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Finding Auroville: An insider discovers reality in a utopian commune

After a short stint as a resident, Rayna Jhaveri finds all is not perfect inside India's utopian, no-cars commune

By [Rayna Jhaveri](#) ([author/rayna-jhaveri](#)) 23 August, 2010

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The author helped look after an expansive house-and-garden property built by Roger Anger in Auroville's original model community, Auromodele.

On the east coast of the state of Tamil Nadu, near the erstwhile French colony of Pondicherry, a 40-year-old experiment teeters on the verge of a quiet explosion. It's a testing ground that started off as a barren, rocky wasteland and, through great dedication and natural means, has been converted to a densely forested expanse. Its willing subjects, a mix of men, women and children from around the world.

The aim of the experiment is the functional realization of human unity. Its name: Auroville.

Auroville was founded in 1968 based on the vision of a French woman of Turkish-Egyptian descent named Mirra Alfassa, better known during her time in India as The Mother. The Mother, whose life was filled with intense metaphysical and transcendental experiences, was the spiritual collaborator of Sri Aurobindo, who himself -- in addition to being an Indian nationalist and freedom fighter -- was a prolific poet, writer, visionary philosopher of human progress and avant-garde spiritual evolutionist.



The Mother in Pondicherry in 1969.

The Mother had a revelation of Auroville as a place meant to contribute significantly toward the "progress of humanity towards its splendid future by bringing together people of goodwill and aspiration for a better world." Auroville aimed to be a town that expressed humanity's aspiration to integral perfection, where creative exploration, active solution-seeking and open communication were encouraged as means to a better, more harmonious way of living.

Upon its founding, a handful of soil from each of 124 countries and 23 Indian states was placed into an urn as a symbol of Auroville's communal spirit. The initial population of this universal township stood at some sixty people, with plans to accommodate a population of 50,000. Various living and learning communities were formed with names such as Fraternité, Verité, Shanti, Aspiration and New Creation, many with open, natural architecture inspired by buildings designed by Auroville's principal architect, Roger Anger. Aspiring new entrants were granted residency by a simple process: The Mother or

one of her closest disciples would look at the aspirant a moment, then nod or shake their head to indicate 'yes' or 'no.' There was no doubt, only clarity; and it was in The Mother's clarity of purpose that Auroville laid down its roots.

When The Mother died in 1973, the Government of India got involved with the administration of Auroville (The Mother had repeatedly warned of this), and external regulations entered an environment that had been fluidly evolving in its own way. As the population grew, Auroville's own internal administrative system became more structured, not unlike a growing start-up company. With structure came some organization, but also bureaucracy; a community founded

upon the dynamism of heart-spirit became slowly infiltrated by the rigor of mind-rules. Still, Auroville continued on, channelling its way through narrow stretches fuelled by The Mother's dream.

I visited Auroville for the first time earlier this year. I'd previously only known of it as a place from which high-quality natural products came (incense sticks, perfumes, soaps), and had heard it described as "a cool place" where one could live close to nature, explore art and craft, work as a volunteer on farms, meet interesting people from around the world and generally be inspired to live a more holistic life.



Jhaveri was inspired to do less and observe more.

I had been travelling more compulsively than ever lately, seemingly looking for a way out of the compression I'd been feeling in Mumbai. Friends returning to Auroville for a visit invited me to join them.

For two weeks, I lived in an eco-friendly forest hut with no electricity, bathed outdoors and bicycled everywhere. I ate delicious vegetarian food, often locally-grown and organic, at Solar Kitchen, the popular communal dining hall where cooking is largely powered by a massive solar dish. I painted boulders for a kids' workshop space, helped produce a radio interview for Auroville's community radio station and worked on the design of a spinning lantern with [Shradhanjali](http://www.shradhanjaliaouroville.com/) (<http://www.shradhanjaliaouroville.com/>), a women's paper handicraft collective. I conducted a [poi](http://www.homeofpoi.com/) (<http://www.homeofpoi.com/>) workshop for local Tamilian village children, witnessed the magic of permaculture reforestation at the miraculous [Pebble Garden](http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=109362432429880) (<http://www.facebook.com/group.php?gid=109362432429880>) and coaxed eerie sounds out of the unique singing stone at musical instrument production unit [Svaram](http://www.svaram.org/media-collection/) (<http://www.svaram.org/media-collection/>). I attended

a superb jazz concert, went to a lemonade-and-cookies dance party in a jam factory (Auroville discourages alcohol, nicotine or other stimulants) and chatted with international visitors and Aurovillians over many coffees.

There were some undercurrents of anxiety in the air -- an almost tense, fearful relationship with money, jibes about underpaid, overworked volunteers, small-town gossip -- which, in my breathless euphoria of being in a new place, I brushed aside. I had a short meditation session at the Matrimandir, a giant, futuristic golden globe at the center of Auroville representing "the Divine's answer to man's inspiration for perfection," complete with pristine white carpets, air conditioning and an inner silent meditation chamber at whose center lies a space-age crystal ball lit from the top by a ray of sunlight. The Matrimandir from the outside reminded me of the Epcot dome, and my first experience in Auroville was a bit like a kid's first trip to Disneyworld, wanting to get on all of the rides at once.

Auroville was shiny and exciting, and I decided to return soon for a longer stay. When I returned a month later -- with my cats and all -- I had the good fortune of being presented with all the elements of the "insider experience" of Auroville.

Instead of living at a guest house I had the opportunity to help look after an expansive house-and-garden property, built by Roger Anger in Auroville's original model community, Auromodele. Located on the periphery of the circular township, the house and garden had a wonderful energy that felt more expansive, more Auroville-like than all the many activities I had been playing with on my first visit. The most beautiful spirits of Auroville I met were the ones who kept more to themselves, focused on their work and personal growth, and didn't invite jealousy, envy or ego into the clean space they had taken so much care to create.

Entrants were granted residency by a simple process: The Mother would look at the aspirant a moment, and nod or shake her head in a 'yes' or 'no'.

— Rayna Jhaveri

I was inspired to do less and observe more. By taking care of the house (writing, cooking, cleaning, maintaining, fixing, arranging), working in the garden (pruning, planting, watering, trimming, harvesting), interacting with local Tamil villagers (housemaid, gardener, milkman, electricians, plumbers) and speaking for many hours each day with a spiritually liberated friend who was intimately familiar with the works of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother, I felt as though I was experiencing the true, original heart of Auroville by *living* it, rather than *looking* for it.

In this less-involved, quieter mode, I also had the opportunity to observe what felt to me like a subcutaneous itch under Auroville's smooth surface, a spiritual sickness of sorts that lay beneath the shiny armor. It was the smell of hot milk right before it boils over and burns. I watched as many aspiring newcomers -- frustrated by their experience of the now wooden and long-drawn process of becoming Aurovillian -- throw their hands up in confused sadness and walk away.

A South American lady who'd spent over a year of time, energy and money following the rules of entry to finally gain citizenship was told that she'd have to start again from scratch if she left Auroville for a few months to visit her terminally ill father abroad. A second acquaintance gave up halfway through, his expectations unmet. Another friend, who'd also spent all his time and savings on living in and working for Auroville for over a year, was not only rudely and inexplicably denied citizenship after being led about a complicated dance of half-communications (on the vague basis that he hadn't "followed the rules" to a T), but was not paid a large sum of money previously agreed upon, sent childish, slanderous emails and third-person messages from Aurovillians. He was even told that his Indian visa (granted by Auroville) could be taken away at any moment, and that he'd have to leave the country on a moment's notice depending on the administration's whim. He didn't understand what he'd done wrong, and was hurt that no one would come gently and explain his offense to him directly.



When it was founded, a handful of soil from 124 countries and 23 Indian states was placed into an urn as a symbol of Auroville's communal spirit.

A Dutch friend who'd been living as an Aurovillian for a few years was tired of giving his time to offer his services to Auroville and not being paid for it. He had also had some difficult experiences with some of the township's new-guard administration. "After a while, everyone who works in (an Auroville administration unit) becomes a monster. Even a sweet young girl would turn into a Medusa there," he said. "It sucks the spirit out of you."

After more than 40 years, Auroville's population remains at 2,170, still far from the goal of 50,000 residents.

Some original Aurovillians express outrage about the current state of affairs, some promise action, some form working groups and committees and have meetings and brainstorming sessions. I didn't feel as though much was actually getting done beyond nostalgic reminiscing about the old days, or talking about how things *should* be. The guardians of The Mother's dream turned out to be child soldiers with matchsticks for swords.

I still wanted to be fair, to give Auroville a chance, so I persisted in my own experience. I was working with an Auroville unit, my efforts for which were emphatically promised to be "duly compensated." It was emphasized that I wasn't there as an unpaid volunteer even though the discussion of actual monetary amounts seemed to be avoided each time the opportunity arose. My heart sank each time as promises turned to compromises, as I watched two potential clients -- both also Auroville units -- clam up and disappear when issues of money came up. No offer was ever made to duly compensate me. In a single moment of maturation, I saw the silken hopes I had clung to all my life turn into the rough, reliable rope of reality.



After more than 40 years, Auroville's population stands at 2,170 people.

I felt like I was putting time, love and effort into a golden dream that was slowly turning to rocks as I awoke. I felt as though this was closer to the power politics, jealous backstabbing and petty feudalism of a medieval town, not Sri Aurobindo's vision of working towards the realization of the superhuman. As one from the outside world, so to speak, I didn't understand what was going on, and no one inside Auroville seemed to want to explain. The experiment, in my limited understanding, had reached a critical boiling point, and its subjects were waiting with eyes squeezed shut for the explosion.

There was great joy in feeling that all this was part of the bigger picture; that these passing phases could be recognized as the inevitable high and low tides in the unchanging ocean of consciousness. It was in Auroville, through Auroville, for Auroville that I found the seed of my own unchanging self. When I left, I felt as though my own experiment had been successful. I had my own understanding of Auroville in my heart, and could take it with me wherever I went, with no fear that anyone or anything could take it

away.

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Rayna has been getting lost since she was three years old, and figured she might as well make a living writing about it. Read more about [Rayna Jhaveri](#) ([author/rayna-jhaveri](#))

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