Elephant in the room
An “elephant in the room” is an obvious truth that is either being ignored or going unaddressed. The idiom is based on the idea that an elephant in a room would be impossible to overlook; people in the room (who pretend the elephant is not there) might be concerning themselves with relatively small, even irrelevant, matters compared to the big one. It can be a controversial issue which is ignored by a group of people, out of embarrassment or because it involves a social taboo, such as race or religion...

Calling something an “elephant in the room” may imply a value judgment that the issue ought to be discussed openly, or may be an acknowledgment that the issue is there and not going to go away by itself. For sure an interesting theme for MAgzAV, an Auroville magazine aiming to cover / uncover the emerging culture of Auroville.

And so we set out to ponder: “In Auroville, what elephants are lurking?”

Disclaimer 1: We do not claim to offer an exhaustive (or even extensive) list of elephants in Auroville.

We started with the list of “elephants in the room” produced after the “Auroville Retreat”. Housing was number one on the list. And we do touch on that, especially in Krishna’s article. And the issue of censorship vs. freedom of speech was a very interesting one for us to talk about. Gordon brought into the equation, “What are things we “can’t” talk about?” which is what Marco S ended up writing about in his article. For whilst it’s easy to proclaim that “I will speak up at any cost”, even here (especially here?!), it’s hard to follow through if one’s visa / financial support / a bearable life depends on one not doing so. I distill that it boils down to myriad groups and even more rules (“you cannot live or work outside, or smoke inside...”). So we shut up rather than risk God knows what, all in the name of progress.

I’d name one of the main obstacles to the progress of Auroville: “Not allowing people to just get on with their lives”. In my article I try to bring into focus the elephant called Trust, or rather Lack Thereof. Sure, many may look upon my proposal as too radical and a sure way to end Auroville altogether, but I feel we have to attack Lack Thereof with Trust.

During the work on this issue of MAgzAV we realized that we disagree on many things. (O the beauty of unity in diversity in action!) And so:

Disclaimer 2: Each author/creator is responsible for her / his work only and accepts no responsibility for the content as a whole.

Do enjoy the pieces of an incomplete puzzle by Marco S (who not only wrote but also spotted elephants all over Auroville), myself (also compiling Kathy, Bhavana and Mauna interview excerpts),
Gordon, Renu, Hamish, Krishna (interviewing Amy, Inge R, Olivier B, Renu and Toine), Nina (including an homage to Rauf), Sri Kolari (who travelled 3,906 kilometres by road in Ethiopia to photograph the effects of El Niño), Tagore, Sarah C., Aikya (Nature & Spirit), Mauna, Anna Breytenbach (a well-known Animal Communicator from South Africa whose interaction with a black leopard published on YouTube received over 4.5 million views) and Rod.

One missing piece is a much-wanted article by Laura Joy and her fellow conflict-connoisseurs. Ideally they would have talked about giraffes and such, but were too busy working to manifest Restorative Justice in Auroville and so are forgiven.

Enjoy spotting not only elephants but a variety of creatures in this issue of MAgzAV. I wanted to illustrate the article, which to me deals with the issue of banging people on the head with Mother’s words vs. universal appeal, with a portrait of Mother with the hint of a trunk, but was voted down. Instead I trumpet: Let us not be too serious, it’s also supposed to be fun!

Indeed, some nerves were touched in the process of creating this issue of MAgzAV. Perhaps, as Gordon pointed out during our early discussions, it is not that we “can’t”, but that we “won’t”. Or perhaps it is being done, in spite of us all, for I, for one, cannot believe how much Auroville has developed since I arrived here five years ago.

And yet I end: “Let us all call upon Ganesha, the elephant-headed god known to be a ‘remover of obstacles’ to help us overcome all of our elephants, personal and communal, as ignored they will stay, but acknowledged they may dissolve.”

On the cover: an elephant in the Art Service office.
Small City Life

by Marco S.
translated by Sarah C.

The small city life is not as easy as it may seem... As soon as you leave the house, you are very likely to meet someone you know and in that same moment you will have to decide whether or not and how to greet that person. Depending on the mood of the day, the degree of closeness, and the clues that you spot in the other person, you have a few seconds to choose the appropriate behaviour. Should you pretend you didn't see him? Wait for her to say hello? Should you just smile and go on? Should you stop for some small talk? Regardless of your choice, you already know at that point that, once you turn the corner, they will comment on your attitude, your haircut, your new iPhone... Everyone knows everything about everyone and gossip makes the rounds quickly, fed from mouth to mouth.

How nice it would be to live in a big city, invisible to the eyes of others, anonymous amongst the anonymous, absorbed by the multitude, without any social obligations or forced smiles, just part of a big mass moving along like a school of fish in the sea.

Auroville is supposed to be a city, but it has as yet remained a village. And in a village if you say something edgy or different, people will judge your entire personality rather than judge your thought alone.

This is annoying, immensely annoying to those that like to say what they think without worrying that they might lose that nice self-image that we all cultivate in order not to disturb or create conflicts.

The other day I was sitting at La Terrace to chat about this and that with Aurovilian friends, and we ended up talking about how the Auroville welfare is largely based on hundreds of Indian and Nepalese workers who come here every day to work for starvation wages.

MAgzAV, which calls itself a magazine of art and culture (meaning innovative and provocative, otherwise art and culture have no place here...)
- We want to touch sensitive subjects, which can largely be considered elephants in the room as we see them every day in the Aurovilian institutions and power dynamics.
- We live inside a democracy (India), in Auroville which is by definition anything but a dictatorship, and whose goal is the Supreme Truth.

At the same time, we are afraid to put a signature that gives value to our thoughts and to help in some way to spread the word and take active part in a change that we, almost all, hope for. So in the end: Scared of what? Come on...

Anonymous, you can accuse without verification of facts, or by putting them to your advantage, as happened recently in a letter, allegedly from a village, against members of the Land Service and the Working Committee. Anonymous writing is insulting and denigrating. It is for the fun of personal revenge that fuels anger and does not solve anything. This is anonymity in democracy. Even the international Anonymous movement, denouncing and boycotting the powers in place, is not as strong as it could be if it had hundreds of thousands of signatures instead of the mask of anonymity, I think.

This fear that meanders through the Aurovilian life seems rather a ridiculous self-censorship. In a country where you’ve built a totally inoffensive identity you cannot afford to criticise. You would be seen like an evil person by your neighbour, a source of shame for your husband or wife, a pain in the ass by work colleagues. So better keep silent, keep smiling in public, and then eventually let off steam in the mystery of an anonymous letter. So you can report the matter and ‘punish’ the alleged offender, without the risk of losing those influential friends who always help you in small daily needs. And so the elephants grow and multiply.

My goodness! Suddenly big words like “exploitation”, “post colonialism” and “tax havens” made their appearance in the discussion... meanwhile, some of us started to look around to see who was listening, the voices were lowered, the words almost whispered, until we closed the subject in an awkward silence.

Maybe we are too close to a dangerous subject... Someone might be eavesdropping? Is there an elephant on our table and nobody sees it? What is this fear of saying how things are and standing up for what we think in public?

The same fear even infiltrated the MAgzAV team when the topic of this edition was being discussed. “Maybe some texts should be published anonymously” - someone said - which is still unresolved and not clear, even while I am writing this article. But the facts are very clear:
- We are working on the new issue of
Speaking of elephants, I recently found myself in the middle of what seemed to be nothing short of a herd. Do you know the feeling? Panicking, looking for a way out, only to realise that there is none. Then, if only for a moment, I managed to stand perfectly still in the midst of it all and I could feel the chaos subside. The giants (of all shades of grey imaginable) eventually calmed down and disappeared altogether.

Rubbing my eyes, I realised that the elephants had made sure that I had seen them. Which begged me to question: Why? Were they, perhaps, messengers of some kind? Not giving a damn about my comfort, what was their message?

Tapping away, right here, right now, that is what I ponder. I ponder the fact that the time of the beasts retiring back into their various corners of this Matrimandir-hugging international village coincides with a deadline for my MAgzAV article themed "the city the earth needs", or: "things that are obvious but that we do not want to (or feel we cannot) talk about."

Since I prefer dreaming to outlining problems, I took a stab at the idea of Auroville as "the city the earth needs", with the nagging suspicion: The earth doesn't need more cities. In fact, could it be that this busy-ness of "building a city" (in a frantic, shrill voice) is part of old dogma, actually preventing us from evolving? As you surely know, truth, too, is evolving, and rather than holding on to old dogma we need to look to the future, and realise that we are creating it, right here and now.

Standing still, in midst of the stampeding huge flat feet with stubby toes, a voice in my inner ear (a hum): "The establishment may be wrong. Many small, thriving communities may be the way to go."

Ok, let me put it this way: The message that I glean, from those grey beasts (shades standing out: education and housing), that nearly trampled me to the ground in the last few months, is this: We have implemented a centralized governance system made up of an establishment fighting to "build a city", when, as far as I can tell, there is no need for one.

So, in my wildest eleph... I mean dreams... something different: Auroville as nothing that needs joining or building. As nothing but a common (diverse yet united) vision for the future. Rather than a golden city (surrounding wall to come), a loosely defined and held-together "free zone". A more permeable Auroville where people can settle and integrate themselves, all on their own or with the help of others, as long as they abide by a few guidelines inspired by the charter. A place with spaces for people to connect and have their needs met, be they material, virtual, or whatever...

Because, why insist on a narrow city / circle when it lies within the power of the Government of India (in charge of our visas and rights to settle) to decide to venture, instead, into the unknown? May this day-and-age, soon to pitch Clinton vs. Trump, not be a good time for initiating a turning point? See, I think that we are approaching the "building of Auroville", from the wrong angle. That, instead of zooming in on land ownership and rigorous visa procedure, we could choose to open up and say: "Vanakkam." With fewer restrictions, more would be left to the Divine. And all that it would take is the trust that the divine is alive inside all of us, at least some of the time.

I propose setting a wider perimeter — a radius to include 50,000 people, let's say (not throwing the baby out with the bath-water) — aiming to include instead of exclude, to welcome instead of vet. In doing so, allowing resources that appear on Auroville's doorstep to be applied instead of blocking them. Because, let's face it, Auroville will not itself be the place that does away with money. It is a concept more likely done away with in the process of the current overarching civilization (geared towards the 1 percent) crumbling. Rather to encourage, at this point, someone good at...
“making money” if helping the environment and others in the process, what harm is done? A guiding principle being: Towards a resource-based society (see Zeitgeist movement and others for more on that).

Instead of allowing only those that we have deemed worthy, surely, at this stage of our evolution, we’ll be better helped by being truly inclusive. It should, for example, be possible to let people come and settle guided by a few clear principles instead of blocking with innumerable rules, and leaving it up to each individual within the 50,000 free zone to choose to engage, or not. The boundary itself would be a permeable membrane, its main function to measure our success.

I imagine not only less rules but also fewer groups, or at least less group decision-making power. In its place the implementation of a Wise Counsel. That could be made up of the five, or nine, or so, most wise members of the free zone. All within the zone would have the right to vote on a regular basis, if they so elect, and may ask a member of the Counsel to take a break and let another person have a go. No status quo type politics, mind you.

As for guiding principles we know, by now, about sustainable energy provision, transport, and so on. So, to settle and set up a functioning unit, then, one would need to explain what one is all about, but as far as “no ownership” is concerned, is that not better treated as a directive to us all as mere stewards of this earth?

Money exists and may serve to gain access to land for projects with a higher (or not so high for that matter) purpose. Why not allow, help even, all the people who respect the environment and equality, to do what they feel urged to do? Is that not having faith in the divine power?

It would seem that what wants to move cannot if it is constantly being stifled. Can we let go of the idea of a city and instead focus on creating maximum prosperity (for all) at a minimum cost or even benefit to nature? Instead of closing ourselves off and building walls, helping people around us improve their standards of living, allowing all to prosper.

Many villages around our current circle are going strong, but of course there is room for improvement.

“Instead of allowing only those that we have deemed worthy, surely, at this stage of our evolution, we’ll be better helped by being truly inclusive.”

How about letting go of the idea that we are to build a city that is in turn doing outreach work, and seeing, instead, that we are all, truly, in this together. For, if a society without money is what will evolve, then: together we are strong whereas separate and hiding away in a fortress, count us as gone!

Those within the free zone would be free to invest, as long as they meet the basic criteria. We already have many successful businesses and rather than damning them we should be proud. Their contributions (not just the overflow, mind you) should help the neediest, be it with a sack of rice, a cluster of compost toilets, or... whatever.

A virtual (online) network, accessible to all 50,000, could help connect needs with offers. And help rate units / services in the process. And we may start to see a different kind of society spring up. Perhaps a more unified taxi service, more Foodlinks, more affordable accommodation for all...

Ok, we can still call it a city, but let it be a spread out and inter-connected one, one that allows its individuals to blossom. So, there it is (“out of the pen” as Gordon would put it): “Auroville – the city the earth needs. Does the earth need more cities?” With tonnes of love I let it go, but for one final prayer: “Giant elephant droppings, after almost fifty years of labour, help us make a big jump! Teach us to listen to each other, instead of hindering our fellow beings. Let us truly experience that we are not all alone, but that we are all one (Aurovilian or not).”

“I meant what I said, and I said what I meant
An elephant’s faithful, one hundred percent!”

Dr. Seuss/Theodore Geisel “Horton Hears a Who!”
When the first elephant entered my room-mind, I didn’t pay her any of my wander-mind. She’d been there before and I knew she was a refined and shy creature who wouldn’t bother me, so I wasn’t surprised when she just ambled off into a far corner and began to quietly remember the good old peanut field days just out of think-shot. Then the door opened and a few others came in, trunks swaying gently as if to say, “Oh excuse us. I know that we take up a lot of room in here, but there’s actually a lot of red earth here to wander about beneath the work trees, plus plenty of water from all of the wells.”

Suddenly I realized that I had a lot of elephants standing around listening. “Hey, back off,” I shouted, “how did you all get in here?”

“You called us,” said the biggest one with a hint of annoyance. “You wanted 50,000, right?”

“Umm, I suppose so,” I replied a little confused between elephants and people and about to go out and get that galaxy pair to come in for help.

“So deal with it,” another one said, and they all began to pull down branches from the work trees.

“Hey, wait, I . . . ,” but then I noticed that the elephants were of various colours: black, brown, tan, white; over half of them were white elephants.

White elephants! I thought. Just then there was a knock on the door, a banging really, and before I could react, it opened and a whole group of men entered, some policemen.

“Are you Auroville?” one of them, a grey haired man in a grey bush suit, asked. “Why yes, I am in Auroville at this mind-moment I suppose.” He gave me a look that suggested he thought I was from another planet in a galaxy beyond Andromeda.

“I’m sorry to say that there are too many white elephants in this place,” he said evenly. “What are you thinking? We have many problems with terrorism in this country, correct?” “Well yes,” I said, “it’s not like it was in 1968.” “Exactly,” he went on. “There are now many white elephants already moving around India freely. To have 30,000 more of them living here in this one place? It would be a big problem for the foreign registration office and the CID.” He looked around at the galaxy models that had suddenly appeared out of my inner space. “I understand that this place should be like a galaxy, a big galaxy like the Milky Way with its 400 million suns. But what about a dwarf galaxy like the Sagittarius Dwarf Elliptical Galaxy? Only one-fifth the size of the Milky Way.” “But wait, wait. One-fifth of 50,000 is only 10,000.” “You have done the maths,” he quipped with a smile. “Also, I believe that white elephants need a lot of space to live in?” Then, with a strange smile, he and his men disappeared and the elephants faded out to the far edges of my mind. “Dwarf,” I thought. “Like Vamana, the first human avatar of Vishnu. And he grew to stride over the three worlds.” I ran to the door, opened it and shouted to the two galaxyites still at it, “Hey, did you ever hear of Vamana?”
The cold beers fuelled the flames of the argument I was having with Ravi about the ‘entitled’ behaviour of Aurovilians. I felt that double rage - of anger and defence - when something dear to you is criticized by someone you are not sure loves it quite as much as you do, something you defend outside but may despair about with an insider. I had to acknowledge that the attitude existed and ended the tension with an uncommitted “Of course, it’s easier to judge from the outside” - a used and worn rebuttal. But, after all was said and done - human nature, over-work, the play of forces in, on and against the yoga - nothing quite rubbed out the offending stain his criticism pointed out, and the topic deserved some thought. So I pondered over it in the following months, musing on what propagates, triggers or alleviates this attitude of ‘entitlement’ that Aurovilians are so commonly accused of harbouring.

‘Entitlement’
From Webster’s we are given:
1.a: the state or condition of being entitled, right
1.b: a right to benefits specified especially by law or contract
2. a government program providing benefits to members of a specified group also: funds supporting or distributed by such a program
3. a belief that one is deserving of or entitled to certain privileges.

These are all somewhat jarring definitions and are in contrast to our fabled building the cradle of the new world for nobody in particular on an apparently rather bumpy path called ‘karma yoga’ in order to become ‘willing servitors of the Divine Consciousness’.

I stumbled through the dark. The feeble light of my parked, running bike guided me down the footpath so I could dodge the artfully placed boulders and cow barriers leading to the apartment complex.

Nothing was going to slow down or prevent me from completing the long journey, which had begun months earlier, of delivering a package to its final destination, by cyber ping-ponging queries across the world and between a network of globally orbiting Aurovilians who helped order, purchase, and courier to the next traveling migrant a remedy for an ailing Aurovilian.

I advanced towards the looming box that appeared in the dim starlight, towards the unknown flat. I looked for signs but the tiny beam on my keychain light indicated there were none, the doors to the stairs were locked and the stairwell was even darker than the unlit passageways that surrounded the building. I felt my way towards the rear, where some lights shone through the first floor windows and I began to call: “Hello?! … Hello?! … Hello?!” Finally, a head came out. Brisk directions to my destination and the method by which I was to unlock the stairwell door were given.

I repeated the instructions and directions to be quite sure, as the head was alreadyretreating from the frame, and was about to thank the person when I was interrupted by the final advice, “And stop shouting so loud here!”

There it was! While harmless it stung me: that sharp jab in the constant liver-pain of...
my jaundiced ideal.

Thus, we observe that ‘entitlement’ is often received in the form of a smug instruction or admonition that makes you feel… unwelcome.

And perhaps it hurt me more painfully because my heart and mind had been captivated by this vast, red and hot, empty landscape, which, as a child, I trotted around filling in with the imagined wonders that would come to occupy this place. Drummed into our education were the ardent pursuits of the charter, the words and letters from the Mother about Auroville, ‘The Ideal child,’ the head-scratching efforts of trying to learn four languages, etc.

I felt secure in the certitude of our purpose and privileged to be a part of this exceptional destiny, which I was thrilled to share with all the people … that would eventually arrive. 47 years later, here they were.

Possible causes for the attitude of ‘entitlement’:

Strain:
The first obvious reason is the sheer strain caused by a large, increasing, transient population of tourists, visitors, guests, volunteers and newcomers, as we call them.

This enormous flux is sustained by a dwarfed resident population, which employs a giant work force to run the daily machinery of goods and services produced for sale or consumption. These activities inform a large part of our formal and informal economy and occupy the majority of our time.

The various titles given to this transient population already indicates the need to categorize as much as possible, in order to divert the traffic into familiar patterns of control, in a bid to advise the more-demanding emotional stance that each category may require. This helps us control and govern the taxing responses required for the large number of beings entering our pseudo-intimate glare. Those who do stay on must, in turn, find their place in this changing hierarchy and carry on in the same tradition.

The implied and actual service expected is tiring. Thus, inmates are overloaded and stressed, resulting in a general unfriendliness or aloofness. All this is quite ‘normal’ when you realize that we residents also shoulder the responsibility of procuring the funds and laying down the infrastructure for a futuristic ‘city’ for a projected 50,000 inhabitants to be built in a (now) specific pattern with postmodern aesthetics, in order to complete our ‘apparent’ task dutifully.

If Sri Aurobindo applied to become an Aurovillian today, would he be let in?

Failures loom constantly as matter has a short life span in the tropics and building skills in this part of the world hide behind a vast empire of subjugation, indolence and smouldering resentment.

Ambiguous Motivation:

Frustration shows, in our homemade culture, as a result of attempting to develop without the normal social constraints and measures. And here we fall short; we have yet to build new dynamic rituals of growth or celebrations as markers of success and motivation - such as awards, rewards and promotions. These are considered unspiritual motivators and the crutches of the ‘inferior’ man, we so wish to move away from. We have our three annual (decorum with decoration) meditations at the urn’s amphitheatre (with or without bonfire, music and/or performance), but these silent collective moments cannot fill the chasms that have grown between us or bridge the many layered sub-texts in our society, nor can we be assured of the same experience by all participants. As each person’s ‘meditation’ is unique, any breezy pronouncements of perceived ‘collective aspiration’ can only be interpreted as purely subjective, and finally these ‘global perceptions’ will be as varied as the number of meditators.

Our alleged ‘motivations’ here are anchored primarily in spiritual growth, which is an abstract, invisible and highly subjective concept in itself, one that few can guide us through or serve as role models. Worse yet, we are not assured the ability to recognise such capacities in those that have them. Spirituality is, strictly speaking, more of a ‘feely’ area that commonly generates the interests of Patchouli-Smelling-Baggy-Panted people or Meticulous-Maniacs - both sorts of little material output or wealth… and thus hardly respected.

Our culture adopted a spirit of the Wild West, inherited from early pioneering times here and the traumas of the starving years and violence endured from 1976 – 83, during and after Auroville’s independence struggle. This has marked our behaviour and preferences. Our instinctive sense of preservation prefers and admires material manifestations and capacities as measures of success. And this was also illustrated by the meditating many that sat with fluttering semi-closed eyelids in bliss… unbothered by crying or hungry children… apparently.
anything unrelated to elephants is irrelephant

A benchmark joke often recited here is: If Sri Aurobindo applied to become an Aurovillian today, would he be let in? Let's see; Police record; Terrorism charges; Prone to hallucinations (see: mentally unstable); Has no money (see: burden, besides not advancing our ethnic pool); Refuses to leave his room or do any community service* (see: lazy). The answer is: Most certainly not! He also would not make it past the Matrimandir entry gates without seeing a movie, booking the day before and getting a pass for the next day. Our efficiency in managing the burgeoning tourist industry is coloured by the fear that one may use one's post for personal benefit, which neatly ensures that no helpful or convivial public display is ever encouraged. It also means that we are assured a regular cycle of complicated procedures and timings that will be managed with an unfailing and steady unfriendliness.

* Community service, such as serving in the solar kitchen or volunteering at the Matrimandir, are an approved way to enter the community and to learn the fine art of service (or karma yoga). It has indeed been the unwritten rite of passage for many amongst us and is an important exercise for people who have never volunteered or served before. (The present lack of a common work activity that is shared by Aurovilians and newcomers alike, along with the increased need for economic survival, means a growing social stratification and disparity).

Negotiating the Economy:
The fact of living or being an Aurovillian today relies on the balance of economic forces. The well-meaning individual of little means and high principles will (if accepted) remain alive, but not... well. He may be a prisoner to an endless cycle of insufficiency that will demand increasing spiritual poise, discipline and detachment from choices of: transportation, food, repairs, health, or higher education, which may loom before him in life.

For assistance in these matters you will be directed to chart an unpredictable course through a non-navigable sea of international bureaucratic representatives and groups, each interpreting the numerous collective assistances and hurdles we provide in a variety of accents to help you understand the services' limits and functions as well as the current policy changes that will allow them to know if or not your request may be attended to (but this only after it has been placed on the next meeting's agenda – attended to in the order received). Here too, a façade of anonymity (parading for impartiality) is the preferred mood in bureaucracy, and since Aurovilians are already so emotionally taxed (new people all ask the same questions!)... we cannot

continued on p.55

“Look! I'm a mahout Granny! I'm a mahout!” With great glee I shout as I ride the elephant. I am four years old and my feet swing madly because they don’t touch the ground. I love those elephants. There are two of them, with real ivory tusks and toenails. And every time I go to Granny and Grandpa's house I ride them.

That was 60 years ago. And now during dharshan days or my birthday when I step into Sri Aurobindo's room, it's as if I am transported back to my grandparents'
home in Edinburgh, Scotland. Inside the huge two-storey stone house in Cluny Gardens are masks, drums, carpets, ornaments of ivory, cobras, and more elephants on the mantle. It is a place of faraway magic from the mystery of Africa and India. I was six years old when my family migrated to Canada. I had to leave the elephants behind.

Twenty years later, on my way to India, I stopped to visit Granny. Sitting in that wonderful cosy drawing room, we played Scrabble. Even in her late 80’s she was a whiz, winning every time. I looked at the elephants. She smiled and we laughed at the time I was a wee mahout. “Those rosewood elephants were specially carved for Grandpa and me in 1904 when we lived in Cochin.”

Grandpa had been a Bank of Scotland banker and they had also lived in Madras and Kampala, Uganda for several years. Granny was excited to know that I was on my way to India to search for the mysteries I had read about in the Bhagavad Gita. Amongst all the beautiful things in her drawing room was an exquisitely carved ivory figure of Krishna playing his flute with a cow licking the sole of his left foot. “Oh, Granny, you have a Krishna. How beautiful.” “Take him with you Hamish. Back to India. And then take him home to Canada.” I will never forget the look on her face when she and Aunty Sheila dropped me off at Waverley Station to take the night train to London where I would start my overland journey to India. In her eyes, I could see she knew we would never see each other again.

Years later, long after Granny had died, Aunty Sheila shipped some treasures from Scotland to Canada with a note saying, “The elephants are for you, Hamish.” Those solid rosewood elephants, weighing close to 50 kilos each, travelled with Fif, my wife, and me across Canada. Life as actors requires you to move around a lot. Each time the elephants would be carefully wrapped in heavy blankets and shifted with tender loving care.

On 12.12.12 Fif and I arrived in Auroville to start our Newcomer process to become Aurovilians. My beloved elephants were left behind in the care of Fif’s cousin. After moving 12 times in 12 months in Auroville, Fif and I finally have a permanent place to live. We went back to Canada, to pack up and say good-bye. I could not leave the elephants behind again. For the last time, Fif and I tenderly wrapped them in soft heavy blankets and gently placed them in heavy packing boxes. Carefully we put them in the shipping container. They crossed the Pacific Ocean and now, like us, and Granny’s little ivory Krishna, they have finally come back home, to India – to stay.

Conflicts and Resolutions

Insights into the peculiar Aurovillian way of building a city

by Krishna
We want to shift things... There really is an aspiration to shift.

When speaking with some Aurovilians who put their energies into exposing conflict areas and resolving them, I wonder if the passion of building the best possible city has obtained some sort of semi-religious sanction, and cannot help comparing all the various viewpoints struggling for supremacy and a right to exist with the fight by institutionalized religions towards establishing the supremacy of their respective belief systems and dogmas.

*The ‘Auroville Retreat’ took place during two days in March 2015. After a year of communal research and preparation, several hundreds of young and old Aurovilians in key roles in governance, business and city services, along with members of Auroville’s Governing Board and International Advisory Council, came together to refresh, rededicate and revision the goals of the community, and brainstorm on redefinitions, solutions and new approaches to the city’s development of the coming years.

**90 Aurovilians attended a Town Planning workshop in the beginning of May 2016 in an attempt to describe a shared vision and/or approach to 5 areas of planning and development in Auroville (Master Plan/Ground Reality – ways to implement the master plan given ground realities and polarities; Ethical Parameters for Town Planning in Auroville including vision, values and code of conduct; Role, Structure and Organisation of Town Planning and Development; Selection, Implementation and Monitoring; and Development of a Community Participation Process for Town Planning and Development for Auroville). The work will now continue to structure the areas of the next Town Planning and Development organization.

The big question facing us is: How are we, Aurovilians, going to harmonize our conflicting beliefs and mind-sets and make sure that we are moving towards the City and the Society that is the reason for us being here? Do we have the goodwill to find comprehensive solutions?

How to make decisions

The people I speak with point to the need for strong, effective decision-making and implementation. Toine gives the example of the recently re-activated ARA (Active Residents Assembly, the exploratory, non-decision-making group, doing in-depth ground work on pertinent issues in preparation for discussion in the Residents Assembly (RA)) as being one of the experiments done in the search to move forward. He would like to see decisions actually being made and followed through. Renu concurs, and
stresses that working groups should make sure that the work proceeds according to priorities decided by the Residents Assembly, which, in turn, should support the working groups in their implementation, points out Amy.

How we make our decisions, and the role of the RA and the working groups in making these decisions, and implementing them successfully, is a hot topic with many points of view.

Olivier tells me that at present the ARA is working towards a community ‘decision-making’ process while focusing on a couple of key issues. The process they propose to follow goes like this: Research the subject in depth; Present it to the community; Debate through meetings and feedback process; Explore multiple solutions which are inclusive and integral by making smaller groups which try to reach an intuitive level of understanding (“silence can be of a great help for this shift”); And finally, experiment with one or more solutions.

On an interesting note: the team intends to use their process of deciding how to meet Auroville’s basic housing needs also as a possible option for general decision-making in Auroville, thereby tackling two birds with one stone. “What matters most is not the decision itself but whether or not it creates harmony and helps us move forward. This is the real barometer”.

Meeting basic needs: gripes, grousers and ‘should-dos’

The lack of affordable housing is one of the reasons that Auroville’s population does not grow. Toine feels that one of the major blocks to moving forward is the following vicious cycle: an Auroville economy that does not grow and does not create sufficient collective means to support more residents, including with housing. This creates a material barrier for people who want to join Auroville, which in turn contributes to the lack of socio-economic growth. According to Toine, “One way of breaking this vicious cycle is to create new housing assets that are prefunded and which will allow especially young energetic people to come and live in Auroville”. Olivier makes a calculation based on the current price of a house in Auroville and tells me that a 25 year old French person wanting to join Auroville has no way of affording it unless s/he earns and saves for twelve years! “If only 500 youngsters would join the Auroville experiment, a paradigm shift could happen at many levels of Auroville’s development”, observes Toine.

It is pointed out to me that the target population of 50,000 is one of the essential elements of the Auroville experiment: “Auroville is meant to be a manifestation of the vision of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother in the form of a town of 50,000 and not a rural community or low density suburb”.

How to meet the basic needs of Aurovilians is indeed one of the key issues. Presently people may be trapped in a particular work because of the maintenance (or staff quarters or...) and “that’s a very unhappy way of living. Perhaps, for some people the work they presently do in Auroville is not a joy and this dysfunctionality could be dealt with by working towards a strong community economy that supports all residents of Auroville”. Toine adds: “All of us should be supported regardless of the type of work we do. We had that before. It was called Prosperity”. He points out that Auroville needs to become self-supporting though we can never be self-sufficient (an island).

He dreams of a Human Resources group that actually meets with each Aurovillian, once a year or so, to evaluate how people are doing, to understand if basic needs are being met and if their work for Auroville is done with joy and with a sense of (inner) growth.

The way the average resident seems to want the Auroville economy to function has Amy pointing to the immaturity of some who exhibit the feeling of being ‘entitled’: “The farms don’t get support but we do want food sustainability... and it seems Aurovilians want the TDC to make it happen… and probably the FAMC is supposed to provide the money…” Renu has more confidence: “The Residents Assembly should be involved in deciding development priorities; this should not be left to the working groups”. As an example of how she feels the flow should work, she mentions the Government of India grant of which “the expenditure decisions should be presented by the relevant working groups to the RA, with a clear description of all the factors involved in the decision-making process (including all the options they had before

Based on ground realities, figures and accurate data

One of the topics that currently concern the ARA is the issue that Auroville’s basic housing needs are not met. Olivier is part of a team that has researched background data so that meetings and debates can be organized and feedback solicited based on ground realities, precise figures and accurate data (“we need to get out of the culture of gossip if we really want to progress”). He points out that many communities are against the idea of having more houses (presently only three communities allow new people) and believes that we all need to be aware that we need to solve this problem of lack of affordable housing together.

What matters most is not the decision itself but whether or not it creates harmony and helps us move forward. This is the real barometer.
them to consider); feedback from the residents should be incorporated with a clear mechanism for showing where the feedback has been incorporated. The working groups should make sure that the work goes on according to the priorities decided by the RA. The RA, in turn, should support the implementation of these priorities’.

She adds that the working groups concerned with Auroville’s economy should present five-year development plans along with the details of their decision-making processes.

**The Master Plan**

During my various interviews, the issue of the Master Plan and its controversial implementation guaranteed strong statements, like…”

“There is controversy about the Master Plan because it was published though it was still in a draft stage. At one point, the application of it became more rigid. But now that is changing…” And “The galaxy is not out-dated. It is a timeless vision that allows for the application of all that we have learned over the last 40 years in terms of sustainable development. Name one contemporary sustainability insight that cannot be implemented within the galaxy design of Auroville…”

Toine points out that the total land footprint of the Crown, the 12 radials, the outer ring and the loop around the International Zone represents only 1.7% of the total land of the Master Plan area and 6.9% of the land earmarked for the city area. He feels that this land has to be marked, cleared and levelled as public land for the infrastructure of Auroville, while its actual use can develop in stages, depending on actual needs. He feels that the marking, clearing and levelling of these ‘right-of-ways’ is essential for the installation of underground services (in a responsible and systematic manner), whilst leaving options open for future mobility solutions. The physical marking and clearing would ensure that these ‘right-of-ways’ and public areas are not used inadvertently (or deliberately) for other purposes, and that no buildings are constructed on them. “In all ancient cities of the world, these ‘right-of-ways’ do not change, but their usage does”, concludes Toine.

As he sees it, the Auroville Master Plan fixes only an overall planning and development framework and leaves a lot still to be filled in and designed. The Master Plan fixes the location of Auroville, the size of the city and the green belt, the zones and densities, a basic urban design pattern, the main ‘right-of-ways’, and the target population of the city. It also includes various parameters that stipulate sustainable infrastructure, including water, energy and mobility services. “Within this framework, the Master Plan calls for the preparation and implementation of ‘Detailed Development Plans’ and it is through these plans that the details get worked out, in phases. The work done by the Dream Catchers, Anupama (for the city centre), Luis Feduchi (for the residential zone), and others, need to be seen as contributions towards finalizing the detailed development plans. If you bring all of these contributions together, you will find many common threads as well as a platform for integration”.

He advises everyone to study the Master Plan*** so as to discover oneself how much room for flexibility and creativity it offers through a process of preparation of the five-year detailed development plans. General sweeping statements such as the “the Galaxy plan and the Master Plan are out-dated and need to be redefined” are not very helpful or constructive, he finds.

Regarding the five-year (infrastructure) development plans that have been worked out to date, Renu feels that these should be brought to the RA with all the information that lead to the choices made. While speaking of the recently presented Residential Zone (RZ) plan she notes that there is no information about which of the past studies and researches have been incorporated, and which not. This lacuna does not allow anybody to have a full understanding of the plan presented.

Olivier plainly states that when the work done by Dream Catchers was dismissed by the then l’Avenir, trust broke down in the community, and Renu categorically mentions that she doesn’t have “confidence in Aurovilians doing the best for Auroville anymore”, while Inge goes a step further by saying: “In the City of Truth, there are a lot of no-Truths”. “We have anarchy here”, says Amy, “and it’s not divine. Not nearly divine”.

As Renu mentions, the core of the problem lies in agreeing to the town planning. With the Chairperson of the TDC (the only professional urban planner in the TDC) based in Ahmedabad, it has been difficult for the relevant groups to find appropriate solutions when changes have to be made to the roads, for instance. This may result in conflicting situations and, ultimately, “the Residents Assembly has the collective responsibility to ensure that the City is built!”

Certainly the cutting of trees in the city area has become a sore phenomenon, often referred to as a typical, and universal, ‘green-belter’ vs. ‘city-dweller’ struggle by Aurovillian ‘old-timers’.

“The city area includes green corridors that connect with the greenbelt, which is three times the size of the city area, while the city area itself has an urban footprint of less than 50% (of the city area). If on top of maintaining these green corridors and the green-belt, people start demanding that every tree that has ever been planted must remain exactly where it is today, you might as well give up the entire idea of building a city here”, says one, while another says: “It is expected of non-Aurovilian ‘developers’ to have no concern for the ecological environment. However, in Auroville, we have the knowledge accumulated over the last decades, and we should use it to cut trees appropriately, keeping in mind both the proliferation of a species and the proliferation of a species and the ***www.auroville.info/ACUR/masterplan/index.htm
There appears to be an emerging trend to redefine Auroville as a project dealing with today's environmental, economic and other ground realities, "but Auroville's aims and objectives go much beyond that! In fact, we're already coming up with solutions that are relevant for today's problems of the world but, in Auroville's case, these are 'by-products' of the main objective: a change of consciousness".

Both Olivier and Toine stress that we need to keep in mind that Auroville is a city in the making and that things are going to keep changing. Toine says: "We are here in a project that is not static. We are not here to settle down. We are here to build a city", and Olivier insists: "Auroville is constantly changing and that may be destabilizing for people. But we have to always remember that Auroville is an evolutionary experience and that it is always on the move". They both feel that there needs to be more active participation of Auroville residents in building and running the Auroville Township. "How many people in this city are having sleepless nights because we are not developing into a city...? I think not many..." says Toine, lamenting our collective laid back approach and the absence of time-bound plans.

Stepping back to look at the overall situation, Renu points out that what could help us now is if mandates and policies had a clear intention incorporated that could be used as a touchstone in decision-making. "Can we honour our agreements?" asks Amy, "Can we listen to each other? If so, I believe there will be less conflict". Toine feels that solutions lie in ensuring that all voices are heard and that feedback is incorporated in a transparent manner. Olivier smiles, and tells me that there is no closed and final end to this exploration and experimentation: "It is a process of constant re-visitation and we should be flexible enough to be able to constantly evolve".

Each one has good reasons to support his own opinion, and I am no expert to judge between them. But from the spiritual point of view I know that with true goodwill all opinions can be harmonized in a more comprehensive and truer solution. This is what I expect from the workers of Auroville. Not that some give way to others, but that on the contrary all should combine their efforts to achieve a more comprehensive and perfect result. The ideal of Auroville demands this progress — don't you want to make it? Blessings."
• Elephants have the largest brains in the animal kingdom.
• Female elephants are called cows and male elephants are called bulls.
• Elephants have small eyes and poor eyesight.
• An elephant’s skin is so sensitive that it can feel a fly landing.
• Elephants can sense seismic signals with sensory cells in their feet. They can also hear a deep-pitched sound from ground vibrations.
• Elephants need frequent mud-baths; the mud is used as a sun-screen and an insect repellent for their sensitive skin.
• Elephants have excellent memory as well as excellent spatial and emotional awareness.
• Elephants are capable of emotions such as grief, sadness, humour, and can even cry.
• Other than humans, elephants are the only living beings on this planet that have proper death rituals. They dig shallow graves for their dead and cover the bodies with branches and dirt. They mourn for days.
• The closest living relative to elephants are hyraxes; small, thickset, herbivorous mammals often mistaken for rodents.
• Elephants are not scared of mice but they are scared of ants and bees.
• Elephants cannot trot, jump, or gallop (which requires four legs to be off the ground), but they can run very fast.
• Like human toddlers, great apes, magpies and dolphins, elephants too recognize themselves in the mirror.
• Humans have baby teeth which are replaced by adult teeth – so two cycles. Elephants have multiple tooth rotation throughout their lives.
• Female elephants remain pregnant for 22 months – the longest gestation period in any mammal.
• Elephant families, like bovines, are led by females.
• Elephants need only about four hours of sleep each night. Part of it is while standing, but in their short deep sleep they lie down and snore loudly.

- The monk holding an elephant goad and a lasso is the individual
- The flame represents effort - The elephant represents the mind
- Black elephant, the mental factor of sinking, lethargy - The monkey is distraction
- Black monkey colour, the mental factor of scattering
- The Five Objects of Sensory Pleasure are the object of distraction
- The rabbit represents subtle sinking, lethargy

continued on p.35
'Matrimandir' by Marco S.
Elephants are excellent communicators. They have gestures of friendliness, threat, happiness...

They can hear the trumpet calls of other elephants eight kilometres away. They also make infrasonic sounds (inaudible to humans) to communicate over very long distances.

Musth is a condition when bulls have heightened levels of testosterone and are very aggressive, especially toward other bulls.

An adult elephant needs at least 300 kilograms of food and 160 litres of water every day.

Elephants are excellent swimmers.

Elephants have the best sense of smell of all animals. They can smell water from over 150 kilometres away.

About 100 elephants are illegally killed every day in Africa alone for their tusks.

Elephants can distinguish between human beings according to gender, age, and even language.

Elephants and chimpanzees can show behaviour similar to post-traumatic stress disorder and even depression.

Elephants rarely develop cancer because they have 40 additional forms (or 20 copies) of a tumour suppressing gene, while humans have only two forms (or 1 copy).

Elephants have three times more neurons than humans have, and it cannot be explained why they are not smarter than humans (or maybe they are!)

An adult Asian elephant can hold about eight litres of water in its trunk.
El Niño effect in Ethiopia
by Sri Kolari

Ethiopia is facing its worst drought in 30 years. The harsh truth is that this news is drowning in the world news that is focused on the conflicts in Syria and Yemen and on the migrant crisis in Europe. As a documentary photographer, I have been covering under-reported humanitarian crises since 2009, and in 2016 I travelled 3,906 kilometres by road, in rural Ethiopia, documenting the effect of El Niño.

Even if Ethiopia is one of the fastest-growing economies in Africa, 30 percent of the population still subsists on less than $1.76 per day. More than 80 percent of Ethiopians live in rural Ethiopia and rely on their own agricultural production. Farmers usually harvest two grain crops per year. The recent problems started during the smaller “belg” season (March to May), when rains were about half of the normal average. Erratic precipitation throughout the summer meant that the main “meher” harvest in the eastern areas, too, was well below average, according to the US Agency for International Development’s Famine Early Warning Systems Network.
With the subsequent rise in prices, families are forced to skip meals and sell their belongings. The Ethiopian government estimates that 10.2 million people are in need of food assistance, due to a drought that has been exacerbated by El Niño. In December 2015, the government launched the 2016 Humanitarian Requirements Document (HRD) calling for $1.4bn to support 10.2 million people in 2016, over and above the 7.9 million people who will be supported through the government-led Productive Safety Net Program (PSNP).

Weather agencies worldwide have said that the current El Niño, a warming of the equatorial Pacific Ocean, may become the strongest on record. The climate system impacts rainfall patterns and temperatures around the world, but most intensely in the tropical regions of Africa, the Asia-Pacific and Latin America.
If you have ever visited Pondicherry, you most probably have met her. You even, possibly, have a selfie with her...? Lakshmi is the elephant of the Manakula Vinayakar Temple just near the Sri Aurobindo Ashram. MAgzAV had the pleasure to interview the 24-year-old elephant lady. We went to her house, at the Shiva Temple on Iswaran Koil Street, that has a private indoor space and a little garden where she sleeps.

M: Lakshmi, you must be very honoured to be the temple elephant… do you know why they chose you for the job?
L: Well, I don't know if I’m honoured as I didn’t really have a choice. I came to the temple when I was only six years old, basically a baby.

M: A baby? At six?
L: Well, you know, an elephant can reach 70 to 80 years, even 120 in exceptional cases. One of the reasons why I was chosen is perhaps because, apparently, female elephants are easier to tame. In fact, most elephants in temples, zoos and circuses are females. Easier to control, less instinctively aggressive... get it? Also, my white nails, proportional body, my footprints… O my, funny how appearances seem to matter to humans.

M: How does a regular day look like and what do you do in your spare time?
L: Spare time? I have none. I have no privacy… From 6 to 8am, Senthil, my legal guardian, and three other persons give me my daily bath. Then the make-up artist comes; everyday new designs and symbols are painted on me. I am a living God, you see, or so they say, and it seems to mean I need to be present every moment, without a break. Around 8.30am I leave home to go to the Manakula Vinayakar Temple, a few hundred metres away. Walking on a tarred road is really painful, especially in summertime when it’s just too hot. Those beautiful footprints... Oh well! Once there, the daily ritual consists of going inside to bless the statue of Ganesh, then the brahmin makes a mark on my forehead, and I’m ready to start my day. Basically, my job consists of standing outside the temple to give blessings, which means laying my trunk on people’s heads. They then give me (or the brahmin, rather) offerings like coins, grass or fruit. Ok, the grass and fruit I take. Point is, everyone thinks I like it, but hell, I’d much rather be in the forest… all these people treat me like I have some superpowers but I tell you, the first thing I would do is break out of those chains! Although I do like the fruit, I must say, and most of the people...

M: Do you ever meet fellow temple elephants?
L: I met some. Once a year the Tamil Nadu government organises a holiday retreat for all us working elephants in the state. Once we went to Mudumalai forest for 45 days, where we were given various check-ups, treatments, therapies and special food. I met fellow temple elephants there, but I’ve never actually met any wild ones. Can you believe that?

M: You live mostly around humans, though, so how do you communicate with them?
L: I do understand every command they give me. They use Malayalam, my mother-tongue, as I was raised in Kerala. But sometimes I just don't feel like doing what they ask of me... Loud sounds scare me and I don’t like all the cars beeping their horns. During Diwali, for example, I couldn't sleep for two full nights because of the crazy firecrackers. Why do people do that?

M: Do you follow the news about other temple elephants. What are you thoughts on all of your future?
L: Well, I do hope I am a Sunder and not a Bijlee or a Poornima.

M: Sorry, but what does that mean?
L: Well, 55-year-old Sunder felt the cool grass under his feet after years chained in a dungeon-like enclosure at a temple in Kolhapur district of Maharashtra. It was the Bombay High Court that finally stepped in to rescue him. Bijlee was 58 when she collapsed and died on the road, en route to a temple festival, no cool grass in sight. I do hope one day I will walk the cool grass, freely. But you know, some things have gotten better here in Tamil Nadu. For example, mahouts are no longer allowed to march with us on the streets or busy markets, forcing us to beg for a living. It is also illegal to make us stand in the scorching sun for long, to leave the ceremonial gears on for an unreasonable duration, or to burst crackers around us for ceremonial purposes... And, these days we get to rest during the monsoon, and, guess what? Our retirement age, in Tamil Nadu, has been fixed to 60 years. Yup, I think I am a Sunder!

M: Thanks so much for talking to us, Lakshmi, and we do hope you will get out of those chains soon!
The elephant starts to move closer. He slowly passes right in front of us and circles around the vehicle watching each and every one of us in the eyes: Motusi and me in front, the Bushman, Tina and Reiner next, and then Nina, Donalea and Stella in the back. Finally he leaves, still looking back, stopping, watching...

At that moment Alwyn, the other guide, calls us from the radio in the other car telling us the leopard is grunting close by: Do we want to join them? We shake our heads and Motusi calmly replies ‘we will come when we can’. All of us want to stay right where we are. Meanwhile two elephants in the water enter into a kind of dance. Slowly one places its trunk on another’s trunk. They both halt for a moment, as if suspended in timelessness and start again. We get into the slow entrancing rhythm of the elephants. I hear drums in the background, perhaps only the small fridge in the car playing a part. The dance of elephants mirroring each other goes on, sometimes with trunks rolled up in the air. It is magical. No words can explain it. Perhaps it is a mating ritual. For sure it is a rare privilege to witness. Finally, all the elephants, one by one, come out of the water, stop and watch us. Are we receiving elephant blessings, or some other transmission? More and more elephants appear out of the bushes behind us, slowly. They too watch us. At this point we are all crying, speechless, our hearts shining with love.
My Elephantine Decision

by Nina

We did not pay any attention as our rickety Pondicherry - Chennai Thiruvalluvar bus made its way through the tamarind tree-lined narrow Tindivanam Road—now part of National Highway 66, minus the gorgeous trees—to the section near the Chengalpattu area, where the vista opened up to the scrubby vegetation leading to the hills. One can still see the hills but those natural scrubs are long gone.

We, my classmates and I, were used to this travel. And any discomfort on the way was easily masked with enthusiasm and chit-chats. This time, right around a rocky outcrop our bus stopped. Initially we did not react. It was not unexpected to have some traffic jams — sometimes a lone cow lying supine, sometimes a herd of goats crossing over. Usually, the drivers and conductors of the buses would get off to sort things out — and the journey would resume.

But this time it was different. Nothing seemed to move for a while. We realized that the traffic had stopped both ways and for some reason the conductors and drivers were standing next to the buses, chatting but in low volume, or simply remained inside and were not their usual proactive selves. What was going on? More time passed and a couple of us got down to check it out. There was a row of buses standing still. When we went to the first stalled bus, we could see that at a distance the buses from the opposite direction were similarly queued up.

Between the two-way stalled traffic stood an elephant. One single adult — smack in the middle of the road, laterally facing west. It seemed as if it had come from the scrubs to the east, got on to the road to go to the hills, but for some reason was having a sojourn on the tarmac. It was not doing anything in particular, but nobody could guess if and when it would decide to walk away. It gently swung its trunk from time to time but otherwise just stood — as we and others stood mesmerized, watching it from a respectable distance. Prudent conductors and drivers did not dare to shoo, honk, or coax the elephant to do anything. It was understood that when the elephant would feel like and decide to move — only then the traffic would resume.

Now, let's turn back the events that led to this. It was late 80s, and we, the first 15 hand-picked batch of students from the first-ever school of ecology in the country, were in our third semester. Having two full semesters of intensive field-based core courses, it was time for us to pick our specialization. There was a good spread to choose from — determined to make my own decision. My head ruled over my heart and I chose to study urban ecology. I rationalized that it was the right thing to do given my background, familiarity, etc. but — there was a voice inside that kept disturbing me. In the meantime my new advisor, also an eminent scientist in his field, suggested I start thinking about my research topic and should go and explore Chennai library and archives for a couple of days. The decision was made. I, along with a few of my classmates who hailed from Chennai, jumped into the bus, which by now had stalled mid-way as the mighty elephant blocked our way.

We gazed at the pachyderm for a while, blocked our way. And Rauf had advised me that I should choose behavioral ecology/ socio biology and study with him.

Rauf, Dr Rauf Ali, one of our faculty members, was instrumental in creating and initiating this first-ever school of ecology in the country. He had insisted, uncharacteristic of the Indian ways, that we must call our faculty members by their first names. Not everybody liked the idea but then who would oppose Rauf? He was in his mid-30s himself and the youngest full professor. He had returned to India after a stint in Harvard University and Mahidol University in Thailand, and now lived in Auroville after being involved in a project with the Indian Institute of Science in Bangalore. Despite these lofty credentials, Rauf was in some ways one of us (or at times even more juvenile). I heard Rauf's advice but had set it aside — determined to make my own decision. My head ruled over my heart and I chose to study urban ecology. I rationalized that it was the right thing to do given my background,
by Mauna

Yes..., well..., talking about elephants..., I sometimes wonder if there's not a still deeper laying, un-outspoken elephant in our midst that we as yet don't dare to let come up in thought or voice. It more and more often shimmers in my mind which may mean that it does in many of us, trying to break through. It has to do with the question of what we are trying to do here and, more importantly perhaps, of how we present to the world what we're trying to do here.

Are we attempting to come out into the world as an inspired, vibrating and pulsating, living homage to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, or are we trying to shape a wide open, inspiring, aspiring universal city for all men of goodwill based on universal values, as the Mother asked us to do? A universal city based on truly universal values would mean a society based on genuine, basic, common-sense, high-spirited values that are recognisable by all kinds of people, all kinds of religions, all kinds of schools of thought, and by all kinds of individuals being part of this our human species. And Sri Aurobindo and Mother have given us these!

It is my strong conviction that this is what we're asked to do here. But for it to happen, we would need to dare, and want, to come out of our safely confined cabinet, with our well defined dogmas and patterns of thought and hassles and ways of being, our scriptures, quotes and models of thinking..., while still remaining anchored in the essential call and vision of Mother and Sri Arawinda. Only then would we become worthy of inviting the world to participate in building this universal city and have a chance to be heard. And yes, of course, it would mean a shifting away from our current still somewhat religious tendencies, and we would definitely need a new language, a new way of letting ourselves be known, of presenting ourselves.

I remember some 15 (?) years ago, when I still did Outreach Media work, and got a request from 11 Swedish poets who were travelling in India. They had heard about Auroville and wanted to come visit two days later. I asked Shraddhavan if she was willing to have them in the then just emerging Savitri Bhavan and she said yes. As I accompanied the poets to Matrimandir and around, I went along to Shraddhavan's talk with them and was so very, very deeply impressed with how she managed to communicate to these men what we are attempting to 'do' here, how we go about it, what our inner work entails.... She managed to offer them the heart of Auroville's transformative vision and its wide ranging scope without ever falling back on quotes left right and centre, and without putting these people off by using terminology that the West finds difficult to swallow. I have seen Asterji do the same.

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Are we attempting to come out into the world as an inspired, vibrating and pulsating, living homage to Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, or are we trying to shape a wide open, inspiring, aspiring universal city for all men of goodwill based on universal values?
We all know that many folks in the world are allergic to hearing about gurus and masters and mothers and mantras, but at the same time it is acutely evident that in the mainstream of ‘western’ awareness of today there’s a desperate need and an acute readiness for a new and better way of living, a new paradigm of placing oneself in this mystery called Life. Through non-stop all-level crises and unnameable atrocities happening on our planet these days, a universal need for an other than external certainty and stronghold becomes starkly apparent. It seems to me that the time is right for the awareness of being One Species to become paramount (again) and effective throughout the planet. But it should be introduced in a way that’s recognisable to all, in free and clean terms the gist of which can readily be seen and understood, and welcomed, without any connotation or ballast attached.

In August 1970 Mother said (to Satprem who objected to some texts of Mother or Sri Aurobindo that had been put in a brochure without mentioning their name): “One just has to leave the idea of the statement to its own worth, because if one presents the idea in the name of someone people don’t like, they will just discard it!”

It’s the idea, the message that counts. As I see it, Auroville has to learn to stand on its own and speak (and live!) its own clear, common, high-committed and inspiring language with which to reach out to the world. And yes, there’s a tremendous risk and danger in such an exercise, but here I would trust that Auroville’s critical mass of true inner conviction and determination will prevent any deterioration of the city’s high aims and goals. On the contrary, it would make us stronger, provided it would enjoy a conscious agreement and commitment by all of us. And of course, as long as we cannot, as a community, collectively consider the need for such a shift, the time just ain’t right, and waiting is...

If, however, we were to succeed in universalising Auroville’s message, and our ways along with it, Mother’s “Auroville, the city the earth needs” might find wider inroads into the world’s understanding and acceptance, thus also providing Auroville’s 50th with tools and means for a genuine gift to our planet.

help but colour our work with some of our frustrations – as we are after all still very... human! Policies are fashioned constantly by the department’s own self-sacrificing members. Suggestions coming from the residents are generally rejected as impracticable. And (if insisted upon) by the time a meeting is held, everyone is at the end of their tether and nothing is achieved except a back-and-forth of accusations and defence... till the meeting is adjourned. Criticism, varied and insistent, being a constant ‘ignore and carry on’ seems to be the only attitude one can have in public service. The end result is that our collective identity remains blurred in rhetoric and urgent priorities remain invisible in the noise.

Small Town Issues and Gossip:
Since we are a relatively small resident population (2700 adults and children), beneath all this activity lies our true and pseudo-intimacy, which at best is an inner bond but is most often simply opinions formed of each other, by each other, coloured by momentary encounters that are intensified by hearsay over time.

The charter’s futuristic thrust and its progressive ideals challenge our nature in daily life. We are unthinkingly drawn to the familiar; we instinctively tend to embrace uniformity. Seeing unity in diversity requires an effort, a wider view of the whole on several levels. We have no authority to measure its spiritual aims nor do we accept the pronouncements made by others. Thus, we focus on material manifestations as visible signs of progress. Meanwhile all this brick and mortar does little to advance human unity. The somewhat bitter international medicine freely distributed in large doses here are criticism, personal attack and bureaucratic obstacles. These become part of our cultural interpretation: ‘bad karma’, ‘hostile forces attack’, or ‘Divine’s design for the benefit of one’s personal
The song of Divine Anarchy has yet to be played; we endlessly tune our instruments or play our own tune, hoping to rally others with an expectant but illusive refrain that one day we will all play the same song. The overall effect is a cacophony with the spiritual lilts and strains of the flute colliding awkwardly with the blood pumping military marches of our material ambitions. Maybe we are actually fearful to acknowledge what we already know deep down inside - that it may be time to forget the fanfare and its song, throw aside the instrument and hop on the departing vehicle… before it’s too late!

Spiritual Bypass and Fatalism:
The fifth factor contributing to the notion of ‘entitlement’ is the spiritual magnificence of our charge.

Unconsciously it distorts the view of our inner or outer accomplishments and we may interpret our blunders or failures as Divine Guidance, wrapped in the smug belief that the ‘vast sacrifice’ of living here guarantees us a visa to supermanhood.

The foreclosed destiny and the evolutionary thrust of our gurus’ aims can mean that existing issues are not addressed and are dismissed as ‘the mysterious ways of the Divine’ required by the said ‘aggrieved’ person for his personal yoga. This further ensures that there is very little imperative or collective energy to address issues, thus urgent changes are very charily made and with only inconsequent or minor results that do little to change the overall flavour or cure the lurking ill. Besides, like most administrations and bureaucracies, the machinery’s many revolving cogs are not connected or attached to a central axle. The policies, originally elaborated to inform, collaborate and organize residents, have slumped into a heavy tea-drinking machinery thriving on consultations, approvals, contributions or waivers. An ever-growing number of groups, each fighting for their hierarchical legitimacy and importance, prove their significance by subjecting the residents to an increasing number of forms to fill in for various permissions or agreements to be stamped and signed, with their accompanying mandatory ‘contributions’ at every step of the way to accomplish any action. Only the speed (and silent alacrity by which these percentages are withdrawn from one’s account) is increasing, giving us a sense of ‘progress and order’ and helping us to hobble on and sustain.

Since no major change in our administrative set-up or economy can be done in isolation, changing anything in the current paradigm appears impossible!

Why So Entitled:
I sometimes muse at the vehemence with which the post-modern ritual of enslavement is embraced by the new generations … far away now are the freedom-loving hippies who spilled over the mountains of Afghanistan or Nepal and the caravans with fiery French revolutionaries with whom I shared my life.

According to me, the invasion of the ‘secretaries’ or ‘spirit snatchers’ became possible around the mid-to-late 80’s, as the level of comfort had increased enough to host this predatory breed. And naturally, with continued progress the ritual of enslavement shows no sign of losing its grip. Our fascination for being ‘normal’ - a dissonant longing to gain legitimacy from the ‘real’ world – is an old (but needed?) yardstick for achievement. The protestant morality and a 9-5 workweek are still frantically in vogue and their legitimacy is strengthened as such notions find their way creeping into our policies with well-meaning western efficacy. In other words, I helplessly witnessed the death of fraternity and the arrival of the ‘Monday Morning Blues’, all with its accompanying depression and angst, as we joined the powerless masses driven to daily drudgery alongside a gradually growing moneyed caste with their celebratory lifestyles. Much of this current paradigm’s dissonance is held in place by the constant pressure of the insufficiency of our collective finance, while the rhythm is ordained by the manufacturing and public service sector’s hours. This creates perhaps yet another divide between the majority that follow regimented hours and those that don’t (with the ensuing resentment and/or ‘punishments’). The ethics and morality of the western protestant is probably to counteract the long established slovenliness.

We advance in outer appearances and we stall on exploring consciousness and free will. We protect what we have and resist change to the model evolved, so patiently and painfully. Anxious, aware of the dwindling energy and resources as we age, our grip tightens, and we grow further apart from each other and as a community.

Meanwhile for the casual tourist, visitor or guest, amenities undoubtedly will continue to improve and flourish. However, the same cannot be said for the long-term volunteer or newcomer embarking to join hand, heart and soul with us - the ones that will literally ‘sweat it out’ with us. These fellow adventurers will have to follow an increasingly narrow route towards establishing an identity, work, home, friends and income, as they navigate the waters of our tired (and hurt) representatives, to start shedding their pasts and to begin joining ours - with all our privileges and entitlements. And we? We are left to pray and hope that some of them will strengthen our weakening resolve to end our entitlements and to better share our privileges.
I dream of an Auroville pulsing with Force
From its centre through petals of beauty
Quiet inspirational actions happening there
By individuals and groups
Alone or involving the community
Building harmony
Creating a melody that pulses silently
Outwards
Out into the roads and the buildings
Out into the fields and areas of work
Inspiring the creation and conception of the City
Inspiring new ideas and expressions
Inspiring new ways of creation and construction
Inspiring actions, big or subtle
Inspiring small performances and large conferences
A symphony
That pulses outside of Auroville
Out into the world
Inviting people of goodwill to enter
Inviting new thoughts and ideas and ways
Inviting people to come and build the City
They stream in towards the centre
Bringing abundance and prosperity
A wave of new expressions and realisations
Carrying us on its zenith
We surf joyfully
Inwards
Inexorably building the City
With all the treasures we have gathered
And moving silently through the spaces
To float in the Sea of Consciousness
Together

On 19 – 28 August 2016, artists Adil Writer, Henk van Putten and Nele Martens exhibited their work in Art Bengaluru at UB City.

Several Aurovilians participated in the PondyPHOTO exhibition at the Old Port between 26 August and 11 September. Among them were Hamsini, the Auroville Sisters, François, Grace, Ok, Dhrupad, Carla, Noeul, and others. More information on pondyphoto.com
As part of PondyPHOTO, Ireno Guerci and Lalie Sorbet (Clodine) participated in a group show at Kalinka Art Gallery. Also from 27 August to 11 September 2016,

Ceramic artist Supriya Menon Meneghetti curated an exhibition of 15 contemporary ceramic artists from India for Creta Yuga an exhibition in Faenza, Italy, during 2 – 4 September 2016. Kratu’s work was on show there as well as Supriya’s and many others.

Adil Writer went to Barcelona to participate in the International Ceramic Symposium (27 August - 11 September 2016) with his soda-fired ‘Books’, and then went on to exhibit his Planet-Gaudi Treasure Boxes at the International Academy for Ceramics from 12 - 16 September.

Twelve artists from Auroville and the bioregion were invited to participate in a ceramic and sculpture camp hosted by JSW Foundation at JSW Steel Ltd (Vijayanagar Works), Vidyanagar Township, Bellary District, Karnataka. Called ‘RENDEZVOUS WITH VIJAYANAGAR - Inner Space… Outer Space…’, the camp was from 12 - 27 September 2016. Participants were: Chantal Gowa, D Saravana, Kratu, Marie-Claire Barsotti, Masha, Nausheen Bari, Nele Martens, O Ramesh, Priya Sundaravalli, Puneet Brar, Sabrina Srinivas, Saraswati (Renata Sereda).

And, inside Auroville, the Sankalpa Art Centre was one of the 40 global locations that hosted Art Break Day on 2 September 2016. This was a community co-creation engagement rallied worldwide by US-based non-profit organization ‘Art is Moving’.

For more details and photographs, visit www.artservice.auroville.org

STATISTICS

These statistics were arrived at using the Master List, the list of people who received City Maintenance, the list of recurring transfers with contributions, and the comments of HRT for those who were not on list 2 and 3 (i.e. list of people who received City Maintenance and the list of recurring transfers with contributions). If anyone wants further information on this, good luck with running the gauntlet of the DMG form and procedures!
Prayer
by Anna Breytenbach

Blessed Oneness, that which I am and which we all are in our deepest Essence, please communicate to those gentle giants of the Earth, the elephants that I stand in strength and solidarity with them. I offer this prayer from my heart for their healing and well-being. I pray that they may find support where they need it and compassion instead of abuse.

May the humans they come in contact with respect and honour who they are as sentient beings. May they be blessed with peace and a fear-free life and held in loving kindness. I offer great gratitude knowing this will be so. Thank you, Amen.

Mauna, here since 1977 (In the ashram before that, since 1971)
Interviewed in 2005 by Daniel Endin:

“In the seventies, Auroville was a small platform for those who were really called, a very different idealist feeling, and fewer people. Now we are perhaps a bit over-organised. (...) It is difficult to keep up one’s idealism. We should look towards where research is on the edge. I have a feeling that we are lagging behind when it comes to looking into consciousness. But perhaps we do it without speaking about it. I have the hope that many Aurovililians are inwardly very active and working on these things. Are we simply not yet far enough progressed to bring it out into the open?”

Kathy, here since 1997 - 2010:

“I was part of a group that started Adventure, bordering on to Edayanchavadi, in 1997. There was not even a well there then but there was context, with the will to live simply, in a hut. (...) The connection to village work came through the whole Adventure experience. I believe that the future really depends on learning to get along. But how to get along with people who may be different? We had a lot of challenges but also a lot of community building processes, conflict resolution and so on. At some point things became very intense. For me it was a kind of test of faith and a catalyst. I realised I had to get involved with village work or leave Auroville. Anything else would have been hypocrisy. Out of that came the Thamarai project. Simply, it arose out of a felt urge to forge a relationship based on something deeper. One thing is clear, though: One cannot just click one’s fingers, it takes work.”

Bhavana, Village Action, in AV from 1970’s until her passing - 2010:

“I got on a van but hopped off in Pakistan, went to Afghanistan. As I didn’t want to get into India all poor and scared I started with getting used to being poor, in order to enter with some poise. Upon crossing the border, I felt safe. (...) India was like the answer to a dream, the core value being: receive every Guest as a God. I was treated very well. (...) My purpose was to find Truth. (...) I was happy, though poor. (...) [In Auroville] I felt I could live all of human development again, keeping in mind that to occupy land is not a good idea if one really wants to build a society (...) [and that] hiring people is not a good idea if you really want to build community. (...) There was a language barrier. The practical reality of organising the work, without being able to explain more complex issues, meant that the Tamil would do the “easy to understand” manual work. But many young ones picked up English, and now there are many interesting units and projects.”
Concealment
by Rod Hemsell

Nature is a repetition of forms
A collocation of frames and words
Striving to be free
As they populate the spaces
Of themselves, ready as leaves
To tremble and fall,
Ready as branches
To bend and sway,
Yet constrained in their presence
To take their stand,
To be more than they appear
To mean more than they can say;
Manifold, unmoving, and still
They unify the relational field:
This oneness of difference,
This stillness and change,
Hides its defiant discourse
In a radiant golden calm,
While planning its secret subversion
And spreading its silent revolution,
Her apparent inhibition is a ruse;
Nature's silence surrounds a fuse,
Awaiting the lightning of intention
To ignite the flame and release the cry
Of liberation, consciousness, and a new creation.

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We are always looking for content and contributors. Contact us on magzav@auroville.org.in or 0413-262-3187

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