

Auroville as a field of dreams

Kathy talks about Community building, which has been the underlying theme of her life in Auroville.

I came here in 1997 and literally fell into the very beginning of Adventure community which was life-changing for me. It ignited this deep fascination with 'creating community' which has been 'my call' for the past nine years. I wanted to understand how our need for freedom and our longing for community can be reconciled, and what can be done to bring harmony amongst groups and individuals from very different cultural backgrounds within Auroville. Living and developing the community in Adventure put me right on the spot for this – I had never lived amongst such diversity. There was no walking away from the issues that arose, unless I admitted defeat and left the community. In retrospect, I learned many things to do with human relationships.

Not long after joining Auroville, I took up a job as secretary in the Housing Service. But instead of being the 'nice little office job' I imagined, I found myself in a swamp of demands and frustrations. It was very distressing for me to see people becoming so stressed because their basic need for a place to live could not be met. Some of their expectations were unreasonable, but it was often due to lack of clarity on both sides. The situation became so critical that in 2002 Auroville stopped accepting Newcomers until the housing crisis was resolved.

That state of emergency shocked me and I realized something had to be done. There was a need for new housing projects. That was when five women came together to give birth to Creativity – my next community building adventure. We all wanted a place where the richness of human diversity could express itself in a harmonious environment and this presented a new set of challenges. We soon discovered we had very diverse ideas about how it should be done and faced our own set of interpersonal issues in the process of trying to establish conditions for this new community. I worked on the project for three years and eventually withdrew as the community began to form.

Shortly after, I began to work on the SAIER development proposal. Kireet Joshi saw an opportunity to access funds from the Indian government to establish Auroville, under the umbrella of SAIER, as a learning centre or a University town, in the widest sense of the word. I found this very exciting as this was always one of Mother's main purposes for Auroville and one of Auroville's ideals that inspired me. This was a very satisfying experience that brought me into contact with many people and projects in Auroville. Through this work, Auroville received funds for projects such as Savitri Bhavan, the Botanical Garden, the Visitor's Centre and the Mitra Hostel.

It is still in early stages for the vision of a University City but I feel it is coming more and more into the collective consciousness. Last year we had about one thousand students from all over the world come to Auroville to study or work. Auroville has a great deal to offer, especially to young inquiring minds, and they have a lot to offer us with their energy and fresh points of view.

Since coming to Auroville, I have been fascinated with and worked for projects that addressed the global outreach dimension of Auroville. Yet in early 2005, circumstances forced me to take a closer look at what was happening right next door. A young man from Edaiyanchavadi village, which is at a five minute walk from Adventure, became a member of Adventure. I went away for the summer and when I returned, I discovered the residents of the community were embroiled in a complex conflict with the man. It pushed me to my edge of understanding what it takes to reconcile differences, especially when cultural views are so far apart. The conflict brought the matter of communities and communication back into my life in a very intense way. I realized the relationship between Auroville and its neighboring villages is fragile. I felt a lot of insecurity during that period and did a lot of soul-searching and deep reflection. If Mother had put Auroville in this place it must have



Kathy

been for a very good reason. It seemed to me that ultimately Auroville's survival would depend on our understanding and cooperation with the villagers who have lived here for generations and had very different attitudes to life. But, how to make this work?

This was the catalyst for the inspiration behind Thamarai – the community centre Bridget and I established in the heart of Edaiyanchavadi village. Part of the reason we established the centre was to foster tangible bridges between Auroville and the village. 'Thamarai' is the Tamil word for 'lotus'. It represents the quality of unfolding beauty and potential which is what we wanted to foster in a context where this is not normally encouraged, especially among women. It was not easy to engage the participation of women as they were always busy. Most of them worked in Auroville then went home and cared for their family, leaving them with no spare time. It was the children who responded enthusiastically. We also made good contacts with the village youth, many of whom had been educated in Auroville and they became our partners in developing the project.

Thamarai, now in its 5th year, sprouted a new programme in 2008 – the Edaiyanchavadi Healing Centre. This was a natural outgrowth due to the acceptance of the community centre and was inspired by the one really well attended programme that was hosted for women – a weekend training in energy healing offered by Ruth Lamb and her colleagues from Langara college in Western Canada.

The Healing Centre has been evolving steadily and during the summer an interesting situation developed. A recently-elected village leader came up with the idea that rent should be paid by the Healing Centre for the building. Over the past five years it was rent-free in exchange for the renovation of the building and provision of services to the villagers. The situation intensified to the point a lock was placed on the gate of the centre to prevent access until the rent was paid.

To our relief, when learning of this, the leaders of the youth club intervened and rallied support. They managed to gather over 100 village youth who were opposed to the action of the leader. They not only felt it contravened the agreement but interfered with a service to their community. It

ended with the youth courageously removing the lock themselves thus enabling the service to continue. While this might be perceived as an expression of support for Auroville or the Thamarai project, I felt it was a significant expression of the confidence the youth have to stand up for social justice on behalf of the people in their community and more importantly, not be intimidated by the leaders. This really felt like a turning point for Edaiyanchavadi's and Auroville's growing relationship.

Lately I have been involved in the emerging SEDAB project (Sustainable Enterprise Development for the Auroville Bioregion). This is a new project which is likely to receive funding support from the Ministry of Rural Development. The project offers the possibility to link Auroville's talent in enterprise creation with the further development of the bioregion through setting up village based production units. I find this very interesting as a potential vehicle for women's empowerment and village transformation. Over 12 years, I have undertaken a small scale production of women's re-usable cloth menstrual pads – a project that developed out of a personal concern for sanitary waste disposal. The creation of a social enterprise that offers an exciting opportunity for team-work, community building and, of course, steep learning curves is a new field for me.

I can easily get overloaded with my enthusiasm to get involved in so many interesting and inspiring projects and I have to learn how to ration my energy. I keep Sundays quiet and try to stick to my daily practice of mediation, bodywork and reading. Without this focus I am sure I would get overloaded and lose sense of my priorities.

I also try to go to Hampi twice a year for a retreat which I love – it is now like my second home and I come back refreshed and with a clear mind. I see Auroville as a "field of dreams" and feel wonderfully privileged to be able to put my energy into it.

Dianna

AWARDS

Award for Sadhana Forest

The Auroville community Sadhana Forest was recently awarded 3rd place at the 2010 International Humanitarian Water and Food Awards (HWFA) for their ongoing sustainability project in the Auroville Bioregion. The award ceremony took place on the 25th November, 2010 at LIFE, the Faculty of Life Sciences of Copenhagen.

The Humanitarian Water and Food Award highlights and rewards groundbreaking projects that are using effective solutions to conserve water and grow food sustainably. The purpose is to make the information/technology from these projects globally available for those communities that are struggling to provide clean water and healthy food for their people. Water and food are essential for mankind, yet more than 1 billion people starve everyday and 1.4 billion do not have access to clean water.

Aviram, from the Sadhana team, said that they had put in their nomination for the award last year. He adds, "This award is yet another international recognition of



the ecological and social work done by Auroville, and an acknowledgment of the growing power of volunteerism. It was exciting to celebrate the reception of the award with Shri Ashok Kumar Attri, the Ambassador of India to Denmark, and his wife Mrs. Usha Kiran Attri, who both honoured us by attending the award ceremony. We are also very happy to be

the Auroville International Liaison group in Haiti. We hope that this award will enhance our work both in India and Haiti." Auroville Today will be reporting on the Haiti project development in the near future.

The Association of the Humanitarian Water & Food Award is a member of United Nations Global Compact. Professor Alfred, a faculty member of LIFE said about Sadhana's entry, "Great ideas attract people. And today, looking at Sadhana Forest we see that volunteerism is not dead, but very much alive. Great ideas have the power to engage us to volunteer to help make the change towards sustainability."

Sadhana Forest celebrated its 7th birthday on 17th December, 2010. Louise

CULTURAL ZONE

CRIPA nears completion



The first phase of the CRIPA (Centre for Research in the Performing Arts) building in the Cultural Zone is scheduled to be completed in early 2011. The 500 square meter rehearsal hall will be available for cultural events in dance, music and theatre.

The second phase of CRIPA will include a café, a library, accommodation space for visiting artists, offices, storage spaces, and three separate halls for the performances of music, dance and theatre as each group has its own specific requirements for sound, equipment and stage.

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Editorial team: Alan, Carel, Dianna, Elaine, Louise. Guest editor: Lesley. Proof-reading: Alan. DTP: Carel. Photo editing: Jean-Denis. Published by Carel Thieme on behalf of the Auroville Foundation. Printed by Brihat Consultants, Pondicherry, and published at Surrender, Auroville 605101, Tamil Nadu.

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