infrastructure. Every week he would cycle the 12 kilometres from the Ashram to the CSR office to follow up on projects, freely sharing his expertise. As Tency from CSR puts it, "You can say that for any research project anywhere in those days – biogas, solar water heaters, solar panels, wind pumps, climatic architecture – he had an input."

"While he was frustrated by our poor data system and lack of proper documentation in Auroville, he knew we were not scientists. In fact, he valued perseverance and truthfulness above everything. And he always wanted to be involved. He once said,

"I am an Ashramite by choice, an Aurovillian by heart."

#### Town planning

Perhaps the other area in which Auroville has received much outside help is the complex task of town planning. While Mother sketched the original zones and Roger provided the larger concept, neither was a town planner. In 1999, when initial work was being done on the Master Plan, Lalit was the only specialized town planner living in Auroville. Nevertheless, over the years, attracted by the adventure of the Galaxy and a new concept of urban living, various experts have shared their insights and knowledge. "The eminent architect, Dr. B.V. Doshi, tried to integrate our ideas and concerns," says Lalit, "and give a direction for growth and planning related tasks involving community participation. He was very receptive to the vision of The Mother and had a wonderful eye for detail. He also could articulate the key tasks to be done in the short and long term perspective. He even offered us space in his office in Ahmedabad. Unfortunately, he didn't receive as much support from the community as his expertise warranted."

More recently, Luis Feduchi, Spanish architect and town planner, made a detailed development plan for sectors one and two of the Residential Zone, which he presented to the community in 2016. "It was the next step in the grounding of the Galaxy concept," says Lalit. "He did a very comprehensive and professional job in 'decoding' the Galaxy, in putting in mobility patterns, public spaces, community facilities, etc., while integrating inputs on ecology and the existing reality."

Andreas Cammarata is doing a similar work at the moment for the International Zone.

However, two names that are less well known outside our planning group are G. Dattatri, the first chief town planner of the Chennai Metropolitan Development Authority (CMDA), and Aroma Revi, the founding Director of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements. Dattatri's contribution was considerable. "He came at just the right time," says Lalit. "There was an urgent need for Auroville to come up with a Master Plan and he brought in the recognized planning structure and terminology. In

fact, he actually wrote the Master Plan with the support and guidance of Dr. D.S. Meshram, who was at that time the Chief Planner of the Town and Country Planning Organization, Government of India."

"Dattatri, was a very gentle soul and a great integrator. His job in Chennai had been very challenging, as is the case with any major city in India. Auroville was a different experience for him. He felt that what was being talked about elsewhere was actually being done or planned here. In that sense, he saw Auroville as a potential role model for India."

At the invitation of the L'Avenir team, Aroma Revi wrote in 2007 what is, according to Lalit, the most comprehensive document to date on how Auroville could plan for the future. As Revi put it in his *Auroville Mission Notes*, there is a need to "build a high quality, result oriented team that is based on capacity within Auroville, but uses a complementary external catalyst team – to kick-start the process of first building a flexible pattern language for the city; then developing a detailed development plan and appropriate urban design for key segments, and finally a financing and implementation plan that would enable the 'city' to be created over the next few decades."

"Unfortunately, we have not been able to implement his suggestions," says Lalit. It reflects our inability over the years to make the best use of those who have offered their insights and expertise to our planners.

And yet, in so many other areas we have benefited hugely from our friends and supporters. Some have come in briefly to help with a specific project and then disappeared, others have become lifelong collaborators.

Perhaps, as Toine suggests, we need to revisualize our role as Aurovilians. Rather than seeing ourselves as the source and measure of all that happens here, we should view ourselves a little more modestly as the back stage assistants who take care of 'sound and light'. "We have to keep the stage ready and Mother will bring the actors."

Alan (with input from Alain G., John H., Lalit, Piero, Tency and Toine)

## "Aurovilians continually make you think"

Manuel Thomas is a senior Chartered Accountant who works with Auroville groups and commercial units in various consultative capacities. He is also co-author with Henk Thomas of a history of Auroville's economy, *Economics for People and Earth – The Auroville Case 1968-2008*. The book is now being extended to include the findings of the years 2008-2018.

#### How did you become involved with Auroville?

It was through Aurovillian Mukul who I knew from Chennai days. He called me one day and said there was a project for a historical overview of the Auroville economy, and they needed somebody to do the database. Would I like to do it? I came and looked and realised it would not be easy. There were 2 500 balance sheets from multiple sources, and different auditors had used different formats, so the first thing that needed to be done was to establish a uniform format for the database. Nevertheless, I agreed to do it.

Henk Thomas from the Netherlands was the team leader, and Mukul and Stuart were supposed to do the analysis of the database. But when Mukul and Stuart left Auroville, Henk asked me to do the analysis. Harini took over from Stuart at the Social Research Centre and oversaw the project.

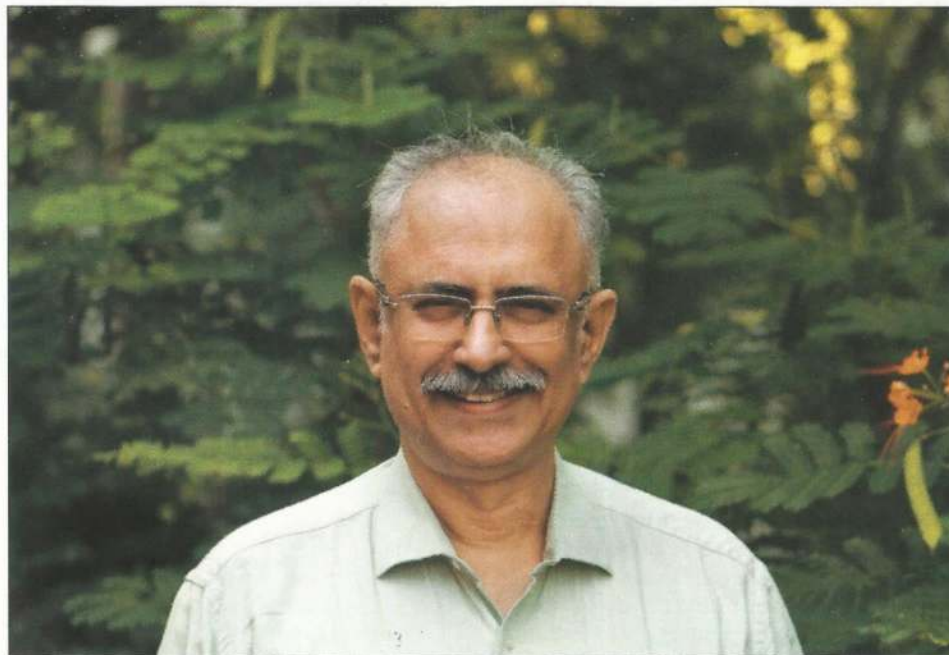
Initially, it had been a purely professional assignment. But then Henk dangled a carrot in front of me, suggesting that I look at the project as a way of obtaining a PhD. I fell for it, and at that point it stopped being just another consulting assignment. I thought if I'm going to do it as a PhD, I'm not going to charge for it. In the end, because we had to do so many corrections, it took 15 years. We finally came out with the book in 2013.

#### Didn't having to deal with all the different account formats give you a rather negative image of Auroville and its organisation?

Not at all. It was fascinating because it was history, I was seeing what was happening with the Auroville economy over time, and I had Aurovilians around me who gave me perspective, who would explain why a unit suddenly stopped or changed its name. Then again, some of the units had fascinating names, like *Memories of the Future of Light*. It was all very different from the other kind of work I was doing, which was working with corporates and other small and large businesses.

#### Do you feel that your report has influenced Auroville in any way?

I think one result is that people are now more aware of something that is called the economy. Before "economy" was something of a bad word, nobody wanted to look at it, but now there is definitely



Manuel Thomas

more interest and awareness. People realise they are functioning in an economy which is made up of flows from outside and from internal flows, and it is supported by people both inside and outside the community. We made a presentation of our work to the Governing Board. At the end the Chairman said this was the first time he had heard clear numbers regarding the various sectors and their budgets. That was nice to hear.

#### What is your professional relationship with Auroville now?

I work mainly at the policy level, not at the grassroots. I mostly consult on tax matters like the impact of GST. I don't do any audits with Auroville clients because there are lots of auditors from Pondicherry and you need somebody near you.

#### Has your work with Auroville impacted you in any way?

Aurovilians continually make you think because they don't simply accept any statement. You need to fully explain the point you are making, and then somebody will ask questions which you have never thought of, and you are forced to look again at what you are proposing.

At the same time, what made our history project doubly difficult was that when we sought clarifications there were many opinions, and very often there was no answer to a specific question or no decision was taken. That was frustrating. I think this is a particular problem here. At some stage a decision has to be taken; you can't endlessly debate.

Practically, partly because of my Auroville connection I now have an exceptional number of foreign clients for a firm of my size. Perhaps my involvement with Auroville helps me understand better where they are coming from. For example, most foreign clients value punctuality and take deadlines seriously. But in India time is extendable. The authorities may tell you that a certain permission will come in three days, but suddenly you'll suddenly find there's a holiday or something else in between and it will take much longer. So with foreign clients you have to be very sure to tell them about the hidden uncertainties.

#### Has your contact with Auroville challenged or changed the way you think about yourself or about the world?

A very fundamental idea of most conventional societies is that it is good to own property, so you work hard to buy it or invest in it. But in Auroville the ideal is no private ownership of property: everything is for the good of the larger community. So the fact that people here don't work for themselves but for the community is inspiring and a very big difference from the rest of

the world. I don't think this is fully appreciated even in Auroville. In our report, we were trying to highlight this motivation in your entrepreneurs because we felt that the non-commercial sector here never fully appreciated the commercial side of Auroville. These entrepreneurs are the ones who are supporting the economy and unless you help motivate them, you won't get more of them.

Some of your ideals are very high but, I think, impractical in present circumstances. For example, Auroville always wanted to have a no money economy. So far you've come up with a kind of debit card system, which means that most of the time you don't have to carry cash, but this is just money in another form. The problem is your economy is very interwoven with the outside world, and in an economy that is not closed and so porous you can't have a no cash system; it clearly will not work.

#### What about the deeper ideals of Auroville, like human unity? Do these interest or touch you?

I feel that a lot of the people I meet here have understood these ideals and are far more evolved than most people, so if you just interact with them, something will rub off on you.

This is one reason I enjoy coming here. In fact, every time I come I am rejuvenated in the right way. This is an international township, there is so much going on here, and the fact that it is possible to partake in it is a wonderful thing.

From an interview by Alan



# "It's time for Auroville to take stock!"

**S**riram Panchu is a senior advocate at the High Court, Madras, and an internationally recognised mediator. Over the past 20 years, he has been instrumental in bringing mediation into India's dispute resolution system. The Supreme Court of India has called upon his mediation services a number of times, most recently in connection with the long-running Ayodhya Ram Janmabhoomi – Babri Masjid dispute.

He has a strong connection with Auroville, and has advised both individuals and Auroville institutions on legal matters.

**How did you first become involved with Auroville?**

I began working in 1976 with Mr Govind Swaminadhan, a very senior lawyer. He was helping Kireet Joshi in the case relating to the forming of the Auroville Foundation. He asked me to work on some matters relating to Auroville and that's how my connection started. Over the years I have advised the Foundation and individuals in Auroville, and appeared in cases.

**Does the legal status of Auroville pose a particular challenge for lawyers?**

Auroville is undoubtedly an unusual legal entity; it doesn't fit into existing concepts easily. But we were able to fit most of the things we had to deal with into the existing judicial system.

**You are very well known for your mediation work. I believe you helped a little bit in the setting up of the mediation service in Auroville?**

I've had discussions, I have given some advice and put some Aurovilians in touch with others in

the sphere of mediation, but I don't recollect being very much involved in the actual setting up of your mediation centre. I heard that this centre is doing good work. Auroville has not had an easy time with developing models of democratic self-governance. The mediation centre can play a very useful role in sorting out issues which otherwise can become bones of contention and conflict.

**Do you think mediation is a more appropriate approach for Auroville than adopting elements from existing judicial systems?**

Definitely, mediation is definitely more appropriate and fits the ethos of Auroville well.

**Does mediation favour a rather different concept of justice from that of the state judicial system?**

If you take 'justice' to mean just the authority of the State applying the rules, then mediation is different from justice. But if you can also conceive of justice as the result of what both parties think is just and equitable given all the circumstances of the case, then mediation does have the flavour of justice.

**Mediation seems to give a better opportunity for working through situations and problems in depth, and to take into account the complexities of the human condition.**

That's right. Mediation doesn't usually see things in terms of black and white. In mediation you can get to the see multiple facets of the problem and the people involved and explore a lot of options for settlement. Having said that, I think that the justice system has a looming majesty, and the



Sriram Panchu

law codes provide a guide to conduct, so they can work quite well with mediation. I don't see them as being inherently in conflict.

**Would you describe your relationship with Auroville as being purely professional?**

I have many personal friendships which are valuable and rewarding, so it's not just professional. But I have not been much in touch with Auroville over recent years.

**How do you view the experiment of Auroville? Do you see it as being important for the larger India?**

Auroville is 50 years old so you are somewhat beyond the experimental stage, at least the initial one. You are a wonderful oasis, so that part of the experiment seems to have come right. I have, however, lost touch with your experiments in internal governance; I used to observe them with wry amusement as a microcosm and example of humanity's elusive attempts in this regard.

How important you are for the larger India is another question. It's not something I have an answer to. I know of a couple of areas where Auroville has scored well; there may well be more. But it's primarily for Auroville to take stock now, and to tell us what it thinks it has done for India's benefit. Then we can measure achievement, and also assess if there is a communication gap.

I think Auroville could play a useful role in India's mediation efforts. You could hold a mediation meeting or conference in Auroville where you invite mediators from elsewhere, and see if there is a wider opportunity for Auroville in this field.

**Would you be willing to be involved with this?**

It's a possibility. Perhaps a little later.

*From an interview with Alan*

## PROFILE

# Opening up new opportunities for participation

**M**any residents have come to know Sathish Arumugam through his work with the Residents Assembly Service (RAS) and his recent chairing of General Meetings. He joined Auroville in 2007 but before that he had been closely connected with the community for many years. Here is his story.

My father comes from a village about 20 kilometres from here, my mother is from Kulapalayam. I started my education at New Creation School, where I did well, but when I went to Udavi School I was very naughty and not much focussed on my studies. One teacher told me that because of my playfulness in the classroom I should stop coming to school and act in movies instead!

My mother was supporting my whole family, so at 16 I felt I should leave school to help her. Around 1999 I began work in Auroville's Future as an office boy. I only did it for a year but during that time I met many Aurovilians because I was also functioning as a messenger and going to different communities with blueprints of maps etc.

After that year I went back to After School because of my friends, all of whom were continuing their studies, were telling me about school life and I felt I was missing something. It was there that I learned computer work and the basics of web development, and this has been my profession ever since.

During the school holidays, I was able to work with Alok Aurovilian in his unit AVision, doing multimedia and web development for overseas clients. Alok was very important in my life. He didn't see me as just a worker but he was educating me about how I should live my life and how I should approach my work etc. I worked with him for three and a half years until he closed the unit.

Then he referred me to Maroma, where I worked there for eight years, doing package design and computer administration. Simultaneously, I was working at Auroville's browsing centre in the Solar Kitchen. I would work in Maroma until 5 pm and come to the browsing centre for another two to three hours in the evenings.

At the same time, I was freelancing in web development, and this has become my main activity after leaving Maroma. I work for customers and clients in Auroville and outside, although I've also set up and maintained websites for Auroville activities like fund-raising for the land. One of my clients, who I have been working with since 2007, is a pharmaceutical research company based in London. I look after all their web requirements and manage their websites. The owner is a friend of Aurovilian Minhaj Ameen (Min), somebody who I also work with. While working with Min, we've developed a web based database software to collect data for about 5 000 schools in 15 states of India.

My wish to join Auroville was due to a pull from some of my friends who had already joined. This seems to be a pattern in my life, taking decisions based upon what was happening around me. However, I knew a lot about Auroville before I applied, through my schooling life and working with Auroville's Future.

After I joined, for many years I was not much involved in the community's life; I was totally focussed upon my work because it was so demanding. I used to work like a machine, getting up in the morning and going directly to my work and then working until two or three next



Sathish Arumugam

morning. This would go on day after day. However, I'm thirty-six now and my body can't do this anymore.

Fortunately, a friend is working with me now and my work pressure has eased a little bit. Now we're mainly working for a Singapore-based client for whom we developed a real estate marketing tool. While the workload is not like before, I still get what I need financially and I am happy with it.

I always wanted to get more involved with the community so now I had more time for community matters. One year ago, the RAS announced they were looking for new members and I decided to apply. My intention was just to provide technical support but gradually I have been pulled into chairing community meetings, something for which I was not at all prepared. In fact, my first one was a bit of a disaster.

Maël and I were supposed to present the results of a survey on the selection process, but just before the meeting we both did some practice on who could present which part. During the meeting, I was so nervous, seeing so many people in front of me, that I messed it up. I couldn't focus, I started blathering and felt so embarrassed. Luckily Maël was equal to the situation and presented perfectly, even though he was also nervous. For one of the General Meetings the RAS organised, residents who called the meeting said that a chairperson should be selected on the spot as they were concerned that a preselected facilitator would have a predefined outcome in mind. However, when we in the RAS asked the meeting for somebody to volunteer, nobody came forward. Everybody was looking at myself and another colleague from RAS and I had no idea what to do: at one point I felt it was actually a ridiculous idea. Finally, somebody volunteered.

At the next General Meeting on the topic again we called for a chairperson from the floor and this time nobody came forward. This time I felt I had to do it. I tried calming myself, telling myself to forget about the crowd. Somehow I managed to focus people on the topic. People were shooting at each other and somehow I managed to get them to focus on the meeting's objective. Afterwards, people said they appreciated what I had done and this gave me more confidence. Now I

am continuing to chair meetings although I'm not yet perfect and I imagine I could do better.

Also, we don't have enough time or people in the RAS to work with other facilitators and help them prepare the meeting.

It's a year since I've been working with the RAS and I've noticed a number of things. For example, people come to meetings mainly based upon their interest. Many people came to the Governing Board meetings and meetings where Auroville seems in danger, like the threat of a new highway, but people have their own lives to lead and if they don't feel impacted by the topic, they don't come.

It's also been noted that relatively few people from the local bioregion attend many of these community meetings. While I think language may be a factor for those who struggle with English, I think it's often a lack of interest, as well as the fact that people cannot spare the time from their work and personal life. This was certainly the case for me in the past.

But I've also been seeing participation happen in other ways. Recently, Aurovik and Vinodhini organised two separate meetings in Tamil on the entry/exit process and a very different crowd of residents came. One meeting was for old-timer Tamil Aurovilians, the other for younger ones. Each meeting went on for three hours. People were asking many questions, making good suggestions. Of course, the fact that the meetings were in Tamil made them feel more relaxed about expressing themselves.

So it doesn't necessarily mean that residents from the bioregion are not interested in community affairs, as some people have suggested. If they are invited personally and are given time to understand things and can express themselves in their own language, many of them are very willing to participate. Also, if they know there will be people from their age group they are more likely to come. The problem is that in General Meetings we have limited time both to give information and for questions. Hence many of these people don't come.

In other words, we need to open up opportunities for those, and there are a lot of them, who don't have the time to come to a General Meeting or do not feel comfortable speaking in English, or do not use the computer.

I have no complaints about my life in Auroville. I've had my problems, like housing problems, but who hasn't! Every situation I have been through has given me something: writing skills, learning skills, speaking skills. Everything happened on its own, I didn't go after things, but I've always been able to learn through circumstances, through whatever happened to me.

My wife, Usha, is a teacher in Nandanam School and we have two children. Usha was born in Auroville. It's a love marriage. We met while we were at school.

I feel I've been supported by the community, and I'm very happy to be part of the Residents Assembly Service because the team is so good and I meet so many new people. I feel that now I'm really contributing something to the community beyond my professional work, something which had always concerned me before. So even if my professional work stops, I will keep doing this to learn more about myself and Auroville.

*In conversation with Alan*



# We are living in difficult times

Auroville is under attack, both from the outside and the inside.

**I**t started in February 2019 with the publication of the book *Auroville A Dream Hijacked*, authored by Dr. Nirmalya Mukherjee. This book purports to give a true history of Auroville's early days up to the passing of the Auroville Foundation Act in 1988. But it entirely fails in this objective. The book reads as a justification of the position of the Sri Aurobindo Society and contains no reference to the outlook of the early Aurovilians who, till the end of the book, are referred to as "the rebels". Former Aurovilian Michel Danino, who lived in those strenuous times, permitted us to publish his view on this book. [see article on page 6]

The second attack has come from an individual known as Mr. Vikram Ramakrishnan, who has been using the Indian Right to Information (RTI) Act to file many requests for information about Auroville, either directly to the Auroville Foundation or to the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Auroville's nodal ministry. The immediate reason is Vikram's dissatisfaction that Auroville did not agree with his assertion that the house near Kulapalayam village he had been renting from a villager and its surrounding land were owned by Auroville and not by the villager, and that Auroville did not come to his aid when he was then assaulted by ruffians, nor secured police protection for him afterwards. Auroville's stand that the attack was because of Vikram's own behaviour and that Auroville is in no position to tell the police what to do was not accepted by him.

Vikram then started questioning the honesty and integrity of Auroville and many Aurovilians. His numerous RTI applications – one numbered more than 500 pages – caused an immense amount of work for the Under Secretary and the RTI officer of the Auroville Foundation and for the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly. Not satisfied with their responses, he started writing directly to Indian authorities, making allegations about the misdeeds of the Under Secretary of the Auroville Foundation and of Auroville trusts, of working groups and individual residents and about them not following the ideals of Auroville and about corruption in Auroville.

## Sri Aurobindo on psychic self-control in the midst of discussions

The psychic self-control that is desirable in these surroundings and in the midst of discussion would mean among other things:

1. Not to allow the impulse of speech to assert itself too much or say anything without reflection, but to speak always with a conscious control and only what is necessary and helpful.
2. To avoid all debate, dispute or too animated discussion and simply say what has to be said and leave it there. Then should also be no insistence that you are right and the other wrong, but what is said should only be thrown in as contribution to the consideration of the truth of the matter.
3. To keep the tone of speech and the wording very quiet and calm and unobtrusive.
4. Not to mind at all if others are heated and dispute, but remain quiet and undisturbed and yourself speak only what can help things to be smooth again.
5. If there is gossip about others and harsh criticism (especially about sadhaks), not to join – for these things are helpful in no way and only lower the consciousness from its higher level.
6. To avoid all that would hurt or wound others.

Sri Aurobindo  
(Letters on Yoga IV, CWSA 31, page 87)

## The Enquiry Committee

When he started writing to the hon'ble President and hon'ble Prime Minister of India, Dr. Karan Singh, the Chairman of the Auroville Foundation, decided to take action. On April 24th, he constituted an Enquiry Committee consisting of three members of the Governing Board, Mr. Madan Gopal Madabushi, Dr. Anirban Ganguly and Dr. Nirima Oza, as well as former Secretary of the Auroville Foundation Mr. N. Bala Baskar and the then Secretary, Mr. M.V. Chunkath, as convenor, to look into Vikram's allegations. After the constitution of the Committee had changed – Dr. Anirban Ganguly was not available and was replaced by Prof. Sachinanda Mohanty and Mr. Bala Baskar was unable to attend – the Committee members began their work. Mr. Chunkath relinquished office on June 12th, and from that date onwards was no longer part of the Committee.

The Committee decided to separate the complaints into two parts: (1) those against the Under Secretary Sri Srinivasamurthy and (2) the complaints "consisting of serious allegations on Auroville Foundation, various Trusts, Groups, individual residents including on foreigners." In order to thoroughly analyze the complaint and the documents submitted, and also understand the various complex issues raised, the Committee gave opportunity to both the Under Secretary and Vikram to explain their views in person.

Regarding the allegations against the Under Secretary, the Committee concluded that "he cannot be directly held responsible for alleged mismanagement and other allegations of various trusts, working groups and of specific individuals. As the Under Secretary is one of the functionaries in the office of the Auroville Foundation and also has no independent powers, it is beyond his reach to influence any alleged wrong decisions as cited in the complaint." In the light of these circumstances, the Committee exonerated the Under Secretary from all the charges levelled at him in this specific instance.

Regarding the second set of complaints, which included "encroachment, embezzlement of donations, benami properties, money laundering, round tripping of black money, encroachment of government lands, squandering of government grants by foreign nationals" and a host more including "foreigners who are anti-India and anti-government, economic frauds, visa falsification and drug abuse," the Committee gave opportunity to Vikram to elaborate and substantiate his allegations.

After analysis of the complaint, the Committee observed that the allegations cover the violation of various laws which it enumerated. It stated that it was neither technically equipped nor professionally trained to address the issues raised in the complaint comprehensively and that it did not have the "wherewithal and required manpower/mechanism to wade through the complex web of events, happenings and unravel the truth." It concluded that it is convinced that there is a *prima facie* case for investigation and recommended "unanimously and strongly" that the entire matter be handed over to one or more appropriate central agencies "in order to unravel the complex web of incidents, ostensible criminal in nature".

The Enquiry Report of the Committee, dated June 28th, was discussed in a special meeting of the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation on August 26th, the minutes of which were not shared with the Auroville residents. The Governing Board decided to send the Enquiry Report with all proceedings and enclosures to the Ministry of Human Resource Development.

## A secret report

Both Vikram and the Working Committee of the Residents' Assembly of the Auroville Foundation were kept in the dark. Their requests for a copy of the report were not granted; neither were they otherwise informed about the content of the recommendations or the fact that the report had been sent to the HRD Ministry. Vikram didn't take this lying down. After approaching the High Court to order the Foundation to give him a copy of the report – the court denied the request – he filed another RTI application to the HRD Ministry. This time he was successful. The Ministry sent him a copy of the 28-page report and of the 670 pages additional documents which the Ministry had received from the Auroville Foundation. Vikram promptly shared the report



The Pour Tous meeting on December 2nd. The Unity Pavilion was

with many Auroville residents and working groups. He also started the website *The Auroville Files*, which details his allegations about the wrongdoings in Auroville.

The protests were predictable. The Working Committee wrote to the Board objecting that it had to receive a copy of the report from Vikram, the accuser, and not from the Board. "Our objection is even stronger as the Enquiry Committee has concluded that there is a *prima facie* case that requires the entire matter to be handed over to an appropriate Central Agency," the Working Committee wrote. "We would have appreciated it if the Board would have informed and addressed these issues with the Residents' Assembly." The Working Committee requested the Board to publish the report on the AuroNet, so as to keep the Residents' Assembly informed. No reply to this email was received.

## The community response

But the outcry of the community was unprecedented. The Residents' Assembly Revival Group called for a Pour Tous (For All) meeting on December 2nd to discuss the matter. "This is a time we need to come together as Auroville as a whole. It requires all of us to take our responsibilities and take action. We need to find solutions to this grave situation together. We can no longer turn our eyes away or put our heads under the sand. Nor can we each do our own thing in our corners. We have to come together. We have to respond seriously to these allegations, expose what is unjustified and incorrect, and take responsibility where the accusations are true. We have to discuss what to do." The Residents' Assembly Revival Group requested all offices, units, playgrounds, shops, centres, schools, eating places, etc., to be closed from 4 pm that day to enable all Aurovilians to attend the meeting.

The meeting, which drew more than 700 people, denounced the incompleteness of the Enquiry Report as the Committee had come to its conclusions without even seeking the views of any of the former Secretaries of the Auroville Foundation,

nor of Auroville working groups such as the Working Committee and Funds and Assets Management Committee, and none of those who had been accused by name. Why had the Under Secretary been given opportunity to respond and no one else? The decision of the Board to send the report to the Ministry requesting it initiate an enquiry was also severely criticised. If the Enquiry Committee does not want to investigate these allegations, we'll do it ourselves, was the conclusion. And, on the spot, a Task Force was formed to do this work. The Task Force is expected to present its findings to a meeting of the Residents' Assembly, after which it will be sent to the Governing Board, ideally before its meeting on January 24th-25th, and to the HRD Ministry.

## The internal feuds

Aurovilians have always been known to hold strong views and harmonising them is an uphill battle. In the words of former Governing Board member Ameeta Mehra, "In Auroville, the first thing you meet when you want to do something is somebody who disagrees and wants to oppose you."

While there is nothing wrong with people voicing their views, the decision of some of them to email them to people outside Auroville, including members of the Governing Board, as well as airing them on Auroville's internal website the AuroNet, has become problematic, the more so when the views include strong-worded accusations against other Auroville residents.

Of course, every Auroville resident has the right to approach the Board with the request to settle a grievance. But this also shows the failure of the community's aspiration to settle disputes internally. Alan, one of the editors of *Auroville Today*, wrote about this on the AuroNet. [see *Appealing to Authority* on the next page.]

The difficulty of posting one's grievances on the AuroNet is that the AuroNet is far from 'internal'. Many outsiders have access, including those who use the opinions voiced to attack Auroville.

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## Appealing to authority

PHOTO COURTESY AUROVILLE RADIO



overcrowded. It was the largest meeting ever of this kind in Auroville.

*continued from page 4*

But stronger reasons can be found in one of the letters of Sri Aurobindo, where he wrote about the psychic self-control desirable in meetings. [see the box on the previous page]. His advice is equally valid for those who publish their views on the AuroNet, or freely email their views to all around. It is to be hoped that the community will soon agree on some sort of AuroNet moderation.

Why are some Aurovilians so harsh in denouncing others? One reason is that "the other" is not seen to be adhering to the ideals of Auroville. Another is dissatisfaction that a working group does not take action against an offender as wished by the accuser but there may be many reasons for this. Members of

the Working Committee and Auroville Council often spend long afternoons trying to harmonize those with differences, but sometimes to no avail.

All this is food for those who wish to show to the world how poorly Auroville has developed. But is this truly so? Auroville has always been a complex place to understand. And while clearly there are areas in which we need to improve, perhaps the present challenges are stepping stones on the way to a better tomorrow. Is there a truth behind the force of falsehood? Dyvanshi writes that there is.

Auroville has been through difficult times before and we'll certainly get out of this, but only if we increasingly work together in a spirit of mutual trust.

*Carel*

It's a paradox. On the one hand, I detect a strong anti-authority bias in this community. Aurovilians don't like to be told what to do by working groups or anybody else, and behind the present movement to revive the Residents Assembly there seems to be a strong egalitarian bias, a feeling that we are all as important as each other.

On the other hand, some of us are very ready to appeal to authorities like the Secretary and/or the Governing Board for help when they think they have been wronged or they perceive some injustice in the community needs to be righted.

Of course, sometimes they do this because they believe they have exhausted all possible avenues for resolution in the community or because they believe that certain points of view important for community development are being suppressed or ignored by our official bodies. This is perfectly understandable and appealing in such cases must remain a basic right. Others argue that the Governing Board, as 'family', has a right to know everything that is going on and to make recommendations because, ultimately, they are responsible to the Indian Parliament for what happens here. Granted, and it has to be admitted that in our past dealings with them we haven't always been as open to them, as welcoming, as we might have been. Moreover, there should be no question of hiding our faults and failings.

But in some cases, the motivation for an appeal to a higher authority like the Governing Board seems to be to exert pressure upon working groups, or individual Aurovilians, to act in a certain way even though the appellant is aware that the larger community may not support this.

Our collective process is very far from perfect. But I can see two big problems with Aurovilians appealing too easily to other authorities:

Firstly, it puts members of the Governing Board or the Secretary in an invidious position. Doubtless they have our best interests at heart but they have no way of knowing, without extensive research, the veracity of the 'facts' that are being put before them or the wisdom of the action they are being asked to take by individual appellants. And even if they decide to act, they are likely to be criticized by others for 'interfering' in our internal process. In other words, they can't win.

Secondly, as this appeal to authority often bypasses or short-cuts our community deliberations, it effectively undercuts, emasculates, that process. In effect, these people are saying not only that they distrust our working groups, but also that they distrust our larger collective process to come up with solutions to particular challenges. At times, this may be the case. Nevertheless, it is difficult to see how we can improve this and strengthen the

Residents Assembly, which is a particular concern of many at present, if this 'parallel process' of readily appealing to other authorities, however well meaning those authorities may be, continues.

Perhaps, at root, the need of some people to appeal to authority figures reflects a fundamental lack of trust not only in our collective process – which, after all, is understandable at times – but also in The Mother's protection and in the efficacy of the inner guide on charting our individual and collective journeys.

But we are also dealing here with power issues. As long as certain people feel disenfranchised, rendered powerless, by working groups, there will be a tendency for them to seek redress in approaching other 'power bodies'. No doubt, individuals need to work on their own issues with power, but this may also indicate a larger issue, which is the perception of how power is exercised in Auroville. For, in spite of the fact that numerous Working Committees and Councils have asserted that they have no effective power to enforce decisions and that the Residents Assembly is the final authority for decision-making in the community, there's a persistent belief in some quarters that the major working groups are 'power' bodies which sometimes act independently of the knowledge or wishes of the other residents.

Here, better communication leading to increased trust between the working groups and the community is a must, but the key to changing this perception may be for all of us to stop viewing Auroville's evolutionary process in terms of the need for 'governance', which implies some form of power hierarchy, and to begin focussing more on 'organization'; on helping each individual to find his or her right place in the larger whole. As one Aurovillian put it, "It is for us to organize ourselves so that Auroville can be, and not try to govern each other. Let us leave that to the Divine".

However, as Mother pointed out, the ability to organize in this way requires a very different temperament and consciousness from that of the classic, power-driven leader:

*The conditions to organize – to be an organizer (it's not "to govern," it's to ORGANIZE) – the conditions to be an organizer should be these: no more desires, no more preferences, no more attractions, no more repulsions – a perfect equality for all things. Sincerity, of course, but that goes without saying; wherever insincerity enters, poison enters at the same time. And then, only those who are themselves in that condition can discern whether another is in it or not.*

*Alan*

*(This is a modified version of an article that first appeared on the AuroNet.)*

## The Truth behind the force of Falsehood

The publication of the book *Auroville A Dream Hijacked* by Dr Nirmalya Mukherjee, Vikram Ram's publicity stunts on his website *The Auroville Files*, and the Governing Board of the Auroville Foundation sending its enquiry report into the allegations of Mr. Vikram Ram to the Ministry for Human Resource Development with the suggestion that the Ministry initiate an investigation into Auroville, bypassing Auroville's Residents' Assembly, shows that there is a force in motion right now that is seemingly seeking to damage Auroville.

But I see this as a wave that is pushing Auroville to the next orbit, closer to its purpose. It is, essentially, behind the outer appearances, a movement towards Auroville's unity and individualisation. The movement towards unity is more obvious, as was witnessed in the Residents' Assembly revival meeting held on December 3rd, but also it is a movement towards Auroville's

individualisation, which may be less obvious.

In the first stage of Auroville's evolution, during the time of breaking away from the Sri Aurobindo Society, Auroville was like a child claiming shelter and protection from the Government. Today, the child is approaching adulthood, and learning to take up greater responsibilities.

I believe the time has come for the child to claim full adulthood, and no longer depend on structured authority, especially on those who have not committed themselves to coming to live in Auroville and being of service to Auroville. For those who have not stepped into the sacrificial fire of Auroville's adventure will not know what it takes. We need no outer authority to remind us why we are here; we already know and we need to tune into it. The force is at work, it is moving at an ever-accelerated speed towards the realisation, we only need to be silent and tune into it.

It is the time for Auroville to demonstrate that Auroville is capable of organising

herself and that she can move fast, take decisions and make things happen collectively even as its processes are unconventional, inclusive and non-pyramidal. I firmly believe everyone here is doing to the best of his ability, including our Working Committee members, who are often accused of all sorts of things. The real issue is systemic, not individual.

And by systemic, I do not mean 'oh the system is corrupt.' What I mean is the system can be more transparent, more sleek, less bureaucratic, and the organisation can be flatter. It is not so much that corruption exists here, it is a lack of an efficient collective organisation.

The wave toward self-organisation has been set in motion and it is only pressing for a greater realisation, a greater Truth, and a truer individualisation. Auroville has all the capacity in the world, and at a deeper level, a faith firmer than ever, a trust truer than ever. In the past, Auroville has demonstrated this

at every hour of crisis; today, more than ever, Auroville has to bring this out. Auroville is full of people of goodwill and the very fact that we are here for so long holding the fort on the ground, choosing this over everything else, is a testimony to it; and those who never jumped into this adventure will not know what it means.

We have both the goodwill and the capacity which is needed. We just need to organise better – organise better to be more transparent, organise better for real-time visibility, organise better to show our trust. The present wave is pushing Auroville to the next orbit. It may appear as a wave of Falsehood, but behind it I see the Divine Grace pushing Auroville to clean up, not the clean-up in the sense as asserted by the so-called whistle-blowers, but rather a clean-up of our processes and become a collective body fully capable of organising itself unitedly as a whole, in a way that has never happened before!

*Divyanshi*



# Auroville: The Dream and the Nightmare

In April 2019, two articles appeared, one in *Deccan Chronicle* by M.R. Venkatesh, the other on *IndiaFacts* by Raman Reddy, reviewing a recently published book, *Auroville: A Dream Hijacked*, by Nirmalya Mukherjee. These three write-ups have a common message: in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Auroville's foreign residents, variously called "hooligans" and "rebels", in collusion with a few powerful political allies, plotted to "hijack" the dream project of Auroville by snatching it away from the Sri Aurobindo Society (SAS), whose benevolent management was unjustly interrupted by the Indian Government's takeover of Auroville lands. It is now time, the subtext continues, to correct this injustice and bring Auroville back under the SAS so it may benefit from the latter's spiritual roots the better to achieve its objectives. Indeed, this shamelessly distorted narrative is but a distant echo of the propaganda the erstwhile SAS used to indulge in during the conflict between it and many of Auroville's residents.

At the outset, a disclaimer: what follows is not a point-by-point rejoinder of those write-ups, which would be a tedious and thankless task; it is merely a comment and testimony based on my personal experience. I do not and cannot speak on behalf of Auroville and write purely on my own initiative. What follows also does not claim to be a detailed historical narrative of the conflict between Auroville and the SAS; I hope someone will write it someday. I lived in Auroville from 1977 to 1982, at the height of that conflict, was among the "rebels" and "hooligans" reviled by the three write-ups, and played a minuscule role in early attempts to submit to the Government possible formulations to resolve the conflict. I have maintained my interest in Auroville as an experiment of great value, an aspiring laboratory for Sri Aurobindo's vision of a humanity endeavouring to rise above the ego and its endless greeds, many of which the SAS exemplified. I have visited Auroville fairly regularly in recent years and seen something of its achievements as well as the challenges it has had and will have to face.

## Navajata and the Sri Aurobindo Society

To begin with, what was this Sri Aurobindo Society, and why was there a conflict at all? The SAS was a society registered in 1960 in Calcutta for the purpose of raising funds initially for the Sri Aurobindo Ashram, later extending to the project of Auroville, and using those funds to acquire lands or create infrastructure for Auroville. Although the Mother, Sri Aurobindo's companion and the initiator of Auroville, was the SAS's president, and although the SAS was largely run from Pondicherry, it was legally independent from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram (which is run by a trust). This takes us to the most perverse distortion in the three write-ups: the role of the SAS was strictly limited to the above – fund raising and acquisition of lands; it was never to manage Auroville or run this experiment. That was left to Mother herself, as her innumerable messages, instructions, letters and discussions with Aurovilians demonstrate. There is not a single line by her entrusting Auroville's affairs to the SAS, much less to Navajata, who at the time ran this Society on Mother's behalf and is now sought to be depicted as a victim of evil foreigners ("mostly French"). Had there been such a line, Navajata would have brandished it later in the courts. But let me not anticipate.

Who was Navajata? Keshav Dev Poddar was a Bombay businessman who joined the Ashram sometime in the 1950s. Mother, seeing some potential in him, renamed him "Navajata", an invitation to work towards a new birth. Instead of confining himself to the tasks Mother had given him, he began putting on the garb of a spiritual figure. As early as March-April 1961 – seven years before Auroville's inauguration – Mother clarified: "The Sri Aurobindo Society is a strictly external thing, organized by businessmen to bring in money – EXCLUSIVELY. That is, they want to put people in a position where they feel obliged to give (so far they have succeeded and I believe they will succeed). But this has nothing to do with working for an ideal, it is COMPLETELY practical. ... It has nothing to do with yoga or spiritual progress or anything of the kind. ... My name, the fact that I am president [of the SAS], is simply to give my guarantee that the money won't go into the pockets of those who collect it but will be used for the Ashram, the running of the Ashram, and that's all. And on this basis alone I give my guarantee." [In a talk to her French confidant, Satprem. *Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 2.]

From 1966 onward, with UNESCO expressing its support of the project through several resolutions, Navajata's ambitions grew boundless; he

excelled at public relations and now reached out internationally. At some point in 1970, he attempted to turn Auroville into some sort of a UNESCO project, as "a huge sum of money is expected to flow from it." A concerned disciple reported this to Mother, who gave the following answer in her own hand: "I do not know who told you that but there is a misunderstanding somewhere because to hand over the management of Auroville to any country or any group however big it may be is an absolute impossibility. If it [such a step] has been at all taken, it is without my knowledge – because I say to it an emphatic NO" (*Auroville in Mother's Words*, Vol. 2, p. 66). The last "NO" was underlined three times. "Any group", of course, included the SAS itself, to which, it bears repeating, Mother never once gave the charge of running Auroville.

Indeed, Mother was throughout deeply distrustful of Navajata's ambitious designs. Two more statements of hers, of 1972, will suffice here. In March, she confided to Satprem, "... It's not that money is lacking, it's just being wasted, scattered. You see, Navajata keeps wanting to expand and expand the Sri Aurobindo Society, he buys plots of land worth lakhs of rupees, and instead of the money being used for the general work, it is frittered away. I told him, but he didn't understand." (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 13) To "expand and expand the SAS" meant, in effect, to expand Navajata's personal empire and "his" SAS, which went on opening numerous branches in India and abroad.

In December, in a discussion with one of Auroville's architects, Roger Anger, and a few more people, there was a general complaint about the lack of coordination at Auroville; someone suggested that Navajata could perhaps be entrusted with the general coordination of various organizations working in and around Auroville. Roger Anger noted in his diary Mother's answer: "It is impossible. It is impossible. It is impossible. A third person is required whom I can trust. ... You see, Navajata came this morning, he did not tell me anything. He couldn't; one cannot lie to me, you understand." (*Auroville in Mother's Words*, Vol. 2, p. 441 ff)

Possibly the briefest and most accurate characterization of the SAS was reportedly made by Indira Gandhi to a group of Aurovilians that met her in 1980, soon after she had returned to power, to ask for her intervention (see further below). She told them, "You have no idea what you are up against; it (the SAS) is an octopus" (as communicated to me soon after the meeting by one of those in the group).

## Who were the hooligans?

Immediately after Mother left her body in 1973, Navajata appointed himself chairman of the SAS, and soon began asserting his control over Auroville. Most of the residents were then from Europe and the USA, people of diverse origins and aspirations generally driven by a deep dissatisfaction with Western ways of life. Once it became clear that Navajata was projecting himself as the head of Auroville, a few Aurovilians began protesting: if "Auroville belongs to nobody in particular; Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole," as its Charter (composed by Mother) proclaims, how could anyone claim absolute control over it?

Navajata was confident he could stifle those early protests through a multi-pronged strategy. On the one hand he got pliant journalists to conduct in the Indian press a smear campaign against the "foreigners"; they were portrayed as hippies, drug addicts, debauchees, anti-Indian, and so on. On the other hand, he started holding back funds raised in the name of Auroville by "his" SAS, exerting a not-so-subtle financial blackmail. Besides, the SAS being the official guarantor for foreign Aurovilians vis-à-vis the Indian Government as far as their visas were concerned, this provided another most effective avenue for arm-twisting. Indeed, from 1975 onward and at regular intervals, Navajata got the visas of a few "ringleaders" cancelled and Leave India Notices issued; a few were deported. It took the personal intervention of friends of Auroville such as Sir C.P.N. Singh and J.R.D. Tata to get such measures annulled. This naturally led many more Aurovilians to rebel against such browbeating and work towards Auroville's liberation from the SAS's clutches. In 1976, a few of them took over a small house which Navajata pretended to keep in Auroville but hardly ever used (it was more like a "hut", as we called those small thatched-roof units with only low walls). Navajata reacted fiercely, bribing the local police (and later, the courts) to arrest a group of Aurovilians (over forty of them at some point), and cancelling more visas. He also got a few local *goondas* hired to assault Aurovilians, several of whom were hospitalized as a result.

All these facts were faithfully recorded and documented, with detailed reports sent to the

Government at regular intervals; briefs, fact sheets and press releases were also issued, although the press rarely took any notice of them. Instead, the media campaign demonizing the "foreigners" went on in full swing in dailies and magazines. Were they "hooligans"? Some did have rather rough or loose characters; a few lacked honesty or transparency in their dealings with the rest of the community – altogether, nothing very unusual for a sampling of humanity. But nearly all worked hard on Auroville's harsh landscape of endless expanses of red laterite, planting trees, digging ponds, controlling the erosion to prevent top soil from melting away into the ravines, producing millets, vegetables and fruits to feed a community starved of funds, and sometimes starved of food, hammering at iron bars in workshops, experimenting with windmills (among the very first to do so in India), organic farming or eco-friendly constructions, running cottage industries that were slowly but surely bringing some prosperity to nearby villages, or quietly doing onerous community service day after day. As one of the "hooligans," I found many of them to be fine human specimens with a sincere aspiration for change; if genuineness were to be used as a criterion, they and their would-be master stood nearly at opposite ends of the scale.

A decade earlier, right at the beginning of Auroville, Mother was already hearing mostly negative reports on the Aurovilians. But when a member of the Ashram visited Auroville in 1970, he sent her this brief report: "Mother, I was taken to Auroville a few weeks back. I was very happy to see the people working there. Here were the people against whom we hear all sorts of bad reports. They were busy with hard labour. Not many of us can do so much. You know that it is not easy to satisfy me with work, but I was truly happy." Mother answered: "I am very happy with what you write and fully agree. So all is well." (*Mother on Auroville*, Vol. 2, p. 148)

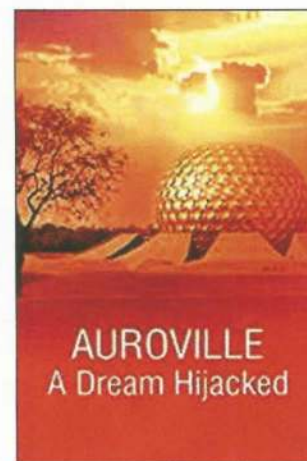
"Not many of us can do so much" was an honest estimate of most of the inmates of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry. An objective reader of the thirteen volumes of *Mother's Agenda* will be surprised to note time and again the low opinion Mother had of her "disciples", including Navajata. Just one sample, from 1961: "The other day, I told Navajata (and I told him loud enough for everyone to hear): 'We can dispense with a good half of the ashramites straightaway and not lose a single *sadhak*.' ... People imagine that by the simple fact of being here they become disciples and apprentice yogis!" (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 2) Where were the spiritual accomplishments that we are now told the SAS embodied?

I must correct an impression the above might give that all Aurovilians were foreigners at the height of the conflict; it was not so: Auroville already counted Indians from various parts of the country among its residents. I remember how delegations of penniless Aurovilians had often to travel to Delhi and camp there to meet ministers and top bureaucrats of the Central Government and give them a factual picture of what was going on; in such groups (I was part of a few), the presence of Indian Aurovilians, some of them highly respected (such as the late Prem Malik) was proof, at least, that the SAS's propaganda was little more than slander. In the 1980s and '90s, with the absorption of many Tamil villagers into Auroville, the dominant nationality gradually became Indian, quite simply.

To turn the Auroville story into a "foreigners vs. Indians" narrative is an old canard of the SAS which the three write-ups faithfully repeat, along with the old lie that Aurovilians wanted to create a separate, Vatican-like, enclave in India. Had they wanted to do so, would they have repeatedly called for the Indian Government's intervention and welcomed its takeover of Auroville lands? Would they have fought the SAS in the Supreme Court to defend this takeover?

## The Government Takeover

The three write-ups I refer to complain that the 1977 Kulkarni Committee report of investigations into the SAS affairs, which the Government of India cited as one of the justifications for its takeover of Auroville in 1981, was a set-up and was eventually annulled by a local court. But it was public knowledge at the time that (1) those courts were easily and frequently influenced by Navajata's money power (the hundreds of false cases he got filed in those same courts against Aurovilians simply to harass them were all later annulled by



higher courts); (2) the said report barely touched the tip of Navajata's financial misdeeds, which Mother was already aware of, as we saw above; (3) the takeover was justified not by this report but by Navajata's unbridled ambitions to turn Auroville into his personal fiefdom, in violation of Mother's express intentions.

The story of the Government takeover and the SAS's challenges in court is a complicated one, which to my knowledge has not yet been fully written.

If we needed a single confirma-

tion of the SAS's dishonesty and unsuitability for managing Auroville, I would quote its false statements in the Calcutta High Court and later in the Supreme Court, where it challenged in 1980 a first ordinance issued by the Government to take over Auroville's lands from it. Among them, its claim that Sri Aurobindo's teaching constitutes a "new religion" was particularly despicable. The intention was transparent: if the SAS represented a "religious denomination", it could claim protection from governmental interference under various articles of the Constitution of India that accord special rights to minority denominations. Several of us supplied the Supreme Court with long extracts from Sri Aurobindo and Mother to show the deep dishonesty of the claim, since both had been emphatic that their intention was not to found a new religion but to work for a complete and radical change in human nature. The SAS's plea was nothing but a betrayal of what Sri Aurobindo and Mother stood for. On 8 November 1982, four judges out of five on the bench agreed with our argument and threw out the SAS's bluff. It was the end of the road for Navajata, whose dreams now lay in the dust; he died shortly afterwards.

(An aside: it was instructive to observe the position of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Trust through this conflict; although officially not involved in it, it was supportive of the SAS's attempt to grab Auroville, never protesting Navajata's public postures and manoeuvres; many of Navajata's acolytes were Ashramites. However, when he filed his claim that "Aurobindonism" was a new religion, the Ashram Trust got the jitters, as it had been receiving educational and other grants from the Government of India for its research on yoga and spirituality; had Navajata's argument been accepted, such grants, which cannot be issued to "religious" denominations, would have been called into question.)

## Leave Auroville Alone

After the Government passed the Auroville Foundation Act in 1988, completing its takeover of Auroville, well-meaning people on both sides suggested that it was time to heal the wounds. While it was nobody's case that a continued hostility between Auroville and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was desirable, those good intentions neglected two crucial points.

The first is that Mother wanted a clear and sharp distinction between Auroville and the Ashram to be maintained. In 1970, a disciple told Mother of his desire that Ashramites should regularly go and work in Auroville; otherwise, he argued, "if there isn't the inner force of the Ashram people mingling with the Aurovilians, the Aurovilians will remain what they are." He was anguished to note "a break between Auroville and the Ashram". Mother's answer was revealing: "As for me, I don't find it [the break] sufficient. ... I don't find it sufficient. It's not at all on the same level [Auroville and the Ashram]. The people here [the Ashramites] ... You just have to imagine I were gone. ... Just imagine that and you'll see, you'll soon see what will happen." (*Mother's Agenda*, Vol. 11) Indeed, we soon saw.

The second is that for any genuine, lasting reconciliation to take place, the offender must first acknowledge its past misdeeds and express genuine remorse. Not once did the post-Navajata SAS give the slightest hint that it was prepared to do so. The current attempt to pass it off as a victim is surreal, although a classic stratagem. The Aurovilians had every right to rebel against the SAS's nightmarish stranglehold, which would have turned Auroville into an international "spiritual" circus, a glittering shell void of substance and meaning.

In the end, for Auroville to be fulfilled, it needs no power-hungry schemers, fraudsters and calumniators, no self-appointed spiritual teachers, but the simple spark and aspiration for change that Mother was looking for in every one of her would-be followers.

Michel Danino, May 2019



# Spiritual idealism

**Valentina Beatriz is a 29 year old Chilean filmmaker who joined Auroville two years ago. She is progressively discovering the vision of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, after having studied and experiencing the teachings of other masters.**

**N**owadays people are more willing than ever to find alternative solutions to cease suffering and improve their lives, searching more for answers in the sublime world of so-called 'spirituality'.

As some masters have said before, I believe we are spiritual beings having human experiences. Nonetheless, coming from highly religious past centuries, fixed belief systems are still pretty rooted in the collective consciousness, making our breakthrough towards an authentic experience of our spiritual nature a real challenge.

That is normal: as humans, an important part of our being is a product of our time and education. We have been thoroughly conditioned by our environment since early childhood. The way that we were raised and the ideas that we absorbed can play a role even in the most enlightened being. We have the tendency to replicate and apply the structures and beliefs that we learned from past events to new fresh paradigms, many times unaware that they are incompatible. This phenomenon leads to an unconscious transfer of ideas from organised religion to the vast realm of spirituality, causing us to create specific expectations of what 'true spirituality' should or shouldn't look like, even though everything can be potentially spiritual, as everything can be perceived and experienced as part of God (including ourselves).

Because the ordinary mind needs structure, we have the tendency to pack and label which thing, person or attitude is 'spiritual' and which one is not. If we invest too much energy in this encoding, rigidity, fear, attempt to control, and other sabotaging mechanisms appear, opening the door directly to the ego to lead us. Then, the very tools that we have chosen to help us in the way towards the reunion with The Source are used by the ego to create more separation.

To overcome this situation we may require not only to observe and clear our limiting ideas with patience and compassion, but also to understand that for the call 'to be spiritual', you don't have to abandon any aspect of your humanity, but rather: constitute a new perspective of what being human means. A fresh look free from condemnation is required.

## Ideal vs. Real

Undoubtedly, in Auroville we have very high ideals concerning what we want to become and, as a small sample of humanity, to manifest for the sake of the planet. Those ideals are noble and beautiful, and certainly the aspiration that we need to keep us working with meaning together, but is important to remember that ideals are useful

tools that need to be used with balance, always grounding ourselves into present reality.

When ideals become standards to measure life, we may be feeding a part of the mind that is more inflexible than creative. Under those circumstances it's impossible to feel happy, peaceful and grateful with our lives in the current state. The mind will always find a way to see the "lack" of this or that, the imperfection in this person or that particular situation, the gap between Me and The Divine Version of Me. Unavoidably we will always be going to perceive ourselves as not good (or not God) enough. Isn't actually the entire point of bringing heaven down to earth to dissolve that illusory gap?

I've observed that in Auroville. It is pretty easy to fall into the feeling of worthlessness just because we are not living in the way we think we should as a collective, or because we are not quite 'achieving' the external goals that have been set for us in the experiment. But what may be the most ironic thing is that, even if we have virtually rejected the current consumerist lifestyle of today's world, many of us have replaced it by consuming 'spiritual activities' or, in this case, ideas of spirituality, instead of resting in the knowingness of being divinely loved already. Is it possible that there's not so much of us to fix, but rather an inner acceptance and love to come to?

## Emotional Intelligence

I believe a practical spirituality shouldn't demand that we give up any aspect of our experience on this planet, and certainly shouldn't start from the focus of how imperfect we are. It should also remind us that we are not purely rational beings (as modern philosophy made us believe), but we are actually mammals. Being part of that animal class, what we have in common (besides producing and drinking milk from our mothers) is the need for touch, physical affection, intimacy, bonding and expression. We can choose to reject those experiences if we want to, but we may be missing a beautiful part of our human-spiritual journey along the way.

For me, spiritual practices make much more sense when they are helping us on the path to deeply love and accept all aspects of ourselves, overcoming denials and providing support to shed light on those things that we may feel afraid of; for example, the intensity of our emotions. In that sense, to deeply feel and navigate feelings may be the scariest, and at the same time, the most necessary process of all. This may be why many people with the excuse of being spiritual bypass a real emotional connection, as it requires a lot of courage.

However, no matter how painful or pleasurable an emotion manifests, as the word Emotion suggest, it's just "Energy in Motion". In that way, it would be better that instead of repressing them or projecting them in others, we take full responsibility for whatever we are feeling, observing and validating the sensation and learning how to administrate that energy in the best way we can. To learn how to do this in a powerful place like Auroville is very necessary, as our progress has been intentionally accelerated from the very foundation and feelings can easily get overwhelming.

But this is not always an easy task. Many times we have the tendency to judge our feelings instead of accepting them. This behaviour creates much resistance in our spiritual journey. Fortunately, in Auroville we have at hand many practices and healings for our emotional relief and liberation, and it is common to hear a very powerful and simple advice: "Give it to Mother", or "Give it to The Divine".

Nonetheless as much as the exercise of surrendering feelings to The Source is completely necessary and produces a great relief, it doesn't replace the need to surrender yourself to those feelings.

Perhaps a key shift in perception is acknowledging that emotions are not who you are in essence, and yet are an essential part of the experience that we all are having right now on this planet. They also constitute an important part of our evolution in the path of reunion with The Source. Emotions can also be seen as sacred and not disposable, so every time that we refuse to embrace our feelings and express them for the fear of not 'getting emotional', for not showing ourselves as vulnerable, or just because the preconception that emotions are basic, gross, imperfect or 'not spiritu-

al', we are also judging a part of The Creation as 'imperfect'. What if instead of doing that we try to be like the ocean, feeling intensely and letting go each wave naturally? Can we surf the emotional waves with ease instead of drowning?

## Divinely Humans

I think a global crisis of consciousness is also a crisis of self-love and acceptance. What does it take to remember that we are part of God? Certainly, no words can answer that question, because the answer comes through life experience itself, when you allow the plan that The Source has for you, to unfold.

Words, thoughts, dreams and goals are useful tools if they are used with that awareness: they are tools to serve us, never to enslave us. We can't figure out life with our minds, but we can surrender to the intense feeling of life flowing through us, and maybe start perceiving that heaven is not so much there in the sky but right here in our human bodies.

Finally, in Auroville we can't predict the future nor the results of our efforts towards the collective dream, but we can certainly choose to apply our faith and feel differently about ourselves and our reality right now. Perhaps one of the changes that we can make is to realize that the dream is only possible if every person organise their own Inner self first, removing the blockages that prevent us from feeling spiritual and unconditionally loved.

If we can incorporate that understanding into our everyday perception, maybe one day our point of view about Auroville will also change: there's not so much heaven to build, but a heaven available to be realised, and we are the lucky ones chosen to share that immense awareness with the world.

Valentina

## Art for Land Exhibition

**T**his month, the 5th Art for Land exhibition opened at Unity Pavilion, in collaboration with Auroville Art Service and Acres for Auroville. Until 21 February, a collection of sculptures, paintings, ceramics, photographs, and more offered by Auroville's artists and well-wishers will be displayed for the community. But more than being a congregation of beautiful artwork in a diversity of styles and mediums, this event aims to inspire donations to secure the lands needed for Auroville's physical manifestation.

Those who feel drawn to donate to the cause of land for Auroville during the Art for Land exhibition can receive a piece of artwork in appreciation of their generosity. All the artists have suggested a contribution for their pieces and so donors are able to choose a piece corresponding to the donation they feel drawn to give.

Donors can take part in the fundraiser remotely through the <http://artforland.in> website. The exhibition is there in digital form, with beautiful images of the artwork, information about the artists, and their suggested contributions, along with a form for donations.

## LIVING IN AUROVILLE

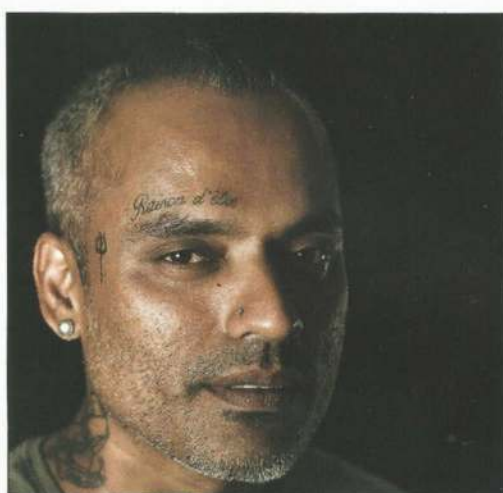
# I am the problem, I am the solution

**Recently, the Youth Center has been holding 'conscious learning nights'. In mid December, they invited Aurovik (Vikram Mani) to share his experience of living in Auroville for the past 15 years. Here is a slightly edited version of his impromptu sharing.**

**I** am happy to come to have a conversation on a topic like Auroville. As I sit here today, I can't believe that 15 years has passed so quickly. I can remember taking care of this Youth Center when I was young, pathetic, full of dreams, wild making lots of mistakes. I had lots of anger, fear. 15 years later, tuning into what I am today, there is a little less fear, less anger, maybe I'm a little less pathetic. I'm a little more humble, a little more aware and, mostly, a little more tuned in to the purpose of being here.

I have zero competence to talk about anything on a mental level, telling you Auroville is this or that. I can plagiarise a few things and try to sound smart and intellectual and philosophical, but the truth is I don't know; I have never known. But what I am certain of is that 21 years back I saw a photo of Mother in the Ashram and now, 21 years later, the only thing that matters to me is Her. I'm not interested in comfort, I'm not interested in much of the everyday stuff. Everything has boiled down to Her.

I still struggle incredibly, but here's the good part. Auroville is exactly the space that was created for this struggle to happen and for all the hidden muck to come to the surface and, little by little, over a period of time, for some light to enter into all the cracks and crevices of the inner being and for some baby steps of transformation happen. I am positive that I have landed here to somehow



Aurovik

crawl and struggle, push and fight, somehow achieve some balance, so that I could make a small meaningful contribution and, hopefully, leave a simple footprint that would help to take the conversation forward.

Mother says somewhere that if humanity doesn't change in consciousness then crushing circumstances will be arranged for the change to happen. And for me, every day here in Auroville, those crushing circumstances are arranged, some on the subtle level, some on the visible level, some on the meta level. It's always about each individual's inner journey in transformation and the collective rise in consciousness. If we are transitional beings, then what we encounter daily

are the outcomes of transition, these are the visible and invisible evidences of a transitional and transformational journey.

Auroville is me. It is what is inside that shows on the outside, whether it's on an individual level or a collective level. Learning about what is inside people and what separates them or unites them, what pulls them, what pushes them, is for me the very essence of being here. For me, Auroville is an incredible opportunity to not just change the narrative in theory but change the narrative integrally on the inside and eventually on the outside.

In status I am an Aurovilian, but actually I'm just a simple, full of imperfections, human being who is trying to be an Aurovilian. The current climate is very intense because a force is creating an

atmosphere of fear and chaos and power and division, and instruments are feeding into it. So every moment I have this massive choice: to be in balance, to connect more with the diversities and polarities and unite, or get into the same repeated criticisms and pulls and again divide and separate.

I am going to try my best not to play into these forces and become their instrument. I am going to retain my purpose of connecting with people, agreeing with them, disagreeing with them, and sometimes agreeing to disagree with them, but I am not going to disconnect from them because I am not willing to stay disconnected. Not with myself, not with anyone else.

For what do we want to do? Do we want to repeat the old patterns and divide and find enough justifications to stay divided? Or should we persevere relentlessly in coming closer to each other, even if we see things differently?

Can we stop differentiating between people – young/old, local/foreign, man/woman, newcomer/old-timer etc. – because it feels like a never ending cutting of the cake into smaller and smaller pieces rather than just seeing it as one. We are all the same.

I'm not afraid, I don't need to be liked or be accepted. I don't want to play games. Rather, I want to make a change every moment and try to progress: to get out of my comfort zone, take responsibility for the patterns I have been repeating. Above all, I want to connect more deeply with Her.

I don't want to blame a single person or entity for what I am now or the circumstances I find myself in because that excuse has been played out so many times. Instead, I am going to focus on me, I am going to invest on focusing inside and getting better, and becoming the best possible version of me for the Mother.

For Auroville is me. I am the problem, I am the solution. I have to get better.



# Ok's Journey of Sustainability

Ten years of creating art from premium waste

Walking into the Centre d'Art at Citadines during the "Journey of Sustainability" exhibition is to enter a shifting space where the ugly dregs of our consumerist society take on new fanciful shapes. Enormous jewel-toned birds with plumage made from broken glass and metal bangles greet the visitor upon arrival and the tendrils roots of an invisible tree, intricately crocheted from old cassette tape, trail down from the ceiling. In the next room, the light has been transformed by blue cellophane on the windows into an underwater blue. A swarm of enormous jellyfish, all made from plastic packaging waste and assorted beads, drift suspended from the ceiling. And just beyond, the air sparkles with the refractions of dozens of iridescent fish, their scaly bodies composed of discarded CDs. But in tragic contrast to this waste-turned-art, masses of plastic bottles are deliberately scattered along the floor beneath them.

All this has been created by Ok Jeong Lee, an Aurovilian artist and founder of Ok Upcycling Studio. Through this exhibition - her second in Auroville [see *Auroville Today* no. 282 for coverage of the first] - she has encapsulated her work over the past ten years in Auroville. Ok's medium is premium waste, which can be any clean discarded objects that she collects from the community's waste disposal service, EcoService, or from individuals who directly contact her with materials. In addition to the whimsical flora and fauna, she also has on display practical items, such as cushions made from recycled PVC filled with waste plastic, and bags made from crocheted VHS tape and stitched slides.

Ok grew up in South Korea, which was still a developing country at that time, and so her first experiments into art as a child were with waste materials. Her work has taken many forms as she has always seen the boundaries between art, design and craft to be very fluid. After settling in Auroville, she reconnected with the medium of waste materials when she became involved in the Litter Free Campaign in 2010, which included craft activities with waste materials and culminated with the Trashion Show where beautiful or eccentric clothes were fashioned out of waste. Only after this did Ok learn the term 'upcycling' and become aware of this larger community around the world.

However her work remains instinctive, and she gains her ideas from the materials themselves, inspired by the colours, shapes, and textures. She sees the history of human invention being played out through the materials she collects, as people reject diskettes, audio tapes, video tapes, CDs, and pen drives as better technologies emerge.

When visitors come to see Ok's exhibition, she lets them experience the pieces on their own. Many are particularly drawn to the aquarium room, with its sad yet beautiful atmosphere. "There is a report that by 2050, there will be more trash than fish in the ocean. We will have a plastic ocean. This is the message that I want to express," Ok says.

Ok acknowledges that Aurovilians are more conscientious than the average in their consumption, but there is still a long way to go globally. Even Ok still looks for ways to reduce her waste. One of her creations, a simple cushion that can be stuffed with 3 to 5 kg of packaging plastic, has particularly deep meaning for her.

As Ok looks toward the next ten years, she hopes to be able to go deeper and expand her reach. She wants to see the media spreading awareness about the rampant problem of waste and believes that art pieces can have the power to convey that message. As a result, she has an exhibition planned for Korea next year and plans for others in wider India and France. Ok also wants to see more engagement with upcycling, and looks to grow the team at Ok Upcycling Studio through offering more workshops and collaborating with other artists.

Hilary



Illuminated jellyfish made from plastic packaging waste and beads



Ok sitting in the blue room amidst a sea of plastic bottles below a swarm of iridescent fish made from discarded CDs



Ladies bags made of old headphones, cassette tape and gramophone records



Installation made from discarded dvd wheels and plywood

## CLARIFICATION

Dear *Auroville Today*,

This is regarding the issue of the articles in *Auroville Today* # 364, focusing on the employees of Auroville. While I am grateful for the issue dedicated to our employees, in this article, however, no mention is made of SEWA, who did an employee survey in 2000, along with Auroville's Social Research Centre and Pondicherry University, and most importantly, the funding agency, the Dutch Stichting de Zaaier. Without their support we could not even have thought about doing such an exhaustive survey in Auroville.

And this fact was made very clear when the attempt to do the same survey by us in 2007-08 had to be shelved (with a very heavy heart!) after a full year of working on it, because we had been given to understand that there were simply no funds available in Auroville for such an undertaking!

Warm regards,

Klara



## Heinrich Weihrach

Heinrich Karl Weihrach peacefully passed away in his Auromodèle home on Wednesday December 25th at the age of 81. He had suffered a number of strokes since 2010.

Born in Heidelberg, Germany, Heinrich had studied business, law, Egyptology, piano and cello before embarking on an allopathic medical career in Germany, which included homeopathy and natural healing methodologies. In 1980 he visited Auroville for the first time, but was not impressed. But when he met his future wife, artist Chantal (Shanta) Gowa, a year later, the idea of India came up once again. In 1985 they visited Auroville and in 1991 Shanta joined Auroville with their son Coriolan. Heinrich settled three years later, in 1994, and applied to the Medical Council of India for permission to work as a medical doctor in India. However, this permission was never granted.

Instead, he focused on music. He was a gifted and fervent western classical pianist and cello player. As Auroville had no small music salon, they asked Roger Anger to include a music studio in the design of their house in Auromodèle. Salle Auropax was inaugurated on The Mother's birthday in 1999. It became the location for many intimate concerts in the years to follow by visiting musicians and by residents of Auroville. Of particular interest were the performances of pieces written for two pianos, as Heinrich had managed to bring two grand pianos to India.

Increasingly, Heinrich also gave solo performances. His last one was a year ago in CRIPA. When death surprised him he had been preparing for the next.

Heinrich's body was brought to the Farewell Centre, and cremated at the Adventure burial and cremation grounds on December 29th.

## PASSING

## About *Auroville Today*

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