

## Gijs, a social entrepreneur, farmer, teacher and consultant, joined Auroville in 2010. Here's his journey.

*Auroville Today: What are your early memories of your turning-points which clarified the direction of your life?*

**G**ijs: My parents are film-makers. They had made a documentary on children in Rajasthan. I was 10. The story was about twins – a brother and a sister. Due to sex discrimination, the girl wasn't allowed to go to school. However, when her father and brother went to the Pushkar fair to sell their pottery toys, the girl would wear her brother's clothes and sneak into school. The story was magical: my reality in Amsterdam where I was living was so incomparably different.

There was a farmer from Rajasthan, Inder Dan, who helped my parents make this movie. He came to the Netherlands to promote it and visited us at our home. I remember very clearly the image of this man – big bright turban, long beard, white gown, there he was standing in our very Amsterdam kitchen making his rotis (chapatis) on the open fire, without using a pan. 'Wow, I want to go to where you come from,' I told Inder Dan. All he said was, 'Finish your education and then you can come work in my farm.'

So that was it, I knew that this is what I wanted to do! This idea stuck in my head for the next 8 years. When I was finishing high school I started preparing to go to his farm. I had no farming experience, so I looked at some local organic farms in Amsterdam to gain some experience in farming. I also took a Hindi course and finally went to India and worked for a year at Inder Dan's farm.

Inder Dan is a multi-talented guy. He is a farmer, poet, playwright, historian, manager and inventor. All my experience in farming and insights into politics, economy, entrepreneurship stem from the time spent with him.

### UnLtd Tamil Nadu

On 15th February, 2013, Gijs Spoor gave a presentation on "The Social Entrepreneurship movement in India: how can we join from Auroville." He explained how UnLtd Tamil Nadu can serve as an incubator for aspiring changemakers by offering access to coaches and mentors and providing training and funds for two categories of start-up projects. Level 1 – to start a new initiative from scratch UnLtd Tamil Nadu offers up to Rs 80,000 of seed funding + 160 hours of hands-on support in 12 months; and Level 2 – to propel an existing high-potential project towards greater impact and sustainability it offers up to Rs 200,000 + 220 hours of support over 12 months. UnLtd Tamil Nadu wants to raise Rs 30 lakhs (approx. US\$ 60,000) in two years to support 30 social entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu.

I had so many experiences and memories of this one year in India. All of these have shaped my life to make me what I am today – a changemaker. Inder Dan had these great ideas, he was a social entrepreneur who was always experimenting with business models and institutional forums. I was interested in grounding his ideas. I would always tell him, 'Let's do it.'

I remember saying that just selling raw products wasn't going to bring the farmers a livelihood; we decided to go up the value chain and have a retail shop. Inder Dan had been doing research and he knew how to make bread in a traditional way with a wood fired oven, and other exotic healthy bakes. One brilliant idea he had was to cook healthy meals for rickshaw pullers, and in return they would do some advertising for him. He gave them t-shirts to wear which advertised our shop on the back. All the tourists would come to our shop.

After this year in Rajasthan, I went back to Holland to get myself a university degree.

*Did anything significant change in your belief system after this year? Did you face any challenges in Holland?*



From left: Jessamijn, little Sijmen, Liesbeth and Gijs

Yes, definitely. What changed was that I was determined to implement change where it was required. At my university I became very active in the student movement for voicing the truth. We realised the system was chronically sick, it was always trying to restrict thinking. So we did everything to resist the politics in the system and implement effective actions. We were quite successful in standing our ground.

#### How did you come to Auroville?

We were a few friends from university who had all studied organic agriculture. Two of them, Dave and Natasha, who today are Aurovilians, were also part of this circle. They got married to each other in India and it is through them that I came to know of Auroville. While we were all in India attending their wedding, Dave, who had spent his career in Tanzania, Africa, convinced us that Tanzania was the place to start our own organic farm. We thought of buying a large 1,000 acre farm to grow organic Fair Trade herbs. So I went there to prepare the transaction and to make a business plan. It was very challenging because the system there was corrupt. We identified the land. It was beautiful land, it had a national wildlife zone, spring areas and an agriculture zone where the soil was rich rich rich; we could grow anything there. But there were five legal claims to the same piece of land so we decided to leave it. Our other obvious option was India, so I came back.

Dave and Natasha were already settled in Auroville, at Evergreen. I came to spend 6 months with them in 2003, working with the Farm Group doing research and preparing their first 5 year plan. But the more I explored Auroville, the more I felt that it was too inward-looking and disconnected from the world outside. I really wanted to experience India. So I left Auroville and went to Hyderabad.

I started working with farmers in Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Kerala. Everything I did was to do with organic farming and Fair Trade, which meant mobilising groups of small farmers and helping them to get access to high-end value markets. I set up two companies. I wanted to experience the mainstream corporate sector, and I did. However, I also realised that what I wanted to do in the business world is actually to bring a change based on values, and I couldn't find a space to do that there. I still remember meetings in Mumbai with these huge textile conglomerates. We were not communicating. I couldn't express that what really matters is to use all this factory set-up to change the world rather than to just make money. Five or six years after I had first left Auroville I realised that, actually, Auroville is the place to explore how to insert values into business.

By now I was married to my wife, Jessamijn, who was also in our agriculture friends' circle from university. We already had a child and the second one was coming. I had been working too much and neglecting my family. We decided to quit Hyderabad and come to Auroville. It was a decision to spend more time with family, with values, with passion. It was 2010."

#### So what have you been doing in Auroville since you returned?

I came back to work with the Farm Group again. I was supporting them with planning, what to grow where, how to increase consumption, matching supply and demand. After charting the next 5 year plan, I wanted to do something practical as well, so I worked at Foodlink distributing vegetables. Now I steward a 9 acre forest in Udumbu, where we also try to grow food, but I am not a very good farmer.

Meanwhile my daughter started going to TLC, The Learning Community. This is a school where parents also dedicate their time to teaching children. So I got involved with TLC, teaching biology and science. After the first batch of kids graduated from TLC and went to Last School, I continued teaching them the same subjects at their new school. It was very important for me to start infusing values at a very formative age in a child's life. I even tried including systems thinking in the classes.

At Evergreen we started a systems thinking course called Systemic Change. It is a three-day workshop where we help people articulate the change they aspire to bring about, and build the vehicle that will help them reach their goal. Last time we had professionals from Bangalore who work with CEOs of big companies like Wipro, Voltas etc. By the end of it some of them realised they needed a change in themselves. One of them decided to quit his job altogether. He wants to come back to explore what he should do next.

My main passion is to be associated with a change in society. When we did these courses we realised that in three days there's very little you can

accomplish. In order to consolidate or ground these different practices or perspectives, we need to spend at least 10 days together, if not longer. So the idea came that instead of giving courses, why not provide regular coaching and support to those who want to bring about a change in systems?

I decided we should get associated with UnLtd India, a launch-pad for social entrepreneurs. This is an Indian setup which 'finds, funds and supports exceptional individuals whose ideas, passion and entrepreneurial skills can bring about long-term solutions to India's social problems'. Right now we are in the process of becoming affiliated to UnLtd India. My targets are to raise 30 lacks (approx. US\$ 60,000) in two years to support 30 social entrepreneurs in Tamil Nadu. As soon as such milestones are achieved and we have proved to be a worthy UnLtd India affiliate, we can officially call ourselves UnLtd Tamil Nadu. Once this happens, UnLtd India matches 100% of the money we have raised in the 1st year and 50% in the 2nd year. This will really help us in achieving our goals."

#### Have your views on Auroville changed since you first left Auroville?

"Yes, they have. Today I believe Auroville has a great potential to be a R&D hub for the world by experimenting with different models. Compared to when I first came to Auroville ten years ago, I see more initiatives in Auroville now in reaching out to the rest of India in the field of rural development. SEDAB, for example, the enterprise development programme in Auroville's bioregion, could create a serious impact [see *Auroville Today* # 278, September 2012] Another programme, IRD, Integral Rural Development programme, is still being considered by the central and Tamil Nadu governments. If it is approved, we can work with 20,000 rural families, and Auroville can become a hub for rural development for Tamil Nadu, and maybe even for India. The question is whether we have the management capacities to deliver that promise.

Auroville can bring a special flavour to the rural development sector. One example of a methodology we can introduce is "presencing" – leading from the future as it emerges. This concept is developed by C. Otto Scharmer from the MIT Sloan School of Management, based in Cambridge, Massachusetts. What he believes is that if you are very clear about what you want to see happening, and if you have also checked it wants to happen, then it will happen. The question is how you can collaborate effectively with its materialisation and support it so it grows.

I want to be connected to the collective, the outside world; that is my mirror. I see that as my karma yoga. When we talk about changemaking, inner work is half the job, but the other half is being effective in the world!"

*In conversation with Mandakini*

### UnLtdTN

Please visit the [Indiegogo.com](http://Indiegogo.com) website to help Gijs and the team reach their funding goal:  
<http://tinyurl.com/unltdtn>

Three important Auroville projects are included in this first round of funding and each has their own website if you wish to find out more:

<http://ecofemme.org>  
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