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AUROVILLE

A utopian laboratory in India

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We left Chennai (ex-Madras) and its turmoil three hours ago and headed toward Pondicherry (see map). The taxi, reinforced by its loud horn, has since been zigzagging between trucks, "security" barricades and stray dogs. Finally, the car turns off the main road. The shops are less frequent, the lights further apart. All that remains is a dirt road diving into lush vegetation. No sign to proclaim "Welcome to Auroville". And yet, here we are, in the heart of one of the oldest utopian cities in the world. Its charter proclaims: "Auroville does not belong to anyone in particular. Auroville belongs to humanity as a whole." An international community, born 40 years ago from the impetus of a French lady, Mirra Richard, better known as "The Mother". She was then living 10 km away, in the Pondicherry ashram.

It is in this place of retreat that the Indian yogi Sri Aurobindo shared with her his vision of "human unity". This belief of belonging to one single humanity, without distinction of race, culture nor religion, became the dream of The Mother. She imagined a place of peace and harmony, in the heart of nature, where money would not rule and where work would be a means of expression. A place where competition and conflict would be replaced by collaboration, emulation and fraternity. A dream she wished to realize by creating Auroville...

While walking, one quickly feels the particularities of Auroville compared to other Indian cities: more quiet, sparsely populated, not polluted. The birds are competing with songs. The houses modestly conceal their architectural originalities behind the trees. No Aurovilian can claim to own a house, even if he paid for its construction. The rule is clear: in case of prolonged absence, the house's occupancy and maintenance are passed to someone else. On the map, the names of areas evoke, as in Prévert, the feelings of the first inhabitants. Silence and Discipline face each other; a single path separates Revelation from Vérité (Truth), while Promesse (Promise) and Hope are on the outskirts of the town. On the paper, everything seems simple. For the neophyte, nevertheless, it is impossible to find one's bearings. The dirt roads form a labyrinth with no signs to help. At night, it is even worse: public lights don't exist. Perched on their mopeds, with windblown hair, the Aurovilians drive around in complete relaxation. As is the case everywhere else in the country, two-wheelers take precedence over cars. Only a few electric vehicles join the traffic. That's the routine here. The few guards keeping watch don't even notice when they drive past them.

As you follow the road, the landscape changes again. The houses become much closer to each other and more modest. On the doorsteps, women and children play, brush their hair, and prepare the food. Without even noticing it, we again passed the invisible "border" between Auroville and the rest of India. There are more than a dozen local villages within the perimeter of Auroville. Their population (around 45,000 people) has exploded in the last 10 years. Although these villages are far from sharing the prosperity of the universal city, its influence has helped provide employment, education and improved health care.

RETURN TO THE HEART OF THE CITY. A small information centre offers several pamphlets to passing guests. We learn that religion and politics are not practiced in Auroville. Official languages: Tamil, French, English and Sanskrit. In reality, Aurovilians haven't shown much originality. English, with or without accent, passes everywhere. Nowadays, about forty nationalities are represented. The 850 Indians, the clear majority, rub shoulders with the 297 French, 228 Germans and 103 Italians. At the last census, in July 2008, the city also had two Byelorussians, one Algerian, one Colombian... But who is really interested by the traditional origin of his neighbours? One is first of all Aurovilian. A first name is enough to call out to someone. The many guests who stay in one of Auroville's guest houses, for a week or several months, are accepted, without excessive benevolence. Some guests come to work voluntarily; others take advantage of the many yoga classes on offer. It is up to them to integrate....

Conceived to welcome 50,000 people, the community counts "only" 2,018 Aurovilians to this day. Of these, more than 1,570 adults are called when the need arises to take decisions, with unanimity being required! In this little corner of the world, one is following no hierarchy, no leader, no guru. By an unwritten law, however, seniority confers a certain moral authority, even a few privileges. The organizational system is constantly evolving, searching for itself. "We are in between feudalism and the purest form of democracy", says Benjamin, an Aurovilian of around 30 who arrived with his parents at the age of one. It is a utopia made of human beings and therefore based on the reality of human interaction. But there is a real adventure to live in this social, ethnologic laboratory, where everything is thrown upside down. "

SUCH AN EXPERIENCE IS PERPETUALLY INTRIGUING. Unesco has been supporting the project since its beginning. In 1988, the Indian parliament granted a special status, unique in the country, to this big village of 20 km². As a result, Auroville enjoys a privileged freedom of action and its foreign residents gain preferential status for their visa (one year renewable as opposed to six months for tourists).

Forty years ago, nobody would have fought for this arid plateau, carved into ravines by the monsoons and swept by the winds of sand. "It was a desert. A laterite desert with a soil hard as stone", remembers Jean. Barefoot, dressed in a simple piece of cloth tied around the waist, in the Indian style, this pioneering Frenchman, sixty years old today, has lost none of his humour. At the time, it was not a matter of ecology but of survival. The urgency, for those who responded to the call of the Mother, was to replenish the earth in order to find food and shade. Therefore, to plant trees. "It was completely crazy: we were 20 years old, working half naked in the full sun, under 40 to 50°C heat. But nobody knew anything. At first we planted deciduous varieties. Can you imagine! Once the summer arrived, it was like there were no trees", he recalls, still laughing. "At the same time, we were the first generation not to have experienced war. We could have illusions." I turn around. All around us, dozens of different species intermingle: acacias, banyans, bougainvilleas, frangipani ... More than two million trees and shrubs have been planted in 40 years. By sheer sweat and human energy, the desert has turned into a tropical paradise.

Reforestation is not the only field of excellence in Auroville. The teams of its Centre for Scientific Research (CSR) have been actively interested in renewable energy, recycling of water, green construction as well as hybrid and electric vehicles ... for more

than 20 years. Yesterday's so-called "utopian" or "avant-garde" work is now the concern of laboratories around the world.

"I built houses with earth", tells Satprem very seriously while pushing the door of his office open. "Mixed with a bit of lime and cement, its resistance is amazing." This Aurovilian, a world famous architect, a harsh, austere and passionate man, has made his work his reason to live. The result is astonishing. Nothing leads one to suspect that these bricks are sun dried earth blocks - one of the common "recipes" used here to protect oneself from heat, moisture and ... excessive expenditure. For electricity, the same principle: solar panels provide part of the energy supply and there are no electrical wires to be seen. The water - scarce - is recycled in the new buildings. But the demanding Auroville does not yet consider itself a "sustainable" city.

ONE THING IS CERTAIN, if ecology is naturally present in people's minds, it is not the "raison d'être" of the community. At first, it is difficult to detect what is the common motivation among Aurovilians. From the youngest to the eldest, the richest to the poorest, the most fervent to the most critical, the newcomers to the pioneers: the journeys are as diverse as can be. And yet. Some expressions come back: a need "to change life", "to escape the consumer society", "to be in Truth" ...

"Our unity lies foremost in our spiritual expectations", emphasized Gilles calmly. A former civil engineer, this Frenchman settled here 35 years ago, abandoning an obvious career in France. In his office, a television and a computer are side by side with the books of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo, the two spiritual companions. In Pondicherry, as all across Tamil Nadu, their portraits abound everywhere. Displayed in shops, sold in small medallions, worshipped also by certain Indians. There is even a taxi company called "Mother travels"! Born of the inspiration of these two people, Auroville is no exception to this fervour. "According to Sri Aurobindo, man can participate in his own evolution. This requires a change of consciousness in order to reach a higher state", explains Gilles. That's why we are here. In the west, it is called an inner change. Here, one speaks of yoga." Auroville would be a place where, despite a minimum mandatory work, a simplified way of life would leave more time for spirituality? "Most people in the world are stuck in their daily life and work to earn money. They compensate by dreaming about their vacation or retirement! The Mother wanted us to use our profession as "a song of yoga", to make it a kind of tool for evolution. Thus, some Aurovilians labour intensely, and while not paid, they don't need to compensate".

This statement is still resonating in me when I arrive in the vicinity of Matrimandir. The "soul" of Auroville, according to the Mother's wishes. Impossible to miss. This huge golden sphere reaches 36 m in diameter. Its construction, which began 36 years ago without any machinery, is certainly the one that required the most labour - Aurovilian and Indian. Some compare the sphere to a UFO. For others, it can only have been built to the glory of a guru. This old rumour that Auroville is a sect recurs regularly. When evoked, the residents often respond with a shrug. If this was the case, how could Unesco and India recognize Auroville? How could one imagine that a sect would function with decisions adopted in a collective manner? That it would let tourists and journalists move around at their leisure?

Just as every day, dozens of tourists are crowding at the reception. The visit is free but well regulated and supervised. Without question, the place will become folklore! The Indians are particularly fond of this kind of visit. The circuits they travel include a

multitude of temples. The tombs of the Mother and Sri Aurobindo at the Ashram in Pondicherry and the Matrimandir usually complete their journey. "You're not in front of a place of worship or prayer", says Andrew, the guide. "People come here to concentrate, to empty oneself, to quiet the mind in order to feel something else". Half-impressed, half-curious visitors rush quietly before entering the Matrimandir's enclosure. They only have fifteen minutes to enjoy this experience.

In the vicinity, only three shops offer products "made in Auroville". There are no advertising signs, however, and no sales of electronic gadgets or mainstream fashion clothes. Not the smallest supermarket! Just a bank on the periphery and some mini-markets. The "simplification" of daily life also means the absence of temptation. Have the Aurovilians won the bet to live without money? The Mother was dreaming of achieving this "ideal". The reality needs to be qualified. Housing, education, basic medical care, cultural and sporting activities are actually free. For the rest, those who have no income receive a monthly "maintenance" of 5000 rupees (about 74 euros). Some "virtual money" is credited for purchases made in Auroville as well as electricity and restaurant bills. This amount, however, is not enough for those who want to travel or pay for their children's higher education. To make up for it, some have started up a business unit within Auroville. The manufacture of incense, candles, lampshades... Other Aurovilians prefer to migrate during the heat to their country of origin. If possible, to work and earn enough to live during the rest of the year. And to purchase products outside Auroville. Utopia has its limits!

LIFE IN THE HEART OF NATURE, generally caring fellow citizens, a lack of pollution, healthy food, free working hours: life in Auroville seems idyllic. One question stayed with me from the beginning of my stay: why does it attract only 2000 people? "And you, why don't you come? Perhaps because it is not so easy ... ", one resident once joked at me, teasing. In Sadhana Forest, the joke becomes even more meaningful. This community within the community, located in the green belt, has chosen to live like the first pioneers and plant trees "by the sweat of one's brow". It's backbreaking work. Especially in the humid heat prevailing here. Aviram and his wife, Yorit, built the first hut here in 2003, with their child under the arm. "After a first trip to India, it took us three years to leave Israel," confides Aviram in his soft voice. "Three years to leave everything: a comfortable situation, our careers, families, friends ... There are fears to overcome, these steps to climb, but we understood we had to change our lives. In order to feel better, so that it resonates better. "

To the great surprise of its founders, Sadhana Forest welcomes at times up to seventy volunteers. "They stay one or two weeks, sometimes several months. Some come back every year. Many seek different ways to live their life." Before resuming his work, Aviram opens his golden book. "It's a Swiss lady who left this sentence, which I understood much later." I lower my eyes. On the already yellowing page, a fine handwriting traced these words: "We came to Auroville to grow trees. But it is the forest that made us grow ..."

Captions:

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The Matrimandir, built in the centre of the city. To the displeasure of some Aurovilians, who don't view the development of tourism very favourably, this place of meditation also attracts a large number of tourists.

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The original plan of Auroville, conceived in 1967, followed the drawing of a galaxy with the Matrimandir at its centre. The exorbitant cost of the land today limits the development of the city.

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Auroville's schools welcome children of all nationalities. For the youngest ones (between two and a half and six years old) the emphasis is on the discovery of nature, relaxation, listening to others and to one's own body, as well as on artistic activities. Reading and writing (in English) is learnt through the phonetic method.

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As an architect, Satprem specializes in building with earth, "an ecological material, abundant, cheap and which performs better than fired bricks", he assures.

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The solar bowl installed on the roof of Auroville's main communal restaurant is one of the largest in the world (15 m in diameter). This "concentrator" produces steam for cooking food. 1,000 meals can be prepared each day in this way (at lunch and dinner time).

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Approximately forty architects live in Auroville. The city is undeniably a place of predilection for them. The dwellings range from the simple wooden hut to earth or concrete buildings with remarkable designs. Recently, small collective and ecological apartment buildings have been built. For reasons of economy, the new accommodations are equipped with solar panels.

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Away from the centre, Deepika and Bernard are almost self-sufficient. They cultivate their garden without adding anything and using very little water. "One can be organic everywhere", assures Bernard. "On small as well as large areas."

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The tradition of natural (and more ecological) dye had almost disappeared in India. With The Colours of Nature, his small manufacturing unit, Jesus tries to maintain it in Auroville. Under wicker baskets, the indigo flower is fermenting in a small tank. After a quick bath, the cotton takes its blue shade. The unit sells jeans, skirts and blouses on the Internet.

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Surrounding the Matrimandir, twelve "petals" each house a small meditation room (here, the one called "Equality") open only to Aurovilians. The vast inner chamber, entirely white, is situated in the centre of the golden building.
