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Farewell matters



The new Farewell Centre

Death is not a popular topic of conversation. Yet philosophers through the ages have stated that an awareness of death and preparedness for it is essential to living one's life to the full. In fact, one can say that one's attitude to death is a powerful influence upon how one lives one's life.

The Mother spoke extensively about death. The reason for death, and its relationship to what we term 'life' and to other states of consciousness, was central to her explorations in transforming the body. Through her extraordinary experiences, she not only provided glimpses of a new state of being, she also radically redefined the meaning of life, death and immortality.

It is debatable how far this knowledge has permeated into Auroville. As a new, dedicated Auroville 'Farewell' facility reaches completion, perhaps it is time to mine her extraordinary revelations and to initiate sensitive conversations into what death really represents, both for the individual and for the community as a whole: not as a morbid preoccupation, but as a celebration of the richness and ever-expanding horizons of our lives.

In a few weeks, the new farewell facility will officially open. Suzie, who is a long-term member of the Farewell Group, describes their work, the importance of the new facility, and her own evolving relationship to death.

What does the Farewell Group do?

We are a self-organised group that focuses upon everything relating to the event of death. We are not involved in hospice-type care prior to death or in any kind of long-term bereavement therapy for relatives or friends after death.

When somebody dies and the body is brought to us, one part of our team washes and prepares it for the cool box. Whatever the family or friends of the person have indicated – how the body is to be clothed, how long it is to be kept in the cool box, the decorations in the viewing room, whether it is to be cremated or buried etc. – we help them implement. If the family wants the preparation and viewing to happen in the home, we help by bringing one of our cool boxes there and, if necessary, by renting generators to maintain a constant power supply.

We have forms (which are also available online) that people can fill in at any time with their last wishes concerning their funeral arrangements, but many do not do this. One of the members of the team will present different options if people don't know what the deceased wanted.

The Auroville burial and cremation ground is at Adventure. We transport the body there, if this is not taken care of by family and friends, and make the final arrangements for cremation or burial. The family of Juanita, who died in the U.S. some time ago, is coming in December. A tree has already been planted and there will be a ceremony, to which Aurovilians are invited, when they place her ashes near it. These are the kinds of things we also facilitate.

The BCC has budgeted Rs.30,000 for each event, but sometimes it costs more. We get no separate budget for maintaining the facilities at Adventure, so now we include in the cost of a burial

or cremation a certain amount for cleaning and maintaining the site.

Is every farewell event different?

Yes. There is no set way of doing things; each event is very different. We are simply there to support people in whatever they want.

Of course, we have our preferences. The burial section at Adventure has become very personalized. That wasn't how we had thought things would unfold, but we understand that there can be a need for it. Now we have also created a small hillock where people who don't want a gravestone can bury the ashes anonymously.

But you can't make a rule about this, or anything else concerning death. You can't say to a grieving family that you cannot do it in a certain way. For example, you might think that everybody should be buried in Adventure, but I know all my greenbelt neighbours will want to be buried in the forest they have planted.

Mother has written or spoken so much about death. Is there a general consciousness concerning what Mother said about death? Or is the attitude to death still very varied in Auroville?

I think it is still very varied. Those who want to keep the body for a few days have probably read what Mother said in the *Agenda*. Regarding the local people, sometimes there is a dispute between the Aurovilian part of the family and the part that is still living in the village about how to handle things around death. I remember speaking to a senior Tamil Aurovilian about it. He said for his parents' generation they have to do it the way they want it, but for the next generation it will be different.

Do you think it would be useful to have what Mother said about death made more public?

My own view is that there is a moment when a person becomes open to this. In my own case, it wasn't until someone near to me died that I started to look at it. However, it is important when you start

looking that the information is there. This is why we have put together a shelf of books at the Laboratory of Evolution on the topic of death and dying. It's also about grieving and hospice work as well as what Mother said. These are good resources for those who want to know more about the topic.

How did you become involved with farewell matters?

When Sydo died in 2004, he was the second person in my life who I been very close to who was murdered, so it set off an alarm bell in my being that I had to look a little bit in this direction.

After Sydo's death, I was recommended to see Barbara, an Auroville healer. We became friends and we started to talk with others about death in terms of the collective rather than of our personal issues. We wanted to have a material base in the community that was more supportive of the process around death.

Mother tells us that a certain atmosphere, of quiet, silence, is important so we were trying to figure out how to create those conditions.

We decided to fix up a room in the Health Centre, the old operating room, which could be used for viewing the deceased. Albert, who was then one of the managers of the Health Centre, was very supportive. He had already bought a cool box which allowed us to keep the body for some days, but, more than this, I became aware that he was someone who had inner knowledge about the passage of death and could support it.

But then he had an accident which led, after some time, to his passing. We knew that without him it would only be a question of time before we had to move out, so we started thinking about having a permanent facility. In the meantime, we looked around for temporary places. We finally found a place at Auroshilpam that would accept the project on a temporary basis for one year.

Then we started working on a project for a farewell facility. We began asking Aurovilians what kind of facility they wanted, and what we kept hearing was that it should be somewhere in the centre of Auroville and in nature. *continued on page 2*

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Personal copy

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So in 2009, a few of us started tramping around the cashew topos behind Arka, near where the new Health Centre, Santé, was going to be built.

In fact, we first thought the new farewell facility would be small and adjacent to the new Health Centre, but Helmut, who designed the new Centre, advised us to make our own independent facility.

Dorle joined the team as architect, and she helped us get site permission for a lovely site on the edge of Mahalakshmi Park. We worked with her for one year to clarify what we wanted, and she came up with a concept, for which the original estimate was around 35 lakhs.

By the end of 2013 it looked as if we had enough money, and on 5th December we had the foundation event. However, after six months it became evident that it was going to cost much more than the original estimate, something like double, in fact, and that we would have to begin fundraising again. It was a difficult time, but now the work is almost finished. It will be opened as soon as the landscaping is completed.

Where did the funding come from?

The Dutch foundation, Aurofonds, has been very supportive. The Government of India helped with the purchase of equipment, and several Aurovilians and units also donated. No money came through the FAMC or BCC, although we had a lot of moral support.

How has the new facility helped you improve the farewell process?

Now we can really create our own atmosphere. The new facility is facing the park, so many people can sit all day in a large covered space and look out on these peaceful surroundings. Also, now we have a much bigger viewing room: in the old Health Centre there was not enough space, and if there were two bodies at the same time, as actually happened, we simply had to put a curtain in between.

The viewing room is an open free space that can be arranged in different ways, and if the family wants to do the decoration they go ahead. If nobody comes forward, then we do something ourselves.

We also have a preparation room and a rest room where a family member or friend of the bereaved can stay overnight. Several Auroville artists have also donated beautiful items to us, like golden pillows, pottery and a beautiful stained-glass window, to make it feel more special.

All in all, I'm sure that the material aspect of farewell matters is in place for at least the next few decades. But we definitely need to expand our team for the future work.

At the opening of the new facility, we will answer questions about our work and explain how people can fill in the forms concerning their last wishes. But we also hope it will be an energy-gathering occasion and that people will come forward to help us in our work.

Has your view of death been changed through your involvement with this work?

Mother and Sri Aurobindo are my gurus, so when I read what they say about death, I believe it. But, still, I had to have my own experiences to really make it 'mine'. Sydo's death and this work

provided me with that experience and helped me better understand some of the things that they were saying. But even now when I reread something they have said, something new will pop out. It is an evolving understanding.

This work has also given me a kind of confidence. In the past year, my uncle went into a coma. Everybody in my family was freaking out; nobody knew what was going on or what to do. I said, talk to him, he is there. So then those who sat by his bedside spoke with him, my sister and brother-in-law put music on a tape and that was played to him, and I wrote a letter that was read out to him. This was really healing for my family because here was something they could do rather than just sit there.

I could suggest this because I am more familiar now with death. Often I make time to sit in the viewing room. This is also a kind of research as it's interesting to observe that the atmosphere can be very different from one person to another.

I feel comfortable now. But in terms of truly understanding death, for me it is an ongoing process.

From an interview by Alan

Death and Dying – Do we need to talk about it?

"Death is the question Nature puts continually to Life and her reminder to it that it has not yet found itself."

(Sri Aurobindo in "The Supramental Manifestation upon Earth")

"...And from the universal standpoint, it is this inertia, this unconsciousness that made the existence of death necessary – the 'existence' of death!!

(Mother's Agenda, 30.4.69)

Monsoon rains poured down when a group of ten huddled together in Vérité's Integral Learning Center for a workshop on 'Death and Dying' with Susan. The participants shared their experiences with death and the inevitability of acknowledging one's own fragility. Responses to the death of a loved one, one's own near death experience, or deaths in numbers by acts of terrorism like the one in Paris – incidentally on the same day as the workshop – were freely shared. Here, Susan talks about the concepts she tried to explore through her workshop.

Why is it important to initiate conversations around death and dying?

I don't think it is essential that everyone has to talk about it, but what is essential is to create a space for people who want to talk about it. People come to the subject for different reasons – grief or loss of a loved one or experiences like visitations. Sometimes people want to talk about death because they don't know how much time they have, especially if they have been diagnosed with a life-threatening illness. For many years I worked in the US as a social worker in a support programme for people with cancer. Many of our patients said that facing the reality of their own mortality helped wake them up to live the life they wanted.

At a more pragmatic level, conversations around death help people to take responsibility for what they leave behind – what to do with their physical or material remains, possessions, debts and assets. Many people are comfortable thinking or talking about death and dying, but somehow have not found the time to write their last will, which is especially important if they have children. End-of-life health care decisions are also important to discuss and make clear to those who

will be caring for you. The Farewell Group has created a form for Aurovilians to state and record their wishes, which I understand most people, including me, haven't yet done!

Perhaps also because a significant part of Auroville's population is ageing, there is now a need to engage in these topics in a philosophical, spiritual, and even experiential approach.

How is Auroville as a community dealing with death?

As Aurovilians, we can benefit from the extensive writings of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo about death, dying and immortality.

Auroville is reaching a level of maturity which can be seen from the developing work of the Farewell Group and the new farewell facility. The Farewell Group have been around for a long time and provides a great service. As far as I know, they are all volunteers who have other full time work in Auroville, but they go to great lengths in after-death care and help to create beautiful, meaningful funerals.

Could you share some more on the ideas you explored in the workshop and your own learning from it?

What interests me is not just the philosophical, spiritual or legal aspects of death but also to understand the beliefs and practices of different cultures. India is a particularly rich field for this type of research. The tradition of conscious preparation for death and dying is there in many ancient cultures. The Tibetans, for example, have a deep philosophy and detailed practices around death. The Dalai Lama is reported to have said that if you don't practice or prepare towards your end once you're 50, then all your other practices makes no sense in terms of your spiritual development.

I structure the format of the workshop to address the left and right side of the brain – the rational to talk about some things, discuss ideas, do some practical writing, and the experiential with creative activities, meditations, and silence.

Overall it is a good idea to let people know that imagery or music can also be used to explore such themes and not just rational thinking. At the closure, I got a sense from the participants that they needed some more time to talk and interact. The one-day workshop was in fact too short to facilitate this. So



Susan

next month I will be adding a separate session dedicated to practical decision-making and plans.

What are some of your personal experiences that inspired you to take this idea forward and transform it into a meaningful exercise for the community?

I found that often people are able to transcend their differences when they are dying or a near one is dying – a lot of things that separate us tend to fade away and the essence or soul comes more to the surface. When I was a kid of 9 or 10, one of my early conscious thoughts about death was from a book written by a famous TV personality whose daughter had died in a school bus accident. What struck me the most was that the morning of the accident, they had argued about something silly and her daughter went off to school with them still being mad at each other. After the bus accident, she never saw her again and they never had the chance to reconcile. Like the line from Sting's song: 'Lest we forget how fragile we are', it's useful to remember that any of us can be gone in a moment, whether in an accident, a natural disaster or a terrorist attack.

Do you see the children as a part of such conversations?

In India people are more familiar with death and dying as it is very visible in our daily lives – the end of life is very visible in this society, and most kids have a natural awareness about it. So maybe the children who grew up here do have a natural sort of understanding of death, without verbalizing it. Unlike in my childhood, these days children are no longer kept away from death or hospitals to visit the dying and this can help them develop their own ideas and beliefs around it. But it would be interesting to find out how it differs from culture to culture.

In conversation with Shradha

About testaments

When she died, her heirs were at a loss. She had not made a testament nor had she left any instructions for the bank which had major deposits in her name. There was no other solution for the heirs then to go to her home country, arrange for getting an appropriate inheritance certificate that showed who the heirs were in accordance with the laws of her country, have the certificate 'apostilled' so that it would have international recognition, and return to India to claim the inheritance and subsequently pay inheritance tax. It was a frustrating, time-consuming and costly job.

Like her, many Aurovilians are not aware of the legalities involved in making a testament. A useful piece of advice, certainly for Aurovilians of foreign origin, is to have a testament made in accordance with the laws of their home country to ensure that all legalities are being observed. If there are also assets in India, such a testament will need to be 'apostilled', that means formally attested, before it will be considered 'valid' in India.

For foreign nationals who have no intention to return to their home country, a testament can also be made in India. This can be done with a notary public in Tamil Nadu, at the Sub-Registrar's office in Vanur, or with a notary in Pondicherry. The document has then to be authenticated by the Home Ministry of Tamil Nadu in Chennai (if made in Tamil Nadu) or by the Home Ministry, Puducherry (if made in Pondicherry). Afterwards, the authenticated documents have to be 'apostilled' (formally attested) by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in Chennai. The process is time-consuming.

A testament can also contain bequests to Auroville. Here the issue of inheritance tax is important. In some countries, charitable organisations and organisations working for the general interest do not pay any tax on any inheritance they receive. Many Auroville International Centres qualify as such. This means that if a bequest is made to the Auroville International Centre in your country for the benefit of Auroville, no inheritance tax is payable and all the money can be transferred to Auroville by the Centre. But if you leave your money directly to Auroville, a high amount of inheritance tax would be due.

For Indian nationals, the system is simpler. India has no inheritance tax laws. If you are a national of India, your beneficiaries will not pay any inheritance tax. Also, Auroville does not pay inheritance tax over bequests it receives from Indian nationals.

Apart from making arrangements about your assets, a testament should also include naming a guardian for your

minor or specially challenged children and the name of the person who will execute your will. You could also specify what has to happen with your body and, in the case of cremation, what is to be done with the ashes.

Once you have made your testament, leave a copy in the safe of the Financial Service or with a trusted friend so that, at your passing, the people in Auroville know about your wishes. You may also like to include an overview of your debts and assets (mortgages, deeds, stock certificates, bank accounts and numbers, fixed deposit certificates etc.).

Most banks in India allow you to nominate someone to access your account upon your death. The banks have a special form which is to be filled-in by you and then co-signed by the bank manager. Upon your death the nominee will present the paper to the bank and get access to your account. Similarly, you can inform the Auroville Financial Service who should manage your Financial Service account. In case you want the money on your account to be given to someone, or to an Auroville project, or to Auroville in general, it makes sense to give your nominee your instructions in writing. However, in case you also made a testament, the provisions of the testament prevail over the instructions to the nominee. In such a case, the nominee has to inform the executor of the will that the account has been emptied and hand-over the amount to the executor of the will.

Make it easy for those you leave behind. Fill-in the paper 'Serious Events in the Lives of Aurovilians', downloadable at Auroville.org.in or available from the farewell facility, so that people know what you want in case of an accident, illness or death. In India, a 'do not resuscitate' certificate will need to be presented to a hospital in case you prefer not to be kept artificially alive when in coma. In this paper you can also specify what has to happen with your body and, in the case of cremation, what is to be done with the ashes.

It is useful to make a list of people and organisations (with addresses and other details) you want the executor to inform of your passing, such as family, friends, and organisations that are involved with your income such as banks, pension funds, life insurance companies, or government organisations. If you have a safe, inform a trusted friend where the safe is, where the keys to your safe are or what the code of your safe is. This information can also be left together with your testament at the Financial Service.

Lastly, keep all that is strictly personal and which you do not want others to see, such as your diaries, your personal letters and papers, in a box on which you write, "to be burnt at my death". Better, burn such papers yourself.

Carel

The Mother and Sri Aurobindo on death

What is death?

...the cells contained in the body, or composing the body, are held in form by a centralization of the consciousness in them, and as long as that power of concentration is there, the body cannot die. It's only when the power of concentration disappears that the cells scatter. And then one dies. Then the body dies.

(Mother's Agenda, 17.12.69)

Death is the phenomenon of decentralization and scattering of the cells making up the physical body.

Consciousness is, in its very nature, immortal, and in order to manifest in the physical world, it clothes itself in material forms that are durable to a greater or lesser degree.

(Mother's Agenda, 18.5.68)

But people are so ignorant! They make such a fuss over death, as if it were the end – this word 'death' is so absurd! I see it as simply passing from one house into another or from one room to another; you take one simple step, you cross the threshold, and there you are on the other side – and then you come back....

But it's simply that – you take a step, and you enter another room. And when you live in your soul there is a continuity, because the soul remembers, it keeps the whole memory; it remembers all occurrences, even outer occurrences, all the outer movements it has been associated with. So it's a continuous, uninterrupted movement, here and there, from one room to another, from one house to another, from one life to another.

(Mother's Agenda, 24.6.61)

But there is NO LONGER any of that sensation people have of a brutal clash between life and its opposite, death – death is not the opposite of life! At that moment I understood, and I never forgot: death is NOT the opposite of life, it is not the opposite of life. It's a sort of change in the cells' functioning or in their organization....

(Mother's Agenda, 16.3.63)

I have reached the conclusion ... that there is really no such thing as death.

There is only an appearance, and an appearance based on a limited outlook. But there is no radical change in the vibration of consciousness.

(Mother's Agenda, 7.3.67)

Last night or the night before, I spent at least two hours in a world – the subtle physical world – where the living mingle with the dead with no sense of difference, it makes absolutely no difference there.

(Mother's Agenda, 12.10.62)

That's what I said to T. (I don't think she understood), I told her that there isn't so much difference between what people call "life" and what they call "death"; the difference is very small, and grows still smaller when you go into the problem in depth and in all the details. People always make a clean cut between the two – it's quite stupid: some living are already half dead, and many dead are VERY alive.

(Mother's Agenda, 4.10.67)

So we could correctly say that there are kinds of GRADATIONS in death. Gradations in life and gradations in death: some beings are alive to a greater or lesser degree, or if we want to put it negatively, some beings are dead to a greater or lesser degree. But for those who know, oh, for those who know that this material form can manifest a supramental light, well, those who don't have the supramental light in them are already a little dead. That's how it is. So there are gradations. What people have conventionally called "death" is just a purely external phenomenon, because it's something they can't deny – the body going to pieces.

(Mother's Agenda, 14.6.67)

Why is there death?

It was the conditions of matter upon earth that made death indispensable.

The whole sense of the evolution of matter has been a growth from a first state of unconsciousness to an increasing consciousness. And in this process of growth dissolution of forms became an inevitable necessity, as things actually took place.

For a fixed form was needed in order that the organised individual consciousness might have a

stable support. And yet it is the fixity of the form that made death inevitable. Matter had to assume forms; individualisation and the concrete embodiment of life-forces or consciousness forces were impossible without it and without these there would have been lacking the first conditions of organised existence on the plane of matter. But a definite and concrete formation contracts the tendency to become at once rigid and hard and petrified. The individual form persisted as a too binding mould; it cannot follow the movements of the forces; it cannot change in harmony with the progressive change in the universal dynamism; it cannot meet continually Nature's demand or keep pace with her; it gets out of the current.

At a certain point of this growing disparity and disharmony between the form and the force that presses upon it, a complete dissolution of the form is unavoidable. A new form must be created; a new harmony and parity made possible. This is the true significance of death and this is its use in Nature.

(Mother, Questions and Answers, 5 May 1929)

So, when the earth no longer needs to die in order to progress, there will be no more death. When the earth no longer needs to suffer in order to progress, there will be no more suffering. And when the earth no longer needs to hate in order to love, there will be no more hatred.

(silence)

It is the quickest and most effective method of pulling the creation out of its inertia and leading it on to its blossoming.

(Mother's Agenda, 15.5.63)

Death is no longer necessary

...the whole of humanity believes firmly in death; it is, one might say, a general human suggestion based on a long unchanging experience. If this belief could be cast out first from the conscious mind, then from the vital nature and the subconscious physical layers, death would no longer be inevitable.

(Mother, Questions and Answers, 1929)

And when Matter is supple enough to be transformed under the action of the consciousness – a CONSTANT transformation – then this need to abandon here something that has become useless, or is in impossible conditions, will no longer exist. That is how it will be possible, for the requirements of the transformation, to have at will a continuity, at least, of existence for a form which was transitional.

But yesterday, the impression was that it [death] is now only an old habit, no longer a necessity. It's only because ... First, because the body is still unconscious enough to (how should I put it?), not to "desire," because that's not the word, but to feel the need of complete rest, that is, inertia.

When that is abolished, there is no disorganization that cannot be mended, or at any rate (the field of accidents hasn't been studied, but let's say in the normal course of things) no wear and tear, no deterioration, no disharmony that cannot be mended by the action of the consciousness.

(Mother's Agenda, 21.10.67)

And then, you see: as the process grows more and more perfect – "perfect" means integral, total, leaving nothing behind – it NECESSARILY, inevitably means victory over death. Not that this dissolution of the cells which exist involves stops existing, but that it would exist only when necessary: not as an absolute law, but as ONE of the processes, when necessary.

(Mother's Agenda, 30.12.67)

Each cell of our body will have to become conscious. It is the work I am doing here. It will allow the conquest of death. It's another story; that will be future mankind, perhaps in centuries, perhaps sooner. It will depend on men, on peoples.

Auroville is the first step towards this goal.

(Mother's Agenda, 28.2.68)

What happens after death?

The soul takes birth each time, and each time a mind, life and body are formed out of the materials of universal nature according to the soul's past evolution and its need for the future.

When the body is dissolved, the vital goes

into the vital plane and remains there for a time, but after a time the vital sheath disappears. The last to dissolve is the mental sheath. Finally the soul or psychic being retires into the psychic world to rest there till a new birth is close.

This is the general course for ordinarily developed human beings. There are variations according to the nature of the individual and his development. For example, if the mental is strongly developed, then the mental being can remain; so also can the vital, provided they are organized by and centred around the true psychic being; they share the immortality of the psychic.

The soul gathers the essential elements of its experiences in life and makes that its basis of growth in the evolution; when it returns to birth it takes up with its mental, vital, physical sheaths so much of its Karma as is useful to it in the new life for further experience.

(Sri Aurobindo Letters on Yoga, Vol. I)

Hell and heaven are often imaginary states of the soul or rather of the vital which it constructs about it after its passing. What is meant by hell is a painful passage through the vital or lingering there, as for instance, in many cases of suicide where one remains surrounded by the forces of suffering and turmoil created by this unnatural and violent exit. There are, of course, also worlds of mind and vital worlds which are penetrated with joyful or dark experiences. One may pass through these as the result of things formed in the nature which create the necessary affinities, but the idea of reward or retribution is a crude and vulgar conception which is a mere popular error.

(Sri Aurobindo, Letters on Yoga, Vol. I.)

These things are very interesting. They must form part of the work I have come on earth to do. Because even before encountering Theon, before knowing anything, I had experiences at night, certain types of activities looking after people who were leaving their bodies – and with a knowledge of the process; I didn't know what I was doing nor did I seek to know, yet I knew exactly what had to be done and I did it. I was around twenty.

As soon as I came upon Theon's teaching (even before meeting him personally), and read and understood all kinds of things which I hadn't known before, I began to work quite systematically. Every night, at the same hour, I was working to construct – between the purely terrestrial atmosphere and the psychic atmosphere – a path of protection across the vital, so that people wouldn't have to pass through it (for those who are conscious but without knowledge it's a very difficult passage – infernal).

(Mother, June 24, 1961 in a conversation with a disciple)

Not long ago M.'s sister died (psychologically, she was in a terrible state – she had no faith).

Well, on that day, [May 17, 1959.] just when I came to know that she was passing away, I remember being upstairs in the bathroom communicating with Sri Aurobindo, having a sort of conversation with him (it happens very often), and I asked him, 'What happens to such people when they die here at the Ashram?' 'Look,' he replied, and I saw her passing away; and on her forehead, I saw Sri Aurobindo's symbol in a SOLID golden light (not very luminous, but very concrete).

There it was. And with the presence of this sign the psychological state no longer mattered – nothing touched her. And she departed tranquilly, tranquilly. Then Sri Aurobindo told me, 'All who have lived at the Ashram and who die there have automatically the same protection, whatever their inner state.'

(Mother's Agenda, 24.6.61)

How should one treat someone who has died?

For there's a consciousness of the form, a life of the form. There's a consciousness, a consciousness in the form assumed by the cells. That takes SEVEN DAYS to come out. So sometimes the body makes abrupt movements when burned – people say it's mechanical. It's not mechanical, I know it's not.

I know it. I know that this consciousness of the form exists since I have actually gone out of it. Once, long back, I was in a so-called cataleptic state, and after a while, while still in this state,

the body began living again; that is, it was capable of speaking and even moving (it was Theon who gave me this training)...So I don't like this habit of burning people very much.

(Mother's Agenda, 28.5.60)

The violence of the accident had brutally exteriorized him, but when it happened he must have been thinking of me with trust. He came and didn't budge – he never knew what was happening to his body. He didn't know he was dead! And if....

Then and there I said to myself, "This habit of cremating people is appallingly brutal!" (They put the fire in the mouth first.) He didn't know he was dead and that's how he learned it! ... From the reaction of the life of the form in the body.

Even when the body is in a thoroughly bad condition, it takes at least seven days for the life of the form to leave it. And for someone practicing yoga, this life is CONSCIOUS. So you burn people a few hours after the doctors have declared them dead, but the life of the form is every inch alive and, in those who have practiced yoga, conscious.

(Mother's Agenda, 4.7.62)

Last time you said, 'They are burned, or shut up in a box without air and light – fully conscious...'

And it is hideously true.

But what should be done then? Should people wait, or what?

I have looked at this a great deal but...socially, conventionally, it's impossible – there's nothing else to do. The living take their stand with the living, naturally. So the only thing I've seen is that, as always, there must be a grace associated with that state....

If at death you withdraw from physical circumstances, from ordinary physical consciousness, and unite with the great universal Force, or the divine Presence, then all these little things...It's not that you are not conscious of them – you are very conscious: conscious of what others are doing, conscious of everything, but...it's not important.

But for those who are attached to people and things when they die, it must be a hellish torment. Hellish.

But then, is it better to be buried or burned?

Had you asked me this question a week ago, I would unhesitatingly have said 'buried' – and advised people not to do it too quickly, to wait for external signs of decomposition.

Now, because of this, I can't say any more. I just can't say. I have the feeling I am learning a lot of things about this transition called death.

(Mother's Agenda, 16.10.62)

The attitude of the living towards the dead is one of the most loathsome expressions of mankind's selfish ignorance.

It's either a complete I-couldn't-care-less attitude, or else, "Ohh, anything to get rid of that!" I have some children here (they're no longer children), who live here with their fathers and mothers (who aren't very old), and some of those children told me "dreams" in which they saw their fathers or mothers dead and coming to them ... and they sent them back violently, saying, "You're dead, you've got no right to come and bother us!" ...

You're dead, you've got no right to come and bother us. There you are.

That's ... few will be frank enough to say so, but it's very widespread.

Many things must change before a little bit of truth can manifest – that's all I can say.

(Mother's Agenda, 10.8.63)

One can help the departed souls by one's good will or by occult means, if one has the knowledge. The one thing that one should not do is to hold them back by sorrow for them or longings or by anything else that would pull them nearer to earth or delay their journey to their place of rest.

(Sri Aurobindo Letters on Yoga, volume I)

Almost all extracts are from "Death Doesn't Exist: The Mother on Death," a compilation by PRISMA. Only for circulation within Auroville.

Promoting poor girls' education in



A meeting of the Women's Self-Help Groups at Auroville Village Action Group

At the end of June, the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) received a 1 Crore grant from Motherhood Systems Limited through their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programme, for a project that aims to increase access to education for poor girls. The project has multiple objectives. Firstly, it wants to initiate a permanent revolving fund to financially support the education of girl students of deprived families from rural and poor communities in the Vanur area. Secondly, it means to increase access to educational facilities such as night schooling, life skill training, and exposure visits, to create a support system to improve education in subjects like languages and mathematics. Lastly, it aims to provide a knowledge platform for concerns related to health, menstrual, psychological and abuse issues.

Even though research has shown that the education of a girl child is a key indicator of development, the priority to educate the girl child is still notably lower in this region compared to the boy child. As a result of rising costs of education and a lack of institutional financial support, the girl child's education is often compromised, resulting in poor literacy levels and a low quality of life due to non-employability. In light of this, the project empowers girl children by helping them become skilled and employable.

Methodology of disbursement

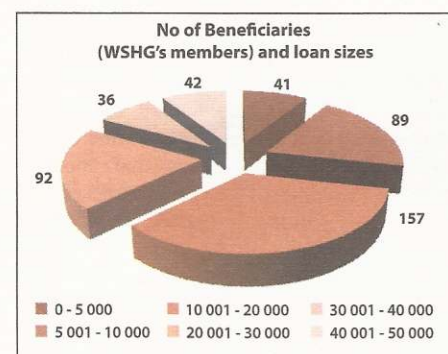
The average amount of a loan is Rs 20,000, which is adjusted on a case-by-case basis, depending on the amount that each beneficiary needs. These education loans are first approved by the women's federation, a registered body that takes decisions relating to all projects for women. Then they are disbursed through the Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) Self Help Groups (SHGs) organisation, which involves around 5,000 women from the surrounding local villages. The loans are given out to members of SHGs, either for themselves or for a member of their household. Upon receiving the loan, a case by case decision is made regarding loan repayment. Although beneficiaries are advised to pay back their loan within 20 instalments, those women who earn a higher income will pay larger instalments, while women at the lower end of the income spectrum will pay back their loans over a longer period in smaller instalments. The amount of each instalment varies according to the loan size. While each beneficiary decides the amount of her instalment on a monthly basis, everyone must pay back the decided amount plus a monthly interest of 1.5%. This amounts to an annual interest rate of 18%, which is far lower than the interest rate offered by any other loan source.

Once the monthly repayments start, the corresponding amount is made available for other

needy girl students through other SHGs. This ensures an effective continuation of the fund so that other girls from poor families can benefit from the scheme. In a few cases, girls who have received a loan also received a grant. The conditions for grants are reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the core team, consisting of the trustee, executive and the three directors of AVAG, who meets regularly to monitor the development of the project. The grants are usually, but not exclusively, received by orphan girls, or girls that come from a single parent household.

Administration

The interest paid on the loans is used for the administration of the project as well as the close monitoring of the progress of the girl students involved in the project. This is coordinated by the Women's Federation together with AVAG staff. Besides this, the interest supports further education in the form of night schooling, as well as covering the costs of activity based teaching of sub-



jects like Maths, English, Science and Accountancy in government schools. Some of the money is also used to take up projects that improve the infrastructure and thereby the standard of education. Special centres for the girl beneficiaries will be opened to teach spoken English and computer programmes.

So far, 457 Women Self Help Group members have taken out loans for 577 students. The students have received amounts ranging from INR 5,000 to INR 50,000 amounting to a total INR 1,00,00,000. The beneficiaries come from 118 different Self Help Groups (SHG) in 39 villages and hamlets. The loans were used to help enrolment in education ranging from LKG (lower kindergarten) to 9th standard, but also including college and university for Bachelor programmes such as computer science, engineering, nursing, arts, polytechnics, IT studies, as well as Masters of Arts, and DMLT (Diploma in Medical Lab Technology).



Indrani and Sevvanthi

Psychology in his first year and a sister who is in 12th standard. Her mother, who was a member of an AVAG, away after undergoing heart surgery funded by an AVAG SHG at the age of 18 years. Mumta is now in the second year.

As her father has succumbed to alcohol abuse since regular income, he cannot afford tuition for all his child that will allow her to complete her education. Although studies, Mumta is determined to attend additional English

Anjana Devi and Anuradha



Anjana Devi and Anuradha

college and when it is the time to come back home I become a support system for my mother. They do not allow me to see the need to earn money for the family. They do not allow me to be committed to support my mother in all possible ways. I do morning to prepare food for all of us and then I get ready to go to school. My mother does not help me to pay the fees and many days I was asked to wait about AVAG scheme quite late but this time I was able to pay

Padma

Padma, from Manipura, works as a gardener while her husband is unemployed. They have two daughters. One is presently studying to 12th standard. Padma explains that prior to receiving her daughters' education through AVAG, she was constrained by money lenders, who charge 60% interest rate per month. She had to have meant paying a monthly interest of INR 3,000 for financial requirement she wouldn't have been able to manage her loan in 25 monthly instalments of INR 2,000 and then her daughters' education without worrying.

Shivagami



Shivapriya and Shivagami

port till she completes her course". She adds: "I am happy that my children's education was not delayed by a few weeks. Students Principal, and we will be made to stand outside his room v



Women's Self-Help Group meeting

Inge

the villages

Project beneficiaries

Here are some of the beneficiaries' stories which shed light on the way that loans alleviate the financial burden of paying tuition fees for education.

Indirani

Indirani, mother of three sons and three daughters, lost her husband a few years ago. Following a fatal car accident, her first son and his wife left behind three children. Indirani has been their sole caregiver ever since. Indirani's granddaughter Sevvanthi is in her first semester of a Bachelor degree but Indirani could not afford to pay for the second semester. Sevvanthi's younger brother is in standard 11. Indirani has obtained a grant INR 20,000 through the project, with which she paid for Sevvanthi's second semester and helped her to reimburse a previous loan.

Mumta

Mumta, from Perumpakkam, has two younger siblings: a brother who is studying standard. Her father works long hours to earn in AVAG Self Help Group (SHG), passed AG loan. At that point, Mumta joined the year of her English Literature degree. Her mother's death and no longer receives a pension. She has received a loan of INR 20,000 and she does not have a lot of time next to her language training at AVAG.



Mumta

Anjana Devi, the mother of Anuradha, recounts how her husband passed away after a heart attack a few years ago, leaving behind three sons aged 25, 23, and 20, and a daughter, none of whom are permanently employed. She was very nervous, anxious and worried throughout the interview, and cried a lot. She needed to be consoled. Her first son is a bullock cart driver and an alcoholic. He rarely goes to work and spends all his earnings on liquor, often initiating quarrels at home. Anjana Devi explains that until he goes to bed, she hides with her daughter in the corner of the house. He scolds her for not finding him a bride, and her three sons fight on a regular basis, often escalating to physical violence. Her other two sons are not employed, claiming instead that they are waiting for a 'proper job'. She says that her daughter Anuradha has become so unhappy that she wants to commit suicide. Anuradha, who is 19 years old and in her second year of BBA (Bachelor of Business Administration) says: "I am happy only when I am in my

unhappy and get agitated. I really do not know how to correct my brothers and they do not let me talk to anyone, including girls. They suspect my fidelity and this hurts me a lot. I am not allowed to do any household work when I am at home. I wake up early in the morning to go to college. In the evenings I help her again in all works and then I sit to study. My brother used to stand outside the classroom for not paying the fees on time. My mother came to know about the fee in one go."

husband works as a farmer. She is a nurse, while the other son is a carpenter. She took a loan of INR 50,000 for her business. For her, this would be a loan of INR 50,000 – a loan that she can now repay. Padma can now repay her loan and can support her daughter's education.



Padma

Shivagami is one of four women who completed their tailoring training a few months back and started an enterprise with AVAG's support. Her husband is a carpenter and is semi-literate. Her first child is Shivapriya, who is currently enrolled in the second year of a nursing degree, for which she has to pay an annual tuition fee of INR 75,000. The couple has another daughter and a son who are both in school. In the first year, they paid their tuition fees by mortgaging a piece of land. To pay the fees for Shivagami's second year, they managed to get INR 45,000 and for the rest they approached AVAG. Shivagami says: "I was supported for my daughter's education and I am hopeful of continuing getting the support since I was able to pay the full amount of the fees on time. Last year I paid in installments who could not pay the amount on time are usually asked to go out of the class to meet the teacher to meet him. Now I do not need to undergo that insult."

Since I was able to pay the full amount of the fees on time. Last year I paid in installments who could not pay the amount on time are usually asked to go out of the class to meet the teacher to meet him. Now I do not need to undergo that insult."

ALICE in STEM land



Students operating the systems at STEM Land

All you need to be a poet in Sanjeev's STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) Land is a love of solving problems and abstractions. A bit of madness helps as well. This is what one finds in this cosy and open space at the top floor of Udavi school, where a few youth and a bunch of children come together to co-learn programming in ALICE (a 3D programming language), electronics, strategy games and much more.



Sanjeev with the children at Udavi

Having earned a Doctoral degree in Electronics and spending most of his life designing chips for a living, Sanjeev is an Aurovilian whose relationship with children's education and Auroville go back 13 years when he met Subash and Lourdes at an educational conference and came to visit Auroville schools. Subsequent conversations around the existing plethora of pedagogical techniques helped shape the initial ideas for the STEM Land. It took 11 more years and an experience in Vipassana for Sanjeev to move to Auroville to test his ideas.

Initially, he began volunteering in the schools in Auroville, teaching Maths and Electronics and sticking to what a 'good' teacher does – being familiar with the textbooks and find ways for fun learning within the curriculum. During this time he happened to meet a donor of old laptops to the school. Sanjeev recounts, "The donor asked us if the old laptops were being put to any use and if the computer lab was functional. What do you do in your computer lab," he asked, and I realised I didn't know." This got me thinking. In a country with around 3.5 lakh computer labs, the children were often using them as a personalised television or to play games – but even the educational games are not entirely convincing in terms of their actual purpose."

After letting the kids 'meddle' with the old laptops and using them to create programmable hardware, Sanjeev finally decided to experiment and start his own 'lab'. It was during this time he met Bala, an Auroville youth, who along with Sundar and Vaidegi started working on educational interventions in January. Their experiences led them to set up the STEM Land in Udavi school this October. They were inspired by *The Stewardship for New Emergence* workshop offered by

Dr. Monica Sharma and are supported by Aura Semi-Conductors Ltd. to create this space for children, where the classroom intervention was reformulated into enabling children to lead their learning environment rather than be passive recipients. This is in accordance with Sri Aurobindo's principle that 'nothing can be taught'.

Currently, STEM Land comprises not only Sanjeev, Bala, Sundar (Auroville youth) and Vaidegi (a youth from the bio-region) but also others like Naveen, another Auroville youth. He frequents the place to volunteer as well as learn aspects of electronics through classes that Sanjeev offers once a week for adults. Though most youngsters leave Auroville or their villages, the youth with Sanjeev are the ones who want to stay back and find meaningful pursuit in their home places.

For Sanjeev, it is essential to retain youngsters and create a workforce to support the electronic infrastructure of a city, which Auroville's aims to become. With this belief he continues his work in STEM Land, offering programming lessons in Scratch, Blender, ALICE, along with over hundreds of learning resources like strategy games, and books. The classes combine older and younger children from grades 5 to 9, and volunteer teachers are expected to aide them with their requests rather than coming-up with lesson plans. The children have already come a long way in this experiment, with most taking responsibility for choosing their own study topics and finding the means to learn them. Anita, one of the students from Isai Ambalam, particularly enjoys her time in STEM Land, where she recently started using ALICE, finding it amazing to create animations using codes.

"It's high time we shift from our chalk-and-talk teaching method, and explore shared learning experiences and methods in classrooms", Vaidegi says. Co-learning and facilitating the experiential learning techniques in STEM Land helps the children understand their subject even more and makes this shared experience rewarding and enjoyable.

In a country with a booming population and increasingly unproductive child-to-teacher ratios, especially in rural environments, innovative experiments like Sanjeev's are glimpses of alternatives that could make a real difference in our education system.

Shradha

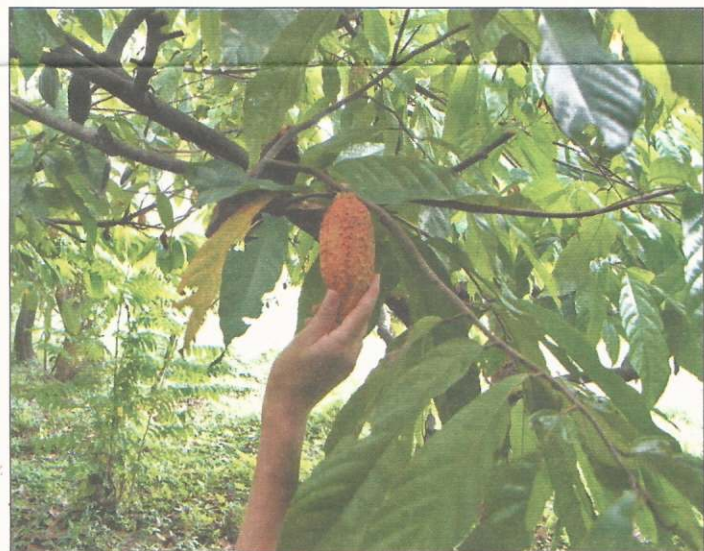


Auroville youth Bala and Sundar demonstrating the kids' work to a visitor

Craftsmen of chocolate

“When I moved here there wasn’t any chocolate I could eat. All the bars were non-organic, full vegetable fats, sugar, and milk, and with only a minimum of cacao,” says Jane Mason, who joined Auroville four years ago. Jane hails from Australia but spent a couple of years in Indonesian Bali working as a Raw Food Chef with raw chocolate. “Indonesian chocolate is of a very high quality, and I began wondering about India.” Together with her husband Fabien Bontemps, who came to Auroville from France when he was 11 years old, she started researching chocolate. They found that India is one of the larger cacao growers in the world, not as a main commercial crop but as an intercrop in rubber or coconut plantations to optimize land utilisation. Pesticides are used a lot. “Frankly, the quality is terrible,” says Fabien. “But that doesn’t matter much to the big players in this industry, because the type of chocolate they make doesn’t require high quality cacao.”

They started buying small amounts of beans and making chocolate at home, experimenting with different beans to assess flavour and quality. The research gradually turned into an aspiration: to commercially make high quality chocolate, preferably using organically-grown beans, organic sugar and without chemicals, preservatives or emulsifiers. In 2012, the hobby turned serious and the Auroville business Mason & Co – Craftsmen of Chocolate was born. “We first thought of calling it ‘The Auroville Chocolate Company’ but this name was not appreciated by some,” says Jane. “Then a friend, who is a marketing manager and graphic designer, proposed Mason & Co, a bit of an old-fashioned name, but one, she felt, that inspires confidence in quality.”



Harvesting the cacao pod

Finding organic farmers

How does one find organic cacao farmers? “We spent a lot of time on the road asking around,” says Jane, “and the search slowly paid off. If a farmer has an IMO or India Organic certification, that’s a clue. But we also found farmers for whom the cost of organic certification is too expensive but who also cultivate beans without the use of pesticides, or only with a minimal use. We found a number of young farmers who are open to experiment and are willing to sell to us. But we have been very careful to not just walk in and behave as if we know better than them. One farmer was finally ready to deal with us after four visits. Only then can we advise them on better harvesting and fermentation techniques.”

“The difficulty is that the farmers already sell all their produce, even the mouldy and unfermented or half-fermented beans,” says Fabien. “In India, the big companies buy everything they can. They have collection stations or visit the farmers every week to pick up what they’ve produced. So only truly motivated farmers are willing to go the extra mile and produce a better bean. From our side, we offer to pay more, even purchase their entire crop and advise on how to organically fight plant diseases and do proper fermentation. The organic farmers take this opportunity. They see us not only as a better source of income, but also as people who share pride in their products.”

Proper fermentation, explains Jane, is one of the main conditions for developing a good flavour. “After harvesting, the cocoa pods are broken open. The beans inside are surrounded by a white gooeey pulp that starts fermenting as soon as the pod is opened. The farmers put the pulp and beans in fermentation boxes that are covered with leaves, and turn the beans every day or so for proper oxidation. From two to eight days, the pulp breaks down, liquefies and drains away. Chemical reactions cause the flavour and colour of the beans to develop. After fermentation, the beans are usually laid out in the open and sun-dried. We are working on improving the post-harvesting techniques (harvest, fermentation, drying) of the farmers with a focus of better flavour development and quality control.”

Yet, even then you never know what quality you’ll get,” says Fabien. “Like coffee, wine and tea, there are many cacao species. But we cannot go to the farmers and select the bean variety we like. Unlike cacao growers in neighbouring countries like Indonesia and Malaysia, the farmers in India are often unaware of the cacao variety they are cultivating and do not know the flavour of their beans. The ten varieties of Indian cacao, originally imported by Cadbury, were specially chosen for their disease-resistance and high yield. Over the years



The open pod shows the white ‘gooey’ covering of the chocolate beans

much cross-breeding has taken place. The strategy has always been to have Indian farmers grow as much as possible, not to have them grow fine-flavoured cacao.”

“No flavour-profiling has ever been done of these ten varieties,” adds Jane. “This is one of the things we have started working on with the Agricultural University of Kerala. If this is successful, then we can say ‘this is the type of bean we prefer’ and encourage farmers to start growing this variety. But that is still a long way ahead.”

The source of the cacao

Today, Mason & Co buys cacao from farmers in Tamil Nadu and Kerala. Incoming consignments are checked for quality – “we cut-test the beans to have an idea of the percentage of mould and fermented and unfermented beans,” says Fabien – and then hand-sorted. The good beans are roasted, which develops their particular flavour. “After fermentation, this is the second most important factor to develop the brown chocolate notes,” says Jane. “Depending on how you roast, you can have hundreds of different flavours. We spend a lot of time testing different roasting techniques for different beans from different farms. Each technique develops a different flavour.” Mason & Co also works with additives, such as organic orange essence and ginger, which they mostly make themselves. Chocolate made from beans produced by farmers who do not have organic certification are marketed as ‘natural’, while the label ‘organic’ is reserved for chocolate made from beans produced by farmers who have an organic certificate.

Experimentation is not restricted to Indian-sourced beans, but includes foreign chocolate varieties. “We sometimes get chocolate beans from abroad and these are the basis for our Limited Edition flavours,” says Jane. An example is the *Peru Marañon Limited Edition*, made from the rarest cacao beans in the world, of which they managed to source a very small amount. “These 80% white beans are known as *Pure Nacional* and they produce one of the best chocolates I have ever tasted...almost no bitterness whatsoever with beautiful caramel and nutty notes,” says Jane. Chocolate connoisseurs are advised to follow the company’s Facebook page to get hold of these special treats.

A waiting list ...

For Mason & Co doesn’t advertise. “There’s a website [<http://www.masonchocolate.com>], a Facebook page and we blog,” says Jane, “but that’s as far as we want to go.” There is no need.

Prospective buyers keep knocking on the door and there is a waiting list of over 200 clients. “The demand, not only from within India but also from abroad, is outstripping our supply possibilities. We sell in large Indian cities and through Amazon India. Even supermarkets in Australia, France and the UK have contacted us,” says Fabien. “But we have a challenge shipping our products. As we produce 100% organic chocolate with a high cacao content and no vegetable oils, our products have to be shipped in temperature-controlled ways. We are probably the only chocolate company in India which ships in this way.”

Mason & Co has the potential to become one of the largest Auroville units in terms of turnover. Shortage of funds, however, has halted expansion. “We’ve put in every cent we had and have exhausted both our personal resources and the goodwill of our families who have given us loans,” says Jane. “Auroville hasn’t come forth with offers of investment,” adds Fabien, “and in order to grow we need a lot of funds. But we are weary of taking loans. If Auroville wants to benefit from its business activity, it has to invest in its commercial units.”

For the time being, Mason & Co will continue as a small artisanal factory with their workforce of five people who are considered ‘extended family’. “We are not yet ready to exchange



Chocolate beans during fermentation

that for an industrial set-up,” says Jane. But what about competition? She laughs. “Since we started, four other companies have started on the



Spreading the chocolate before putting it in moulds

same lines. One of them is organic. But even if there were fifty companies taking-off tomorrow, we would still not be able to produce enough to meet the demand.”

“Mindful choices, joyful eating, blissful being” is the motto of Mason & Co. Their chocolates are certainly adding joy and bliss to a large number of ‘mindful’ Aurovilians.

Carel

Twinning Auroville and Pondicherry as fair trade towns

On 20th November, The Hindu newspaper reported that an initiative had been launched to make Puducherry and Auroville the world's first 'Fair Trade Twin Towns'. But what does this mean?

The Fair Trade movement is now widespread in the West. The generally accepted definition of Fair Trade is "Fair Trade is a trading partnership, based on dialogue, transparency and respect, that seeks greater equity in international trade. It contributes to sustainable development by offering better trading conditions to, and securing the rights of, marginalized producers and workers – especially in the South."

Two of the core principles of fair trade practices are promoting environmental sustainability and providing decent working conditions for employees. In this sense, isn't Auroville already a Fair Trade town?

"Of course, it is," says Uma of Upasana. "If you were not interested in the concept of fair trading you would not bother to start a commercial unit in Auroville. But this does not necessarily qualify us to be a Fair Trade town. For this we need to be affiliated to the World Fair Trade Organization (WFTO), and this requires us to fulfill specific conditions, like having regular financial, social and environmental audits. Also, it is not cheap. It costs a minimum of €500 a year to be an affiliated member."

Today, five Auroville units – Mereville, Upasana, Imagination, Aurospirul and Maroma – are officially affiliated. In fact when Dara, the manager of Imagination, affiliated his unit twenty years ago, it was one of the very first Fair Trade companies in India. "He was very much the pioneer of Fair Trade in India," says Uma.

But if Auroville is already practicing

the principles of Fair Trade, what is the advantage of being affiliated? "I want to position my unit, Upasana, as a brand both nationally and internationally," explains Uma. "By being affiliated we are on the WFTO's map of the world, so anybody on the planet looking to trade or work with fair trade bodies will immediately find us. If we could affiliate the township as a whole, it would give Auroville even greater visibility. It would make huge economic sense as well as emphasising our ethical credentials."

But isn't Fair Trade still an essentially Western concept? Are consumers in India really aware or interested in supporting Fair Trade activities?

"It's a relatively new concept in India," says Uma, "which is why the Fair Trade businesses in India have tended so far to focus on the export market. But the upcoming generation, particularly in the big cities, is much more aware now. They are looking for something different to do with their money, they want something to be connected with something they can look up to. Over the past year, I have been presenting Upasana and Auroville all over India and I have had a very good response, both to the aesthetics of our products and to our ethical approach to business."

"In Europe, most people associate fair trade with buying healthy, ecological products. In India the fair trade focus is more on getting fair prices and on promoting social equity. Auroville is and should continue to be part of this larger movement."

Behind the twin towns Fair Trade



Pushpanath Krishnamurthy on his walk in Auroville where he was hosted at Auroville Village Action

intuitive is Anjali Schiavina, the founder and managing director of Mandala Apparels in Pondicherry. She says she has been inspired by Bruce Crowther, considered the father of the Fair Trade Towns in the world, to help Pondicherry and Auroville earn this unique title. Also partnering in the initiative is Puducherry-based NGO PondyCAN.

The initiative was kicked off in late November by activist Pushpanath Krishnamurthy, a senior campaigner at Oxfam. He has begun a 450 kilometre walk from Pondicherry to Ooty. On his first day he walked to Auroville. "He wanted the blessing of the Matri-mandir," says Uma. "It was pouring with rain that day, but over one hundred

people walked with him." Along the way, he will create awareness of Fair Trade practices in Pondicherry and Auroville, and he will also talk about the interlinked issue of climate justice.

Fair Trade is, without doubt, a powerful tool for social development and transformation. But certain questions remain. For example, it is not clear what the twinning of Auroville and Pondicherry as fair trade towns really signifies when the vast majority of businesses in Pondicherry have probably never heard of fair trade, let alone practice it. How will it change things?

And then there is a larger question. Does the fair trade movement represent an alternative to the global economic

system, which many see as essentially broken and dysfunctional? Or does it remain dependent upon it?

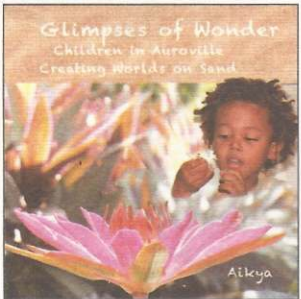
Uma admits her concern. "The one thing that bothered me all the time is that we are plugging into an existing economic order that is unsustainable, even though we are trying to help the disadvantaged. I don't think the existing world economy will ever become fully fair trade: we have to live with that. At the same time, we must have faith that something else will transcend it, reflecting a shift of consciousness deep within."

"Until then, it is a good start to have fair trade as a movement."

Alan

NEW BOOKS

Glimpses of wonder



Glimpses of Wonder – Children in Auroville creating worlds on sand, describes the experiences of Aurovilian Aikya, a Belgian psychologist, working with Auroville children from *The Learning Community* in the World Game, a term usually described as 'Sandplay Therapy.'

Aikya started this work in 2005-2006. In her therapy, the sandbox is positioned in a beautiful garden or in a beautifully decorated 'sacred space' in her house. Children play with small figurines in the sandbox, creating their own worlds, while music plays in the background. Aikya, as facilitator, supports them to bring their creativity to the front. Her attitude, she writes, is to be non-judgemental and be present in the moment 'to be able to communicate through the psychic.'

The children's 'stories in sand' are meticulously recorded. "The children have a remarkable sense of concentration and an incredible sense of imagination," she writes, expressed in themes such as

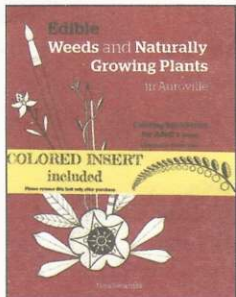
nature, civilization, battles, and various life events, often involving 'magic' figurines of fairies, dragons and crystals. Aikya also sees aspects of the children's psychic being expressed.

The book concludes with practical suggestions for those who wish to work with the World Game and an introduction to the sandplay origins and history by visiting scholar Dr. Heidi Watts.

Glimpses of wonder is available from SAIER and in Auroville bookshops. Price in India Rs 750.

For more info contact aikya@auroville.org.in.

Edible Weeds and Naturally Growing Plants in Auroville

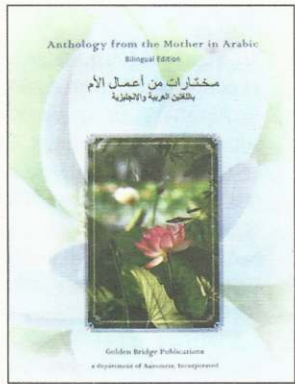


Edible Weeds and Naturally Growing Plants in Auroville, a colouring book for adults and young, was released by Nina Sengupta at SAIER on 19th of September. The book contains 40 beautiful botanical drawings of weeds that are commonly found in Auroville. The book comes with a colour guide and tips and information on parts of the weed and how they can be eaten.

Available from SAIER and in Auroville bookshops. Price in India Rs 365.

For more info contact nina@auroville.org.in

Anthology from the Mother in Arabic



On The Mother's Mahasamadhi day, November 17th, Zackaria Moursi released his new compilation *Anthology from The Mother in Arabic* "as a humble token of his infinite gratitude and perpetual adoration to The Mother."

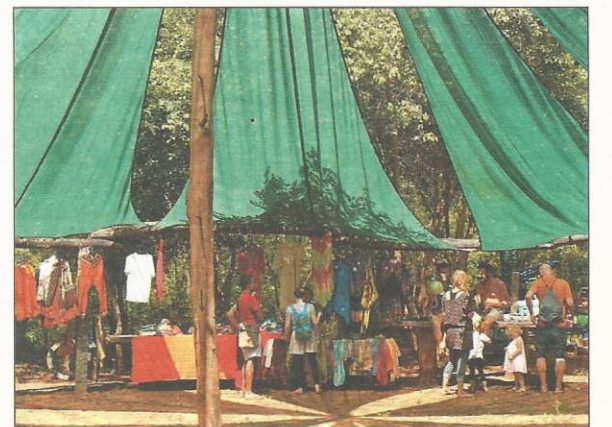
The book is a bilingual edition. It can be read in the 'Two Page View' of any Adobe Acrobat reader with the English text on one side and its Arabic translation on the opposite side.

The book can be downloaded for free from the website <http://www.sriaurobindo-inarabic.com/en-originals/en-Anthology-Mother.pdf>. The book is also available in print at <http://www.amazon.com> and can be ordered from <http://www.auromere.com>

Saturday market reopens

On Saturday November 28th, the weekly Saturday Market at the Auroville Youth Centre re-opened. Despite the threat of heavy downpours, eight stalls were set up in an effort to instill new energy into the 'Localicious' movement initiated by Krishna from Solitude Farm two years ago. Localicious is an initiative to promote locally-grown food. Stalls showed products manufactured by Auroville Village Action Groups' social enterprises such as ethnic wear, spirulina, crochet lamps and stuffed animals. Several farm products were also available, such as cheeses from Anapurna and Aurogreen. And there were organic clothes from Colours of Nature; seedlings, tinctures, medical weeds, pickles, and gardening info material by Erin and Ricardo. Even some beautiful jewellery by Maddalena (aka Madda) from Nine Palms was for sale. To top it, delicious dosais were prepared by the Youth Centre team.

At the moment, Localicious is a group of friends working together and is relatively small-scale. According to Ricardo, a 24 year old volunteer who came to Auroville in June 2014 to assess our food security and now helps run an urban farming project, the idea behind Localicious is to "reconnect people with what the local environment provides." He explains that "the market is an opportunity to showcase Auroville's products and



resources in a spirit of fraternity. It aims at mobilising people towards localising our diet and using resources more efficiently."

Although the market is part of a larger platform that aims to support local Auroville farms, they are also a social event to bring people together. Madda, who is part of the organising team and was slightly disappointed that several stall holders did not show up, is certain that it will pick up in the future. After all, who doesn't want to spend a Saturday morning contributing to the livelihood of our bioregion's inhabitants and supporting Localicious, if all it takes is to admire (and show appreciation by purchasing) Auroville's diverse local produce, while sipping on organic fruit juice, and having tasty dosais for lunch?

Inge

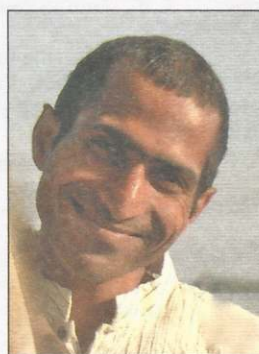
PASSING

Anand Agrawal

On October 30th, Anand Agrawal left his body due to kidney failure. He was 43 years old.

Anand, who grew up as student in the Ashram, came 15 years ago to Auroville and had been working as sports teacher in Dehashakti and Deepanam. For years he stayed in Courage where his flat was an oasis of peace, quiet and serenity. Unfortunately, these last years the precarious situation of his kidneys took him out of Auroville for medical treatment at more or less regular intervals. He was known as a gentle, quiet and conscientious person whose contact with Sri Aurobindo and the Mother was silently radiant.

Anand's body was taken to the new farewell facility for friends to bid farewell. It was cremated at the Adventure cremation ground.



The Residents' Assembly Service: its vision and evolution

The Residents' Assembly Service (RAS) facilitates the decision-making process of the Residents' Assembly (RA). The current team is the third since it was set up. Over the years, the vision and the role of the RAS have changed as new teams replaced older ones. Here, former RAS member Rakhal and current members Inge and Slava share some of the RAS' history, its present role and their plans for the future.

The history of the RAS

The RAS, says Rakhal, was created around 2004 and its role, at first, was rather limited. It was to organize the decision-making process of the RA, count votes and announce the outcome. Over the years, the group also got involved in the facilitation of meetings.

The second team, in which Rakhal participated, evolved the role of the RAS by attempting to organize new ways of meeting. One of their experiments was called 'the RA gathering', an event during which people were not only sharing, but also eating and playing games together. "It brought a new sense of meetings, but it didn't last," says Rakhal.

The current team is now further evolving the role of the RAS. The members, Inge, Jesse and Slava, are supported by Hedia and Isha. But more people will be needed, says Slava. "The RAS should be strengthened. We need additional resources, more skills, and more brains." Also, a new mandate is being prepared which will soon be presented to the community.

"It is very hard for a large number of people, such as the Residents' Assembly, to agree on decisions. People are often not well-informed; they sometimes have opinions about things they do not know about. Here the RAS has a role to play," says Rakhal. "There is a tremendous amount of knowledge in the community and the RAS encourages the sharing of this knowledge. What's blocking is a lack of trust," says Inge. All acknowledge that participating in the



Inside the RAS: From left, Slava, Inge and volunteer Christa

Residents' Assembly is a learning process. "The RAS has an important role in this learning as it facilitates the decision-making process. The RAS can encourage learning or hinder it," says Rakhal.

What changed with the new team

One of the very important steps for the RAS, according to Slava, was the Retreat, which the RAS helped to organize. "The Retreat notably improved the relationship between the RAS and the residents as the latter got the feeling that they could rely on the RAS as they felt listened to." After Inge joined, the RAS started improving the way meetings were facilitated and began using online tools to get the views of the community. "What we have achieved is that discussion now starts online. The RAS is also facilitating small

preparatory meetings between parties so everyone feels heard and respected. When people get to a general meeting, it is no longer a confrontation on the emotional level and the issue itself can more easily be resolved," says Inge.

In addition to improving the atmosphere of General Meetings, Slava and Inge also try to improve community participation, both in terms of quality and quantity. Inge emphasizes the importance of 'homework'. For her, residents can only discuss topics meaningfully if they have information about them. That is the reason why Slava and Inge started to prepare meetings in advance, posting relevant information on a specially created website. "Making information and feedback public," says Inge, "promotes transparency". She feels it has opened up a lot of trust

in the community. Also, thanks to these online tools, the RAS got a better sense of how many people were participating because numbers were easier to get (for example how many people read the website). "People can now participate according to their own possibilities and willingness," says Rakhal. "The decision-making process has become more like the reflection of a collective intelligence, because it comes from several different perspectives and thus leads to richer and more durable decisions."

The future of the RAS

The RAS' work of supporting the RA, says Inge, "is just beginning" with the RAS itself now enjoying support of the community, including financially. Ideally, says Inge, the RAS team should consist of five full-time people. "I foresee that in the next two years there will be an increase in the amount of work of the RAS and then I expect it to diminish gradually. The job of the present RAS is to get through the blockage of lack of trust and transparency. When this blockage is gone, the RAS will not be needed any more because information will flow freely. By then, only a secretariat will be required as there will no longer be any need to have to do what the RAS is doing now, which is collecting information and doing research on the ground."

Slava explains that the RAS would like to start a proper online platform called the 'Community Collaboration Space' which would be complementary to the existing AuroNet. "Through this platform, Aurovilians could opt to only receive the information they are interested in, give feedback on any topic of their choice and channel this feedback to the working groups concerned." The project is still in the early design phase.

In brief, says Inge, "the role of the RAS is to help realize Mother's Dream by supporting the RA in becoming a collective manifestation of Aurovilians' inner growth."

Gaëlle

The Active Residents Assembly initiative

One of the strongest messages to emerge out of the Retreat discussions was the need to re-examine our present organizational structure, to make it more reflective of our core values and ideals and to strengthen the role of the Residents' Assembly.

The Governance Task Force took this up and made one of its first priorities the creation of an Active Residents Assembly (ARA). The ARA is open to all Aurovilians and Newcomers, and its members commit to reading relevant background material and attending regular meetings to build agreements and solutions for the community's various problems and challenges. Although the ARA has no formal decision-making power, it is hoped that its work will increase the quality and participation in our Residents' Assembly decision-making meetings.

The ARA pays particular attention to the way they meet together as, in the past, community meetings have often been fraught with personal disagreements. ARA members agree on the need to create a spirit of harmony and solidarity in their interactions and to seek solutions that integrate and reconcile all sides of an issue or problem. They also aspire to give intuition a major role in the discovery of integral solutions.

The Vision statement of the ARA is as follows: *As committed members of the ARA, Aurovilians offer their participation towards renewing and enhancing the capacity and effectiveness, as well as the Spirit, of the Residents Assembly, with an aim for building Human Unity and Peace in the community. Members participate with openness to learning and growing in a spirit of Sincere Service, Collaboration and Goodwill, where the evolution of a Learning Society becomes central to the collective development.*

The community's response to the ARA initiative has been promising. So far, over 100 people have signed up and two introductory meetings have been held. In the first meeting, the ARA began the process of deciding which topics they felt were the most fundamental issues to be solved if the community was to make progress towards its ideals. Many of the issues listed out, like housing, increased youth participation and a better community decision-making process, were clearly interrelated.

No clear decisions were taken at the first meeting, and those members of the ARA who did not attend were invited to send their suggestions, which resulted in a consolidated list of challenges (see box). The second introductory meeting evinced a strong spirit of harmony and the eventual decision to allow a small team of ARA members to choose the topic for the first full meeting, as well as to plan the process for how we would meet together.

Ultimately, we do not know what will emerge from the ARA experiment. The pull of old meeting habits remains strong. At the same time, now there is a very strong aspiration to move beyond the old polarities and our narrow personality-based preoccupations to seek solutions that will benefit the community as a whole and lead us closer to our ideals.

It should be noted that the ARA is only one part of the proposed changes to be made to the Residents Assembly and the decision-making process. The other changes include expanding the role of the Residents Assembly Service (RAS). This would allow it, among other things, to more efficiently gather all the relevant information on a particular issue, to share it with the larger community and to receive and review feedback.

Alan

ARA's list of major challenges facing the community

1. The need for a clear and inclusive decision-making process ratified by the RA which fosters the spirit of unity. Without this, we won't be able to change what need to be changed or reorganized.
2. Housing: the housing problem is one of the major bottlenecks for Auroville's growth.
3. Managing our water resources. A plan of action needs to be decided upon.
4. Selecting the right people to occupy administrative positions. This is imperative as the wrong people do not have the discrimination to choose what is appropriate for Auroville.
5. Move from a 'each one to himself' kind of society to a society where people care for each other.
6. Clarification of the status and direction of our Town Development Council
7. Establishing trust between us and overcoming fear.
8. We need to establish trust between the larger community and the work groups.
9. The collective needs to be empowered.
10. Increase the influence of our ideals in our everyday lives. Finding new ways of encouraging people to act in accordance with our ideals.
11. Increasing understanding of and establishing faith in the larger purpose of Auroville.
12. Putting the aspiration for the Divine at the centre of our lives and revisiting governance, education and the economy from this perspective instead of being guided by our egos.
13. The need to bridge the gap with the local Aurovilians.
14. The need to attract and engage the youth in all our activities.
15. Transparency is the one major element to be fully established in order for the collective to move forward.
16. Make our economy reflect The Dream and as well as be self-supporting.
17. We need to look at the fact that many Aurovilians are working outside Auroville. What implications does this have for Auroville's development?
18. A mobility plan for Auroville has to be evolved to control profusion of cars.
19. The need to access intuitive intelligence and make it more central in our lives.
20. Solve the issue around the Matrimandir gardens and benches.
21. Create a justice system in Auroville.
22. Reduce our policies, rules, regulations as they are negative, based on problems not our ideals.
23. Draw up an Auroville constitution.
24. Make the entry process a genuinely welcoming process.
25. The need to take joyful responsibility for one's own life and development.

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