

THE WALRUS

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India, Terror, and Human Unity

December 4th, 2008 by [Holly Jean Buck](#) in [Shades of Green](#)



AUROVILLE, INDIA — Forty years ago, this was desert. The topsoil had been stripped and washed by the monsoon rains into barren ravines; livestock had consumed the greenery; and the villages could grow little else but millet. Yet in 1968, this site in Tamil Nadu was chosen for a new township. Called Auroville (meaning “the city of dawn”) and founded by Mirra Alfassa, known as “The Mother,” it would be an experiment in human unity. And it would be green, sustainable, and open to all who were seriously interested in such an experiment.

As explained by the Aurovilians:

The purpose of Auroville is to realise [human unity](#) – in diversity. Today Auroville is recognised as the first and only internationally endorsed ongoing experiment in human unity and [transformation of consciousness](#), also concerned with - and practically [researching](#) into - sustainable living and the future [cultural](#), [environmental](#), social and spiritual needs of mankind.

Today, the experiment continues: about 2,000 Aurovilians from over forty nations are living on the land they have greened. What have they learned about sustainable living? What challenges do they face today?



“Back when we first started, you had to cycle to Pondicherry just to buy a banana,” the old-timers told me. Today, many people — villagers and Aurovilians alike — own or wish for a motorbike. And you can purchase not just bananas, but high-quality sweets, jams, coffee beans, and more at Auroville’s shops. There is definitely a measure of prosperity here, when compared with the surrounding countryside. However, with disparity comes tension.

One of the chief tensions in Auroville is caused by boundaries. Why boundaries, in a community devoted to human unity? Well, any experiment in sustainable community is both resilient and fragile. Resilient, because the people who are drawn to such an endeavor generally have adaptable, creative minds and innovative ways of doing things. Fragile, because to dream for sustainability, or human unity, or spiritual community, is still somewhat against the status quo. But because of this fragility, there is an impulse to draw boundaries, to protect, in order that the creation may be nurtured and grow.

I talked to one frustrated afforestation worker: she has spent hours, years of her life, planting saplings which the villagers often steal to sell or burn. This is a new forest, and in a way, it is under threat: it needs time and care for the greenery to really take hold. So, one reaction is to draw boundaries, to build walls: an understandable reaction.

The boundaries in this township are both physical and social. Physically, Aurovilians would like to purchase the remaining tracts of land around their town, but land prices have shot up in India, and so they lack the funds to do so. So for the visitor, there is a sense of blurring, of not knowing where Auroville begins and ends, of being almost-but-not-really a part of the local villages.

Socially, there is quite a process to become an Aurovilian: one cannot simply move there. There are interviews, assemblies, a trial period of a year. Hence there is a social boundary between who is and is not an Aurovilian, and there are also about 4,000 workers from the local villages who work in Auroville but are not an official part of it. And of course some local Indians want to join Auroville: a few suspect that this is because Aurovilians earn a “maintenance” of several thousand rupees per month from the central fund. Some residents seem to fear that the social cohesion of their community will fall apart, if too many people join who are not motivated by immediate financial gain rather than the greater dream.

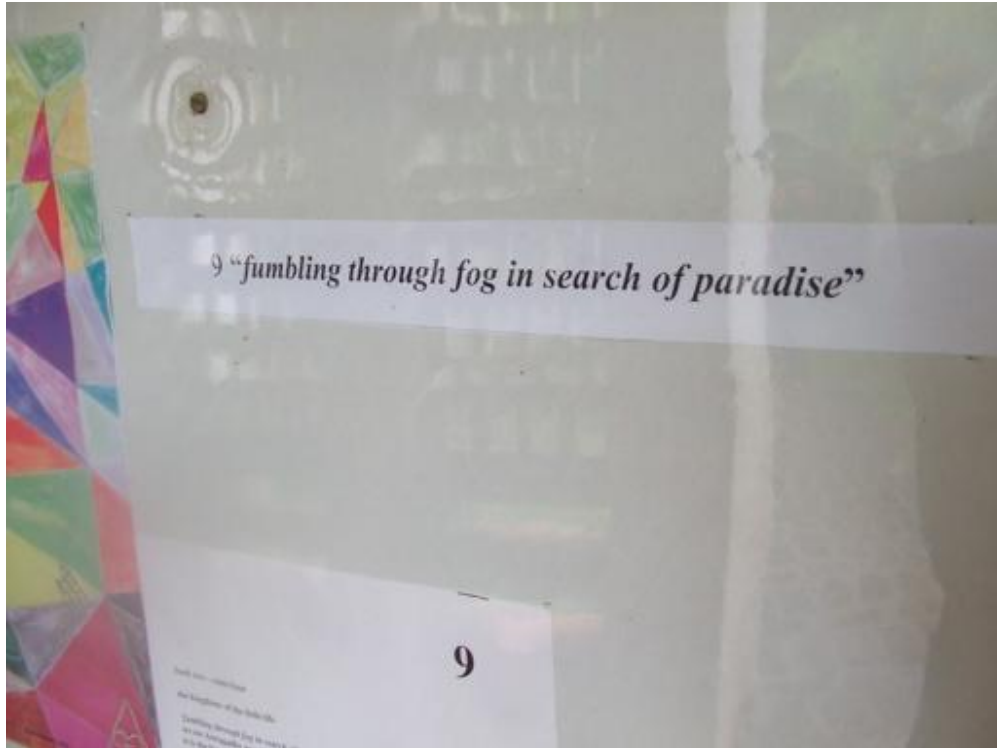
Beneath these tensions is the spectre of colonialism, for Auroville is in some sense a colony. Clearly, Auroville is [not a colony](#) in the same sense that the British colonised India: Auroville’s aim is to create a place for everyone, a microcosm of the world. The Aurovilian pioneers took the villagers into account and continue to work to improve their quality of life. The town operates several initiatives for local welfare: women’s clubs, educational programmes, etc. It also provides employment for villagers, and has arguably raised the standard of life in this area.

Although Auroville did not commence with a fixed blueprint for social, economic and political development, it did commence with the implicit mandate to provide employment to the local villagers. In fact, the villagers were considered the “first Aurovilians”.— from [a socio-economic survey of Auroville employees](#)

In fact, Auroville reminds us that there are good things about building a colony: pioneering, imagining a better world (that old American archetype), working hard to make something beautiful. Take into consideration the etymology of the word *colony*: from Latin *colonia*, from *colonus*, farmer, colonist; from *colere*, to cultivate. Essentially,

to colonize can be a creative act. There is something basic and human about transforming and cultivating a piece of land into something inhabitable by humans.

Aurovilians are very conscious of their cultivation project, and also conscious about the tensions inherent in it: they see them as part of the learning process. As written in the [introduction to Auroville society](#), “sometimes the human mix seems too much, too complex, as hidden tensions rise to the surface or old behaviour patterns take over, but actually it is perfect, just as it should be, if Auroville is to be a valid experiment representative of humanity as a whole.”





In this town in South India, people are farming their vegetables, practicing yoga, sweeping the dust out of their homes, having heated discussions, drinking their chai, grumbling over the monsoon rains, all engaged in this challenging and nuanced experiment of how to get along with each other, discovering what human unity is.

Meanwhile, on the other side of India, we have witnessed the forces of human disunity erupt in Mumbai. What is terrorism? That which strikes at human unity. What causes terrorism? It's not useful to attribute terrorism merely to "evil." Slightly more specifically, terrorism is caused by the desire to provoke human division.

It's important to understand where India is right now. With one-sixth of the world's people, with the world's largest democracy; one could see it as a budding superpower poised to soar. India as a young woman, about to enjoy her coming-out party. As Mumbai novelist and columnist Shobhaa Dé writes in her new book, *Superstar India*,

The world is suddenly looking at us with wonderment, even a tinge of envy. India counts. India rocks! India is 'hot.' ... We see our freshly-minted image and wonder, 'Is that really us?' There is charming disbelief in that reaction. But there is also renewed confidence. We have finally started believing in us!

So, what happens when that freshly-minted image is attacked? As columnist Kanishk Tharoor commented in [*The Independent*](#):

Mumbai does not belong in the same continuum of Islamist attacks on Western targets abroad such as that in Bali. Make no mistake, this was a blow aimed at India as much, if not more, than at the West. The terrorists singled out iconic landmarks in downtown Mumbai, including the Taj Hotel, which sits next to the majestic Gateway of India, a symbol of India's historical openness to the world. South Mumbai is the hub of business and cultural activity in India's cosmopolitan financial capital. To bring death and destruction here is to strike at the country's image of itself as an aspiring world power.

With the aspiration comes a kind of tender stage of development. In a comparison which is perhaps a stretch, but perhaps not, modern India is like Auroville in a way — still-developing and fragile. Robust and resilient, to be sure, but it feels not fully formed yet. This isn't my outsider's opinion, but something I've gleaned from talking to various people within India and reading Indian columnists. Consider what Ms. Dé writes about India's image, psyche, and future:

The French have managed to successfully dominate many diverse areas with complete aplomb. One myth (the Great French Lover) was nearly shattered after extensive surveys disproved the belief. But that's before Sarkozy got into the act and pulled off his shirt to compete with Putin. Sarkozy's love-handles were photo-shopped by obliging editors, but the image of a dashing rake was established, when the danger was of being typecast as a cuckolded husband. This is what twenty-first century image-fixing is about. India needs to photo-shop its love-handles. And in order to do that, we need dedicated, clever, imaginative spokespeople to go out there and radically alter boring, outdated perceptions. Enough has been said about our 5,000-year-old culture. It's time to talk about the 'now' — the next five, twenty, fifty years. Especially the next five, which are likely to be crucial — a do-or-die half-a-decade during which we either get our act together as a nation, or allow ourselves to fall into a self-dug, bottomless pit.

Terrorism causes a relatively small number of deaths, compared to other atrocities; its damage is psychological and economic. Why would somebody want to attack India on these fronts, and why now? [Mira Kamdar writes](#) in the Washington Post of the terrorists' goals: "to punish Mumbai, give the lie to India's economic rise by bringing its financial capital to its knees, scare the living daylights out of foreign business investors and tourists, tempt Hindu nationalists into retaliating against India's Muslim citizens, focus the United States and a weak government in Pakistan on dealing with an angry India rather than targeting the Taliban and al-Qaeda elements they work with in the Afghan borderlands." In short, to create division.

But any sustainable, green, relatively pleasant future relies on human unity and cooperation: for cutting carbon emissions, reducing deforestation, transitioning to clean energy, sharing water resources, etc. As poet Robert Duncan put it: "The drama of our time is the coming of men into one fate."

Or, [as the Aurovilians say](#):

A new stage in the evolution of man has already begun; a new consciousness, higher than the mind, a truth-consciousness ... has already started to appear, and all the upheavals and convulsions that are at present so painfully tearing our earth are the outward signs of this evolutionary crisis. This new consciousness is already at work in the atmosphere of the earth: we can connect with it, we can call it in ourselves, we can use it to transform our entire nature and consequently the world in which we live.

Grand words, no? It's heartening to know that at least one small settlement around the globe, people are putting their ideals into action. On a greater scale, India itself is heartening: 1.1 billion people of all different ethnicities, religions, languages, and castes manage to live together, for the most part. All over, you can see icons of Ganesha, Breaker of Obstacles: evidence of the indomitable human spirit that impresses most travelers to India, including this one. If Auroville can meet its challenges in its microcosm; if India can refuse to give into the forces of divisiveness and maintain peace; then perhaps the whole planet can manage to get along. Finally, the global mood seems ripe for this.



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