

AVI-USA CONNECT

Summer 2019 Newsletter

Issue 12



Pongal Kalam

CONTENTS

CONNECTIONS

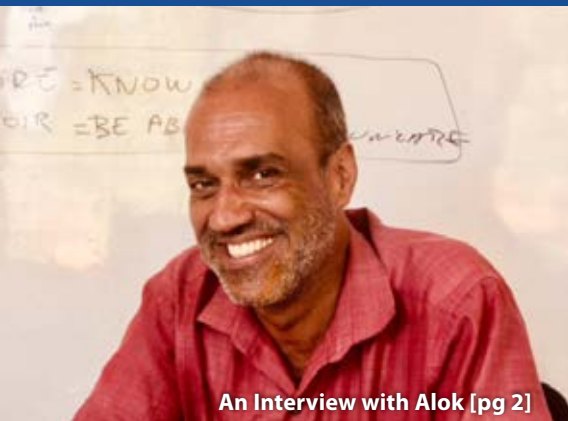
An Interview with Alok	2
"When the Student is Ready, the Teacher Will Come"	4
The Amherst Yoga Center and Mohanam	5
Keep Informed	6

REFLECTIONS

Discovering a City—and Myself—at Age 50	7
What Am I Doing Here?	8

UPDATES

The 4 Sisters Pioneer Memorial Dry Garden:	9
Let the Games Begin in Auroville's New Stadium	11
Awareness Through the Body (ATB)	12
Tourist Visa Regulations	12
Tell us Your Story	12



An Interview with Alok [pg 2]



"When the Student is Ready, the Teacher Will Come" [pg 4]



The 4 Sisters Pioneer Memorial Dry Garden [pg 9]



Let the Games Begin in Auroville's New Stadium [pg 11]

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An Interview with Alok

Alok came to Auroville with his parents who started a school for village children in the 70's. He grew up in Auroville during that time and, like many other young Aurovilians, attended the Kodaikanal International School. This is his story as told to Connect.

My connection with the USA began with my going to the international school in Kodaikanal in 1982 on a full scholarship for the 7th grade. I spent five years there and because the school was a Presbyterian school I got introduced to the American system of liberal education. I also did the International Baccalaureate curriculum (IB) and thus had the option of going to Europe for higher studies. I chose to go to the USA because I wanted to do a double major in liberal arts and science. In Kodai I had taken the main IB exam in literature, math and physics and the secondary exam in French, Hindi and history so I wanted to continue with that type of diverse education.

I applied to many universities, was accepted, but I didn't have the funds. One of them, Warren Wilson College in North Carolina had a work/study program in service. Most of the students were able to fund their own education by working 15 hours a week on campus. I was accepted there, but I also needed a sponsor who would guarantee my stay.

This is where AVI-USA made a huge difference in my life, and I'm very grateful to Jack Alexander for taking on that sponsorship and helping me. I needed that guarantee to get the visa.

I went to Warren Wilson College for three and a half years and did a double major in English literature and math, mainly computer science. That was another journey. My professors told me that I couldn't do a double major in those two subjects because they were so different and I wouldn't have the time. No one had done it before. I just let them talk. I slowly built up the credits in my first two years and by my junior year I had enough to complete both majors. It was an unusual combination of degrees, but I felt like I got the best of both sides of my brain.

After that I had to choose one of them because you can't go on to graduate school

in two subjects. I chose the sciences: computer science and math, but the main reason I went to the USA was to get this broad-based education at a liberal arts college.

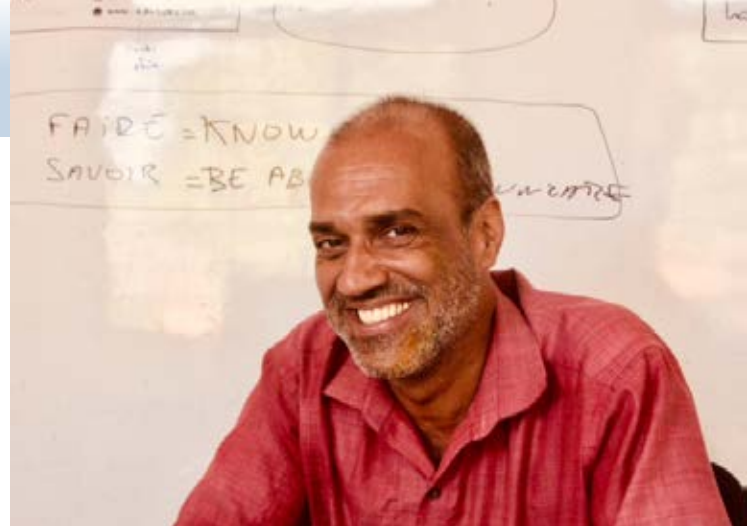
I was inspired to do literature because of Sri Aurobindo's writings. My father always encouraged me to read Savitri but I never understood it enough. In the Kodai school I read Shakespeare and Milton, and I wanted to continue that kind of reading in the USA. I thought that if I had a good background in literature, I could understand most of Sri Aurobindo's works. That was my literature motivation.

Then the math. I felt the need to study something systematic and logical in order to help me solve problems. It's a good background to do anything. I knew that I didn't want to stay in one field so if I had a good foundation in math I could get involved in any scientific area. I always recommend that young people study in these two areas so that they can do anything later on.

After I completed Warren Wilson College I felt it would be easier to go on to graduate school rather than take a break. So I went into a master's program in computer science at Clemson University. It was a practical decision that would guarantee me a job and an income; plus that whole field was developing in the early 90's. But after six months studying computer science I realized that it was the math that attracted me. It was less competitive, more stable so I switched from computer science to math. That department was more relaxed and philosophical.

I was there for about a year when I had a breakdown, and I needed to leave and come back to Auroville. I had been studying for all of those years so it was time to return. I joined the After School program for two years where I taught 10th grade and helped students pass their exams.

My interest in continuing my education led me to apply to Pondicherry University and join the comparative literature department Master's program. I went there for three months. After studying in the USA, going to



Alok

classes in India, where you had to wait for teachers to show up, was a big change. They might not even come, but the students had to sit there for the entire hour. When they did come they were not interested in class discussion, just reading the text. For example, in one class we were to take up one of Sri Aurobindo's poems, so I read it thoroughly and some of his others that related to it, but when the teacher came he just read the poem and then left. At that moment I realized I was wasting my time there. I needed to go somewhere with interactive learning.

I reapplied to Clemson. The professors were very happy to get me back. It was difficult to study again after a two-year break; math was not so easy to just pick up, since in Auroville I was doing different things like teaching and construction.

After I finished Clemson I still had a visa for one year of practical training. I wanted to work. I interviewed with American Airlines in Dallas, but I realized that everyone there had two Ph.D.'s and were very experienced. I had done my Masters in operations research—all problem solving like logistics and scheduling. It was a lot of fun, but I decided to get into the internet realm because the need was there, so I became a consultant for a company in the Quad Cities, Iowa that was consulting for large corporations.

I spent a year there and did two major projects: the first was for John Deere where I set up a major online data base to monitor energy use at their factories; the second was to design an online accreditation system for midwestern high schools which administered the ACT test. The whole thing was so new to me, since I came from a math background, that I had to learn on the job, staying one day ahead of everyone. I learned that to be a consultant is to stay a couple of weeks ahead of

the people you're working with so that you can transmit the new knowledge.

It was a very fruitful year, but the weather was harsh. I could have stayed longer, but I had made a one-year commitment to them so that I could come back to Auroville and, by returning to India, not get involved with a complex visa process.

One of the things I learned about the USA on the first day of Warren Wilson is that there's no age limit to going to college. In the admissions office I met a Viet Nam vet who was coming back to college after 30 years. I thought then that there's no limit to what you can do. I have a Masters and I'm very much involved in Auroville, but I've always felt that, if I wanted to, I could go back to the USA and study more. This knowledge has helped me not to feel "stuck" at times . . . that I could always return to study. The US allows this more than any other country in the world. Europe allows it, but lifelong education happens more in America. When you have some good life experience, even the professors value that and call on you to help the younger students to learn from you. That has been the most amazing thing about studying in the USA.

I've been back in India for 22 years now and have done many things in Auroville: I had a leather binding workshop; helped a friend with his diaries; did software development for some of my colleagues from Iowa; processed organic foods (tea and Auroville cashews); helped one of my Kodai friends with his business; all of these were based on friendships from the past.

For the past 12 years I've been involved with a business that exports preserved vegetables and gherkins from India and around the world to the US and Canada. This work still keeps me connected with North America. I go to Canada every couple of years.

But now, everything that I did there, that I studied there, has come back to support me in my current project – a laboratory that I've set up to test water in Auroville and the surrounding area. For the last seven years I've been working on this project and we finally opened it on Auroville's birthday, February 28, 2019. This lab will test waste water, agricultural water, all kinds of water.

Going back into this science makes me draw on my experience in the US, on research projects I did in college that were funded by

NASA and other agencies. When I graduated from college I was elected a member of Sigma Chi which is a research society of some twenty thousand people. A few months ago when I remembered all this it gave me the confidence to do this project—I've not been a scientist all of these years in Auroville. No one knows me for that background here. Somehow I felt I have to prove myself, but I can draw upon it to do this scientific work.

I've also found here in Auroville another member of Sigma Chi who is a retired scientist from the US and who is joining Auroville. His name is Richard Presley (see) and he'll join me; I've been blessed to have his support. We both think alike and can work together because of our past experiences in the USA. Also, some of my best friends from university are heading big water associations and companies in the US. I finally feel that all of my past is like a big network that is going to be very useful . . . I see the dots connecting now.

The next few years I will be going back to the USA and also drawing upon my ties there to support my projects in Auroville. For example, for this lab and research projects here we need very expensive and sophisticated equipment which I hope to import from US labs that I'm in touch with and bring them to Auroville at reduced prices to be available for research.

I think that in terms of recommending students to go to the USA, it's harder to do that now because college education has become so expensive. In the past I have sent two or three students from Auroville to study at Warren Wilson like I did, but these days I think we need to bring American students here, to Auroville and India. There's a lot we can do here to engage young people in our work, especially research.

Twenty-two years ago when I came back from the US A I started this place, A-Vision. I wanted to be in the Industrial Zone

and do some entrepreneurial activities. The first thing I noticed when I came here was that the water system was not being maintained very well. I took it over back then and that began my relationship with water. We fill up all of the tanks in the zone—CSR, Auromode, Upasana—with one bore well and two years ago I drilled a second bore well to a aquifer of 120 meters. I saw the need for water and it has been the main service that I do, regardless of all my other projects in Auroville. It's a thankless service because the people only call you when there's no water. I've asked other people to take over this work, but no one wants to.

I'm sort of alone in this because we have a big water system in Auroville, with the "elephant" water tower in the residential zone now connecting up most of the community. The one I manage is independent, not connected to that one. I think we have better water quality because we don't put it all together into one tank.

That was one connection to water, and then about five years ago I went to Spain to visit some friends for whom we were manufacturing some devices for their farm and hydroponics. Once there I saw how they were producing vegetables with very little water using hydroponics and I decided that this is something we need to implement in India.

I've traveled to Spain a few times to study their system and now I'm setting up a greenhouse which will be able to produce about 200 heads of lettuce a day using only 5% of the water amount in current gardens. One can grow lettuce throughout the year. This is important when you have a water scarcity and need a regular supply of food.

This hydroponics is also a demonstration and research project because we're using certain technologies to improve the quality of water. One of them is a pipe that I make which has complex magnetic fields in it that change the water that passes through. We've named



Alok, Mukta, and Tashi at lab opening

it Tapani, for “tani” (Tamil) and “pani” (Hindi). Tapani is a research in process—I’ve seen so many changes that take place by passing water through this pipe in our experiments in Spain and Auroville that I really felt the need to have a water testing lab to enhance that research. The lab has come out of that.

One part of the lab will serve our research purposes; in the other part we’ll do a lot of education and training for young people and government officials about water quality and how to improve it with simple means.

So at the moment I’m involved in three major water projects: the lab, hydroponics and the manufacture of these Tapanis. It’s quite a lot in addition to distributing water but

because of these major projects I get called upon to do other projects in Auroville.

Last year the Auroville 50th anniversary team asked me to help with water filtration. I made two water filters, one now being installed in the Tibetan Pavilion, the other perhaps for the sports ground. We have a big 6,000-liter tank which is probably the only

one in the Pondicherry area that is used for drinking water. This water is so pure that we use it for all of the big events, like basketball and frisbee tournaments. It’s pulled by a tractor. I would like to make a second, smaller one because we sometimes have two simultaneous events happening in Auroville that need drinking water.

I’m getting so much into water that people are coming to me for solutions to water issues. I’m happy about this because I’ve been known for organic tea and cashews and I have to redefine who I am—I was even thinking of changing my



Laboratory Area

name to Alok Wasserman (laughs).

Water is the scarcest resource we have here. For example, the water level in the bore well that I manage dropped 6 meters in one week. When we drilled it two years ago the water level was at 22 meters, now it’s at 66 meters. We didn’t have a good monsoon last year, so the well was not recharged and is go-

ing down and down. I see how the water is depleted every day, and there is really a sense of urgency to work on solutions of treating our wastewater (which Tapani could help with), and recycling wastewater for agriculture, for gardens. I think the residential zone uses most of the good water for plants—more than 50% of Auroville water is for gardens.

I don’t want to get into the water group and water policies because that takes a lot of energy to make people conscious of water use, but I want to go into providing solutions and alternate ways of growing plants, treating water, recycling and using it.

This will be my focus for the next many years. I think that after all of these things I’ve done I’ve finally arrived at the work that is suitable and uses all of my skills. I don’t have the chemistry and biology background to actually work in the lab, but I’ll work to make it take off administratively, which is the main skill needed actually. Also to coordinate between all of the other people in Auroville who are providing and seeking solutions—basically building teams.

I feel the biggest challenge we have is manpower, getting humans together to work collaboratively to solve these water problems. In the next few years, I’m going to be fully into water

"When the Student is Ready, the Teacher Will Come"

by Daniel Greenberg

I suspect like many others, Auroville was not in my awareness growing up, but it appeared at just the right moment in my unpredictable journey and changed my life forever.

Back in the 1980s, in what feels like another lifetime, I studied electrical engineering at Cornell (as well as Hindi, hoping someday to visit India!), but changed my major to Psychology after working in an afterschool program and realizing I liked kids more than computers. I went on to complete a Ph.D. in Child Development and School Psychology naively thinking this would give me skills needed to manifest my dream of starting a community-based school. It didn’t.

It did, however, allow me to pursue a doctoral thesis on Children and Education within Contemporary Intentional Communities, which involved traveling to

around 40 communes across North America in a Westfalia Campervan with my then-partner-now-wife, Monique. Good times! I learned more the first day I stepped foot in an actual community than I did in the two years I had spent studying them! It was like each community was telling a story that one could only hear through becoming immersed in it.

We then spent a year at Findhorn in Scotland, working with children and families, while I completed my school psychology internship. Two events during that year eventually led me to Auroville. The first was meeting Dhanya, who was visiting Findhorn in 1993 as an emissary of sorts from Auroville, trying to figure out how Findhorn did the “touchy-feely” thing and bring some of their New Age wisdom back to Auroville. As you might imagine, his mission was not very successful given Auroville’s “wild west” mentality and where



Daniel and Monique with their children

even the simple act of holding hands in a circle runs up against some core prohibitions of Indian culture. But I distinctly remember first hearing about this amazing community in south India and knowing immediately that it would become a large part of my life.

The second event was when a friend brought one of the first groups of college students to Findhorn. Over the course of two weeks, I remember the students saying things like, "I don't think of who I am in the same way as I did when I first arrived." Wow! I woke up in the middle of that night with goose bumps and what felt like a calling to help more "emerging adults" and future leaders have similar experiences of being "in community" with each other and the world.

After returning to the States, an acquaintance suggested I call a friend of hers, Bruce Kantner, who had started something called Geocommons, a semester program in conjunction with the University of New Hampshire that traveled to Findhorn, Plum Village, and Auroville. It was perfect timing. Monique was about to head to El Paso for 9 months of midwifery training and the next month, I found myself in New Hampshire, preparing a student group for travel!

I co-directed five semester programs from 1995-1998 and Monique co-directed three. I remember the moment I first walked out of the Chennai airport and into the humid heat and the hustle and bustle of Tamil Nadu. I was suddenly struck by a strange vision -- perhaps a past life memory -- of being a monk around 100 years after the Buddha's passing. I felt like I had come home.

This feeling grew deeper after spending time in Auroville. Since the program aimed to immerse students in the vision and practices of Auroville I was very fortunate to develop friendships with many pioneers of this amazing experiment in human consciousness. To this day, I often say, "Of the 50 most amazing people I've met on this planet, at least half of them live in Auroville!"

In 1998, I parted ways with Geocommons and founded a non-profit called Living Routes, which partnered with the University of Massachusetts at Amherst to run study abroad program in ecovillages around the world. In addition to Auroville, we ran semester, summer, and January-term programs at Findhorn, Sirius (a Findhorn spin-off in MA

where we lived from 1998-2016), and communities in Mexico, Brazil, Peru, Senegal, Israel, and Australia. In the end, over 1,500 students were transformed by these programs, probably a third of them in Auroville.


Feeling an increased sense of urgency around climate change, I left Living Routes in 2012 to start a new social venture called Earth Deeds, which offers online tools for groups to meaningfully account for their unavoidable travel emissions. Then, Living Routes sadly ceased operations in 2014. So, more recently, I've started CAPE Consulting to carry on the vision and help develop Custom Academic Programs in Ecovillages (hence "CAPE").

After consulting with several programs, I was excited for the opportunity to create an 8-week climate-change focused gap year program in Auroville from February-March, 2019. I returned for three weeks, launching the program and also smoothing the transition for my elder daughter, Simone, and her boyfriend, James, who were participants on the program.

Many people asked me, "Why run a climate-change program in Auroville? You can easily find more advanced solar systems, wind farms, and green buildings elsewhere." My response was, "Yes, of course, regenerative technologies are an essential part of any climate strategy, but more than new systems and infrastructure, we need new worldviews and new cultures in which we can live high quality, low impact, and meaningful lives together. And here is where Auroville excels."

Auroville is a living laboratory for how humans can "grow up" and transcend our individual and even collective egos. When asked to describe Auroville, I often reflect on Sri Aurobindo's comment that "Humanity is on the brink of an evolutionary leap in consciousness" and say Auroville is home to people who hear that and say, "Yes! I believe this! ... Now what?" It is this air of experimentation, not only in how we can reduce our ecological footprint, but even more importantly how we can raise our states of consciousness and live spiritually fulfilling lives in community with all life, that continues to inspire millions around the world.

There's no place on Earth like Auroville. And I should know as one of my "hats" is serving as President of the Global Ecovillage Network. And now, after 25 years of being a

friend of Auroville, it is time to join the family. My wife, Monique, our younger daughter, Pema, and I intend to become Newcomers this summer in time for Pema to start at Last School. I hope to continue developing international student programs and Monique may continue her work as a midwife, help facilitate the programs, or perhaps do something completely different. The mystery awaits! 

The Amherst Yoga Center and Mohanam

by Matthew Andrews

In 2014, my wife Corinne and I bought Yoga Center Amherst, and since then our entire family income has come from work related to yoga – managing the studio, leading yoga teacher trainings, offering kirtan, and bringing people on pilgrimages to India. We owe our family's livelihood to this complex and messy thing we Americans call 'yoga'.

So much of what is now commonly called yoga bears no resemblance to anything that would have been called yoga at any other time in human history. Yoga is ancient. It is India's indigenous wisdom tradition, honed over thousands of years of practice by millions of yogis to cultivate and nurture the primal human longing to discover and unite with the divine. But what the modern west has invented is more like a self improvement regime that reinforces our experience of separation from the divine. And we are right in the thick of that, profiting from it.

The complication is that we never intended to set out on this path. We felt drawn, specifically by the Mother, to move in this direction, and trust that our path is purposeful beyond what we can comprehend. In the midst of this milieu, one thing that has felt very important to us is to honor the wisdom traditions of India. We have done this by incorporating a deeper study and exploration of the actual texts into our teaching, and also by supporting organizations in India dedicated to cultural preservation.

One such organization is Mohanam in Auroville. Mohanam works to create a bridge between the past and the future by preserving traditional Tamil culture, and empowering Tamil youth to create vibrant, caring, and resilient communities. Through

CONNECTIONS

THE AMHERST YOGA CENTER AND MOHANAM CONTINUED

supporting Mohanam over the past several years, we have come to know Rajaveni and Balu, two of the founders and leaders. The more we get to know them, the more awe we feel at their commitment, courage, and perseverance in the face of many obstacles.

This spring, Rajaveni and Samaran (Balu and Raji's 8 year old son) have come to spend two months with us in our home in Massachusetts. Gretchen Brown-Courage, an administrator at the Amherst Montessori school, met Samaran on a retreat that we led in Auroville in 2018, and she invited him to come as an exchange student to join their learning community. As I write this, it's the school's last day before summer break, and Samaran has had a wonderful time. He was welcomed with open arms and honored in the unique way that Montessori schools have of seeing and holding the inner being of each child.

We are also hosting fundraising dinners for Mohanam at Matagiri in New York and at a local pasta restaurant in Amherst. Lindsey Matarazzo, the owner of Pasta e Basta, also attended our Auroville retreat, and has donated the restaurant, food, drinks, and her and her family's

time to host a South Indian Feast cooked by Rajaveni. We anticipate over 100 guests on June 17th.

In the midst of living together, working together, and dreaming future projects together, we are also experiencing a deepening respect for the complicated relationship between the native Tamil villages surrounding Auroville and the emerging City of Dawn. In the United States, the myth of Columbus "discovering" the "new world" is starting to unravel. My children learn a more nuanced (though still incomplete) version of the story in their rural public school. The disease of white supremacy is festering and becoming less possible to ignore. We begin to feel the burden of the legacies that desecrate the founding principles of our country.

Auroville has its own version of the "Manifest Destiny" myth. We often say that the founders of Auroville came to a barren

plateau and restored the life to this land. Some of this is true – after planting over 3.5 million trees the entire ecosystem has been transformed. But the word "barren" can often contain the underlying assumption that this land was empty not only of plants and trees, but of people as well. But in truth the local Tamil population has a rich and beautiful cultural history going back thousands of years.

Auroville has increased the standard of living for the local Tamil population to an incredible degree. But this has often been a consequence of Auroville's growth rather than a strategy of mutual development. It has been a result of "trickle down economics",

and not partnership that includes working in concert with indigenous leaders. Can this change now? Have the divisions become too embedded, calcified?

The reality is that Auroville in so many ways is a microcosm of the world. People

from 70 countries living shoulder to shoulder and trying to govern themselves (develop and sustain infrastructure, educate the children, plan for future growth...) when people from different countries, ethnicities, languages, may not always understand each other's jokes. Of course the world's racism, bigotry, class division and wealth concentration manifest in Auroville as well. The basic human struggle of ego against ego plays itself out as people scramble to get their needs (and perceived needs) met amid a fundamental experience of scarcity and isolation.

On a personal level, when I've visited Auroville I've often experienced that the issues in my life that are the toughest and most intractable, and that at home feel diffuse and too complex to deal with, come up there in a concentrated way. The concentration makes these issues feel a bit overwhelming, but it also makes them tangible, manageable. This is part



Rajaveni teaches a cooking class at Matagiri

of the energy of India, of Siva – the power of purification that seeks to bring things forward and transform us, freeing us from our own clinging to false identities and patterns that keep us small and separated. Auroville was consecrated as a place for powerful spiritual work supporting the transformation of the Earth, and the force of this consecration ripples through time with real, tangible effects that many Aurovilians are very familiar with.

The world's issues are concentrated, squeezed into a township where water is becoming increasingly scarce and issues that effect the "foreigners" cannot be tackled without collaboration and partnership with the local population. The pressure is turned up, and the issues cannot be ignored. That's the magic of this place, in all its imperfection. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole because all solutions found here flow out and become available to the world at large. It is a crucible of transformation.

I pray for continuance of the healing that I see taking place there between the indigenous and the post-colonial communities. I pray that the broader community increasingly recognize the value of this healing, and support those who are involved with it. And meanwhile we continue to support Mohanam. Our respect for Rajaveni, Balu and their heartfelt aspirations and love of their culture grows stronger by the day.



Corinne, Rajaveni, Samaran, Arin, Matthew, Irina

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Discovering a City—and Myself—at Age 50

by Phoenix Lacroix

We were eating lunch in the Aspiration cafeteria last year when Phoenix walked in, backpack and all. He had just gotten off the bus (see below) but showed no effects of jet lag. He was full of energy and had multiple skills. It was his first day in Auroville.

Auroville was conceived in the mind of the Mother in the 1960's and born to the world on February 28, 1968. Later that same year, I was conceived in the womb of my mother and born to the world in September, 1969. Having been brought into this world at roughly the same time, it should be interesting to note the parallels of our lives - those of a man and a city.

As a middle-class Canadian man, I have become somewhat of a regular backpacker throughout India over the past ten years. Until this year, however, I had only heard of the legend of Auroville from fellow backpackers, having never set foot in the southeastern part of the country. The descriptions of the place were usually vague but invariably mentioned the Matrimandir—Mother's Temple—with glowing reviews. I therefore didn't know much about the place other than it being an experimental city with people from all over the world living there. As a New Year's pledge to myself, I decided to visit and see what all the fuss was about.

I timed my first visit to coincide with the 50th anniversary celebrations—late February, 2018. This period of time also coincided with a desire to “turn a new leaf” in my life and begin looking for a new and exciting place to live. Based on a bit of online research and YouTube videos, Auroville sounded like my kind of place, so I took the plunge and hopped on a plane for Chennai on February 20th.

Chennai impressed me as a thoroughly modern and international city, especially with its new subway system with service straight to the airport. I easily made my way to the bus stand to catch a bus headed to Pondicherry, and thoroughly enjoyed the scenery out the window as we journeyed south along the coastal highway in the early morning sun.

The stop for Auroville was nondescript; only a small, beat-up sign on the side of an otherwise indistinguishable and all-too-typical

Indian road. I jumped in a ready rickshaw and headed 2km up the hill, arriving in the village of Kulapalayam and my guesthouse, named Aspiration. My first notable impression was the ubiquitous forest and the sound of jungle songbirds everywhere in the air.

After a little paperwork to get me signed in, and a trip to the nearby 'Pour Tous' office to exchange money and acquire a local ID/currency card, I settled in to my comfortable room and laid down to rest after nearly 48 hours on the move.

With a little adjustment to my sleeping schedule to overcome jet lag, I spent the next several days simply trying to orient myself along the roadways of Auroville so as to familiarize myself with the layout of the land and the kinds of communities and businesses which exist in Auroville. I rented a scooter and ventured into unknown territory day after day, memorizing the landscape. I attempted to meet new and interesting people to pick their brains about what Auroville is all about and to find out what there is to DO. It was a steep learning curve.

The Aspiration community where I stayed consists of more than two dozen houses and guest huts and boasts of homemade meals served to all inhabitants and guests twice a day in a common dining hall. This was a great place to meet people and find out more about Auroville. I met people from all over the world, some staying for short periods and others for long, who were there for a variety of reasons. Some were there to meditate, others to seek healing. Some were studying architecture, others just passing through as curious tourists.

Myself, I was determined to stick it out for the 10-12 weeks (minimum) needed to “jump through the hoops” and earn the right to become a permanent resident Aurovillian. I did volunteer work in my home community, mainly guestroom painting and gardening), attended workshops, filled out application forms, and went for interviews. In addition, I sought out a long-term place to stay, and found an abandoned house that needed architectural engineering work done to it to make it safe for habitation. I showed my interest in that house by paying for an engineer to



Joy of Impermanence Community

do up drawings for the changes needed, and submitted them to the Town Hall. And I made as many new friends in as many communities as possible in order to feel welcomed in the wider community which is Auroville.

The two and a half months I spent in Auroville went by quickly, with lots of time spent on the nearby beach. I was able to meditate inside the magnificent Matrimandir, perform different kinds of yoga in several lodges, dance around fires with people from around the world in the evening, and enjoy some fine dining in a plethora of restaurants. The weather was consistently around 35 degrees centigrade each day, and I saw rain only once. By the time I left in late April, the midday sun was becoming almost unbearable, and I had a formidable tan going by the time I hopped on the plane to leave India on May 1st.

In the weeks and months which followed I had plenty of time to think about the parallels between our lives - the City of Dawn, and myself. Both were helpless and inexperienced in the early days, and both had to grow by trial and error. For both individuals and communities, to mature is to be accepting and adaptive to the realities in which we find ourselves. Overall, my time in Auroville was an incredible experience—everything I had hoped for. My intention to find a place to spend the rest of my life was fulfilled with this first visit, and the paperwork is now being processed to make a permanent move to Auroville possible. The promise of living in a community that has the highest aspirations of humanity in mind is an honor and privilege, and I am hopeful of becoming a productive member of this eclectic and diverse international community.

With my own 50th birthday just months

away, I can think of no better way to spend the next fifty years of my life than to join a community that has matured as much as I have. The hard lessons and experiential wisdom have already been fought and gained. Now is the time to give back to humanity. Won't you join me?

We met him again this year, and he was awaiting the arrival of his container shipment of several thousand books to donate to the community. In addition he was using his skills with the group of young people who call themselves Impermanence. Their goal is to construct temporary settlements on empty Auroville land, live there for some months and then move on. Phoenix, with his energy and skills, was jumping right into this process.



What Am I Doing Here?

by Richard Presley

When people ask me why I'm here, I tell them the truth: I really don't know, it's a vast mystery, but I feel more at home here than anywhere I have lived during my seventy years, and I have lived, and could live, in many wondrous and beautiful places.

In the West, "knowledge" (even in this "post-truth" era: Oxford English Dictionary's 'Word of the Year', the year Donald Trump was elected) is highly valued; while in the East, for millennia, "wisdom" has held the uppermost tier. Knowledge is subject/object, "I/It" oriented, dualistic, practical; wisdom is inherent, existential, an understanding of one's essential Being inseparable from the All, in Unity, an "I/Thou" relationship.

Knowledge is mental. Wisdom is of the Spirit/Soul. Auroville is a place where knowledge serves wisdom.

Throughout life we are challenged to bring our intellects and instincts in alignment with the greater good, for the greater whole; to achieve something that furthers the evolutionary imperative we all together face, that of being more complete, more whole, not as isolated beings, but all members of one vast choir, responsible for all the harmonies and dissonance of our singing.

I was, as they say, of the sixty's generation, and arrived in Auroville at the end of

a four-month vision quest in India. The seed that was planted during those few weeks in Pondicherry, at the Aurobindo Ashram, and those few days cycling the dusty, parched, scrubland that would become fifty years later a forest, immature, yet vibrant with life; that seed took a long time to germinate, a whole lifetime of commitment to family, friends, and colleagues, always something other, something more urgent, demanding my effort and energy.

That shifted, slowly at times, dramatically at others. Meditative practices increased, the quest for wisdom reasserting itself; and then too those non-linear, dramatic changes in life, lived only half-consciously, would occur, and make me question my lifestyle, my choices, my path, and propel me forward into uncharted waters. After five years of focused aspiration, dedicated practice, and devotion to the fulfillment and completion of my life's work in America, in 2010, at the age of sixty-one, I returned to India, to Auroville, after a hiatus of thirty-eight years.

To live in America required cash-flow, and to sustain myself I had high-return investments, but in companies whose sole aim was profit, and whose products and/or services were not in alignment with my maturing vision of a more ideal, compassionate, and loving world. So, I find myself here, and I divest myself of those holdings, and invest in the future of humanity as a whole, and the heart feels much better for the change.

As for knowledge, it is wonderful to apply skills to work here, as well as cash; as for wisdom, well, that must dawn anew each day. It's just life, you know? We've all our share of ups and downs, excitements, aspirations, delusions, concerns, inspirations, beatitudes, achievements, and heart-breaks, haven't we?

Yet here, in Auroville, there exists something that steadies us, gives us strength, that engenders faith and hope, as if a chalice, an abiding soul or spirit, in many respects transpersonal and transcultural, an essential kindness and recognition of one-being-ness,



Richard Presley

high-mindedness, and amidst all the confusion of all the teeming myriads of beings on this small planet, clarity.

What am I doing here? It's a vast mystery, but it sure feels like home.

Richard Presley dropped out of the University of Michigan, where he had been studying philosophy and psychology, in 1969, and spent the next five years as a Peace Activist. During this time he helped establish community organic gardens, a vegetarian

restaurant and a whole food co-op, in addition to practicing yoga and meditation. During the next few years Richard was active in the fledgling computer industry until the venture capitalists sold the company. With money from his severance package he purchased an old wooden sailboat, and during the next two decades achieved moderate success as a fine woodworker, sailed as often as he could, in addition to being a homesteader, living with his wife and three children on a small farm.

In 1992, at the age of 43, Richard returned to University, first completing his Bachelor's degree and then earning a Master's Degree in Chemistry. His research into novel methods for water decontamination was funded by the US EPA, NASA, DOE, and DOD. He was awarded a STAR Fellowship by the EPA in 1995 for his work in groundwater clean-up research. From 1997 until 2010 Richard worked for a major corporation, focusing on the research and development of new systems for water quality analysis. As a result of irreconcilable differences with senior management Richard retired in 2010. Richard was a champion of breakthrough technology, which would have reduced the cost of water analysis 10-fold. This was viewed by Sr. Management as highly disruptive to the market: they placed a very high value on profit for themselves, not on the greatest good for the greatest number, so they killed the research, and Richard walked away.

Richard's current areas of research include QCEB (Quantum-cast Condensed Earth Blocks), which involves the use of sound-lasers and acoustic-holograms to 'jump directly from chaos to cosmos' (via quantum mechanical processes), to produce high-quality eco-friendly building blocks at much lower energy cost than the currently-in-use 'brute-force' method (based on classical thermodynamic processes) of compressing earth into blocks. Atmospheric Water Harvesting (AWH) is another area of interest for Richard: he is seeking to develop less expensive and higher efficiency systems for extracting wa-

The 4 Sisters Pioneer Memorial Dry Garden: A Proposal for an American Presence in the Forest

by **Lara K. Davis**

Forward by **Matthew Andrews, AVI-Board Member**

In 2017 AVI USA initiated a fundraising campaign to honor 4 women whose contributions to Auroville have rippled through time and inspired countless aspirants. We initially planned to build an upscale guest house to serve as an income generator for International House, which would in turn offer some portion of its existing housing to young newcomers at a highly subsidized rate.

This project ran into some significant obstacles, and ultimately we decided to shift gears and focus our efforts in the area of Auroville that has been allocated as the Americas Zone. It becomes more evident every day that Auroville is facing an imminent water crisis, so the project that we've chosen to honor the 4 Sisters will directly address water and provide education about water preservation, especially water used for landscaping and gardens, which make up a large percentage of Auroville's water consumption.

The 4 Sisters Pioneer Memorial Dry Gardens will be a demonstration project showing how indigenous tropical dry evergreen plants with low water needs can be used to create beautiful gardenscapes. There will be four unique areas for reflection, each of which will hold the energy of one of the four woman pioneers – Anie, Bhavana, Juanita, and June.

We are excited to be working with Lara Davis, who has been working for several years with the Aurville Earth Institute, and has extensive experience with hardscaping and water conservation. We hope you feel as inspired as we do by this project that will set the tone for the American Zone.

—Matthew Andrews



Lara Davis

The best way to pay homage to Auroville pioneers is by continuing the spirit of their work in Auroville. One of the most important issues facing Auroville today is the urgent need to transform our present water-intensive consumption culture to one which reflects the real scarcity of the aquifers in Auroville and Tamil Nadu. Tamil Nadu has some of the highest economic water scarcity levels in the world. Auroville aquifer levels, too, are at all-time lows, as we start to deal with the side effects of bioregional over-extraction. The present rate of exhausted bore wells and new bore well drilling is alarming, and there is likely already permanent loss of aquifer capacity.

Many communities are facing the irreversible problem of seawater intrusion, while in other coastal regions not far away, there is seawater intrusion which extends to 30 km inland! As Giulio from the Auroville Water Group has succinctly put it, "Auroville is facing a crisis with regards to water security. We have a total dependency on ground water. Yet the first aquifer is empty. Salinity is increasing. We can no longer achieve water security through groundwater." Documented climate change indicators and progressively failed monsoons only increase the imminent risk.

Despite this reality, it is estimated by Giulio that "not less than double the domestic consumption" of Auroville's well water is used



Darkali site layout

for landscaping and gardening purposes. In other words, if the Indian domestic standard consumption is 135 liters/day/person, and Auroville consumption ranges from 100 to 250 liters/day/person, then as much as 300 to 500 liters/day is used for the garden of a single steward – a heavy extravagance! At the Matrimandir, an estimated 1 lakh liters (100,000 liters) of potable well water is used every day for only garden irrigation.

To honor the contributions of early Auroville pioneers, and to ensure that Auroville can persist at all and sustainably grow, we must turn back to the conscientious water consumption of the early years when massive effort went into afforestation, bunding, damming and water control. The early pioneers' success story in afforestation must now be extended into the terrain of collective public and domestic gardens, so that there is a viable way for each Auroville resident to dramatically reduce water consumption. We can no longer afford the present culture of "garden ammas" with wasteful, running hoses. Responsible, low water-intensive gardens are not an aesthetic excess, but an imminent survival strategy. Both visiting and local experts in "The Way Forward" participatory planning

workshop in January 2019 collectively agreed that low water-intensive, public "blue-green infrastructure" is critical for Auroville's water security and water consciousness.

Sometimes called "dry gardens" or "xeriscaping," low water-intensive gardens typically incorporate masonry and indigenous, climate hardy plants which require



Auronevi

little to no watering after being initially established. Almost all species of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF) ecology endemic to the Coromandel Coast are low water consuming, drought resistant, climate hardy and low maintenance plants. No one in Auroville has contributed as much to the advancement of TDEF-friendly or TDEF-inspired "dry landscape gardening" as Auronevi and the Darkali team, carrying on also the work legacy of other early pioneers like Poppo and Walter.

Darkali currently has a dry garden, created mainly by AuroNevi. To extend the garden and to promote this model of gardening in Auroville, I propose to build a publicly accessible demonstration dry garden, with a controlled access that protects the principle forest. This garden, dedicated particularly to the early women pioneers, would show some of the very best practice of both TDEF dry gardening and earth-based eco-construction, demonstrating solutions for urgent local problems landing somewhere between forestry and architecture.

Darkali is also the host and present steward of the new future site for the Americas pavilion, an area which its team has spent 30 years planting and maintaining. This offers an incredible opportunity to incorporate dry gardens within the forest, to harmonize with the strengths and skills of Darkali's work – a theme of beauty and abundance with little, and service to the Divine through the work.

In terms of strategic overview, the entirety of the North and South American Pavilion area (7.5 acres) extends through the forested area of Darkali (4.73 acres) and the Matrimandir Nursery (2.77 acres). The current consensus of the IZ Technical Team, led by urban planner Andrea Cammarata, is that a "light touch" nature-preserve is more befitting the Darkali zone, and that a permanent formal pavilion could later be built for all of the Americas in the larger, picturesque, open space area in the northwest corner of the

Matrimandir nursery. This view corresponds to the intuition expressed by members of AVI-USA and numerous American Aurovilian stakeholders.

Reflecting the thinking of the IZ Tech Team and various stakeholders, the overall zonal master planning for the Americas could be conceived as follows: The Americas zone would begin with a "light touch" development of the forested area on the Darkali side, with the eventual possibility of building a formal pavilion structure in the northwest corner of the Matrimandir Nursery. Separated by the road to Kottakarai village, these two "sides" of the Americas may reflect the different geographical and historical diversities of the Americas: from North America, to Central, to South, from the urban landscapes to the extraordinary natural forests and national parks, from the pioneering/ migration-made melting pot culture of the present to the Native American culture dominant in the past.

The IZ Tech Team is looking at the possibility of a late project phase bridge, which would span over the Kottakarai village road separating the sites in the Nursery and the Darkali nature preserve. This pedestrian bridge would allow visitors at the main pavilion to easily access the pioneers' dry garden, like a feature in a modern park or botanical garden.

Dry gardens would be a beautiful way to honor the "4 Sisters" – Juanita Cole, June Maher, Anie Nunnally and Bhavana Dee. These women pioneers made major contributions to early land development in Auroville, and all of them had some story related to environment, ecology and the beauty of nature and gardens. Four distinct contemplation areas would be designed to reflect the spirit of each of these women, qualities best learned by interacting with their surviving friends and family members. What does it mean to be a woman pioneer?



Darkali Dry Garden



Darkali forest

The stories of the women behind the scenes of all pioneering histories are rare. After 25 years in masonry construction – I know only that it requires grit and an otherworldly dedication to something, a transcendent belief in the value of the work and the joy in its undertaking. Maybe there is something in the spirit of the woman pioneer that may open for us all a new way to the future.

Together: 4 gardens, 4 sisters, 4 pioneers, and 1 forest steward, woman pioneer aspirant in an eco-light design where masonry, earthen architecture and TDEF planting come together to honor the memory of Auroville's pioneers and to continue its pioneering spirit.

This demonstration landscape – fusion of indigenous forest, gardens and architecture – would include:

- ▶ A continuation of the ongoing TDEF afforestation in Darkali;
- ▶ A network of forest pathways connecting landscaped open clearing areas;
- ▶ 4 sacred spaces dedicated to the 4 Sisters, set in the picturesque open fields within the forest.
- ▶ A small open-air educational space with a little resource library and field study table for learning about native plants and local fauna. The educational aspect of this "new generation" pioneer work will be highlighted, with carved plaques assisting in the identification of indigenous TDEF trees and shrubs. Hardy tree and shrub identification and taxonomy was a major topic of my own study/ teaching in North America that began for me nearly 20 years ago. I am now beginning to extend this to the TDEF species in Tamil Nadu.
- ▶ A forest steward's residence, very modest in size, low in impact, and match-funded by personal funds

Lara Davis is an architect/ mason and co-director of the Auroville Earth Institute



Let the Games Begin in Auroville's New Stadium

by Jothi Govindaraj

The sound of a basketball hitting a concrete floor with a roof is different than that same sound in open air. There is a resonance that echoes throughout the space. Even before the inauguration of the Auroville Sports Resource Center's new stadium, young players came to try out that sound.

Dr. Karan Singh and Auroville Foundation Governing Board members arrived on the 25th February at 10 am for the inauguration. A large oil lamp was lit by Dr. Karan Singh, the GB members and WC members as a symbolic gesture of opening the stadium. Auroville children aged between 9 and 12 years were the first to play an opening match for the inauguration after which refreshments and snacks were served.

After the inauguration on the 25th, the All India invitation basketball tournament started at 7:30 am on the 26th and went on until the 3rd of March 2019. Teams from Puducherry, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka participated in this major tournament. It was indeed a grand celebration of Auroville's 50th anniversary at the new stadium for a week long! Young men and women came from the four Southern states of India to celebrate with us, the Auroville's 50th anniversary in a grand manner.

Although the stadium was incomplete

with its front and back not closed and the artificial floor not installed, the basketball players: girls and boys, men and women enjoy playing there. An enclosed space contains basketball energy as opposed to playing in the open to air.

The stadium continues to be used throughout the day: early in the morning from 6 am till 8:30 or up to 9pm in the night. The Kulapalayam and youth and children including students from New Creation School boarding come to use the new stadium regularly.

The funds allocated for the floor have had to be re-allocated towards the civil and lighting work done in the stadium. After this re-allocation was done and remaining work carried out by the contractors on the stadium,

a well wisher came forward to give the balance Rs.15 Lakhs towards the special floor. Unfortunately, this was too late, because the Rs.10 lakhs was already in use for the civil work being carried out on the stadium. When this was explained to the well wisher,

we were advised to use these funds for the completion work of the indoor stadium (closing the front and the back). The enclosure work will begin as soon as the funds get transferred to the appropriate account in the



Inauguration Invitation

Auroville financial service.

In the mean time, it is the middle of May in Auroville; the summer "exodus" has begun and people leave Auroville for short holidays in Europe or the Indian hill. Schools close. However, I continue the basketball training at the new indoor stadium throughout the year.

As activities and work go on simultaneously, AVSRC continues to wait for donations towards (now \$43,000) the special flooring for the indoor stadium. Until the special turf is set up in the stadium, I will continue to dream of the completion of the indoor stadium for Auroville.

Editor's Note: The writer of the article on Jothi and the stadium in issue previous to this one was Ravi, not Savitri.



Dr. Karan Singh with Auroville Governing Board and Working Committee behind



Boys squad



Tournament in progress



Girls prepare for the first game



Awareness Through the Body (ATB)

at Matagiri, Mount Tremper, NY 12457

Awareness Through the Body provides tools for teachers, coaches, counselors, parents, and therapists of all disciplines, who work with people of any age, to help their students/clients develop their capacities for calm attention, self-knowledge, and progress towards a balance of the physical, mental, and emotional aspects of themselves.

By synthesizing exercises from yoga, martial arts, dance, and mindfulness approaches into an original and developmentally appropriate series of sequential activities, ATB can enable children and adults to become more self-aware and self-confident. The activities can be quiet or lively, simple or complicated, profound or just plain fun. And best of all, you can experience it for yourself this summer.

Intro to ATB (3 hours)

Intro to ATB (3 hours):
July 6, 7, & 24, 2-5 pm
\$25

ATB 1 (all day)

July 25 & 26
Aug 7 & 8
\$200 tuition. Some scholarships available.

ATB 2 (all day)

Aug 9, 10, 11
ATB 2 tuition \$300. Certificate of completion awarded for ATB 1 and 2
Please call us at 845-679-8322
or email info@matagiri.org
atbworkshop2019.weebly.com/



TOURIST VISA REGULATIONS

For those of you going to Auroville, here is what you're permitted to do on a tourist visa. This information has not been completely confirmed so we suggest you find out more when you are there. It may be necessary to fill out a form for some activities. Check with the Working Committee office.

1. The foreigner holding a tourist visa is permitted in Auroville to:
 - a. do recreation, sightseeing, casual visits to meet friends and relatives
 - b. attend yoga programs
 - c. share his/her knowledge or skills in Auroville by giving a talk or a performance
 - d. participate in an Auroville workshop or seminar
 - e. volunteer in Auroville without any monetary consideration
2. The permissions for the items mentioned in 1c, 1d and 1e are valid for Auroville only. Elsewhere in India other rules may apply.

TELL US YOUR STORY

Use these questions to help. You can choose any one of them as a point of entry. In your story, try to include a focus on a particular moment that is significant for you. Take these questions as a real opportunity to reflect.

1. How did your original connection to the project of Auroville come about? Was it through Sri Aurobindo and The Mother? Was there someone who served as your "connector" or guide?
2. What was your initial reaction? Did you become involved in some way? Or continue on with your life?
3. If you became involved what was the nature of your involvement? How long did it continue or has it continued?
4. What has changed in your connections with Auroville and/or The Integral Yoga?
5. If you have visited Auroville recently, what was your experience? How do you respond to the project or the community?
6. How do you see Auroville now? How do you see your connection to it?