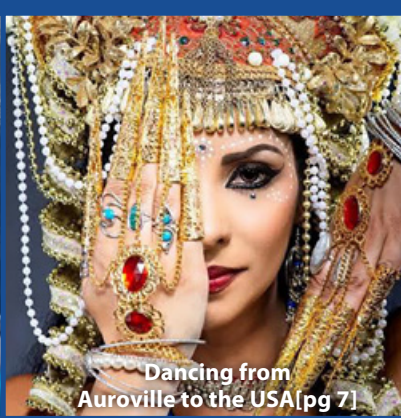




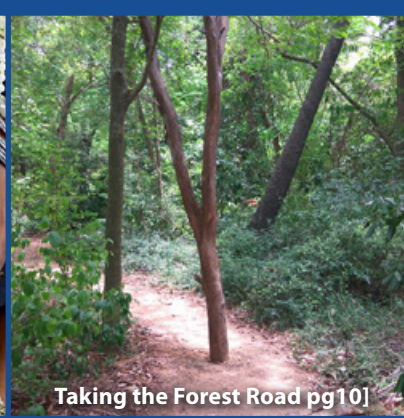
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AVI-USA CONNECT

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The Auroville Economy: A Year in Review

by Matthew Andrews

The Challenge

Over the past year, communities around the world have been navigating uncharted waters. The global pandemic has created different kinds of thorny problems for families, cities, and nations alike. With residents from over 70 nationalities living in more than 100 sub-communities, using various combinations of interlocking economic systems, subsidized by the Indian government, intertwined with the local economy, and heavily reliant on tourism, COVID's impact on Auroville has been as complex and nuanced as Auroville itself.

The Budget Coordination Committee (BCC) manages Auroville's basic shared resources like schools, health care, roads, electricity, and internet. Commercial units, guest houses, and individuals contribute to the Central Fund, and the BCC allocates resources to the service units based on availability and need. Early financial projections during the summer of 2020 painted a dire picture, suggesting that without a change in course, the Central Fund would tap into and then exhaust its reserves by summer of 2021. That would mean that funds for teacher and other essential service salaries, road and grid maintenance, Solar Kitchen lunches, and health care would be exhausted.

2. The Response

Auroville's fiscal year ended on March 31, so the accountants are busy crunching numbers and preparing reports. As they work, a picture of the previous year is coming into view. Throughout the remainder of 2020 and into 2021, the BCC called on Aurovilians and

friends of Auroville around the world to support the Central Fund and shore up its resources. Many Aurovilians responded by donating their monthly allowances back to the BCC, commercial units continued sending contributions from their reserves even though they had little to no income, and the schools and other shared services skipped routine repairs to save money. At the same time, donations from around the world came in to BCC to provide much needed support.

Auroville International USA decided to prioritize the Central Fund in all of our fundraising efforts this year. We reached out to our regular donors, and collaborated with other AVI groups around the world on several livestream events with all revenue going straight to the Central Fund. We have a new donation portal that accepts contributions in any currency via credit card, PayPal, GooglePay, or bank transfer, which has made it easy for well-wishers worldwide to donate and participate.

These events provided much needed financial support for Aurovilians' most basic needs, and also created opportunities for lovers of Auroville around the world to come together and share experiences and connect in new ways. As a result of the donations raised through these initiatives and the other reasons listed above, the current overall financial picture is much better than what original estimates predicted.

As Inge from BCC said recently, "Miracles are happening each day, each moment. We are acting as one collective body. Without big discussions community needs are taken care of by community income with extra support from well-wishers of Auroville all over the world."

Units like Auroville.com, which fulfills online orders for over 4,000 Auroville products, and Aurospirul, which produces herbal and algae-based health supplements, have both seen increases in sales over the past year. Aire, which for years has produced facemasks that were primarily used to block the dust while riding a motorbike, has found a major new market for their masks as



Auroville sports ground during lockdown.

protection against COVID. And Colours of Nature, which produces eco-friendly dyes for international brands like Levis and Quicksilver, reports that they "made it through the lockdown and today we are stronger than ever."

The future however, remains uncertain. After an initial spike in COVID cases in September, there was a dramatic decline throughout India, and Auroville never had a significant outbreak. But recently cases in bigger cities have been rising dramatically, and it becomes clear that more challenges are ahead.

3. Individual Aurovilians

Aurovilians, like so many people around the world, are exhausted by the past year's events. As Chali from the Working Group said, "COVID here is getting more worrisome again, not only because of the skyrocketing number of cases but because people are so fed up." More lockdowns and restrictions could be coming, and simply the uncertainty about how this will unfold has had a chilling effect on tourism and economic development.

Most cost-saving cuts to essential services have already been made. Every year that a school building or a road goes without repairs leads to compounding problems that are not easily reversed. It's unclear how long the commercial units will be able to continue contributing from their own reserves, or how long individual Aurovilians will be able to forgo their basic needs allowances.

Many residents have come to rely on renting out rooms in their homes to guests or offering tours locally or regionally during the tourist season to cover expenses throughout the year. Others go abroad during the winter to sell their wares or work at festivals or the Christmas markets in Europe. Units like Treehouse Community, Solitude Farm, and Bamboo Centre run workshops and trainings that draw students from around the world. With almost no international travel this winter, many have missed these contributions to



Women empowerment at Mohanam

Rajaveni from Mohanam

their annual budget.

According to Alok, many Aurovilians are feeling “challenged and much more financially cautious”. They have spent their reserves, and are facing the year ahead in a much more vulnerable situation than usual.

4. Outreach Schools

One sector that has universally suffered is the outreach schools that provide free or subsidized education in the surrounding villages. These schools have had cuts in regular grant funding, and the families are unable to pay even reduced tuition costs. Many of the families served by these schools rely on them not only for education and childcare, but for food as well. During the tightest part of the lockdown, Aikiyam School provided food baskets that students could pick up and bring home to their families.

At Udavi School in Edayanchavadi Village, their grant funding from the Government of India was cut by half for the 2020-21 school year, and they are receiving about 10% of tuition fees from families. Udavi’s Principal Davaselvy reports that all the laborers are still working 1/2 time, and the few that they released last summer have still not been re-hired. Aurovilian teachers have continued to receive their full salaries from BCC with support from a generous grant from the Foundation for World Education, but Davaselvy has had to cut wages for the non-Aurovilian teachers in order to balance the budget.

During the lockdown last year, the school was closed but the teachers still came in to prepare worksheets for the students, who picked them up and worked on them at home. But since they didn’t have enough money to cover the cost of making photocopies, they had to charge the students for the sheets. Since November, the school has been open for 1/2 days, and the teachers continue to provide worksheets for the kids to do at home during the afternoons.

“We have reduced our day-to-day expenses and are only concentrating on essential things like urgent repairs and cleaning,” says Davaselvy. “Sometimes we ask BCC for additional support and sometimes they are able to help.” She faces difficult budgeting decisions every day, but she’s hopeful about the future. “We are managing, and we are looking forward to opening the school next year.”

Mohanam’s Kindergarten has been closed for over a year, but they have continued to pay salaries for three teachers who are conducting classes online. Every Monday parents come and pick up homework packets, and then during the week the teachers engage with the students via WhatsApp, providing activities in painting, writing, and physical education.

Rajaveni, one of Mohanam’s executives, says that she’s remained committed to supporting the teachers, as they too have families to support. “They have kids themselves - if we let them go then what will they do? And if they are able to get another job then we will never get them back.”

Mohanam is covering all expenses, including salaries and supplies, from their savings. They are not asking for any fees from students’ families, and because their teachers are not Aurovilians, their salaries are not covered by BCC. “Every month we thought, it’s just a little longer, we just need to get through this month,” says Rajaveni.

But now with COVID cases on the rise again and their reserves nearly exhausted, it’s not clear what they will do. They’ve been hearing from parents that the kids are glued to TV and cell phones, and they are desperate for in-person educational opportunities. So they’re working on a plan to bring kids in small batches to their campus in the village three days a week, with six kids coming in for an hour at a time. But this possibility will last only as long as their reserves, unless they find another source of support.

5. Farms and Farmers

Auroville’s farms faced a unique challenge as a result of the way that the lockdown unfolded. At first, their biggest challenge was that local workers from the village couldn’t come to work, and there were no foreign volunteers. But despite the limitations in labor supply, the farmers realized that the entire community would be depending on them for food. They rose to the occasion and they dug in, ramping up production so they could feed the commu-

nity through the difficult times ahead.

Auro Orchard was producing 1000 organic eggs/day, planting a massive amount of vegetables, and increasing their milk production. Then, as soon as the lockdown began to relax, Aurovilians went back to purchasing cheaper eggs, milk and vegetables from suppliers outside Auroville, and the farms were left with a huge surplus. The farm ended up giving away eggs for free and selling milk at 1/2 the usual price to the local co-op, losing the equivalent of thousands of dollars in the process. Having planted so many vegetables, they now had no one to buy them.



Umaramanan from AuroOrchard

Ramanan, a member of the Farm Group, calls it a “terrible time”. “Immediately when the lockdown was relaxed a bit the consumption went down because producers started coming in from outside. But the production was still high because it was all planted. Because of that farmers have lost interest, and now production has gone way down.” This boom and bust pattern has made planning impossible and exhausted the farmers physically, financially, and emotionally.

But Ramanan is not hopeless. He reports that the Farm Group is focusing on planning, assessment and data collection, as well as collaborating with the working groups on long term solutions to ensure the viability of Auroville’s farms, like policies that prioritize Auroville produce over food from outside. “Currently we are not sustainable. We are only at 18% of our production potential, and even that isn’t being consumed. We should be producing at maximum capacity to self-sustain and reduce our carbon footprint.”

After a very difficult year, the Farm Group is pulling in to reflect and strategize how to tackle the bigger systemic issues that surfaced in the midst of COVID. New solutions and possibilities will inevitably emerge from this kind of introspection, and Aurovilians in general are doing the same. As Alok says, “The vulnerability forces one to have more faith and surrender, which is how we lived in the pioneering days. Aurovilians are a tough bunch and are optimistic despite these trying times.”

UPDATE

THE AUROVILLE ECONOMY CONTINUED

A sense of solidarity has developed and an appreciation for the unique status of Auroville in the world.”

6. Toward the Future

We at AVI-USA are also feeling this mix of concern and gratitude. We have reached out and connected with so many lovers of Auroville, and we are developing plans for more livestream events and online connection points. We have created a brokerage account to receive securities, and we are beginning to discuss estate planning with many of our donors who want to set up a memorial fund to ensure their contributions to the Dream of Auroville have an impact long into the future.

We look back on the past year with sorrow and reverence for so many lives lost and so much pain, and with awe and gratitude for the unexpected miracles that bloomed in this midst of profound contraction. And we look to tomorrow with hope.

We anchor our hearts in the hope upon which Auroville was founded, the hope that there could someday be “somewhere on earth a place which no nation could claim as its own, where all human beings of goodwill who have a sincere aspiration could live freely as citizens of the world and obey one single authority, that of the supreme Truth; a place of peace, concord and harmony where all the fighting instincts of man would be used exclusively to conquer the causes of his sufferings and miseries, to surmount his weaknesses



Auroville Farm

and ignorance, to triumph over his limitations and incapacities; a place where the needs of the spirit and the concern for progress would take precedence over the satisfaction of desires and passions, the search for pleasure and material enjoyment.”

Matthew Andrews is President of the AVI USA Board of Directors.



To donate and support Auroville’s future at this pivotal time,

please scan the QR code, or visit www.aviusa.org/donate, or mail a check to:

Auroville International USA P.O. Box 188158 Sacramento, CA 95818

Consumer prices in the US are on average 267% higher than those in India.

So every \$100 you contribute translates to \$267 for Auroville!

CONNECTIONS

We Are All One People

by Aurelia Sanders

I was only one when we moved from Auroville to Wisconsin. We lived in an intentional community out in the countryside that was very connected to Auroville. I always felt that growing up in rural Wisconsin, I had a glimpse into the world that my peers didn’t have. We would have friends from India come and visit us, which meant I was more aware of life outside of Wisconsin. This gave me an appreciation for other cultures and beliefs. I had Indian “uncles and aunts,” which to me felt quite normal.

My home life felt magical but it wasn’t always easy to incorporate that into my public-school life. I quickly learned these two worlds had to be separate. Though my parents were very loving and I felt safe in my commu-



Aurelia with daughter Amara.

nity there was an innocent idealism there that clashed strongly with my school life. My older brother felt lost and unaccepted in school. I

too felt unprepared for the social norms; not knowing what was expected in a rural small-town school and how to fit in.

I remember in kindergarten one day, I felt warm and took my shirt off. I was laughed at and ridiculed for not knowing the rules that govern girls. School taught me that being different and unique was somehow bad and even shameful. I have been working to unlearn this ever since. I think that now there is more openness to other ways of living in the American consciousness, than there was when I was young. I believe this is largely thanks for people like my parents and other Aurovilians bringing new ways of living to the US.

I remember as a child, we would go to All-USA-Meetings in the summer. They were always a blast because everyone was so kind and lovely. It was a place where I felt safe and treated more like an adult than a kid.

There would be fun games and lots of community time.

But all the meditating. How boring! I

couldn’t believe the adults would sit around doing nothing when there were so many fun things they could be doing. Now, as an adult I finally understand. Don’t tell my parents, but now when I meditate I will often hear my mom’s chants of OM in my head. This always makes me smile.

I think the biggest thing my parents taught me was that we are all one people. I feel a strong connection to all people and to bringing love and kindness to everyone. This is what I’ve witnessed my parents doing all my life. They are quick to greet someone new and invite them in for some yummy chai. To me this is Auroville: a place where everyone is welcome and can be their whole selves.

Aurelia Sanders, the daughter of Fanou and Bryan Walton, was born in Auroville in 1979. She was a Montessori teacher for many years and is now in school to become a nurse. She lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her husband and 8-year-old daughter.



Elamma with Aurelia in 1979

Being Part of the Family

by Jyoti Alexander

I have been told that as a child I would say, “When I was in India...” to join in the conversation even though I was born and raised in California, after my family moved back from Auroville. Growing up, many weekends were spent with other Aurovilians that were in various cities around California or Aurovilians coming to the USA and staying with us for a visit or an AUM meeting.

I wasn't taught any religion or spirituality and didn't know much about Auroville beyond the charter, or that of Sri Aurobindo and



Jyoti and her brother Satyavan in Auroville 1988.

The Mother beyond what they meant to people. I didn't question this upbringing until my 20s. My mom told me she figured spirituality is a personal thing I should discover for myself.

It wasn't until my visit there in my 30's that I really questioned how Auroville functioned for people, especially of my generation. Up until then Auroville was a place to visit family friends and eventually my brother.

I visited Auroville when I was 10, 13, 17, 34 and 40. For my first trip I was worried about my hair being too thick for the humid heat, and I had it cut off. I was a scrawny little kid, with almost no hair and a unisex name, so many in Auroville thought I was my brother's little brother. I understood that and it didn't bother me too much. Even though I had a rough go that first trip (got pretty sick, had culture shock, was teased at Transition school, got bit by a horse...) I think my family's love for Auroville was still absorbed by me. I remember a realization during one of my teenage visits of feeling at ease with myself, compared to in the United States.



Jyoti in Auroville

In college I had a classmate who actually knew of Auroville and had visited. He didn't have a welcoming visit and I was quite sur-

prised to hear that. I questioned my family about this, and they explained how frustrating it can be to be going about your day and a tourist is wanting information from you. It was the first time I saw the benefit and privilege of growing up knowing Aurovilians.

My time in Auroville was spent mostly in people's homes, sharing meals and hanging out, as one might do on any vacation to see family or friends. I didn't realize how much of an insider privilege this was until hearing my classmate's experience.

I have lived in and traveled around Europe because of this large global Aurovillian family. Auroville has fostered a global mentality in me that I haven't found in the United States and I am grateful for that.

Jyoti Alexander is a human with artistic tendencies who lives with her cat and works at a non-profit in Northern California



My Inherited Dream

by Aurorishi Hemsell

I was born in Auroville on February 28, 1980, an auspicious date, I was told, because it is also Auroville's birthday. At the age of three I came to the U.S., where I have lived ever since. My father is American, my mother is from an Indian family in the Ashram, and I have returned to India several times over the years for extended visits.

Throughout my childhood my parents would discuss “moving back to Auroville”, and we would hear about what that life was like from video documentaries and a steady stream of residents who would stay at our house when they visited America. The global community of “Aurovilians” felt like extended family and the idea of living in Auroville always seemed like an intriguing alternative to the pressures and pace of Western society. Still, for as long as I can remember, I have always had to adjust more to Auroville and India, where I was a visitor, than to America,

which I called home.

I remember registering culture shock for the first time on a visit when I was seven, and famously remarked to my parents, “this place is so disorganized!” Shock was soon replaced by excitement at this bright, noisy, pungent world, filled with cycle rickshaws, loud temples, and strolls through colorful Pondy markets at dusk. I remember Auroville as a large mystical forest where people with European accents lived in idyllic tree houses or villas with futuristic architecture and exotic landscaping.

Returning to America with these fresh memories, I started to become much more aware of the significance that Auroville and India had to my parents. I began to learn the history of how my parents ended up in the Ashram and then Auroville. As I heard them speak about the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and the vision of Auroville to their friends, I began to understand that it was more than just a place where we had family – it was “the



Aurorishi Hemsell

city the Earth needs.”

I also realized that I couldn't easily describe my experience of India to my friends. They couldn't really understand the total ordinariness of blaring buses charging down crowded roads or confronting the strained faces of hunchback beggars on routine outings. It was even hard-

er to explain a new-age, international, spiritual hippie commune in rural India. I soon stopped trying to describe what it was like.

I returned to Auroville again in 1992 at the age of twelve and for a while lived in a small, thatch-roofed cottage at Auro Green farm. Hidden down a maze of unmarked dirt roads, it was remote, primitive, and uncomfortable. Each morning I would race my heavy Indian bicycle along muddy back roads and up the hill to Kulapalayam to attend Last School. The Auroville kids who had grown up

CONNECTIONS

My INHERITED DREAM CONTINUED

I wondered what was so special about this place that it was worth subjecting my family to that risk? Auroville's ambition and efforts are noble, and perhaps one day it will be a city the Earth needs. But the older I get, the more I struggle to find any inherent significance in Auroville, and the more disenchanted I become with the many conflicting and nuanced interpretations of its vague spiritual

aspirations. Today, I find many places in the world to be more idyllic and sensible, and find many more examples of progress outside of Auroville than within it.

Aurorishi Hemsell is an entrepreneur and owns a real estate investment company in Seattle, Washington, where he has lived for over 20 years and has a family.



Aurorishi and family.

I'm Feel Like a Little Piece of Auroville

by Sunaura "Sunny" Brown

When I was asked to contribute to Connect for AVI-USA, I thought, 'Yes! Of course, I could write about Auroville related topics all day!' But as I sat down to write, I found a great challenge in summarizing what I see as the greatest love story of my life—a story that began in 1973 when I was born into the newly becoming community of Auroville and named Sunaura by Mother; then brought to the US for the first time at the tender age of three months.

As a young girl I constantly longed to return to Auroville. I dreamed, both day and night, about Auroville. The yearning I felt for the land I call my home to this day was constant.

As a young girl I also remember feeling upset with the Mother because I felt she had "called" me "down" and then "left" her body the same year I was born. These feelings dissipated as I grew, but in my child world I missed her. Being in Auroville made me feel closer to her and still makes me feel that way—closer to my authentic self. I often feel like a fish out of water when I am away, and whenever I return it is with a great sense of relief and belonging to an energy, a space that has been blessed by Mother's grace.

I have at times found this same sense of peace when I am abroad and gather with

fellow Aurovilians. The 2019 All-USA-Meeting in WA was one such event where I felt like someone had plugged me in to Auroville's energy and charged me up with all the love, dreams and gratitude our international family holds together.

Throughout my life I have seen myself as a little piece of Auroville out in the greater world. I try and share, whenever possible, about Mother's dream and both the ideal and reality of the Auroville community. You would be surprised where I find people who know or want to know more.

For example, when I was 31 and on a road trip across the US I stopped in a small town in Idaho, of all places, and picked a nice-looking cheap hotel. As I walked into the lobby I was surrounded by pictures of Mother and Sri Aurobindo. Needless to say, it was a lovely stay full of tea, conversation and sense of community.

Another time in Bellevue, WA, I was looking for a new yoga studio, and when I wandered into one found all these pictures of Mother and Sri Aurobindo around me. It was such a great connection. Living now in Southern Oregon, I will often encounter people who read Sri Aurobindo or



Sunny

who have heard, read or visited Auroville and want to know more.

As a young girl I used to proudly announce to people that I was from India. I remember being so perplexed why I often saw looks of horror in response to my great declaration! It was the 70's and 80's so the perception of India and our international world was not what it is today. I am happy that there is such a different perspective about India today, and I still declare I am from Auroville, India with great pride. As an "ambassador" of my home town, I am always looking for ways to share, contribute and expand on my connection with Auroville.

This brings me to my current project which I will share in brief. Throughout my life I have known I am an Aurovillian. It is simply who I am. It is not something that can be taken or given. I am a piece of Mother's dream. I have many Aurovillian brothers and sisters (of the heart) who live outside of Auroville and feel the way I do. Why do we live outside Auroville if it is our home and dream? For each one the story is different, but for many of us, our biological families live outside of Auroville or our career dreams have taken us away from the community. And sometimes it has been appropriate that our life lessons be learned abroad. Regardless, the connection we have with our home still holds a powerful place in our hearts and in our authentic identity.

During my lifetime, the concept of 'belonging to Auroville' or being considered "Aurovillian" has been a challenge. I used to



Painting by Sunaura

get very emotional about it. But as the years have gone by that need to be “seen” as part of Auroville has matured into the desire to help Auroville (which is culturally very young), to create a greater understanding and inclusion of the children born and raised in its wider community.

With this in mind, I have started the Adult Children of Auroville (ACOA) project, inaugurated on February 28, 2021 through an international reunion of adult children of Auroville who live abroad. We have an administrative group and there are many

ACOA who want to work with this project in different ways.

I will share more about this in a different article. However, I will say that along with connecting those of us who live abroad, the ACOA project aims to identify ways for adult children of Auroville to feel included in Auroville and be seen as part of its ever-growing community. It further aims to be a platform to identify how adult children of Auroville who live abroad can contribute to their homeland.

For example, I am a mental health ther-

apist and Somatic coach. I would love to return to Auroville and offer my services while home. In our reunion in February, it was great to see how many professional ‘helpers’ (healers of all kinds) we have amongst ourselves. To be able to share our gifts with Auroville, our home town, could be a beautiful exchange.

Sunny lives in Southern Oregon where she has started her private practice, “Life Align Counseling & Coaching”. She recently married the love of her life, Mark Brown and paints every day.

Dancing from Auroville to the USA

by AuroTejas Hemsall

I am AuroTejas. My parents are Rod and Kirti Hemsall, among the early founders of Auroville in the 70’s, and devotees of The Mother and Sri Aurobindo. My mother’s family are all Sri Aurobindo Ashramites.

Growing up back and forth between Auroville and the USA, in California and Colorado, my entire life has been an interesting trip indeed. I feel so lucky to have had a bi-cultural upbringing. I learned how to walk un-

to Odissi at age 15. I have had 9 Indian dance gurus from traveling back and forth so much.

Unfortunately, being harassed by Indian men made me decide to move back to the States where I could live my life as an empowered woman and be safe. I will always treasure Auroville as being a sacred, spiritual and beautiful place. I have connected with so many interesting and exotic people from across the globe in Auroville throughout my life. It is a special place indeed.



Tejas in the studio

derneath the Banyan tree at the Matrimandir. I grew up studying Bharathanatyam and Odissi, temple dances of India in Pondy.

I miss the birdsong in the morning in Auroville and delicious masala dosas. I miss the sweet Ammas taking care of me. I miss the fragrant Jasmine flowers and the monsoon rains leaving the earth fresh and wet.

I moved back to Auroville as an adult to continue my dance studies. I started studying Bharathanatyam at age 5 and then switched

Now I’m in Colorado Springs continuing with my dance school here. I am more successful as an Indian Classical Dancer and dance teacher because it is so rare here, and in India there are so many talented Indian classical dancers.

I love India for learning and studying with my dance teachers but definitely can make more of a living in the USA as an Indian dancer. I teach classes everyday, online and private lessons in my studio, and group lessons outside. The pandemic has stopped my World Dance Festivals from happening live but I just put out an online dance festival that was well received. I do hope to get back on a stage soon to continue live performances and continue my dream of cultural education through showing traditional dances from around the world.

AuroTejas Hemsall is the founder of the ShaktiDanceSchool in Colorado Springs

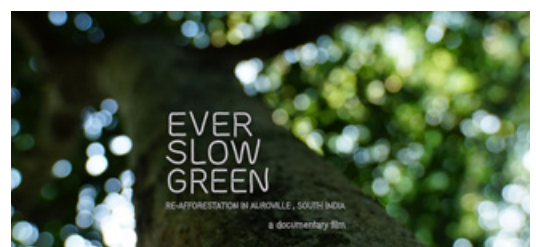


Tejas Hemsall

where she teaches Indian Classical Dance, Bollywood and Zumba Dance Fitness. Contact email: tejasdancershakti@gmail.com

Online Release of Ever Slow Green

"Ever Slow Green," the award winning film about reforestation in Auroville directed by Christopher Pohl (see issues 13 and 14) is now available for watching on the following sites: Cinemapreneur; iTunes; Google Play; and YouTube. 30% of the revenue will be donated to the Auroville Forest Group.



Missing Auroville: My Darshan Experience(s)

by Margaret Greer

I must say, it is really hard to write about my first Darshan at the Sri Aurobindo Ashram after an absence of 47 years. The physical experience is a fun story to tell but the inner experience is very hard to describe, as I believe most inner experiences are. So, I'll share the outer story for those who have not yet experienced it.

I'm grateful that I was in Auroville during February of the leap year 2020. It was the first time I'd been there in a leap year since 1972. And, while I've celebrated Darshan days at the Matrimandir Amphitheater several times before, I hadn't had an Ashram Darshan since I last saw Mother on her balcony in 1973.

I decided at the very last minute, 8 P.M., the night of February 28th, to go to Pondicherry the next morning, February 29, to celebrate the manifestation of the Supramental Consciousness on Earth on February 29, 1956. The Mother's statement: "The manifestation of the Supramental upon earth is no more a promise but a living fact, a reality. It is at work here, and one day will come when the most blind, the most unconscious, even the most unwilling shall be obliged to recognize it."

This happens every four years on the leap year. I ordered a taxi for a 3:30 A.M. pickup, texted a friend to go with me, and went to bed. Three A.M. came rather quickly. I rolled out of bed, had a quick cup of tea and something to eat, and headed to the pickup location. My friend, Lara, rolled up on her motorcycle right on time and we headed to Pondy. There was very little traffic which, if you have ever been on the East Coast Road into Pondicherry, you know is a rare occurrence. But this was the middle of the night. Yes, some hardy souls were up and around getting ready for their days. But there was not the constant barrage of horn honking and the need to dodge other vehicles.

When we got within a few blocks of the Ashram, we had to stop and park. There were throngs of people. Remember, this is not quite four o'clock in the morning! It was still dark!

I had no idea what to expect. My last Darshan was with just several hundred disciples stand-

ing on the street looking up at Mother on her balcony. This was so totally different! There were more than a thousand people and it was still just 4:00 A.M. In 1973, I could arrive less than an hour before the Darshan and still have a good view. Now, there obviously would be no balcony Darshan but we would be allowed to walk through Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's rooms. To do that, we had to wait our turn.

Not knowing the system, we looked in vain for a place to sit and wait. We spent at least 15 minutes trying to figure out where to go. To us, the uninformed, the process was pretty confusing. In retrospect it was incredibly well organized. The spaces between the buildings were divided into roped off zones and the streets between the buildings in those zones were covered with huge canvas tarps, providing a clean space for those who would be sitting and waiting. Within the zones, the people were assigned exactly where to sit by one of the Ashram members assigned to monitor that zone and direct aspirants. He placed people in incredibly straight rows and columns. Thus, by counting the rows and columns, it was pretty easy to estimate how many people were in a zone. My best estimate was one hundred. A friend in the Ashram told me it is about 110. As I said, incredibly well organized.

Additionally, I've since learned that, for certain people Darshan starts between 4:00 and 4:30 A.M. The first to go up to Mother's room are the people who work in the Ashram Bakery and the Corner House, the canteen for the children. Due to the nature of their work, they have to be at their jobs very early to be ready to open and are therefore accommodated as such. Also, some older Ashram members also have the choice to take their Darshan at that early time, avoiding the long lines and wait. Many have permanent Darshan passes with a fixed time that is convenient for them. No need to wait in the general line for any of these people.

So, the people we saw sitting and waiting, those we needed to join, were all the others. I learned that some of those already waiting, those near the front of the line, had come the previous evening and had waited overnight so as to be at the front of the line.

Finally, we found someone who directed us to a place where we could get a little slip of paper that would tell us the place where we could sit to wait. Our zone would be 11. That meant the first 10 were already filled and ours was already more than half filled. There were more than one thousand people ahead of us! Yes, very different from the early days.

By now it was about 4:45. And so, we sat in our column, one in front of the other, and waited. This large crowd was in near silence, hundreds of people with the same aspiration, patiently waiting, incredibly quiet except for subtle whispers and an occasional snore from an older man sitting nearby.

The sky gradually lightened and brought the 29th of February into focus, the anniversary date of the descent of the Supramental Consciousness in 1956. My inner being got quieter and quieter, more and more open.

Finally, I could see a column of people in the block in front of me stand and start moving oh so slowly, entering a small door in the side of a back wall of the main Ashram building. Visits to Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's rooms had started for the general admission group.

Remember, there were about a thousand people ahead of us in line. So, we waited quietly, reverently. Then, having sat for over three hours, it was our turn to start the slow walk to enter the Ashram proper. An Ashramite stood in the front of Zone 11 and indicated, column by column, starting on my right, that we should stand. Only one column at a time! And then it was our turn to rise and start the long slow walk toward that back wall door of the Ashram. Once inside the small door, the



Margaret Greer



Sri Aurobindo's Room

line snaked through many zig zags, skirting the Samadhi where people were sitting and meditating. I'd never been in this back part of the Ashram and the feeling there was deep and clear as if it had been there for eons. All the while, people were absolutely silent except for shuffling feet. You could even hear the sounds of clothes rustling. It was that quiet. The energy seemed curious yet reverent, intense yet calm. We stayed in this line zigzagging all across the Ashram to another outside wall with steps up to Mother's and Sri Aurobindo's rooms. Slowly we climbed the steps.

At the top of the steps, we were directed into Mother's rooms first. For those who have never been, the room is simple, the furnishings simple, the light from the walls of windows delightful. Not surprisingly, the line needed to move much more quickly than I would have liked so there was no time for a real perusal or to get a deep sense of Mother's essence that might remain. Very different than a Darshan with Mother in the early days. Next, we were led to Sri Aurobindo's rooms. Here the energy was very different to me. It seemed wider, more intense. Again, there was little time to fully absorb what was there.

Then we were directed back down to the Meditation Hall. Both of us sat for a bit there to let the experience gestate and settle. Soon it was time to find our driver and head back to Auroville. By now it was around 11 am. The ride back to Auroville was much different than the ride in. Now the traffic was the normal loud, raucous, crazy traffic of a large Indian metropolis, one without many stop lights, stop signs, or traffic policemen. Auroville, by comparison, was quiet. I went to the Botanical Garden to weed little plants, my Zen place of contentment, a lovely way to spend the momentous day.

I went for another Darshan, a "birthday darshan", just before I had to leave Auroville March 20. This was a week earlier than I'd originally booked but, because of the pandemic, the Chennai airport was expected to close within the next few days. The Ashram was already closed for visits except to members. But, they allowed me to go to Sri Aurobindo's room as an Aurovilian and because I had to leave the country that week. I think a little begging and persistence might have helped Somehow, I knew this visit was really important for me.

There were far fewer people, maybe 20 in total. We were able to sit in Sri Aurobindo's room for a meditation. I don't know how long, maybe 15-20 minutes? Of course, I would have stayed longer. As such, I was the last one to leave his rooms. This experience was even more profound for me, perhaps because there were far fewer "vibrations" floating around or perhaps because I had time to just sit and be, to open myself to that vast energy. All I can say is, I am forever changed. There is a different awareness in me than before that Darshan. And it is still very much with me more than a year later. It fades into the background as general life takes over and clouds my vision, yet it is still there when I look for it as a guide for most of my decisions and actions. I am so very grateful for both of these experiences. They have changed my life.

I'm eager to return to Auroville once the ban is lifted and travel is again safe and am reticently accepting that it won't be until a least January 2022. I desperately miss the atmosphere, the calm and quiet felt through the cacophony of Indian noise and sight, the open light in others' eyes, the trust in their actions. I miss being able to sit and meditate

in Matrimandir or to weed in the Botanical Garden in the midst of quiet energy, to share tea at break time with other garden workers. Mostly, I miss the atmosphere, the Auroville atmosphere, created by the long-standing presence of Mother and Sri Aurobindo, a place I'm happy to call home.

Maggie Greer was accepted as an Aurovilian by Mother in 1972. Originally, she lived in Sincerity and worked in the community kitchen at the Matrimandir worker's camp. Later, she moved to live and teach at Equals One, an experimental school in Pondicherry. She traveled to the States in 1975 with the intention of a short three month visit that ended up being 35 years. During those years, she earned a Master's degree in Educational Technology and a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology. She then educated students from kindergarten through graduate school until retirement in 2013.

In 2014, Maggie began to visit Auroville every couple of years for extended visits each time. Additionally, she happily reconnected with many old friends and made many new friends once she began attending the annual A.U.M. conferences in 2015.



Margaret at Auroville Institute of Technical Training with principal Lavkamad Chandra

Maggie also currently serves on the boards of AVI-USA, Auroville International, and Children Rights Collaborative of Northwest Ohio. She lives in Toledo, Ohio, although she considers her true home Auroville.

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Missing Auroville: Taking the Forest Road

By Gordon Korstange

When I think of riding the green belt roads in Auroville I think also of Pleasant Valley road, the 9 mile round trip journey I have made on bicycle since 1989 when we moved into Saxtons River, Vermont. I know each section of that winding route, the ascents going out and the descents coming back; the blue heron standing on the beaver's lodge, the dairy farms where the road goes right between the farmer's house and the barn. So too do I know the Greenbelt forest way in Auroville.



On the back way.

I am bicycling in my mind from Djaima in Auroville east to Town Hall, busy center with its view of the Matrimandir. It is the road less taken. The road that is most taken pours constant traffic through the southern green belt of Auroville via Certitude and Edayanchavadi at high speeds. I have been forced off that road by fearsome lorries and it is frightening. I prefer the forest way.

It begins when I happily swerve off to the left from the paved road (that continues on to the beach) and churn my bicycle toward the Greenbelt away from the ocean, just past the still-empty but elaborately gated entrances to housing plots promoted by developers.

Stage One: The College

I pass La Grace and its companion building, two gated white 3-story hotels that seem out of place in a landscape that is mostly sun-seared fields and waste land. Now I'm officially in the Green Belt, though much of the land is not controlled by Auroville. The road here is wide and rutted, created for the Rajeswari Arts and Sciences women's college. Some days I get caught in the parade of those crowded buses ferrying young women to the school and have to pull off to let them pass as they laugh happily at me.

This part of the road is my least favorite. The fields on either side are owned by villagers who tend to plant cashew trees. There is little shade. I worry that the chunks of

pointed rocks embedded in the road to support the buses will puncture one of my tires. Sometimes I'll pass a young man and woman talking furtively in along roadside as they stand on either side of a motorbike, "dating" in a spot no parents will find them. Vehicles, primarily motorbikes, pass by as I ride, on my way toward the forest shade.

Stage Two: The Forest

After 10 minutes, I go by the college, a large two-story building of 20 plus classrooms buzzing with indistinct voices and enter the coolness of the Auroville forest. Here the Greenbelt proper begins and the road narrows, except when I reach a wide swath of deforested land on the right, cut down by a Bommayapalayam lawyer illegally, Auroville alleges. After getting a taste of the forest it is a shock to see this large red clay gash that stretches northward for a considerable distance.

Back into the forest I soon reach a split in the road; on the left is a mammoth stone table built for purposes I don't know except dinner with the gods. The right path leads to Fertile and AuroGreen. The left goes past Two Banyans on its way to Dana. They divide around an earthen tank that used to have water. I take the left path.

Now I'm under the leaves on a path that suits two-wheelers. The trees grow unruly and thick, mostly Work (acacia) trees with their elongated leaves. Some people complain that these trees have overrun Auroville, but Rishi Walker told me that Work trees grew quickly and have served as a shade protector for young trees and underbrush. The work trees will die out, he predicted, and the tropical dry forest native to the land will take over.

This section is the place to stop, get off the bike and listen to the silence punctuated only by bird calls. It's later in the morning with everyone at work, still cool before the afternoon. How many mongooses will cross the bike path on this trip, pausing to look up at

my approach with a total air of unconcern before sauntering into the underbrush? The anticipation of seeing a wild creature, like the blue heron on Pleasant Valley Road, keeps me standing still, and the enormous pleasure and quiet of being surrounded by trees is enhanced by the knowledge that it continues for kilometers around, along dirt paths where getting lost is easy, all the way to the great banyans hanging their roots above Fertile and beyond. Sometimes I walk the bike through this part to linger among the trees. After the monsoon, mud puddles can remain, sending me on short detours around the main road.

Stage 3: The Schools

I take a left turn at the next intersection and ride in the direction of the Center, cycling past the watchman's house which is sometimes occupied by a lone, bored guard staring into his phone. After this the path becomes a wider dirt road tended by the AV Road Service who I have seen working there in their bright yellow shirts. Here the terrain, which has been uphill until now, changes to a gradual downhill.

I pass a gate to Dana on the left, followed by another one to the sports ground. The road is almost completely shaded in this area by some of the original trees planted in the early years, a pleasure to ride, with only a few motorbikes, fellow bicyclists and an occasional delivery truck. It feels more settled here with older big trees leaning protectively over the road.

I come up to the Transition campus and opt for the bike path proper that parallels the road. It is barely wide enough for two riders to

pass as they meet, so I slow down just in case. I can hear the voices of children from one of the classrooms so near the path that I could almost be inside them.

This bike route goes past Future

School, where I used to teach, and comes to a fork. If I were to go left I would pass the old car planted front end up in the ground, but I go right, still on the bike path, past the Youth Center entrance, site of the annual Christmas fair. Soon after I will turn to go into the forest again.

Stage 4: "Get Out of Your Offices and into the



Rajeswari College Buses

Forest" says the sign not far from where I do get down to navigate my bike through the narrow entrance that even keeps motorbikes out. There are many in the Greenbelt who believe strongly that the forest should precede the city and that the trees still need time to grow.

This forest section covers the area between the Youth Center and Citidines, the apartment buildings north of Town Hall. It is prime turf for development, I would guess, but since I've been traveling it there has been no move to build in it. A warren of intersecting bike paths crisscross through it so I pay attention. There may be village women here gathering firewood from the profuse ground cover. Watch out for that mulle (thorn) vine on the right waiting to scratch my face.



Greenbelt forest

Final stretch. Up a short incline through a cow guard, and suddenly I'm at the entrance to Town Hall with the golden Matrimandir flashing in the morning sun.

I go through the Town Hall gate, a privilege afforded to we bicycle riders, and on to the spot where there is a shaded open-air snack shop run by village women. Here is my

reward: fresh idlis, sambar, coconut chutney and coffee consumed beneath the trees.

Refreshed, I again mount my faithful bicycle and venture into the Center area. It has taken me longer to get here than a motorbike would, but I was not in a hurry, pedaling almost noiselessly through the Auroville Greenbelt forest on a clear January morning with the sun peeking down past the green leaves. I will probably return the same way, gliding easily along the subtle slope that takes me back home to Djaima garden.

Gordon Korstange lived in Auroville during the 1970's and returns almost every year. He lives in southern Vermont. He can be reached at gkotangi@gmail.com

EVENTS

Nakashima Foundation for Peace Award Ceremony

by Roger Toll

The Nakashima Foundation for Peace will present its second Peace Award to Scott and Hella McVay of Princeton

NJ on May 23rd at 4 pm in a one-hour pre-recorded Zoom event. The foundation aims to further the international work for peace started by renowned woodworker, George Nakashima, to whom Sri Aurobindo gave the name, Sundarananda, "one who takes delight in the beautiful."

Nakashima was a Japanese-American architect who, from 1936 to 1939, helped build Golconde, the surprisingly modernist, raw-concrete 51-room dormitory-home that Mother built for disciples. Soon after starting the work on Golconde, he became a disciple and member of the Ashram, with the intention of spending his life there. However, the Japanese invasion of China that led to the war in the Pacific forced him to leave India and, eventually, to return to Washington state where he had been born.

In 1943, he and his wife, Marion Okajima, moved from the Idaho prisoner camp where they had been interred to New Hope PA with



George Nakashima

their first child, Mira, named for the Mother. Nakashima's career of creating extraordinary hand-worked wood furniture flowered from his meeting Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Thirty-one years after his passing, the work continues under the guidance of Mira, who often visits Auroville and the Ashram, where she always stays in Golconde, of course.

Scott and Hella McVay were among the first to learn of Nakashima's 1983 vision to create "Altars for Peace" for each continent. "In a four-page handwritten letter, he wrote us that a piece of walnut had come into his possession which he felt was singular in the last hundred years, maybe in the life of the planet," McVay says in his acceptance speech. "A sketch showed how he thought a peace altar or table might be made from it." George had lived the hardship and insult of war as a prisoner in the internment camp. To illustrate the master woodworker's passion, Scott quotes him: "Peace is more than the absence of war. It is a creative spirit, a great light that can ultimately take over the world."

George Nakashima approached Scott



Mira Nakashima

McVay, for practical advice. Scott had led a number of foundations: He was president of the Chautauqua Institution and sat on the boards of World

Wildlife Fund and The Smithsonian. As creator of the Dodge Poetry Festival Scott and Hella continue to work tirelessly to promote the arts, education, women's issues, environmental stewardship and animal welfare.

Participants in the hour-long video include friends close to the Ashram and Auroville. The event, anchored by a talk on George Nakashima by Scott McVay, will also feature a virtual tour of the Nakashima National Historic Landmark property in spring bloom led by Mira Nakashima, a meditation by Miriam Belov, a tribute by Julian Lines and bamboo flute music by Gordon Korstange.

The suggested donation for this special event, \$25 per person, is tax deductible and will benefit the work of the Nakashima Foundation for Peace.

To Register: www.nakashimafoundation.org



Planned Giving and Special Gifts to Auroville

Stock Donations

If you have highly appreciated securities/investments/stocks in your investment portfolio and dread paying the capital gains to liquidate/sell them, you can avoid paying any taxes by choosing to donate those securities directly (in-kind) to a non-profit organization like AVI USA. Donating securities is a win-win for both you and AVI USA; you have the joy of making a charitable donation all while avoiding paying the capital gains taxes and AVI USA receives your donation tax free! Email us at info@aviusa.org to learn more about how to donate securities tax-free and thus increase the impact of your gift.

Planned Giving

Unused assets available at the end of life can be used to help ensure Auroville's long-term future. Please consider some of the ways you can name AVI USA as a beneficiary of a living trust, will, retirement plan, or other assets. You can designate your estate plan gift to a specific unit or project in Auroville, or you can leave it to AVI USA to determine the best use of funds, depending on the needs in Auroville at the time of the gift.

This giving opportunity, which allows for the flexible meeting of both Auroville's current and future needs at the time the gift is received, is available by designating "Auroville International USA" and including our IRS Employer Identification Number 23-7360183 in your will or trust or through beneficiary designations.

Memorial Funds

You may also want to create a Memorial Fund in your name and invite friends and loved ones to contribute in your honor long into the future. A Memorial Fund requires an initial gift of at least \$20,000, and can be designated to a specific unit or project in Auroville, to Auroville's Central Fund, or to AVI USA itself. All Memorial Funds will receive special recognition on our website, including a bio of the donor and a description of the project you are supporting, so that loved ones can easily find how to honor your legacy.

Charitable IRA Rollover – Qualified Charitable Distributions (QCD's)

If you are 72 or older, you can make a tax-free gift directly to Auroville International USA (AVI USA) from your Individual Retirement Ac-

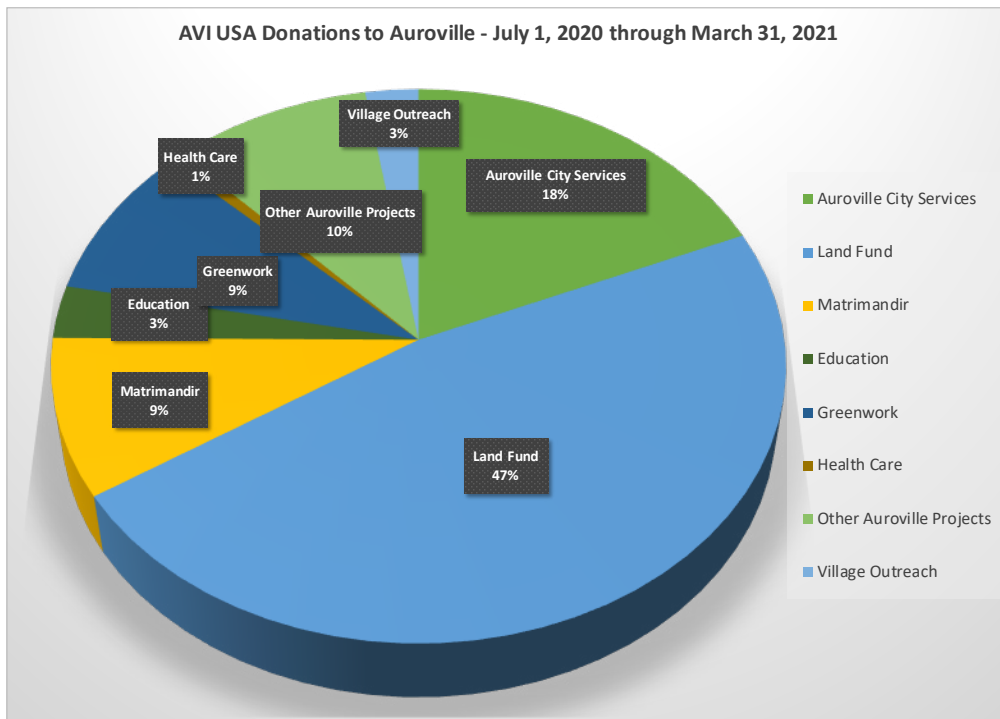
count (IRA). The tax legislation permanently establishing this way to give more formally calls it "A Qualified Charitable Distribution" (QCD). You can exclude up to \$100,000 of this gift from your federal gross income — resulting in lower taxable income and possible tax savings (\$200K exclusion may apply for taxpayers who are married and filing a joint return). Tip: This tax savings is especially valuable to donors who are non-itemizers and donors who have reached their limit on itemized charitable deductions.

Send us at info@aviusa.org for more information about any of these options, or to discuss the giving channel that will best fit your unique financial situation.

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