



Please email us at [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org) if you change your address

**Auroville International USA (AVI-USA)**

**PO Box 188158, Sacramento, CA 95818**

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# *Auroville International* USA

Spring/ Summer 2021 Newsletter

Issue 18

## RE-ENVISIONING RUBBISH



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## Letter from the President

Dear Friends,

I write to you on the heels of a three week trip to Auroville. It was a rich and inspiring time, full of reunions and new connections.

I met with the team of Flourish, the project that AVI-USA has sponsored to research high leverage solutions for Auroville projects that want to scale their operations and make an impact outside of Auroville. To read the full research report from Flourish's first year, visit [www.aviusa.org/flourish](http://www.aviusa.org/flourish). Now their research has evolved to include experiments with successful projects that are interested in scaling. The three initial projects that the team is supporting are TreeCare, Hemplanet, and Wasteless, all of which have demonstrated success in their fields of work and are ready to explore growing and increasing their impact outside of Auroville. Support packages have been developed and discussed with each project, and over the coming months Flourish will deliver tailored support, while also assessing common needs for Auroville projects in general and beginning to create shared resources to uplift the economy as a whole.

I also met with service units seeking help with fundraising, like Auroville Radio, Mohanam, Well Paper, Solitude Farm, and many more. There are so many dynamic and creative projects working on everything from ecotechnologies to integral education to rural development, and I had the good fortune to see many of them first hand and experience their passion and possibility.

I learned about several new tech projects coming up in Auroville, including Tālam, Yuvabe, and STEMLand, all three of which are training youth in programming and web development, building capacity for Auroville's future technology infrastructure. I met a Brazilian entrepreneur who wants to create capacity to meet all of Auroville's diesel needs through biodiesel. And I met with the young, enthusiastic teams of YouthLink and Vivaio, who are supporting Auroville youth to follow their dreams and develop projects that offer solutions to the world's most pressing needs.

As I integrate and digest my experiences there, the strongest impression I have is that Auroville is at an inflection point. After 54 years of experimentation and organic growth, a threshold has been reached, and the next evolutionary phase will require substantial shifts in everything from infrastructure to economy to governance to consciousness.

Auroville is the manifestation of a dream. The city's founder, called the Mother by her devotees, reached into the future and invoked a vision of what humanity is ultimately capable of: unity, harmony, goodness, peace. She

lit a flame and invited all those aspiring to something higher to come and add their fire. Auroville has grown up around the flame of Mother's vision, bringing all the challenges and difficulties of the human condition and offering them to be transformed.

The challenges that Auroville faces in passing through the current inflection point and into its next evolutionary phase reflect the challenges that humanity is facing today, challenges that manifest all over the world. Ultimately, they are different faces of one challenge: that of each soul embodying its unique radiance and singing its true song in a way that supports and enhances the richness of the collective light and harmony. We are evolving from me to we, and all the difficulties of that shift are presenting themselves. Let's join our hearts in a great prayer to be helped and held by the Divine as we transit this passage to tomorrow.

Back at home, today is garbage day. I dumped all the trash cans in the house into a white plastic trash bag and dropped it into a big blue bin. I rolled the bin, a week's worth of household waste, down to the end of the driveway. A few hours later, a big truck came and took the garbage, leaving the bin empty. I don't know where the truck took my garbage. It took it away: out of sight, out of mind.

I personally face no consequences if I send more than my fair share of junk to the landfill. I pay no price, and bear no inconvenience. If the head breaks off of my shovel, or I step on my earpods and smash them, or my shoes start to look old and worn, it's easier for me to replace them than it is to repair. I can easily just think of me and the personal impact of my waste, which is negligible, rather than experiencing myself as part of a broader 'we' that is facing a global waste management crisis.

In 1970s Auroville, the opposite was true. If your shovel broke, then you had better fix it, or else you had no shovel. People were incentivized to reduce, reuse, repair, and repurpose anything and everything, because getting a new one was often inconceivable. This reality persisted in Auroville until very recently, when Flipkart and Amazon India extended their services throughout Tamil Nadu. And because Auroville encourages a consciousness of we rather than me, even the increased convenience hasn't had the same effects here as it has in other parts of the region.

A natural consequence of early Auroville's repair and repurpose culture was that nearly all waste was biodegradable. Piles of garbage could be burned or composted without releasing toxic substances into the air, water, and Earth. This picture has changed over decades, as plastic, styrofoam, and petroleum byproducts have become locally prevalent.

In answer to this reality, Aurovilians have done what Aurovilians do: they have experimented. And through experimentation, they have come up with many innovative solutions, addressing the

problem of waste in various ways. As we awaken to the reality of our global waste management crisis, these solutions offer us meaningful possibilities that could be scaled to address collective problems.

This issue of Connect explores how many of these experiments started, what inspires them, and how they interact with Auroville as a whole. Whether it's old timers like Jack and B, adult children of Auroville like Ribhu and Kali or relatively new Aurovilians like Camille and Laure, a wide range of people are digging into waste management, approaching it from their own unique perspectives. Some focus on education, others on practical repurposing, and still others on fashion and architecture. We hope you enjoy the diversity of approaches and ideas we've curated, and that you find inspiration for ways to manage your own waste more responsibly.

The global Auroville family also lost two beloved friends in March, and we have remembrances of Dakshina Vanzetti and Bryan Walton. They are dearly missed, and our memories of them will remain treasured.

We hope you like the new design, and as always we hope that you feel inspired to share this issue with anyone and everyone that you think would enjoy it. And we would love to hear from you with feedback, suggestions, inspirations, or appreciations! Our Connect newsletter team welcomes volunteers, skilled and unskilled. You can always reach us at [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org).

In Friendship,  
Matthew Andrews

Board President Auroville International-USA



Auroville International USA is a 501c3 nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting the Auroville project in Tamil Nadu, India. Founded by Mirra Alfassa ("The Mother") in 1968, Auroville is the world's largest intentional community, with about 3,000 residents from over 70 nationalities. It is a place of experimentation, where creativity is encouraged and hundreds of cutting edge projects are innovating solutions to some of humanity's most pressing problems.

"Auroville wants to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities. The purpose of Auroville is to realise human unity." - The Mother

Connect is a free, semi-annual newsletter that shares in-depth stories and interesting anecdotes from Auroville. If you'd like to be a part of creating Connect, we'd love to hear from you! Email us at [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org). Subscribe at [www.aviusa.org/subscribe](http://www.aviusa.org/subscribe)



## Innovating In Waste

by Binah Thillairajah

Auroville is a microcosm (smaller version) of the macrocosm (the wider world). With a little over 3,000 official residents, about 3,000 annual volunteers, 5,000 employees commuting from local villages, and nearly 100,000 tourists each year, it's a smaller ecosystem than a city like Denver or Baltimore.

It's size, diversity, and the audacious vision behind its creation have nurtured a spirit of exploration and innovation. Auroville is a learning laboratory where people from all over the world intentionally explore alternative approaches to living with an overarching aspiration to create a city that differs from the ones that already exist all over the world. So it's a microcosm with an added spirit of adventure and the freedom to experiment.

Auroville also differs from many international development projects, where people are trying to solve some of the world's toughest problems like hunger, poverty, and waste management, in that the people implementing the projects in Auroville live there long term and become an integral part of the city. Development aid project managers often fly in and out of the regions where they are overseeing projects, and their stake is not personal. Auroville's interconnectedness creates an inherent accountability. Aurovilians are accountable to their families, friends and the local villages, and this is evident in the care and nuance of their work.

The innovative spirit of Auroville has inspired many alternative solutions to the challenges we face in our everyday lives. Auroville Eco Service attempts to address one of our most mundane challenges, that of waste management and waste repurposing, with intuitive and simple solutions.

According to Kali Borg, a manager at Auroville Eco Service, one of the most significant ingredients is a loving attention to detail. Kali and her co-manager Palini's quest is to shrink the amount of waste sent to landfills and make the physical location an inviting and beautiful place to welcome upcyclers and training programs.

Palini manages the day to day logistics, ensuring that the service runs smoothly. Kali and Palini, with their small crew of six women and a truck driver employed from local villages, manage 12 tons of Auroville's waste each month. Only 22% of that waste ended up in landfills in 2019.

Eco Service picks up sorted waste from approximately 430 locations around Auroville. Waste is sorted into six barrels provided at each location for Glass, Metal, Paper, Plastic and Non Recyclables. Users contact Eco Service when the barrels are full, and Eco Service picks up waste for a charge of 40 Rupees (about 53 cents), or 100 Rupees (\$1.33) if the waste isn't properly sorted. Eco Service will not pick up food waste or "wet" or "nasty" waste. Their approach assumes an engaged user who is willing to be responsible for sorting their waste responsibly and composting all their own simple biodegradable waste at home.

Eco Service both relies on and encourages an engaged community. For instance, if plastic bags aren't washed, they go into the landfill instead of recycling. Eco Service will even ask the users for specific attention to details, like cutting the plastic away from the paper of the tofu packaging so that plastic can also be recycled. This system relies heavily on the goodwill of the users and the ability to communicate with them directly.

Eco Service segregates the six categories of waste into 84 sub-groups, a process they call "microsegregation". Items that can be repurposed or reused are channeled to the various services and businesses that have requested them, a process they call "linking". Microsegregation and linking form the core of Eco Service's ability to reuse and repurpose as much waste as possible. For instance, glass is microsegregated into nine categories, and of these nine categories jars are further sorted by capacity such as 200, 300ml, 500ml. These are reused by businesses that pickle, jam or use jars for their products. Paper is segregated into seven categories, and books are further sorted and sent

*Auroville's  
interconnectedness  
creates an inherent  
accountability.*

to the library and schools, or offered to individuals. Many items that might be considered trash are sanitized and repurposed. Cutlery goes to the community kitchens.

Auroville's Free Store is an important link where many useful waste items are cleaned and displayed beautifully for community members to choose from. Clothes, sunscreen, toys and nick-nacks go to the Free Store where people who need or want the items can pick them up. While wearable clothes go to the Free Store, torn clothes are given to local mechanics to use as rags. Bed sheets go to the dog shelter, and what is left is given to the local rag pickers who are able to turn them into a small profit for themselves.

Eco Service offers community units and individuals a beautiful clean place to view newly cleaned items that they might need and a place to peruse and spark new innovative ideas. The Upcycling Unit run by Ok has a strong relationship with Eco Service. They often request specific items or browse for new inspirations for their furniture and other items that they create and sell. Kali points out that linking is important, not only with units that rely on Eco Service for materials, but also with other units that resonate with their purpose, such as Eco Femme, which produces reusable feminine hygiene products and reduces waste that ends up in the landfill.

Eco Service also links with the Pour Tous Distribution Center (PTDC), which provides food and sundry items to Aurovilians. Together with PTDC, they will often evaluate the environmental impact of products offered and seek out alternatives when the end packaging adds to landfill waste. PTDC in turn links to local farms, restaurants and businesses to distribute their products, lowering the carbon footprint and packaging required.

Kali reiterates that an ethos of recycling, repurposing, and reducing landfill waste is a web that starts with the primary user and spreads out into Auroville, the bioregion, and beyond. Eco Service welcomes sorted waste from around the bioregion, and the word is slowly spreading. They have offered training to nearby Jipmer hospital, which has implemented many of their suggestions, and they have organized waste collection on the beaches with the local National Cadet Core (NCC). They have requests from local and national schools and Universities and regularly host small groups at Eco Service from across the country.

Kali also offers presentations to groups of guests visiting Auroville, and she uses stories to illustrate



that he needs for a shift away from consumerism with the many

guest groups. She is fluent in English, French and Tamil which allows her to comfortably converse in all three languages. One version of her presentation goes like this: "If you see a man with a big car and gold chain - he will impress everyone. In fact he is trying to secure himself in society with his stuff. He is trying to find peace. His end goal is to find peace. But then think of a sadhu. What do you see? Both are trying to find peace. Has stuff made a difference?" She concludes, "Stuff won't make you feel better, it's a marketing trick. Think of your ancestors, your mother, grandmother who had so much less but were happy."

Eco Service's impact has reached further into Tamil Nadu with another successful program implemented in the Palani Hills by Kodai International School. Based on their collaboration with Kali and Palani, they have developed an educational program in local village schools. In collaboration with local government officials, they empower school children to learn about recycling and to segregate waste in their villages and towns.

Eco-Service is developing another collaboration with an NGO in Bombay called Bombay Green Soles. This program will remake shoes using used but solid soles and give them to school children who need shoes. In Auroville, newer shoes are sent to the Free Store, but unusable shoes go to landfills, where according to Kali, it can take up to 350 years for them to decompose.

From a small-scale operation initiated by Stefano on a bicycle in 2008, Eco Service has grown into an organization that continues to lower landfill waste every year. The amount of waste sent to landfills dropped from 32% in 2017 to 22% in 2019. And they continue to enroll local users, expanding from 150 pick-up stations in 2016 to over 430 today. Unlike the angst-filled helplessness we often see broadcast in the news about waste, Eco Service illustrates on a small scale the potential to turn the tide of landfill waste when people and businesses are engaged in an intricate web of reciprocity, recycling and repurposing. The challenge for the future is to maintain the integrity and intention of this service as Auroville grows, and to offer a replicable model for other towns and cities.



# Re-Envisioning Rubbish



## The Umbrella Repair Man

### Honoring Vanishing Skills

One day Kali was traveling through a small town 30km away from Auroville. She saw a man fixing umbrellas, and appreciated his simple, valuable skill for renewing something that would otherwise be thrown in a landfill. She watched him work for a while, and then told him that if he ever made it to Auroville, she could give him some work repairing the many battered umbrellas that have collected at EcoService over the years.

A few days later, she got a call at 7:30am. He had come, swift as the wind, and she rearranged her day to bring him to EcoService and get him set up. This humble man, offering value to a world to which he is mostly invisible, was given an opportunity to apply his skills. He is one of many with useful manual repair skills vanishing under the treads of modernity.



## EcoFest at Pitchandikulam

Pitchandikulam Forest conducted "Schools in Action for the Planet Environmental Education Program" in 10 local schools in Tamil Nadu that cater to underprivileged youth.

Over 350 students participated in an "Ecofest" where they displayed their projects that ranged from artwork to skits and poetry on the topics of plastic pollution, climate change, and biodiversity.

R.Raghuraman, a renowned sea turtle conservationist, participated in the event along with representatives from Tata Communications' Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) that sponsored the event.

The Ecofest brought together a community of student environmentalists in an effort to foster community awareness and support for ecological concerns locally.

It was a day that created a sense of hope, aspiration and empowerment in students to become leaders in stewarding their communities to participate in the greater global efforts towards honoring the Earth.

## Upcycling Studio

Created in 2015 by OK and Mark, Upcycling Studio solves the waste problem by making useful products. Upcycling Studio's aim is to change how we see waste.

### Upcycling Principles:

1. Act locally
2. Use premium (clean) waste
3. Be open source - designs are free to be re-created

Upcycling Studio works with EcoService and WasteLess. They have organized events like Litter Free Auroville, which included exhibitions,

workshops, talks, and films, as well as the Trashion Show, a fashion show of garments made from waste. They also organize waste pickup campaigns with local schools.



### Upcycling is creative reuse.

It is a one of a kind, manual process.

It does not break down the materials, but refashions them.

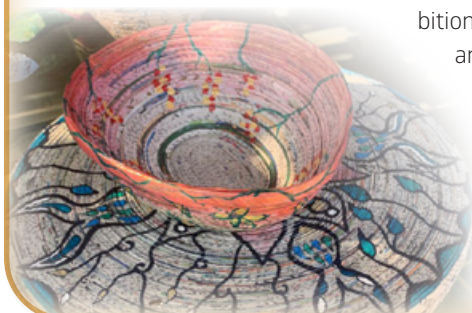
It uses human energy to transform waste materials and byproducts into new, useful, sustainable products.

Material can be anything: tiles, glass, tires, paper, metal....

The end product is of a better or at least equal, quality than the original one sent to waste.

The waste by-product is given a new life as something useful.

Anyone can do it.





## The Trash Mahal And Other Adventures in Consciousness

by Maggie Greer

B arrived in Auroville in 1974. An idealist from California seeking a way to help create a new world., Hhe built a home amid the red Earth and open sky. Like most early Aurovilians, he worked on the Matrimandir, building the impossible using the tools at hand. He stayed for 24 years, and then left to assist his dying mother go to heaven.

In 2008, B returned to Auroville. He noticed that a huge shift had taken place in peoples' relationship to trash. Before, in the 1970s and 80s, almost everything that people used was compostable. There were no plastic packages or bottles, no "carry bags" or plastic utensils.

But now, as B looked around, he saw heaps of garbage everywhere, garbage that wasn't going to just decompose and become compost or food for cows, crows, rats and goats. The acrid smell of burning plastic wafted through the air.

Having already encountered the Zero Waste movement while in California, B was happy to see that Auroville had begun their nascent Eco Service. But, at that time, Eco Service was only able to recycle about 60% of the waste created in Auroville, and the rest went into a landfill. B knew that more was possible. He says the big breakthrough came in 2010 during the first "Litter Free Auroville Day", in which the whole of Auroville cleaned up all the trash they could find. Bags and bags of trash were collected, and all the bags were put into a huge pile in Certitude. There were games, food, art, and even an amazing "Trashion Show".. B demonstrated making blocks out of trash and earth and he says it was a turning point in the consciousness of the people in Auroville.

Soon, as a result of renewed efforts, they were able to keep an additional 10% of Auroville's waste out of the landfill. But there were still three tons per month being buried beneath the ground.

For B, that was too much. His suggestion? If you have waste that's biodegradable, make compost out of it. If it is non-biodegradable, use it for construction.

B decided to illustrate the practicality and feasibility of this Zero Waste idea by constructing a building made primarily with cast-off and natural materials. With architect Manu Gopalan, the International House Eco-Dormitory was built using recycled and compressed Tetra pak\* sheets for the roof, whole local palmyra trees for the pillars supporting the four stories, and Styrofoam, landfill and cement mixed together for the flooring. The building uses solar power to run everything including the refrigerator and has dry compost toilets.

B lived in a room there as the caretaker for a while, and then he built the "Trash Mahal" (Trash Palace), his current residence where he lives with his wife, Nandini. The Zero Waste philosophy is evident in all aspects of this house. He collected earth bricks that were discarded because they were deemed not "good enough". So they were used as filler blocks in non load bearing walls. The required load bearing was accomplished using trees blown down by cyclone Thane.

Hollow steel beams cross the sturdy tree trunks to make the structure on which the upper floor was built. That floor was made from Acacia wood, again salvaged from blown down trees. The main level floor was made from landfill materials packed down and covered with a thin layer of colored cement. The building's roof is made with a wire mesh over tetra pak sheets with a thin layer of cement sprayed on. Whole discarded bottles were placed in the walls in many places, some clear to let in light, others colored and equally decorative. There are clear bottles in the roof that provide plenty of light during the daytime. And, of course, there is a compost toilet.

*The house is  
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Even some of B's furniture, made in Auroville by Marc (at Upcycle), is constructed from tetra paks coated in paper machè, all very strong by the nature of the tetra pak composition. The house is constructed primarily with solid waste and natural materials found in Auroville. He even used video tape cassettes bound for landfill. Three cassettes together are the size of a brick and they adorn the outdoor bathroom.

B believes that building blocks can be made from many different and creative things. For example, broken plastic, bits of glass, metal, and stones can go into cement and concrete. Plastic can be integrated into earth very easily and Styrofoam can be integrated into both earth and concrete, keeping it out of the oceans. And the ubiquitous tetra paks? There's a factory in India that is grinding up and crushing tetra paks to make roofing materials. When pressed and heated, the plastic and aluminum in the paks becomes a very thick and strong sheet that can be used for making a roof, either flat or corrugated. All of these uses keep solid, non-biodegradable waste out of the landfill.

When B first started talking about using waste in building materials, many people told him it wasn't a good idea, that living in a building made from trash would be toxic. "B," they said, "Let us get a nice apartment for you. You don't want to live there." And many workers would not participate in such a project, saying that it is unclean. Further, while a lot of upcycling and recycling is now occurring



"What is a Tetra pak? It is a six-layer sandwich with four layers polyethylene (15%), one layer paper (80%), and one layer aluminum foil (5%). What is polyethylene? In simple terms: plastic. So, while 80% of the pack is paper and biodegradable, 5% is aluminum and 15% is a form of plastic, neither being biodegradable.

A factory in India is making a product for building which is made from Tetra paks and, according to the company, nothing else added. The Tetra pak is ground up and crushed together, then pressed and heated. The plastic and aluminum inside forms into a very thick and strong sheet that can be used for roofing, either smooth or corrugated.

in Auroville through Eco-Service, and there is a much more awareness about creative things to do with trash, making building materials using non-biodegradable trash has not caught on in Auroville. But B hasn't given up hope. As he says, "Auroville has a garbage issue and a housing issue. The garbage issue will actually solve the housing issue if you use non-biodegradable waste to build houses."

And B has worked on other projects related to Auroville's waste, including human waste. One project was started with Tency at the Center for Scientific Research. They started manufacturing biogas plants made out of ferrocement for family and community use to create methane that can be used to cook food and provide fertilizer for growing plants. The biogas projects were funded in part by the Indian government and the UK government. One goal was to use biomass in the Andaman Islands to generate methane for electricity. It was a win-win for Auroville CSR, the Indian Government, and the Andaman Islands. While biogas units were built for Auroville, they required maintenance and, as B says, no one wanted to do it. Most human waste is now processed via septic tank systems, again very wasteful due to flushing toilets but more biological wastewater treatment plants are being constructed where the water can be managed for reuse.



B is concerned that change isn't happening fast enough to have a significant impact on the environment. Looking forward, he cites Wasteless, an Auroville project that teaches children in local schools about the different types of waste and what can and cannot be recycled. This information has been integrated into textbooks in Tamil Nadu. But, once again, he says, this isn't enough fast enough. The next generation is still being trained to be consumers. And this is a huge part of the problem.

He points out that when we buy something, we buy not only that product but also the packaging of that product. We, as individuals, are responsible for both the product and the packaging. He says, "Many have the narrative in their heads that says, 'I'm just one person. I don't make a difference.' We need to dissipate that view. . . . We can make a difference, but it starts with each individual person." Each person needs to think, "I can do more with my waste. I can be responsible."

He says, "What you do regarding recycling waste also counts for your consciousness. It's changing you. You can't change the world until you change yourself. Hah, how many times have you heard that?" As for his overall sense of optimism, "We are doing what we can here in Auroville. Every day is Wow! I'm happy here! I'm living the dream and feeling very grateful."





# When It Flows, You Go

by Alana Wilson

I spoke with Camille, founder of Tulita, on a Thursday morning from Denver, CO. It was 8:30pm for her, 8am for me. She joined the call from her kitchen in Auroville. We resigned ourselves to speaking without video in hopes that it would keep the wifi from failing. Even without video, her kindness and warmth emanated from the call and her laugh was contagious. For a conversation about sustainable fashion and the detrimental impact our current fashion industry has on the environment, I found myself laughing far more than I expected.

On an early morning in May of 2014, Camille stepped off the bus from Pondicherry into the 42° air of Auroville. She hitched a ride with a motorcyclist and was dropped at the visitor's center with no plan of where to go and knowing no one. It marked the second time she had fallen in love, the first time being when she stepped off the plane in India for the first time.

Camille had always been drawn to India. "I must have lived past lives there," she says laughingly. Her journey to Auroville, however, wasn't always guaranteed. Like many, Camille found herself graduating from college, entering the workforce, and feeling dissatisfied with the idea of her whole life revolving around her job as an occupational therapist.

It was actually during one of her sessions with an older woman suffering from Parkinson's that she was prompted to change her life. The woman, a Catholic nun left a great impression on Camille with her stories of her missionary work. She once said, "Camille, you care for others but do you enjoy your life? Do you take time for yourself and have fun?"

The question was answered by her inner child who was yelling, "Listen to me! I want to exist!" Her lifelong dream had always been to travel, but the pressure of society and the wants of those around her were demanding, so she stayed. "I lost myself when I was in Paris: wearing high heels, spending 2 hours getting ready for work, and wearing a mask. I lied to myself and lost myself and I think many people are in this box of identifying as their job. You cannot discover who you are if you're constantly doing. You need time to uncondition yourself, which is a scary

process."

Auroville gave that space for Camille to pause, although the pause hadn't always been her plan when traveling. When Camille set out to travel, she took everything she had saved, and hoped to do a full tour of Asia. She had been to Asia once before on a backpacking trip through Malaysia with friends and it was an unforgettable experience, meeting people who had left everything behind and were solely traveling. The only question she had was whether to start or end the trip with India. She chose to start her trip there.

Flash forward to her arrival at Auroville's visitor center and she soon found herself staying at a guesthouse, meeting new people, and volunteering in various units. One such unit was Auroville Botanical Gardens where she met Sebastian: her third love. Sebastian had come to India with the intention of staying in Auroville but Camille still had the desire to continue her travels, so they settled on a trip to Nepal. Camille insisted they travel by train, rather than plane as Sebastian wanted, because "when it is easy, you don't remember." The pair spent several months traveling outside of India but ultimately felt the call to return to Auroville and ended their travels to go home once more.

They returned to Auroville having seen beautiful places, met beautiful people, and lived both as a volunteer and a guest. Living in Auroville full-time was so different from the work and study grind of Camille's life back in Paris which had created burnout. Living as a guest for a time allowed Camille to slow down and focus on herself. This same attitude of slowing down carried into her pregnancy when she chose to experience an Indian style of pregnancy in which she took care of herself and truly experienced the transformation at home.

It was during her pregnancy that Camille returned to her hobby of sewing. She had initially learned to sew during her time at university. Her mom had purchased a sewing machine and Camille, using only the instruction manual as a guide, created sensory materials for her patients. After graduation, however, sewing was pushed to the back burner with the demands of work. She was reminded recently by Facebook that in 2011 she created her first piece of upcycled clothing: a dress from an old shirt and skirt.

During the final 6 months of her pregnancy, she had plenty of time to create. Considering a sewing machine couldn't have fit in her backpack when she left Paris, she asked a tailor in the street if he had a needle and luckily, he did. Using hair shears and patterns from the internet, Camille began once again making plush toys, which she later learned were one of the most difficult items to sew by hand. She would stay up until 3 am, not even noticing the time, creating dogs,



fish, playmats, mobiles, and hearts all, for her daughter.

She says of this time of creation in her life that Auroville gave her "plenty of time to go deep and stop running. It wasn't something I had to force. I had no business plan, I was just doing it for my kid and I enjoyed the process." In 2020, she set out to create her first clothes.

Tulita officially opened in 2021 and it has since become clear that this is Camille's calling. But for a time, Camille wasn't so sure. She had considered returning to her job as an occupational therapist but the pandemic interfered in that plan. The universe was blocking her in every way. "When the universe is blocking and blocking and blocking, it means it is not your way." Contrary to occupational therapy, however, creating upcycled clothing seemed to just flow. "And when it flows, you go."

It seems like a lot of people who arrive in Auroville are searching for something else. What do you think makes people stay?

At the beginning she said to everyone, I want to travel, I want to go here and there and everywhere. She met someone early on in her time in Auroville that had done that, he had traveled everywhere and he said, "You don't have to run everywhere. The real travel is inside, it's not outside. In Auroville, the world comes to Auroville. You have the chance to meet so many cultures, so many different people and points of view. Everyone is here."

**Auroville works to create a system that serves both people and the planet. Tulita is really one of those projects that fulfills that dream. Did you always intend to create a sustainable fashion brand or is that something that Auroville inspired?**

"I grew up in a family where recycling and upcycling was something we just did, although we didn't call it that. I used to go with my father to a local market and find old treasures. Here in Auroville, EcoService was like those markets for me."


**For people looking to shop sustainably, what are some things to look for and things to avoid when making purchases?**

"Avoid big brands like H&M and Ali Express who are not thinking about the people making their clothing and care only about their bottom line. Look to your own closet, mend the clothes you have, upcycle what you already own. Also, look for good quality fabrics that will last for years."

**What is something you are looking forward to right now?**

"To continue to grow with Tulita and to create workshops to help people learn how to upcycle on their own. Upcycling is more than a trend, it's really entered the consciousness of a lot of people and it will hopefully continue to grow and make a positive impact within the fashion industry. I hope that sustainable fashion will become more accessible as more people create sustainable fashion."

**What advice do you have for someone that is hesitant to follow their passions?**

"It's not easy to go out of our comfort zone. It is always difficult to change our life. Auroville felt quite uncomfortable at first but also quite exciting. Tulita was the same way. Be aware of what you feel in your body. Listen to the cues your body gives you and notice if you feel tension or anger/sadness/laziness. Feel it, accept it, and go where it breathes and it flows, where the joy and love are. Do what you enjoy. That was my big learning in Auroville: to do what you like." 

*You don't  
have to run  
everywhere.*

*The real travel  
is inside*



### Trashion Show

A wonderfully fun and creative event in Auroville seeks to raise awareness about recycling/upcycling. The theme of the most recent show in 2019 was "Be Part of The Solution." The show is intended to raise awareness for waste reduction and seeks to encourage a culture of reduce, reuse, recycle and repair. All garments in the show have been made of rubbish or trash.

Seen on the lovely models were fashions made from Tetra paks for dresses, shoes, even hair adornments. Also seen were amazing fashions made from: plastic bags, a discarded and broken umbrella, foam packing materials, discarded clothing, paper, books, plastic, aluminum foil, chips bags, pet food bags, cloth scraps, and even plastic bottles. Aurovilian Jesse Fox-Allen serves as director and narrator. The script is creative and humorous with lessons about recycling and upcycling.

# Zero Waste Lifestyle

by Alana Wilson

Zero waste living has become an increasingly popular solution to our world's current climate crisis, even if it sounds like an impossible feat to many of us. When I first traveled to Auroville in February 2019, my first thought was one of appreciation for the tree-lined, red dirt roads and beautiful blue sky; my second thought was "Where are all the trash cans?" This absence of waste receptacles was evidently a large obstacle for my Westernized brain to process because it was what I sent to my parents as my first text in place of a "Hello, yes I'm alive and well."

Since traveling to Auroville, I've wondered about how a systemic approach to waste could result in both a few public trash cans and litter-free streets. And this wondering inspired me to reach out to Laure, Social Media Coordinator for EcoFemme and a zero waste advocate. Laure explains zero waste to be a philosophy that aims to create the least amount of waste in your life. The goal, however, isn't to reach exactly zero but to get as close to zero as possible by practicing the 5 R's: 1) refuse anything you do not need, 2/3/4) reduce/reuse/recycle anything you have, and 5) rot (or compost) all biodegradable materials. In theory, a zero waste lifestyle creates a closed loop. "Nothing gets wasted and nothing gets lost. Everything has a purpose," says Laure.

Auroville has created conditions that make it easier for those who want to live according to the 5 R's. For instance, the PTDC (Purchasing



6 months of waste in a jar

Distribution Center) intentionally does not display prices in an effort to encourage shoppers to only take what they need, not what they want. That is the core of zero waste: focus on your needs, not your superficial desires. In this way, a zero waste lifestyle finds its roots in spirituality. Laure explains the connection like this: "Spirituality teaches that material desires and consumer culture do not bring true happiness. It is our approach to life that will create inner peace and happiness, which

is a teaching of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo."

This spiritual relationship to consumerism and waste consciousness is prevalent in Auroville. It is evident in the Green Belt where people live

simply in small spaces with little possessions and in the individual Units that work tirelessly to create sustainable solutions for the planet. One such unit is EcoFemme: a women-led social enterprise responsible for revitalizing menstrual practices that are healthy for both people and the planet through the sale of reusable cloth pads. "It's exciting because Eco Femme is a tangible solution to reduce waste," says Laure.

And people want to be a part of the solution. Part of why zero waste feels so daunting is not only the how but also the why. A warming climate, overflowing landfills, polluted water and soil all paint a dire picture of our future and it can feel easier to remain disconnected from the issue than to face it head on. But as Laure reminds me, "When the Earth is polluted, our bodies become polluted. Whatever you give to the Earth will come back to you and not always in a nice way." A zero, or nearly zero, waste lifestyle is an invitation to remain connected to the Earth and our bodies while creating positive, long-lasting change.

This change does not occur overnight as the transition to zero, or nearly zero, waste is gradual and requires a bit of determination. Laure's own journey to zero waste began by investigating what happened to her waste which then prompted her to slowly change her habits little by little. These habits included changing where she shopped so that she could purchase items in bulk, bringing her own containers and bags, as well as purchasing long-lasting products that don't need to be replaced as often and buying only products with non-toxic ingredients. Laure admits the transition to zero waste can feel annoying when you first begin your wasteless journey because it may require you to change where you shop or how you shop, but the end result is guaranteed to bring joy to anyone who tries. "I feel active in the problem as a part of the solution, rather than feeling the guilt of being part of the problem," Laure says.



my travel toiletry bag.



package free shopping

## Re-Envisioning Rubbish

There are dozens of projects in Auroville seeking to re-envision our relationship to trash, shifting from “yuck!” to “hmmm...” and from “gross!” to “wow!”. Here are a few examples:



### WasteLess

Wasteless is a creative educational project dedicated to transforming the way we think about waste. They design and develop educational materials that empower children to think critically, inspire environmentally responsible behavior, and drive future systemic change. And they have created a school-based curriculum to empower children to drive positive changes at home and in their wider community around the recycling of solid waste.



The curriculum uses materials like memory card games, songs, and other interactive activities that spark curiosity in children about plastic pollution. The activities develop knowledge on sustainable consumption and responsible waste management while promoting communication, reading, critical thinking, and creative skills. For more info visit [www.wastelessindia.org](http://www.wastelessindia.org).

### Let's Talk Trash

Let's Talk Trash is a volunteer activity initiated by Bharathi to clear the most popular roadways in Auroville of litter.

Tamil Aurovilian youth invite the community to join them on two Sunday mornings a month to spend a couple of hours picking up trash. At the conclusion of their work, they enjoy breakfast at a local tea shop together.

One of the challenges is that people and businesses have started leaving their trash on the roadways in anticipation of the volunteers coming to pick up trash which seems to violate the spirit of the initiative: to discourage littering

Another challenge is raising the awareness of tourists and local businesses so they stop leaving their trash and litter along local roadways.



# Meet The Board: Jack Alexander

by Binah Thillairajah

The 1960s and 70s were an era permeated with optimism and spiritual curiosity. The possibilities seemed endless as the US and Europe shifted from recovery from the second World War to growth, and India embraced its independence after centuries of colonization. The United Nations was a symbol of new world collaboration, borders were open in the Americas, Europe, Middle East, and Asia and international youth filled with the spirit of adventure were leaving their conventional lives to explore other countries and new possibilities.

Pondicherry, the previous capital of French India located on the southeast coast, was a natural nexus between the ancient and modern. Seekers from all over India and the world were drawn by the heady mix of tradition and novelty. The great Indian freedom fighter and sage Sri Aurobindo had founded his ashram in "Pondy", adding to the port city's spiritual energy. In the 1960s, Sri Aurobindo's spiritual collaborator and successor Mirra Alfassa, fondly known as "Mother" introduced her dream of Auroville. It would be an international township where people from all over the world would work together in harmony, taking advantage of new discoveries both spiritually and technologically to find new ways of living together in resonance with the Earth.

In 1968, Auroville was inaugurated in nearby rural Tamil Nadu, on a plateau which was home to some local villages and their farmlands. From its inception, Auroville attracted people from all walks of life who had a can-do attitude and big dreams, and who resonated with this dream of a new frontier for a new world full of possibilities. All the founding members of AVI-USA were drawn to Pondicherry in the late 1960s and early 1970s, met the Mother, and were deeply inspired by the dream of Auroville.

Jack Alexander and his wife Mary were one of those founding members who traveled across the world from America to India in the 1970s and spent a decade living and working to manifest Auroville. Today Jack and Mary are the longest serving members of the AVI-USA board. In the 1980s, they teamed up with Constance, June Maher, and others to form a registered nonprofit organization dedicated to supporting Auroville and serving human unity. Service to AVI USA

*He sensed that there was a spiritual mystery hiding beneath the surface of life, and he was drawn to discover and experience it.*

brought them together regularly, as well as keeping them actively linked to Auroville while they built their new lives and tended their young families, a half a world away in the USA.

Today, Jack is well known as a 'fix-it' man extraordinaire and engineering generalist. He had the good fortune to grow up with a dad who taught industrial arts like wood shop, auto shop and drafting.

Hanging out with his dad in these environments, he met other handy folks, helped build their family home, and fixed cars from the time he was a child. When he graduated from high school, he went to a two year trade school to learn to build houses, and deferred payment by offering two years of service at a church community center.

Jack was always a seeker. He sensed that there was a spiritual mystery hiding beneath the surface of life, and he was drawn to discover and experience it. At first he sought the mystery within his local church, but soon became frustrated with the rigidity and emphasis on conforming. Another door opened when his college roommate introduced him to the East - West Cultural Center in LA. Around the same time he found a used book on the Bhagavad Gita and in his words, "I read it and it read me". A fire was lit in Jack and he wanted to build a community of seekers in California where he and his young wife Mary could live and explore a spiritual lifestyle.

In the late 1960s, a man named Navajata from the Sri Aurobindo Society came to the East-West Cultural Center to recruit people to go and build Auroville. He brought shiny brochures and spoke in glowing terms. Still inspired by the idea of communal spiritual living, Jack sent a letter to the Mother asking for blessings to buy a big house to build a community in Southern California and dedicate it to her. Mother responded by sending 25 small packets of dried flowers that she had blessed, accompanied by a note asking, "How will this help the work?" This simple question dissolved his desire to build a community in California and redirected him towards actually moving to the nascent community of Auroville that he had seen in the brochures brought by Navajata.

Jack had helped his friend Narad send some gardening equip-





ment to Auroville for the new nursery, so he knew that tools were scarce, and he would need to bring his own. He spent the next three years painting houses to earn money for his trip and gathering tools from garage sales and thrift stores, so that when he finally left for Auroville, he had to ship all the tools he had gathered by sea in a large container.

Finally, in 1972, at the age of 25, Jack and his wife Mary told their parents they were moving to India with their one year old son, Satyavan. They landed in Pondicherry with a giant crate of tools. It wasn't too long before they ran out of money, and so they asked Mother for permission to live and work in the Pondicherry Ashram. Once again, Mother redirected Jack's path by sending him a message: "You came for Auroville. You can't stay in the ashram. Go to Auroville". Informally she said to her secretary, "At least he's not another artist," as she knew about the tools he had brought.

Jack and Mary moved to the new community of Hope with all their worldly wealth embodied in a giant box of tools. They had no money and were unsure of what was next. The flat open land of Auroville interwoven with small Tamil villages didn't look anything like the shiny brochure he had seen back in California. One day, Jack biked over to the Matrimandir where there were four naked concrete pillars jutting out of the red earth. Nearby stood a tiny workshop where a few foreigners mingled with employees from the local villages.

A warm, unassuming man named Michael Tate ran the workshop, and he invited Jack in. Jack and Michael quickly bonded over the mechanical challenges on the construction site of the Matrimandir.

Jack sensed that the messy, relatively stark construction site of the Matrimandir was the heart of what Auroville might become. It had been envisioned as the spiritual heart of the city, a giant golden globe with a silent meditation chamber in its center, illuminated by sunlight directed into a giant crystal. That vision seemed pretty far out from where Jack stood, toes covered in red sand, staring at a few buried concrete pillars. He was inspired, and offered his tools and services to Michael and the Matrimandir team.

The onsite architect Piero built a special woodworking and metalworking workshop to house the treasure trove of tools that Jack had hauled over land and sea, some of which are still used today. The drill press that Jack brought is still a favorite tool in the Matrimandir workshop. In the early 1970s, the workshop became the mechanical hub of all the work needed to support the monumental task of building the Matrimandir, but it was also a resource for other projects throughout Auroville. The workshop and Jack's tools were used on everything from broken bullock carts to windmills. A make-it-

work spirit was prevalent during those years, and everyone pitched in their knowledge and scraps to repair and keep things running.

As the work at the Matrimandir intensified, Jack moved out of the Matrimandir workshop, to a small emerging repair shop in the Aurovillian community of Abri. There he teamed up with a Tamil Aurovillian named Mani. Mani was a man of many talents, and could fix anything. Jack felt the limits of his own practical skills, so he took a class in welding at IIT Madras and a two week course in diesel engines at Bosch in Bangalore. All the vehicles in Auroville at the time were diesel, most of them having been brought by people who had traveled overland from Europe through Iran and Afghanistan to Auroville. Once they arrived, they had a choice to either donate their cars to Auroville or hand them over to Indian customs, so Jack and Mani had their hands full repairing old vehicles to transport Aurovilians and equipment around the wide open spaces under the sweeping Tamil Nadu sky.

Most of the new communities in Auroville relied on bore wells with windmills for their water sources. These windmills were of an American design from Bangalore, and they were challenged by the elements. As such, they were often in need of repair. Back then they used and reused parts from anything they could get their hands on to meet repair demands of an emerging Auroville.

They didn't know it then, but the team from Abri which included Jack, Mani and a team of young Tamil Aurovilians would eventually evolve into the backbone of Auroville's indispensable infrastructure units. Some of these units are still attending to various technological needs in Auroville today. Mani still has his own repair shop for vehicles and conveyances. Loganathan and Elumalai, who were early members of the team of younger Tamil Aurovilians, are still with the Matrimandir workshop team.

Jack is also the inventor of an Auroville household staple - the Wa-Wa. While at the Matrimandir workshop he used scrap wood to make a small wooden push bike for his toddler son. This was picked up by a wood workshop and soon became the favored toy of most Auroville toddlers. And with his ongoing interest in two wheelers, Jack came back to Auroville in the 1980s to organize and host two bike races. This momentum spilled over into a collaboration with Sukrit, who opened up a unit called Aurovelo dedicated to making, repairing and selling high quality bicycles to people in Auroville and throughout India.

Like many of the people who came to Auroville in the early days Jack represents a persevering spirit that was and is able to manifest incredible dreams with very little money, a lot of grit and whatever they could find and repurpose locally.



## Honoring Dakshina and Bryan

Dakshina Vanzetti, co-founder of the community Sri Aurobindo Sadhana Peetham in Lodi, California passed from cancer in February. She nurtured the ashram lovingly in every detail including flower gardens, a coy pond and waterfall and "the temple of the tools" which were superbly ordered in the garage. But mostly she nurtured souls, welcoming everyone to the ashram and giving them a chance to fit in.

She grew the business Auomere (www.auomere.com) selling toothpaste, shampoo, soaps and incense, some of which was made in Auroville or Pondicherry, and gave 10% of company profits back to Auroville. She also



distributed books related to Sri Aurobindo, Mother and Auroville and many source books on yoga philosophy and Ayurveda.

Her dying prayer was to "be reborn in Auroville where my soul will have a better chance to retain its consciousness of life's spiritual purpose from an early age and Mother's work can be

continued. In some ways I do feel that the body is giving out a bit prematurely and I want to continue in serving the Mother as soon as possible, if She allows it."



On March 8th, 2022, longtime AVI-USA Board Member and ex-President Bryan Walton left his body. He had been coping with recurring cancer for several years.

Bryan's warm demeanor and wry humor inspired countless smiles, and his ready hugs offered comfort to many during the 51 years that he was connected to Auroville. He was a sincere spiritual aspirant and treasured the fact that Mother had accepted him as an Aurovilian and approved his handicraft project, naming it Fraternity.

Although he had no experience in either crafts or business, Bryan bravely started the Fraternity project in February 1972, with many other Aurovilians and his wife-to-be Fanou joining him over the years in the work.

The original 15 acres of loose sand scattered atop hard red clay, dotted with palmyra trees and scrub grass flourished in the subsequent years. The land was gradually cultivated and the original keet sheds morphed into permanent handicraft buildings, a kindergarten for workers' and village children, and an overhead tank for fresh water. The proceeds from the production of handloomed and other craft products supported the training of local village women and youth, a running water system for Kulilapalayam village, and a kindergarten with daily lunch, medical care and lessons in Tamil.

Bryan and Fanou left Auroville in 1980 with their two very

young children, Auomarichi (Christian)

and Aurelia, and traveled to the USA where they lived in rural Spring Green, Wisconsin.

With another couple, they imported art and craft products from Auroville and other parts of Asia, and found markets through their retail store from where they could always be of generous help to Auroville. Over the years Bryan developed a treasure of highly artistic audio-visual presentations, quietly narrated by himself, based on his wide range of interests, including his research into Sri Aurobindo's and Mother's works, art works, books, articles, pictures and many hours of work. He was able to upload most of them, and they can be viewed at (scan QR code).

During his final days, we asked Bryan and Fanou to share with us how they would like his legacy to live on, and they did so in a heartfelt letter. You can visit [aviusa.org/bryan/#letter](http://aviusa.org/bryan/#letter) to read the full letter (scan QR code).



Dear Friends,

Greetings from Fanou and I. As we sat together in snowy Wisconsin during this past birthday week, we couldn't help but long to be in Auroville. And as much as we miss Auroville, we also miss you, our friends and fellow Aurovilians who have come and gone from the City of Dawn over the years... (Read on by scanning the code).



## Have You Thought About Your Legacy?

Because Bryan shared with us how he wanted people to honor his legacy, we have been able to collect and send nearly \$20,000 to Malarchi, which will enable them to purchase a van for outings, build a storeroom, and create a rainy day fund for emergencies. How would you like to be remembered? Is there an Auroville project that you'd like to encourage people to support in your memory? Or would you like to donate a portion of your estate to Auroville? Be in touch with us! We will be happy to work out the specifics with you and make sure that your wishes can be carried out. Email [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org).

And remember, if you have highly appreciated securities in your investment portfolio and dread paying the capital gains to sell them, you can avoid paying any taxes by choosing to donate those securities directly (in-kind) to AVI USA. Donating securities is a win-win for both you and AVI USA.

And if you're 72 or older, you can make a tax-free gift directly to Auroville International USA (AVI USA) from your Individual Retirement Account (IRA). Tip: This tax savings is especially valuable to donors who are non-itemizers and donors who have reached their limit on itemized charitable deductions.

## Stay Connected

**Stay Connected:** Our print newsletter is just one of the many ways to stay connected with AVI USA. Our offerings, from our monthly e-Connect newsletter to our live online events, are designed to connect each one of us to the spirit of Auroville from wherever we are in the world. If you have any questions about accessing these offerings, please send an email to [info@aviusa.org](mailto:info@aviusa.org).

### Subscribe to our E-Newsletter!

e-Connect is a monthly newsletter delivered straight to your inbox with updates straight from Auroville and a calendar of upcoming events from AVI USA. It's the fun, digital version of this print newsletter with more frequent updates and lighter reading. Head to [aviusa.org/subscribe](http://aviusa.org/subscribe) to sign up now.

### Follow Us!

Our socials are filled with beautiful pictures from our friends in Auroville, stories from the "old" Auroville to modern day, delicious recipes to try at home, live updates from events, and more. We aim to share a bit of good news each day to brighten up your own day wherever you are. We've also just created our very own Tik Tok which means we're adding dancing to the list of AVI USA's many talents.

Facebook: [@AVIUSA](https://www.facebook.com/AVIUSA)

Instagram: [@aurovilleinternationalusa](https://www.instagram.com/aurovilleinternationalusa)

Twitter: [@aviusaofficial](https://twitter.com/aviusaofficial)

Tik Tok: [@aviusaofficial](https://www.tiktok.com/@aviusaofficial)

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### Stream AV Live Video Premieres!

Auroville Live (AV Live for short) is a project launched by AVI USA to connect you to the people and places that contain the spirit of Auroville through live streamed content. Our offerings have included a series of Matrimandir Meditations live from the gardens, live theater and choir performances, and a current series called "Matrimandir and I" which documents the relationship that individual Aurovilians have to the Matrimandir. You can find our full list of past, current, and future offerings on [aviusa.org/auroville-live](http://aviusa.org/auroville-live).

### Join Us for an AV Cafe Event!

The AV Live Online Tea Shop has emerged as a new regular series of events to connect you with the people and projects of Auroville in a live, online forum. While each event is unique, you can expect a presentation and an interactive discussion to follow. Stay up to date on our upcoming events by bookmarking [aviusa.org/auroville-live](http://aviusa.org/auroville-live), signing up for our e-Connect newsletter, or following us on our socials.