Who took the initiative of building Auroville?

Compiled by Gilles G.

In October 1965, a few months after the Mother had started to speak to Her disciples about Auroville, Gilbert Gauché presented to Her a set of questions and, in some cases with his suggested answer. The second of these questions was:

2. QUI A PRIS L’INITIATIVE DE LA CONSTRUCTION D’AUROVILLE ?

C’est la Mère de l’Ashram de Sri Aurobindo, situé à Pondicherry dans le sud de l’Inde.

Le Seigneur Suprêm

2: WHO TOOK THE INITIATIVE OF BUILDING AUROVILLE?

It is the Mother of Sri Aurobindo Ashram, located at Pondicherry in the South of India.

The Supreme Lord.

Note that the Mother did not retain the answer suggested by Gilbert – which was that She started Auroville.

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Preliminary remarks

The third point of the Mother’s text: “To be a true Aurovilian”, dated 13.7.70, reads:

For our passage in the material world, what is indispensable to our life and to our action is put at our disposal according to the place we must occupy. The more we are consciously in contact with our inner being, the more are the exact means given to us.

This is actually valid not only for the Aurovilians, but for every human being. This statement explains the following two sayings:

- In India, one often hears that that there is no need to search for a guru because, he will come to the disciple when the latter will be ready\(^1\) – which does not necessarily mean that he will come knocking at the disciple’s door. In most cases, circumstances will lead the disciples to his guru.

- It is also said that ‘Yogis do not start anything’\(^2\). This is because, Yogis being consciously in contact with their inner being, the exact means that are indispensable to their life and action are put at their disposal. They do not need to start anything because the human and material resources, and all other things they require come to them by themselves.

Note that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother never said/wrote that They started the Ashram. They said/wrote that in 1926, disciples started coming and the Ashram started.

The Ashram School started because, in December 1942, during WW II, the Japanese bombed Calcutta. This bombing resulted in many Bengali disciples feeling that the only safe place was Pondicherry, by Sri Aurobindo and the Mother. Naturally, they came with their family, though children were not allowed at the Ashram until then. The Mother explained that She felt the need to educate these children and, on 2\(^{nd}\) December 1943, the Ashram School was started.

\(^1\) This saying explains the title of one of Dilip Kumar Roy: “Sri Aurobindo came to me”. As Sri Aurobindo was not coming out of his apartment at the Ashram, circumstances led Dilip to come to Pondicherry and meet him.

\(^2\) Nirodharan said this in one of his talks to the students of the SAICE.
Let us also remember that in the “Evening Talks” after a disciple had affirmed that Sri Aurobindo and the Mother knew everything, the master replied that NO, he did not know everything; he didn’t know for example what the British prime minister had for breakfast that morning; They knew only what They needed to know. Hence, in some case, the reasons behind certain events may have become clear to the Mother only after some other things had occurred.

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Sri Aurobindo and the Mother had already mentioned several times in their writings the need, at a certain point of the evolution of human consciousness of creating an example of an ideal or Gnostic society* – or ideal town.

Here is the series of circumstances which lead to the launching of Auroville:

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1954 August: The Mother publishes in the “Bulletin” and article entitled “A Dream” in which She describes an ideal society. She ends this article by writing:

The earth is certainly not ready to realise such an ideal, for mankind does not yet possess sufficient knowledge to understand and adopt it nor the conscious force that is indispensable in order to execute it; that is why I call it a dream.

And yet this dream is in the course of becoming a reality; that is what we are striving for in Sri Aurobindo’s Ashram, on a very small scale, in proportion to our limited means. The realisation is certainly far from perfect, but it is progressive; little by little we are advancing towards our goal which we hope we may one day be able to present to the world as a practical and effective way to emerge from the present chaos, to be born into a new life that is more harmonious and true.

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1956, February 29th A first descent of the Supramental takes place. The earth is starting to become ready and it will eventually lead to the launching of Auroville.

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1960: The Sri Aurobindo Society is established. Navajata is its General Secretary and the Mother its President. The Mother will tell Satprem that She became President so that donors could be sure that donations were going to Her work.

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1960 August 20th

   While filing various old papers, notes, etc., the Mother happens upon the plan for a film studio at the lake some five miles from Pondicherry. She explains to Satprem:

   It’s at the lake [Usteri]. The property belonged to the mission and at that time its manager was a very good friend of ours, even though he was a missionary. He said that he would arrange for us to have it. Everything was arranged, and I was to receive the money to buy it (they asked for more than fifty or sixty thousand rupees). But then the money didn’t come and our missionary friend left. He’s no longer there; he’s been replaced by someone else.

   [The Mother looks at a piece of paper]

   “Calling Antonin Raymond”, the architect for the construction. Then there was also “making ready temporary quarters for [an American film maker]”. But then [the film maker] left; he died. That’s what happens – things change. It’s not that the project stops, but it’s forced to take other paths.

   Satprem: But this film project has been completely abandoned now, hasn’t it?

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* The first document, “An ideal society”, we have in this respect from the Mother, dates from 1912.
* Antonin Raymond was the architect of “Golconde” and the father of modern architecture in Japan.
No, no. You see, it wasn’t a studio – it was a school, a school of photography, television and film. It’s not at all buried. But Louis⁵ has enlarged the program. [The Mother indicates the plan]. This is only a small part of his extensive total program. He is planning to have a school of agriculture, a modern dairy with grazing land – there’s a lot of agriculture, really a lot – fruit orchards, large rice fields, many things. And then a ceramics factory. My ceramics factory will be at the far end of the lake, so as to utilise the clay – the government has agreed; as they have to dig out the lake one day, we shall use the topsoil for the fields. First we’ll remove all the pebbles (you know, there are hills over there), which can be used for construction – it’s a mine of pebbles. After removing the pebbles, there will be holes which then we’ll fill with earth from the lake. And below this earth is a thick and compact layer of clay which is so hard it can’t be used for farming – it’s impossible – but it’s wonderful for making ceramics. So right at the very end, in Indian territory⁶, we’ll have a large ceramics industry. On the other side, we’ll have a little factory for firing clay. All this is huge. A tremendous program. We can file it with the other things.

1964 January 18th

The Mother tells Satprem:

I saw Sudhir Ghosh⁷ this morning, the person who went to America, who knew Kennedy and even spoke to him about the possibility of openly joining with Russia so as to exert pressure on the world and prevent armed disputes (he said, “settle all border and territorial disputes in a peaceful way,” beginning, of course, with China and India). Kennedy had been enthusiastic. The Russian ambassador had been summoned at once, and he had telephoned Khrushchev: enthusiastic over the idea (but this Khrushchev seems to be rather a good man). They were supposed to sort it out during a meeting at the U.N. At this point, Kennedy makes off...⁸

But the idea has been taken up again through Khrushchev and he continues to be quite enthusiastic. It seems (I don’t know if it’s quite true, because its Z [a Russian disciple] who says so)... but Z sent him my article “A Dream”⁹, on the possibility of creating a small “international centre” (I don’t like the word “international”, but never mind), and Khrushchev answered, “This idea is excellent, the entire world should make it a reality.” Well, I don’t know whether it’s correct, but anyway the gentleman seems to be well-disposed.¹⁰

And this Sudhir Ghosh is very intimate with the U.S. ambassador in Delhi.... In brief, Sudhir Ghosh has sent me the new proposal – the first one, I had approved it, I had even put my blessings on it, and he had gone to see Nehru: Nehru immediately called both ambassadors for a conference¹¹. At the time, I worked a good deal and things were moving... Now, it seems that the new president [Johnson] is, for the time being, continuing what the other did: he won’t upset the apple cart.... We’ll see.

If it succeeds, it will give some concrete expression to the effort of transformation without violence.

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⁵ Louis Allen, an Ashramite from South Africa who was at that time in-charge of the Ashram’s ‘Lake Estate’.
⁶ Pondicherry was still a French enclave, under French administration. The neighbouring territory was the Indian State of Madras, which later became Tamil Nadu.
⁷ Sudhir Ghosh played an important role in Indian politics as an emissary of Gandhi in pre and post-independence days. This dynamic man became later a disciple of Sri Aurobindo and met Kennedy on March 28th 1963. On this occasion Sudhir Ghosh read him an article reflecting Sri Aurobindo’s views – and approved by him – but actually written by Amal Kiran in “Mother India” on 11th November 1950 about communist China’s aggressive expansion plans. Kennedy found it hard to believe that such a clear-sighted article could have been written as early as 1950. (Ref.: Beautiful Vignettes, p.46)
⁸ Kennedy was assassinated two months earlier, on 22 November 1963.
⁹ Refer to this document: August 1954.
¹⁰ Khrushchev will be dismissed nine months later, on 15 October 1964.
¹¹ Nehru will die four months later, on 27 May 1964.
1964 August 10th to 15th
Sources: GMLA, p.47-54,

The Sri Aurobindo Society holds in Pondicherry its First World Conference.
Vijay Poddar will later write that there were more than 400 delegates from all parts of India and other countries and that the Conference began with a striking message from the Mother:

The future of the Earth depends on a Change of Consciousness.

The only hope for the future is in a change of man's consciousness and the change is bound to come.

But it is left to men to decide if they will collaborate for this change or it will have to be enforced upon them by the power of crashing circumstances.

The Mother approved and blessed the entire programme:
The Conference was inaugurated with Mother’s words:

*No human will can finally prevail against the Divine’s Will.*

Let us put ourselves deliberately and exclusively on the side of the Divine and the Victory is ultimately certain.

The main focus of the Conference was on Human Unity. In an effort to make Sri Aurobindo’s dream of Human Unity a reality, a special seminar was organised on Human Unity. Mother set the agenda by writing out a set of questions and answers:

Q.: How can humanity become one?

By becoming conscious of its origin.

Q.: What is the way of making the consciousness of human unity grow in man?

*Spiritual education, that is to say an education which gives more importance to the growth of the spirit than to any religious or moral teaching or to the material so-called knowledge.*

Q.: What is a change of consciousness?

*A change of consciousness is equivalent to a new birth, a birth into a higher sphere of existence.*

Q.: How can a change of consciousness change the life upon earth?

*A change in human consciousness will make possible the manifestation upon earth of a higher Force, a purer Light, a more total Truth.*

Some of the important decisions taken during the Conference were:

1. To open centres of Sri Aurobindo Society in different countries of the world.
2. To translate and publish the writings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in various languages.
3. To develop a township near Pondicherry for those who want to prepare for a new life.
4. To establish a studio for the production of good and inspiring films.
5. To set up industries which would find a true solution to labour and industrial problems.
6. To work for World Unity in diversity through spiritual education.

During the Conference, two exhibitions were also arranged on ‘Unity a Fact’ and on ‘World Culture’.

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Hence, mid August 1964, the SAS resolved ‘To develop a township near Pondicherry for those who want to prepare for a new life’. Retrospectively, one imagines that the Mother was very happy about it; but from Her conversations with Satprem at that time, it doesn’t seem to have been the case:

On 14th August, She commented to Satprem on this World Conference and some other gatherings but did not express any enthusiasm at them...

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12 One of the 5 ‘dreams’ mentioned by Sri Aurobindo in the declaration he made on India’s Independence Day.
13 Let us note that the Mother will later write that “An effective human unity” is one of Auroville’s aims.
14 Some months later, Mother will name this new township: “Auroville”.
15 “Last night, and maybe the night before, oh, you and I talked for a very, very long time about all sorts of subjects, and I became aware that there is a place, somewhere in the physical Mind, but very close to the earth, where people must almost inevitably go at night.

There are sorts of big meeting rooms where people come and discuss all kinds of problems: they meet, work out programs and discuss problems. I don’t know why, I’ve been going there for the last two nights (I am afraid it is because of all those seminars and all that business where they play tape recordings of me), something pulls me there. And I am literally bombarded with questions by all those people (some I know, some I don’t), and I start answering this one, answering that one, addressing a whole crowd, oh!... When I wake up from it, I say to myself, “Well how silly can I be!... Physically I am out of it all, but now I am doing it at night!” This morning I was thoroughly disgusted: I woke up delivering a speech, oh!... There was a crowd, and people were asking me questions – seriously, very seriously!

But you were there, you are always there. So I wonder why you don’t remember...”
On 19th, when this World Conference and other gatherings were over, far from rejoicing at the resolution to create this new township, She told Satprem that She “told them that all those people who had come had very seriously aggravated the stupidity in the atmosphere.”

As we will see below, on 23.6.65, the Mother will tell Satprem that, until then She had taken only a very secondary interest in Auroville because [She] hadn't received anything direct. She had nevertheless been sufficiently interested in this project to name it “Auroville” and to write to Roger – most probably in March 1965.

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1965 June 23rd:

The Mother describes to Satprem Her plan of Auroville:

Have you heard of Auroville?...

For a long time, I had had a plan of the "ideal city," but that was during Sri Aurobindo's lifetime, with Sri Aurobindo living at its centre. Afterwards ... I was no longer interested.

Then, we took up the idea of Auroville again (I was the one who called it "Auroville"), but from the other end: instead of the formation having to find the place, it was the place (near the [Usteri] Lake) that caused the formation to be born; and up to now I took a very secondary interest in it because I hadn't received anything direct.

Then that little Huta took it into her head to have a house there, near the Lake, and have a house for me next to hers to offer me. And she wrote to me all her dreams; one or two sentences suddenly

16 How are you?  

Satprem: It’s rather you who should be asked that. They told me that you had not been very well.

It’s not that.

There is too much confusion, disorder... Nights very busy, very busy. And too much confusion here.

It’s perhaps a fatigue.

It’s above all (for me, for my consciousness) an avalanche of confusion on me, and not enough time to... (how to say it?) transform it as it comes. So it’s a little too much.

And then everything one reads... I’ve read things written about me, I’ve heard what people told in their “seminars” there’s enough to bury someone.

Satprem: Yes, that’s sure! Their conferences are ridiculous, it’s a tissue of commonplaces [pauvretés] – they teach Sri Aurobindo!

That’s it.

Satprem; They use words without consciousness, without knowledge and without power, so it’s chatter, and an unpleasant chatter.

Yes, that’s it.

Satprem: As Bharatidi said, they like to hear themselves talk.

But that’s just it, she is quite right.

I myself haven’t stopped telling them (you know, I see the quality of the atmosphere) [Mother feels the air with her fingers], I told them that all those people who had come had very seriously aggravated the stupidity in the atmosphere.

And then the others, that World Union – those the first day, they have all been individually in agreement, and they all continued to argue! And it goes on.

This time they have decided to make me President. I asked nothing of them naturally: they decided. And then M. has withdrawn. She wrote me today to tell me: “I believe that I can do nothing in World Union”. If you put the two together, it’s rather amusing; the others write to ask me to be President and M. has withdrawn: “I can no longer work for World Union”. In a word, it’s a mess – you know, fit for a dog.

But what aggravates is that there were too many people, and too many people asking to see me – hundreds and hundreds of people asked to see me; I said: “it’s not possible, materially it’s impossible.” And a very small work, which consists of signing, signing, giving blessings... So; last night it was difficult. This morning it wasn’t brilliant.

You have only to keep quiet and let the storm pass.

17 On 30th March, the Mother thanked Roger for his letter dated 24th March, in which he had replied positively to Her invitation to work on Auroville’s plans.

18 The Mother explained to Satprem on 20.8.60 what was the program at that time.

By the time this conversation took place, the centre of the town had already been shifted to the “Promesse” area.

19 Mother was however sufficiently interested in Auroville to write to Roger and ask him to come and build her town.
awakened an old, old memory of something that had tried to manifest – a creation – when I was very small (I don’t remember what age), and that had again tried to manifest at the very beginning of the century when I was with Théon. Then I had forgotten all about it. And it came back with that letter: suddenly I had my plan of Auroville. Now I have my general plan; I am waiting for Roger to make the detailed plans because since the beginning I have said, “Roger will be the architect”, and I have written to Roger.

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From then onwards and for the next 8 years, the Mother will speak a lot about Auroville and guide its development.

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