

## [Auroville Part 3, Visiting Auroville](#)

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# Auroville Part 3, Visiting Auroville

Where Part I probed the lives of the philosopher/sage and his spiritual collaborateur, the Mother, and part II presented the "Ashram," parts III and IV will focus on Auroville.

To the unprepared, it can look desperate-800 souls scratching a spiritual vision out of 2,200-acres of baked-bare, inhospitable clay, 6 kilometers north of Pondicherry, India. It all began after Sri Aurobindo passed away in 1950 and French-born Mirra Alfassa, the Mother, felt that the "Ashram"-a radically progressive institution she herself had nursed into maturity during Sri Aurobindo's self-

imposed seclusion-was still not bold enough. As early as 1954, she began talking about "a place where beings of good will could live as citizens of the world, obeying one single authority, the supreme Truth." It would cut all ties with every religious blueprint, enlightened footprint and scriptural directive. In 1989, filmmaker/journalist and Aurobindian, Vinanti Sarkar, visited Auroville. The community was still in the healing stages of a tug-of-war between the original Sri Aurobindo Society and members of the Auroville community. Part IV will track the last few years and explore present-day Auroville which, according to reports, has regained much of the original dynamism and joy.

By Vinanti Sarkar

On my first afternoon in Pondicherry, I took a ride in a jeep and entered the cosmopolitan nearby village of Auroville, right on the border of Tamil Nadu state. It is situated on high-level land providing a panoramic view with the sea on the east and a number of lakes on the west and north. The "village" is circular in shape with

a diameter of about three kilometers and surrounding it, a green belt of natural beauty.

One of the first people I met was an old gardener who had been there since the project began. As we stood in the center and heart of Auroville, I couldn't help noticing the giant still incomplete Matrimandir, nerve plexus of Auroville. The gardener told me, "This is the soul of Auroville," which was supposed to be "the symbol of the Divine's answer to humanity's aspiration for perfection. Union with the Divine manifesting in a progressive humanity, Auroville was to be an example of a new social order, of a model town for the future and an experiment in international living. Auroville is named after Sri Aurobindo and literally means "The City of Dawn." He envisaged a divine life in matter on earth, based upon the advent of an entirely new principle of existence, knowledge and action, the "Supermind"-the next great step in evolution, a step beyond the levels of matter, life, mind and the spirit that human beings have attained so far.

Although Sri Aurobindo and the Mother sought to open a new way for human development, they stressed that the aim, in Sri Aurobindo's words was "not to found a religion or a school of philosophy or a school of yoga, but to create a ground of spiritual growth and experience which will bring down a greater Truth beyond mind but not inaccessible to the human soul and consciousness."

By 1965, the Mother had begun to set in motion the process that would lead to the birth of Auroville: "The next step, more exterior which seeks to widen the base of this attempt to establish harmony between soul and body, spirit and nature, heaven and earth, in the collective life of mankind."

At first, only those were accepted into the project who, in the judgement of the Mother, have an inner call for the Divine. She wanted Auroville "to be a universal town where men and women of all countries are able to live in peace and progressive harmony, above all creeds, all politics and all nationalities." "The purpose of Auroville is to realize human unity. No rules or laws are being framed. Things will get formulated as the underlying Truth of the township merges and takes shape progressively. We do not anticipate. It is the experience of LIFE ITSELF that should slowly work out rules that are as simple and as wide as possible." She promised all it would be a "great adventure."

Close to Matrimandir, where I stood, there is an urn of marble-

mosaic, on a raised circular mound with sloping sides. This is the Foundation Stone of Auroville-the dedication ceremony performed on February 28, 1968, by youth of the world. Young people, representing the 19 states of India and 124 nations around the world, gathered, bringing with them a handful of soil which they placed in the lotus-

shaped urn. This unique ceremony symbolized the hope of mankind to fulfill its highest aspiration for true unity and universal harmony.

The charter established: "Auroville belongs to nobody in particular and humanity as a whole. But to live in Auroville one must be the willing servitor of the Divine Consciousness-the place of unending education, of constant progress and a youth that never ages. It stands as a bridge between the past and the future. Taking advantage of all discoveries from without and from within. Auroville will boldly spring toward future realizations and will be a site of material and spiritual research for a living embodiment of an actual humanity."

The project was actively supported by the Indian government and funds for the development of Auroville were received from different organizations inside and outside of India and also from substantial grants received from the Central and State governments. It was unanimously endorsed by the General Conference of UNESCO in 1966, 1968, 1970 and 1983 where resolutions were made commending Auroville to those interested in UNESCO's ideals and inviting "its member states to participate in the development of Auroville as a international cultural township designed to bring together different cultures and civilizations in a harmonious environment with integrated living standards."

Auroville, planned for 50,000, is divided into four zones: work-

Industrial Zone; dwelling-Residential Zone; education and culture-

Cultural Zone; and harmony and social relations-International Zone. By the 1970's, resident clusters had sprung up with names such as Promesse, Aspiration, Peace, Hope and Auromodel. Work began on the Matrimandir in 1971 with help from the local Tamil villagers. Scores helped dig a large crater and erect four concrete pillars. By 1976, the top ring of the sphere had been cast, followed by the construction of the sphere's inner chamber in rough form. Since then, Auroville volunteer have been working on the outer shell, a triangulated grid of 1,200 precast beams.

Family Feuding In 1973, the Mother left her body leaving Auroville, many felt, an orphan. Eventually, a serious crisis developed that threatened the very existence of Auroville. It pitted the executives of the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in Pondicherry, who controlled much of Auroville's finances against Aurovilians who were living on the land. Auroville was forced back on itself to survive. There were two contradictory forces at work-one extremely traditional and conservative and the other attempting desperately to move forward and call the future. No single authority was recognized. Ashram officials contended that they owned Auroville and should have the final say over what happens there, while "settlers" claimed that Auroville is an international community that belongs to the world. Relations deteriorated (there were even death threats reported) and the government of India temporarily opened a police station at Auroville and appointed an administrator. Legal contests ensued. In order to create a necessary condition in which smooth development of Auroville was ensured, the Central Government was forced to take over temporarily the management of Auroville from Sri Aurobindo Society under the Auroville (Emergency Provisions) Act of 1980, valid for five years but extended to 1987.

## Realistic Infrastructuring

I learned that by 1985 the Auroville Resource Center (ARC) took up coordinating development of the town. Sporadically, construction began again. New growth made the development of a solid infrastructure indispensable. In September, 1988, the Central Government of India requested in the Auroville Foundation Bill a "Master Plan." This triggered a positive, inspired mood. Auroville residents started bold initiatives in various fields including: afforestation, soil conservation, water conservation, agriculture, integrated rural development, educational research scientific research, cottage industries and computer technology. The residents also developed a self-organizing system. All these activities are to be encouraged and augur well that the community has learned tough lessons and matured a tough vision. I have all the highest hopes for this unique society. Actually, it's my dream to go and live there one day when I retire.**Sidebar: Facts**

Population: In '92 was 826- 70% European background (38% French or German); 25% Indian.

**ECONOMY:** No private ownership or profiteering. Communal sharing is the ethic. If you build a house with your money, you can live there, but it belongs to Auroville. "Auroville will have money relations only with the outside world," said the Mother. This is the ideal. In reality "we've tried everything from communism to capitalism," confessed one resident. Presently, various cottage industries do pay "maintenance," (a form of community monetary credit) as well as cash. "But no one is really happy with this," one member said. Aurovilian economics is a chronic headache at worst and in-house best-kept joke at best. The Mother did leave the ideal: "Auroville is a place where work would not be a way to earn one's living, but a way to express oneself and develop one's capacities while being of service to the community which would provide individuals subsistence and sphere of action." behavior: An Entry Group accepts or rejects a newcomer after a one-

year probationary period. Based on their recommendation, the Indian government issues a visa. Drugs are forbidden. There are no rules about sexual conduct. There are no cases of AIDS and all persons arriving are required to be tested HIV-negative.

**NO RELIGION:** "I don't want it to be made into a religion. With all my force I refuse," said the Mother. "We don't want dogmas, principles, rituals. I insist that Auroville is an experiment... experiments, research, study." Re-forestation: 2,000 acres have been reclaimed. Two million fruit and other trees and have been planted.

**Commerce:** 50 industries including: incense-making, pottery, construction, architectural services, printing and electronics employ 3,000 local villagers. US \$5 million was fed into the local economy last year.

**water/ENERGY** There are 30 windmills pumping water and 60 solar photo-voltaic installations producing electricity. Income In '91/92, the Government of India gave US\$220,000. Indian/foreign donations, \$1.2 million. Auroville commercial activities, \$3 million.

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