

Sri Aurobindo and the Savitri Legend

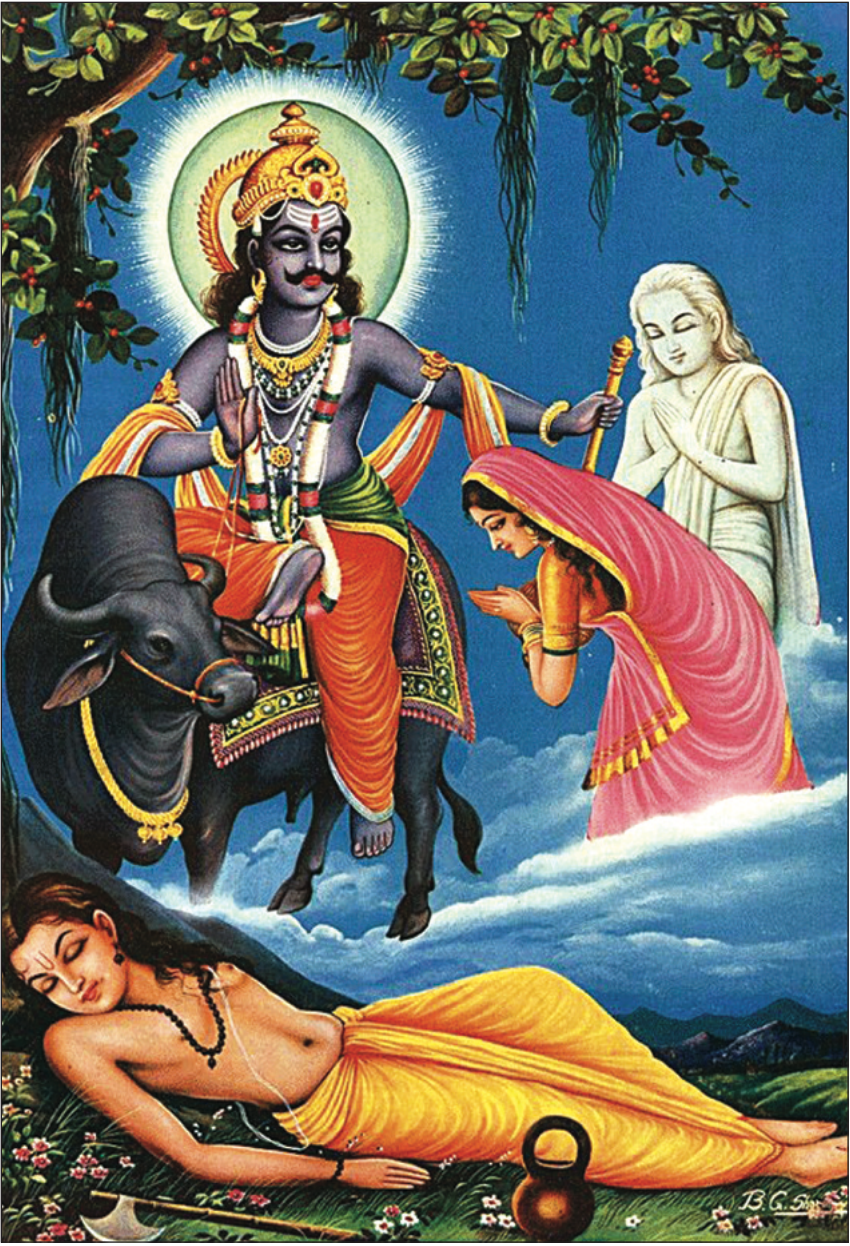
The young Aurobindo Ghose spent his student years in late nineteenth-century England steeped in the only literatures that were readily accessible to him there: those of ancient, medieval and modern Europe, many of whose works, especially their poetry, he read in the original languages. Europe then dominated the world and the path to success, as mapped out for Aurobindo by his anglophile father, lay through the ability to present oneself, culturally, as an accomplished Westerner. Even when his life veered in a radically different direction after his return to India in 1893 at the age of twenty, the imprint left by his formative immersion in Western culture remained indelible and left its stamp on all his subsequent political, poetic and philosophical writings.

The world would never have heard of Aurobindo, however, if he had not reinvented himself as a result of discovering his roots in the literary, intellectual and spiritual cultures of India. Though he continued to think and write mainly in English, the influence of his motherland, exerted upon him largely through the medium of Sanskrit, soon came to dominate the elements in his mental makeup that he owed to growing up in the West. Early in this indigenisation process he plunged into the popular Sanskrit epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. It was in the latter that he came across a theme that would continue to haunt him until he made it the subject of an epic of his own. This was the story of Savitri, the young woman who defied the god of Death and brought her husband, Satyavan, back to life.

The tale of Savitri and Satyavan had already acquired various levels of meaning in the course of its long history in the Indian tradition. By his creative engagement with it, Sri Aurobindo would further enrich the ancient legend with a new layer of significance. But his starting point was an appreciation of the episode as told in the Vana Parva of the *Mahabharata*. However far his reinterpretation of the story might eventually travel from what he had encountered in his initial exploration of Sanskrit literature, elements of the oldest extant version attributed to Vyasa remain as essential features of *Savitri: A Legend and a Symbol*. These include not only the main outline of the plot and a number of specific details, but also a certain stylistic influence of what Sri Aurobindo took to be Vyasa's writing.

In *Notes on the Mahabharata*, written around 1902, he summed up the characteristics of Vyasa's "granite mind": "In his austere self-restraint and economy of power he is indifferent to ornament for its own sake, to the pleasures of poetry as distinguished from its ardours, to little graces and self-indulgences of style; the substance counts for everything and the form has to limit itself to its proper work of expressing with precision and power the substance." These were qualities that Sri Aurobindo evidently admired and found worthy of emulation when he came to write poetry on an epic scale himself, albeit in a language very different from Sanskrit. Fused with other influences from Indian and Western literatures, ancient and modern, an echo of what he took to be the authentic *Mahabharata* style can be identified as a component of the poetics of *Savitri*.

Regarding the Savitri episode itself, we find in *Notes on the Mahabharata* this comment on Vyasa's treatment of the subject: "In the Savitrie (sic) what a tremendous figure a romantic poet would have made of Death, what a passionate struggle between the human being and the master of tears and partings! But Vyasa would have none of this; he had one object, to paint the power of a woman's silent love and he rejected everything which went beyond this or which would have been merely decorative. We cannot regret his choice. There have been plenty of poets who could have given us imaginative and passionate pictures of Love struggling with Death, but there has been only one who could give us a Savitrie." In Sri Aurobindo's hands, during the course of his work on *Savitri* between 1916 and 1950, the legend is transfigured and raised to another plane altogether. But the dauntless strength of character of the Kshatriya princess Savitri herself and the quiet, unshakable intensity of her love remain constant, universalised to represent the power of the goddess in all women. When Death leads Satyavan's soul into his own dark realm, she follows them:



Death claims Satyavan's soul while Savitri pleads for his return to life

The Woman first affronted the Abyss
Daring to journey through the eternal Night...
Solitary in the anguish of the void
She lived in spite of death, she conquered still...
Her limbs refused the cold embrace of death,
Her heart-beats triumphed in the grasp of pain;
Her soul persisted claiming for its joy
The soul of the beloved now seen no more.

A Myth of the Vedic Cycle?

The role of the *Mahabharata* as a source and inspiration for *Savitri* is indisputable, but by itself it accounts for only one dimension of the epic. What Sri Aurobindo had in mind when, almost half-way through his work on the poem, he gave it the subtitle, *A Legend and a Symbol*, is suggested by a note found among his manuscripts of the mid-1940s and published in recent editions as an "Author's Note". It begins: "The tale of Satyavan and Savitri is recited in the *Mahabharata* as a story of conjugal love conquering death. But this legend is, as shown by many features of the human tale, one of the many symbolic myths of the Vedic cycle."

The uncovering of a mystical symbolism in the characters and events of the narrative opened up unexpected vistas of meaning and eventually made it possible for *Savitri* to evolve into something like a poetic counterpart of the philosopher-sage's monumental prose work, *The Life Divine*. Between his reading of the *Mahabharata* episode and his preliminary sketches of an original poem based on it, Sri Aurobindo had made a deep study of the *Rig Veda*. While this research was continuing, he published its results serially under the title *The Secret of the Veda* from August 1914 to July 1916, a month before the date of the opening of the first draft of *Savitri*.

That *Savitri* is interspersed with Vedic imagery is beyond question. In passages such as these lines on the goddess of

Sri Aurobindo was born on 15 August, 1872. *Auroville Today* has often published something related to Sri Aurobindo in this, his birth month, and this year we feature an article on his epic poem, *Savitri*, by Richard Hartz. Richard is a researcher in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives who has written extensively on Sri Aurobindo and on Indian and other philosophical schools.

This month we also feature an interview with Richard's colleague in the Archives, Bob Zwicker, who talks about new material from *The Mother* which has come to light since the *Collected Works* were published in 1978, and which is now being published in a series of books.

inspiration, a familiarity with *The Secret of the Veda* on the part of the reader seems almost to be taken for granted:

In the deep subconscious glowed her jewel-lamp;
Lifted, it showed the riches of the Cave
Where, by the miser traffickers of sense
Unused, guarded beneath Night's dragon paws,
In folds of velvet darkness draped they sleep
Whose priceless value could have saved the world.
A darkness carrying morning in its breast
Looked for the eternal wide returning gleam,
Waiting the advent of a larger ray
And rescue of the lost herds of the Sun.

The third line of this passage reproduces almost verbatim the wording of what is said in *The Secret of the Veda* about the Panis, creatures of the cave, depicted as "miser traffickers in the sense-life, stealers and concealers of the higher Light and its illuminations". Other Vedic allusions in these lines include references to the serpent or dragon Vritra, "the personification of the Inconscient", and to Usha, the goddess of Dawn. The last line relates again to the legend, examined in depth in *The Secret of the Veda*, "of the recovery of the lost cows from the cave of the Panis by Indra and Brihaspati with the aid of the hound Sarama and the Angiras Rishis".

But even more central to the poem than such allusions is the notion that the story itself, as it appears in the *Mahabharata*, is a retelling of a primordial myth passed down from an age that expressed an archaic wisdom in the language of symbols. Sri Aurobindo seems to have intended to give this immemorial symbolism a new lease on life in *Savitri*, fusing it with his own futuristic vision of a kind of spiritual transhumanism.

The starting-point for his reconceptualisation of the Savitri legend as a Vedic myth resonating with his own philosophy was a recognition of the Vedic associations of the names of the main personages, especially Savitri and Satyavan themselves. *Sāvitṛī* means "daughter of the Sun", the Sun being in Sri Aurobindo's reading of the *Veda* an image for what he terms the supramental consciousness. Satyavān, literally "he who possesses the truth", is explained in the context of the story as "the soul carrying the divine truth of being within itself but descended into the grip of death and ignorance". Sri Aurobindo evidently saw in Satyavan's return from the realm of Night a parallel to the event described in the Vedic hymns as the discovery and liberation of "that truth [satya], even the Sun dwelling in the darkness". This founding achievement of the Vedic religion was celebrated by the Rishis as the work of their forefathers in collaboration with the gods. The result was the forging of a path to immortality, represented as a state in which not only the inner consciousness, but even the physical being "breaks its limits, opens out to the Light and is upheld in its new wideness by the infinite Consciousness, mother Aditi, and her sons, the divine Powers of the supreme Deva".

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Looking for confirmation of his experiences and aspirations in past traditions, Sri Aurobindo discerned in this imagery a fore-shadowing of his own search for the way to a supramental transformation. The supramental change, as he envisaged it, will take place “when the involved supermind in Nature emerges to meet and join with the supramental light and power descending from Supernature”. Miraculous as this may sound, it is a logical extension of the idea in his philosophy of evolution that “the development of life, mind and spirit in the physical being presupposes ... two co-operating forces, an upward-tending force from below, an upward-drawing and downward-pressing force from above”. Savitri, incarnating the goddess who in the reconstructed Vedic myth “comes down and is born to save”, would seem to represent the “force from above”.

But after briefly offering this key to some of the symbolism underlying his poem, Sri Aurobindo hastens in the *Author’s Note* to clarify that “this is not a mere allegory”. Allegory, he explains elsewhere, “comes in when a quality or other abstract thing is personalised and the allegory proper should be something carefully stylised and deliberately sterilised of the full aspect of embodied life...” In contrast to allegory, which must “be intellectually precise and clear”, a symbol expresses “not the play of abstract things or ideas put into imaged form, but a living truth or inward vision or experience of things, so inward, so subtle, so little belonging to the domain of intellectual abstraction and precision that it cannot be brought out except through symbolic images”. Symbolism reaches its height in mystic poetry, where “the symbol ought to be as much as possible the natural body of the inner truth or vision, itself an intimate part of the experience”. Attempting in *Savitri* to write mystic poetry on an epic scale, Sri Aurobindo faced the challenge of sustaining a symbolic meaning without allowing the narrative to become stylised and sterilised in the manner of an allegory.

The Great Negation

Death appears at first sight to be the villain of the story. His shadowy figure represents an aspect of existence that has to be confronted and defeated. He is the great divider and nihilist. Yet the poet also recognises death’s positive function as “an instrument of perpetual life”:

Although Death walks beside us on Life’s road,
A dim bystander at the body’s start
And a last judgment on man’s futile works,
Other is the riddle of its ambiguous face:
Death is a stair, a door, a stumbling stride
The soul must take to cross from birth to birth,
A grey defeat pregnant with victory,
A whip to lash us towards our deathless state.

Writing in *The Life Divine* as a philosopher rather than as a poet, Sri Aurobindo explains “the necessity and justification of Death, not as a denial of Life, but as a process of Life”, though he also endorses the ideal of “an exceeding of the law of the physical body, – the conquest of death, an earthly immortality”.

But for the purposes of the central symbolic narrative of *Savitri*, Death and the Woman are “the great opponents”. Addressing each other often with scornful irony, they seem to be locked in an existential struggle in which one or the other must perish. The atmosphere of their confrontation is far from that of the respectful, though sometimes tense, dialogue recounted in the *Mahabharata*. There Savitri, archetype of the devoted wife (*pativratā*), wins back her ill-fated husband from Yama, the god of death who is also the lord of *dharma*, the social and moral law, by pleasing him with her virtue and intelligence. Yama’s power is undiminished by the boons he grants, including the revival of Satyavan.

In Sri Aurobindo’s poem, on the other hand, the figure of Death is represented not in terms of the traditional religious conception of Yama, but as “embodied Nothingness,” the “great Negation” or “the contemptuous Nihil”. Savitri, in turn, does not incarnate a socio-ethical ideal as in the *Mahabharata*, an epic of what Sri Aurobindo calls the typical age; much less does she fit the stereotype of the dutiful wife to which she was paradoxically reduced by the conventionalism of a later period of the decline of Indian civilisation. The Savitri we meet in Sri Aurobindo’s poem is the embodiment of a spiritual force. The outcome of her encounter with death points towards the possibility of a fundamental change in the balance of forces in earthly life which would ultimately deprive death of its right to have the last word on all things.

When Satyavan has passed from Savitri’s embrace, it is as a “denial of all being” that Death first makes his presence felt:

Something stood there, unearthly, sombre, grand,
A limitless denial of all being
That wore the terror and wonder of a shape...
His shape was nothingness made real, his limbs
Were monuments of transience and beneath
Brows of unwearied calm large godlike lids
Silent beheld the writhing serpent, life...
The two opposed each other with their eyes,
Woman and universal god...

Savitri’s first words, when she finally speaks, establish the combative tone of the exchanges that follow:

“I bow not to thee, O huge mask of death,
Black lie of night to the cowed soul of man...
Not as a suppliant to thy gates I came:
Unslain I have survived the clutch of Night...
Now in the wrestling of the splendid gods
My spirit shall be obstinate and strong
Against the vast refusal of the world.”

As in *The Life Divine*, so in *Savitri*, Sri Aurobindo sets out to reconcile Matter and Spirit, overcoming the opposition between two negations that have exerted a powerful influence on the course of civilisation in the West and in the East: the materialist denial of Spirit and the ascetic rejection of material life. Both ideologies in their extreme forms give a semblance of justification to the nihilistic claim of Death:

“Two only are the doors of man’s escape,
Death of his body Matter’s gate to peace,
Death of his soul his last felicity.
In me all take refuge, for I, Death, am God.”

An other-worldly spiritual view of things lends itself admirably to Death’s insistence on the futility of human life and love:

“One endless watches the inconscient scene
Where all things perish, as the foam the stars.
The One lives for ever. There no Satyavan
Changing was born and there no Savitri
Claims from brief life her bribe of joy. There love
Came never with his fretful eyes of tears...
Live in thyself; forget the man thou lov’st.
My last grand death shall rescue thee from life...”

But scientific materialism is equally inhospitable to the dreams of the idealist. Death turns it to his advantage with devastating effect:

“When all unconscious was, then all was well.
I, Death, was king and kept my regal state,
Designing my unwilling, unerring plan...
Then Thought came in and spoiled the harmonious world:
Matter began to hope and think and feel,
Tissue and nerve bore joy and agony...
O soul misled by the splendour of thy thoughts,
O earthly creature with thy dream of heaven,
Obey, resigned and still, the earthly law...
There shall approach silencing thy passionate heart
My long calm night of everlasting sleep:
There into the hush from which thou cam’st retire.”

Love vs. Death

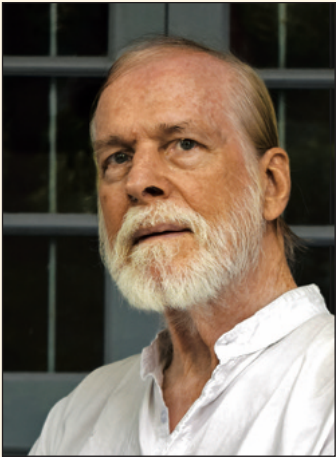
Sri Aurobindo’s integral philosophy admits “both the claim of the pure Spirit to manifest in us its absolute freedom and the claim of universal Matter to be the mould and condition of our manifestation”. In *Savitri*, this dual affirmation is symbolised by love, an ideal in whose highest and purest realisation the seeking for ego-transcending spiritual oneness joins hands with an insistence on embodiment. But love cannot be fulfilled in a world ruled by Death, where Matter and Spirit are pitted against each other as the heroine’s antagonist depicts them to be. In order to “vindicate her right to be and love”, Savitri must therefore argue the case for a view that denies Death’s supremacy, yet is consistent with the facts of the real world. This she does by outlining an evolutionary vision which, unsurprisingly, bears a strong resemblance to the theory of spiritual evolution that is at the heart of *The Life Divine*. It begins with an involution of Spirit in Matter:

“The Mighty Mother her creation wrought,
A huge caprice self-bound by iron laws,
And shut God into an enigmatic world:
She lulled the Omniscient into nescient sleep,
Omnipotence on Inertia’s back she drove,
Trod perfectly with divine unconscious steps
The enormous circle of her wonder-works...
The Eternal’s face was seen through drifts of Time...
Earth’s million roads struggled towards deity.”

Love, like all other potentially divine powers, manifests progressively in such a world, passing through a series of stages marked by a gradual diminution and final disappearance of the limiting and distorting vital ego. Love’s ultimate source, as well as the goal towards which it moves, is that infinite delight of existence which the *Upanishads* call *ānanda*. Love, writes Sri Aurobindo in *The Synthesis of Yoga*, is in its inmost nature and at its highest intensity “the effective power and soul-symbol of bliss-oneness... at its summits a thing of beauty, sweetness and splendour now to us inconceivable”. To be sure, what we ordinarily refer to as love falls very far short of this description; but that objection poses no fundamental difficulty for an evolutionary philosophy. In reply to Death’s cynicism, Savitri affirms the sublimely reality behind the ambiguous appearances of love as we know it:

“Even in all that life and man have marred,
A whisper of divinity still is heard,
A breath is felt from the eternal spheres.
Allowed by Heaven and wonderful to man
A sweet fire-rhythm of passion chants to love.
There is a hope in its wild infinite cry;
It rings with callings from forgotten heights,
And when its strains are hushed to high-winged souls
In their empyrean, its burning breath
Survives beyond, the rapturous core of suns
That flame for ever pure in skies unseen,
A voice of the eternal Ecstasy.”

The spiritual vindication of love is a crucial point in a philosophy that proposes to lay a foundation for the integral transformation of human life. The “whisper of divinity” that redeems love even in its ordinary manifestations reveals the presence of “the imprisoned suprarational”, not only in our higher intellectual,



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ethical and aesthetic strivings represented by the perennial pursuit of truth, good and beauty, but also in “this great mass of vital energism”. All appearances to the contrary notwithstanding, love in its various forms provides prime examples of “the instinctive reaching out for something divine, absolute and infinite”. Sri Aurobindo explains in *The Human Cycle*: “The first mark of the suprarational, when it intervenes to take up any portion of our being, is the growth of absolute ideals... These ideals of which the poets have sung so persistently, are not a mere glamour and illusion, however the egoisms and discords of our instinctive, infrarational way of living may seem to contradict them. Always crossed by imperfection or opposite vital movements, they are still divine possibilities and can ... become for us, not the poor earthly things they are now, but deep and beautiful and wonderful movements of God in man fulfilling himself in life.”

As the champion of love, Savitri exposes herself, to be sure, to the merciless mockery of her adversary. Death’s barbs have a ring of unanswerable truth to them:

“This angel in thy body thou callst love,
Who shapes his wings from thy emotion’s hues,
In a ferment of thy body has been born
And with the body that housed it it must die.
It is a passion of thy yearning cells,
It is flesh that calls to flesh to serve its lust;
It is thy mind that seeks an answering mind
And dreams awhile that it has found its mate;
It is thy life that asks a human prop
To uphold its weakness lonely in the world...”

But in scoffing at love as an ideal that “never yet was real made”, Death refuses to entertain the possibility that the ideals of the present may be the actualities of the future. As Sri Aurobindo argues in an essay, *On Ideals*: “Ideals are truths that have not yet effected themselves for man, the realities of a higher plane of existence which have yet to fulfil themselves on this lower plane of life and matter, our present field of operation... But to the mind which is able to draw back from the flux of force in the material universe, ... the ideal present to its inner vision is a greater reality than the changing fact obvious to its outer senses.” Love is just such an ideal, whose ultimate triumph over Death’s negations Savitri has the audacity to predict:

“All our earth starts from mud and ends in sky,
And Love that was once an animal’s desire,
Then a sweet madness in the rapturous heart,
An ardent comradeship in the happy mind,
Becomes a wide spiritual yearning’s space...
Then shall the business fail of Night and Death:
When unity is won, when strife is lost
And all is known and all is clasped by Love
Who would turn back to ignorance and pain?”

Savitri’s victory is a triumph of Spirit over the resistance of Matter, a sign of the power of a life-affirming spirituality to overcome the inertia of the established order and remake our world from within. Death himself, symbol of the eternal “No” that thwarts all our aspirations, proves in the end to be no match for the fiery spirit of the heroine who reveals through her humanity the force of the goddess who dwells in all of us.

Years before *Savitri* assumed epic proportions, Sri Aurobindo had elaborated a vision of earth’s future, along with the means of realising it, in a series of magisterial prose works including *The Life Divine*, *The Synthesis of Yoga* and *The Ideal of Human Unity*. For his final gift to the world, however, he felt the need to use the heightened mode of expression that poetry offers. Reviving and extending the Vedic conception of the mantra as rhythmic language with a creative power, he sought to make *Savitri* a force for inner and outer transformation in the lives of its readers.

Richard Hartz

New works of The Mother

Auroville Today: When did you come to the Ashram?

Bob: I came in 1971. When I came I didn't know if I would stay. I was looking for someone to guide me and I hoped it might be Mother, but I had to see her face-to-face to be sure. For me the highest value in life has always been freedom. I did not want to put myself under anybody's thumb who I could not trust completely. When I saw her, she blew me away [See box: *Bob's first meeting with The Mother on page 4*]. I have been here ever since.

And when did you join the Archives?

I joined in 1973. About a year before The Mother's centenary in 1978, my boss Jayantilal called me to his room and said: "Bob, The Mother's birth centenary is coming up in 1978. We should issue her collected works. Would you like to be the editor?" "Well," I thought to myself, "no. I'm just a poor boy from Appleton, Wisconsin. I never finished college. I really don't know if I have the stuff it takes." But I couldn't say that to the boss, so I said, "Yes, I will try." Since then, one of my main works has been preparing Mother's writings and talks for publication.

Did you have any idea what you were taking on?

No. Ignorance can be a blessing! But I learned that if you have faith in Mother and if you chip away at the work day by day, it happens because she gives you the ability to do it, and it is a joy to work for her. In this case, by 1980 we had published most of the 17 volumes of her *Collected Works*. Much of the material had been published before in one place or another. We just had to find it and package it in the right order. But there were some new books that we put together from scratch, such as Volume 2, *Words of Long Ago*, which contains The Mother's writings and talks before 1920.

However, the Centenary edition of the Collected Works does not contain everything that The Mother had written or said?

No. We published what was available then. But 45 years have passed since the *Collected Works* came out and much new material has come to light. We have found new prayers, new essays, new public messages, new letters. I also received some of her private notes from her room upstairs. But, mainly, many new letters came. Some were in books and in Ashram journals, but most came when people passed away; then their correspondence with Mother came to the Archives. When there were only a few letters, we published them by subject as "words" of The Mother. When they were big correspondences with many letters, we published them by person as "correspondences".

For four decades I made it my work to collect this material. Then, in 2019, Covid happened. I am over 70, so I was told that I could not go outside. I spent one year alone and I got a lot of work done. And I got a bright idea: I decided it was time to bring The Mother's works up to date by preparing her new writings and talks for publication. By 'new' I meant anything that had not appeared in *The Mother's Collected Works*. In fact, most of the new material had never been published before.

In 2020, the first book, *New Correspondences of The Mother*, featuring correspondences with 12 *sadhaks*, was published. It is a beautiful book because you sense the relationship of each *sadhak* with The Mother; each person is different and she deals with each one differently. Often in reading you identify with the *sadhak* and then you feel that Mother is talking directly to you.

Were these correspondences mainly with Ashramites?

Yes. Only one person, Surendranath Jauhar who founded the Delhi school, lived outside the Ashram. Several correspondences are with well-known *sadhaks*, such as Dyumanbhai, Champaklal, Dilip Kumar Roy, Ambu, Jayantilal and Indra Sen.

Three years later, we issued a second book of her correspondences with nine different people. These included Amrita – nobody had ever seen his correspondence before – and Amal Kiran. Amal's correspondence is interesting because it includes his correspondence with Mother concerning how he should edit *Mother India* magazine. He would ask her if he could publish an article, and Mother would reply 'yes' or 'no'. Once she replied, "I say yes, but without enthusiasm."

However, when he wanted to publish an article on the Indo-Pakistan conflict in 1965, Mother crossed out the entire article with big black Xs and wrote a big "NO" at the bottom. On the cover letter she wrote, "No politics in any of our publications", underlining 'no politics' twice.

So Mother could be strong with some people. But when she corresponded with Dilip Kumar Roy who was a very sensitive person, she only sent him words of assurance and shared her love for him because that's all he could take; he couldn't take criticism. So with each person she corresponded according to their nature and need.

In 2024 we published a third book of new material called *New Words of The Mother*. It is largely composed of letters, but there are also some private notes which I received from Mother's room and some public messages. The book is organised by subject, not person. The advantage is that you get several entries on the same subject.

And a fourth book is on the way?

Yes, it will be called *New Writings and Talks of The Mother*. We hope to publish it by the end of this year, and I think people are going to love it!

Part One has some new early writings, including six new *Tales of All Times*. These are stories for young people to help develop their character. They are based on stories by F. J. Gould which Mother translated but also added her own touches; she called them "adaptations".

Other early writings include eight occult visions which first appeared in the *Revue Cosmique*, the organ of the Cosmic

Movement of Max Théon. These visions are beautiful, iridescent.

Also, in this first part will be six articles by Mother on art and fashion. Here we encounter Mother as an art critic – she reviews the work of artists in three different Paris art salons. Then there are three articles on women's dress and men's dress. In the first article she inveighs against the corset which was popular at that time — she said it was unnatural, unhealthy and ugly. She did not like frills and ruffles and stiff collars. She wanted clothes that were simple, comfortable and followed the natural contours of the body.

The final article is on menswear. She says: if you think women's dress is ugly, look at what the men are wearing today! They are dressed in tubes, in cylinders of various lengths and diameters. The suit is all tubes: the trunk is a tube, the arms are tubes, the trouser legs are tubes.

Part Two of the book is letters to people living outside the Ashram. They include letters to her Japanese friend, Madame Kobayashi, and to her lifelong friend, the explorer Alexandra David-Neel. In one letter Alexandra, who was 73 years old, confined to a wheelchair by rheumatoid arthritis and without close intellectual friends, wrote that she was feeling so lonely that she was thinking of taking her own life.

Mother writes to her that as long as we are alive we have something to do or at least something to learn, and this knowledge should give us strength to face all vicissitudes.

There are also 26 letters to her own mother, Mathilde Alfassa. In *Mother's Agenda* we learn that her mother was a very strong person whose will was "like an iron bar"; she took no nonsense from her children. But in this correspondence of 1920-1922 we find the roles reversed. It is our Mother who is comforting her mother who was always filled with worldly concerns and anxiety. Mother tells her that it doesn't help to worry; everyone has problems in life, and her problems are no worse than those of others. So she should face them and move on.

There are also drafts of two letters to her occult mentor, Max Théon. He was the head of the Cosmic Movement to which Mother dedicated her life for three years, from mid 1905 to mid 1908. In March 1908, Théon wrote her a letter, which we quote in full, in which he accuses her of harming the Cosmic Movement and being the cause of its troubles and discords. In the first draft Mother answers him point by point. She says that while the Movement has troubles, she is not their cause and it is she who has suffered most from them; no one has felt more pain or grief. She tells him: your mind has been poisoned by a woman who has slandered me and made treacherous insinuations, and you have believed her rather than me, I who have devoted my life to this movement for three years.

She says, you write that I have acted out of impulse and passion. That is not true: I am not passionate or impulsive by nature. You say that I have been the cause of this "shameful" state of disorder, but shameful things are deeply repugnant to my nature. Théon asks her, "Why are you doing this? What are your intentions?" She replies that her intentions are now the same as they were at the beginning, to serve the Movement to the best of her ability.

This is a letter in which the mighty Mother is defending what she stands for. It makes magnificent reading; she is not holding back. My guess, however, is that she never sent this draft because there is a second one, far milder, in which she says: you have accused me of many things and they are not true, but if I were to write about them you probably wouldn't understand. Since you are coming to Paris soon, we will talk about them then.

They may have met, but in any event soon afterwards Théon broke with Mother – she did not leave the Movement, he broke with her. Then the Movement itself collapsed because Max's wife died tragically and he was a broken man.

Part Three of the new book has letters to 30 persons living in the Ashram. These include Pranab, who Mother calls her beloved child and faithful companion in building up the new world, and Sunil, whose musical compositions she found to be "exceptionally beautiful". She calls her secretary, Maggi Litchi-Grassi, "my dear little fairy", saying that she had a vital that came from the land of the fairies.

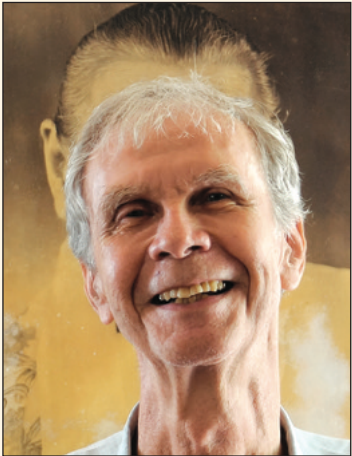
There is also correspondence with AuroArindam, a colourful early Aurovilian. In one letter he writes that sometimes he would like to have a wife and children, and he asks Mother if he should get married. She replies: this sounds like a free man asking if he should become a slave!

The last part of the upcoming volume contains six new talks, ranging from 1957 to 1972.



New Correspondences of the Mother – I, 462 pages, Rs 250. New Correspondences of the Mother – II, 469 pages, Rs 320. New Words of the Mother, 532 pages, Rs 370. Forthcoming books: New Writings and Talks of the Mother; New Correspondences of the Mother – III.

Note: "New" means not in *The Mother's Collected Works*. All these books are available in Ashram book-stores and online from SABDA.



Bob Zwicker has worked in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram Archives for 52 years, with particular responsibility for the Mother's works. Recently, three new books have been published containing new material not published in the Centenary edition of *The Mother's Collected Works*. Here he talks about this new project.

Will these four books exhaust all the new material you have collected?

No, there is more material, and more is still coming in, enough for at least one more volume of correspondence. This will be brought out in due course.

While each correspondence is personal, do common themes emerge?

The thread which is common to all of them is Mother's solicitude, how much she loved her children. She wanted only the best for them, and she sacrificed her time and energy to help them in any way she could. In this yoga we are asked to sacrifice our lives for the Divine. Sri Aurobindo and The Mother have shown us how to do that.

Some of her 'solicitude' was delivered with a very firm hand!

Very true. In the third book there is one section called 'Relations between men and women in the Ashram', and there she gets right down to it. One respected senior *sadhak* wrote to her about the 'psychic relation' he had formed with a lovely young damsel. Mother quickly disabused him of that notion!

She could also be very firm with senior Ashramites like Amrita and Dyuman because she knew they were strong enough to take it, and because she wanted to ensure that her right-hand people always acted responsibly and well.

Another thing I note that she often stresses in the correspondence with Ashramites is the importance of the spirit in which the work is done. Responding to people who complained that their dining room work was looked down upon, she said there is no such thing as inferior, less important work.

Absolutely. Many of the most respected people in our Ashram are not the big shots running the show but people like Babaji, a very sincere *sadhak* who dried pots and pans in the dining room all his life.

Another thing that really comes through in these letters was Mother's attention to detail and her practicality.

She was a most skilled and capable administrator, she took care of all the details. She didn't let things slide.

At some point will there be a new Collected Works of The Mother which will include the recent material?

Yes, all of this material will be included in a revised and enlarged *Collected Works of The Mother*. I am 79 years old and I don't know if I will be around to see this new edition materialise, but I have written down for others where all this new material would fit into a new edition. I would also like to see some of the translations in the present *Collected Works* improved.

You had already read so much by The Mother. Did reading this previously unpublished material provide you with any new insights or understandings of her?

It has been my privilege to be steeped in the writings and talks of The Mother for the past 45 years, but still I have gained something in preparing the new material.

When one reads her articles, her essays and even her prayers, it can be a little impersonal. When one reads her talks, they are a little more personal. But it is in her correspondences that The Mother is most personal, most intimate, for through them one can feel the connection of one's own consciousness with her consciousness in a very direct way. These new letters have brought me closer to Mother and I believe that the same thing will happen to others who read them.

What has doing this work over so many years brought to you personally?

Back in the early 1970s when I joined the Archives, I kind of stumbled into the work: I had no idea what it would involve. But doing this work has been a privilege because it has kept me in close contact with the words of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother and surrounded me with their atmosphere. In my work I try to be honest and faithful to them. It is a wonderful work for which I am deeply grateful.

From an interview with Alan

Bob talks about his first meeting with The Mother in 1971

“I had been afraid of meeting her. It had taken me six long weeks to get to this point because I was afraid of her. In some of her photographs we see how formidable she can be. But I was also afraid that I would be disappointed in her, that she was merely a capable administrator who knew how to put people in their place and keep them happy there. In other words, that she was just a good lady running a good show – and I wanted none of that.

However, when I got to the passageway outside her room, I became aware of a powerful spiritual force in the air, like an electromagnetic field, a force field of tangible but peaceful power. My mind was clear and quiet, but it was also dazed, set back by this spiritual power emanating from her and from her room.

I was in a queue. I watched others ahead of me kneel down before her and look into her eyes as she looked into theirs. Some people seemed unsettled by her gaze and did not stay long, almost as if they could tell that she could see deep into them and they didn't like it.

When my time came, I cast a glance at her attendant, Champaklal. He flashed me a huge smile and my heart just lit up. Then I turned to the left and saw her for the first time. I did not see a fearsome person, I saw a little old lady hunched over in her chair, with her head leaning to one side. Somehow I could sense that this frail 93-year-old lady was completely open, innocent and vulnerable. She had no defense mechanisms; she was protected by nothing except this tremendous spiritual power that was in her and around her. I felt like protecting her, this lady I had feared meeting!



I knelt down before her and gave her a little bouquet of flowers. When I looked into her eyes, I was carried away. It was like looking into the clear, blue sky. And as I looked into that sky, my consciousness expanded and became larger and lighter; I could feel myself going out and out, and up and up, into the sky of her consciousness. My whole body felt lighter and the dross in me seemed to melt away. I watched all this happening with quiet amazement, and when my mind wanted to understand, I kept saying to it, 'No,

no, now is not the time to think.'

And so I went out and out and up and up, as far as I could go, and there were no borders back there, no horizons, no walls; I could see no end to the sky of her consciousness.

After about a minute, I became aware that as I was looking at her, so she was looking at me! At once I felt a stream of pure love flowing from her eyes into mine, and from there down into my heart, filling it like a chalice with the sweet nectar of her love. And the most beautiful thing was that it did not seem like an impersonal love; no, it was personal. I sensed that she knew me, knew me better than I knew myself, and that she liked what she saw.

She liked me, she liked me! And this meant everything to me, and it still does. She saw the goodness in me, the transcendental goodness, and because she could see it, I could see it too.

After some time, there was such an upwelling of emotion in me that my eyes glazed over and I was about to cry. But for some reason I did not want to cry, so I closed my eyes and bent my head down. Suddenly I felt her hand firmly on my head, firm but gentle. Interestingly, nothing special happened: no more force, no sparks of light, just her hand on my head for about twenty seconds.

I can still feel it.

Then she took her hand away. I had composed myself and I looked up into her eyes again. She looked back at me and poured her love into me, poured and poured, and I knew that the best thing I could do was to receive that love. So I did that for maybe thirty seconds.

Then, suddenly, it struck me: 'Bob, there are still a few people behind you in the queue!'

You've been here almost five minutes; maybe you're holding up the show.' So I prepared to leave. But when I looked into her eyes there was no sign that I should leave. It was as though, without words, she was saying, 'This is why I live, I live to share this love, and I have all day for this.'

When I got that message I broke down; tears rolled down my cheeks, and I saw for the first time a little smile on her face. She held out to me a blessings packet and a little bouquet of flowers. I got up and walked out of the room like a man on the moon, released from the force of gravity.

That experience stayed with me for about three days, during which time life was full of meaning and I received many insights; my whole life seemed to come together. Above all, I had found someone who truly cared for me, someone I could trust, someone who had showed me what it is possible for a human being to become if one manages to give up desire and ego and live for the Lord.

So that is what is asked of us, that is what she had managed to do; and I have been here ever since, hoping to be a little bit more like her.

And what I feel now in these troubled times is that we need to quietly carry on our work, knowing that there are forces at work behind scenes, forces we cannot see. We must have faith that things will get better because Auroville and the Ashram are her creations, and we are her children and she will protect us. It is by keeping that faith that she can act in us. We need to be as positive as possible – no negative emotions – because this enables her Force and her Grace to work in us."

MENTAL HEALTH

Maatram – Transformation

Maatram is a mental-health support centre in Auroville staffed by professionally trained psychiatrists, psychologists, psychotherapists, and counsellors who work collaboratively to offer compassionate, person-centred care. AurovilleToday talked with Gopa, one of the counsellors.

Auroville Today: What was the original inspiration behind Maatram? How did this team come together?

Gopa: Maatram has been around for the last eight years. There had been a group of people trying to build a mental health platform for quite some time but, for various reasons, it hadn't come together. Then, in 2017, things finally aligned. Jerry, a clinical psychologist from the Netherlands, and Palani, a retired psychologist, came together along with a few others. They co-founded Maatram.

The name "Maatram" means "transformation" in Tamil. It's not an acronym, but a deeply meaningful word that reflects our intention. It was Palani who chose the name. The inspiration for Maatram came from the Mother's vision – that Auroville should have a space for mental well-being and inner growth.

By 2018, others like myself, Chetna, Saif and Rashmi also found our way here. None of us planned this, it just happened. Personally, I see it as a calling. We each came to Auroville with a desire to offer our services to the community.

The idea was never to create a conventional clinical setup. Instead, Maatram was envisioned as a space for collective growth – emotional, intellectual, spiritual – a place where the entire being could evolve. Mental health just happens to be our area of training, but the broader vision has always been about supporting holistic development, both individually and as a community.

And how did it all start taking shape?

It started in a very raw and emergent way. When we started, we encountered people who were dealing with a lot: mental health issues, major life transitions like divorce or loss, domestic violence, even community conflicts and misunderstandings between neighbours. A group of us – Jerry, Saif, myself, and others – began supporting individuals through these situations. We worked with various groups at the time, including the Auroville Council and the Working Committee. But from the very beginning, we were clear: we were here for the community, not for any one group or institution. Our position was often misunderstood, so we had to reiterate that we weren't affiliated with any decision-making bodies. We were simply here for the people of Auroville. That clarity was essential. Our work was always based

on consent – if someone wished to grow beyond a difficult situation and was open to support, we would step in.

Initially, much of our work was crisis response – firefighting, really. But we wanted to move beyond that and offer steady support. That's when we started Open Consultation Hours (OCH) – a space for anyone to walk in, without needing a diagnosis or 'problem'. It could be anything: a need

by insurance or financial constraints, we don't work that way. We let the timeline be organic. Healing isn't linear, and everyone unfolds at their own pace.

The Open Consultation Hours, do they still happen?

Yes, they do. Open Consultations run Monday through Friday, from 9:00 to 10:00 AM. Each team

isolated in our roles – we're integrated, and that's part of how the Maatram model functions. We look at the whole person, and we work together without the compartmentalisation that's common elsewhere.

One thing that sets Maatram apart is that we don't focus on diagnosis. While we may understand a client's condition, our clients are not defined by it. That's why we created the concept of 'Unclinic', which helps us focus on systemic awareness and relational healing. If medication is needed, we use it sparingly, and always with the intention of moving toward talk therapy, not away from it.

We see mental health challenges not as isolated disorders but as part of a larger, interconnected system, shaped by relationships, environments, life events, and personal narratives. Our role isn't to label, but to walk alongside someone as they deepen their self-understanding. So we aim for a trajectory that moves from symptom management to deeper self-exploration. And we believe talk therapy can be transformative.

Do you think there are specific mental health challenges that are prominent in Auroville?

Yes, definitely. When we talk about Auroville, we also have to distinguish between the challenges within Auroville itself and those in the surrounding bioregion, because they're very different.

For instance, in Auroville, a few years ago we experienced a cluster of suicides, including within one family. That was a deeply challenging time for the community, and we had to respond quickly and sensitively.

Another area of concern is the elderly, as there is quite a large senior population here.

During COVID, many were isolated and lacked support. We stepped in at the time, but it's incredibly difficult to sustain such outreach without a larger team or infrastructure. That's one of our biggest challenges – resources. We could offer so much more if we had more support, but sustaining initiatives, especially in emergencies, is tough.

In terms of ongoing care for people with serious mental illnesses – like schizophrenia or bipolar disorder – there's often no clear space for them to recover. We don't yet have any dedicated infrastructure to support those needs properly.

However, most of the clients we see don't come in with severe clinical diagnoses.

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The Maatram team. From left Raam, Saif, Mathilde, Rashmi, Palani, Megha, Gopa and Marina

to talk, a curiosity about psychology, or just a feeling of something being 'off'. We deliberately made it non-clinical, informal, and accessible.

We worked quietly, with our heads down. We didn't promote ourselves much. I think we've only made one major community presentation, in 2019. Otherwise, we've let our work speak for itself. We estimate that between 400 and 500 people come into contact with us annually. But what's more important than quantity is the depth of engagement. We grow with our clients. Some people stay with us for over two years. The process is never rushed.

Unlike in many places where therapy is limited

member takes a specific day. This structure also allows people to experience different therapeutic styles. We are a diverse team with varied specialisations, and we each bring something different [see box]. And that's also the reality of mental health – it's not one-size-fits-all. It's a rainbow of approaches.

So OCH provides a window into these different paths – each therapist brings something unique, yet we're united by the same ethos. What's beautiful about Maatram is that we work as a team. A client can simultaneously receive support from a psychiatrist, a psychologist, and a neurofeedback specialist, depending on what they need. We're not

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The vast majority are people facing everyday emotional challenges – anxiety, sadness, grief, confusion, transition. And they know they can seek help.

Are there any other groups in Auroville that you see as particularly vulnerable?

Yes, definitely. I’ve worked a lot with schools, and there are some consistent challenges – especially around resources, both human and financial. Teachers are stretched. Some families, like single mothers, face unique difficulties trying to balance work, healing, and raising children. Interestingly, that’s very different from the challenges in the bioregion. There, people often have extended families to lean on – grandparents, aunts, uncles. But the challenges there are more related to domestic violence, abuse, and untreated mental health issues like depression, which people are still very reluctant to talk about.

So yes, we’re working with very different realities. And we try to meet them both with care and respect.

Newcomers to Auroville can face specific challenges.

Yes, it’s very real. When newcomers arrive in Auroville, one of the first things they need is a sense of safety – a stable place to live. If you think of Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, this is the foundation. But housing is already a challenge here. Once that’s addressed, they also need to think about their children’s schooling, and to do that, they often need to find a volunteer unit where they can contribute. That brings its own complexities – which unit will take them in? What will their work hours be? Will they receive any support?

Auroville, as many people learn quickly, isn’t cheap. People are expected to contribute – not just through work, but also financially. And in the early phase, schooling can be expensive. So it becomes a lot to navigate all at once – housing, work, finances, and family life.

It’s also important to recognise that people from the bioregion who become Aurovilians sometimes face a different, unique hardship: they may have to leave their families and villages behind, and that can lead to a sense of being cut off or even rejected. I’ve seen that happen. They become a bit of an outsider in both worlds.

That said, in my experience, many do eventually find their footing. There’s a period of churn and struggle, and then, often, a kind of settling. But some people leave, and they leave disillusioned or disappointed. We’ve seen that too.

But what brings most people to us at Maatram isn’t necessarily housing or education. It’s more often their personal inner life – emotional struggles, relationship issues, identity shifts. It can be incredibly intense if they’re also navigating something like a separation while trying to establish themselves here.

Has there been resistance to your mental health work in Auroville and the bioregion?

In the bioregion, it’s still difficult. There’s still a stigma, and not everyone feels comfortable walking into a space like Maatram. Conditions like depression or anxiety are not always acknowledged, let alone spoken about. So, there’s deep-rooted cultural resistance.

But within Auroville, things have shifted significantly in the past few years. There’s a global conversation around mental health now, and Auroville is part of that wave. People here are much more aware and curious now.

People still ask us things like, “What do you really do?” or “Why would I talk to a stranger?” There’s a belief that one can just talk to a friend or family member. But what we offer is different. We’ve been trained to ask the right questions, to hold space, and most importantly, to do it without judgment.

There’s a misconception that therapy is just talking. But it’s not. It’s a skilled process of creating a space where someone can explore themselves safely, honestly, and often, for the first time.

There’s also the spiritual dimension in Auroville – how does that intersect with mental health work?

I’m glad you asked. Auroville is a spiritual community, and with that comes another layer of resistance – not from ignorance, but from belief. Some people think, “I don’t need therapy, I have my spiritual path,” or “I can work through this on my own.”

That belief, while sincere, can overlook something essential: that growth is layered. Spirituality might be the highest aspiration, but to truly grow we have to first move through the earlier steps – emotional regulation, relational awareness, self-understanding.

Western psychology in the 1960s and 70s may have left some people with a bad taste, and I understand that. But the field has evolved immensely. With developments in neuroscience, we now understand trauma, regulation, memory, and healing in far deeper ways. Therapy today is much more nuanced, integrated, and gentle.

And so, we don’t position ourselves as “know-

ers” or “healers.” We simply say – we’ll walk with you. We’ll be that mirror, that witness, and that companion on the journey inward. Because we all have blind spots. We all carry shadows. And having someone trained to help navigate those places can be transformative.

So no, we’re not here to interfere with your spiritual path. We’re just here to support those first few steps – to help you look within, with kindness and clarity.

How do the professionals at Maatram manage their own learning and growth while serving the community?

Each of us has his own way of navigating this balance. But one thing is clear: while we are rooted in Auroville to serve the community, we also have a deep commitment to staying current in our field. That means continuing education, training, supervision, and regular reflection.

At Maatram, we have a training budget that allows us to pursue learning each year. Some of us attend international conferences or present our work – like Chetna, who recently presented a paper on neurofeedback in Malaysia and who now plans to host a conference in Auroville. I stay closely connected to the EMDR [see box] community worldwide and receive regular supervision from professionals outside Auroville. That external perspective is vital for identifying blind spots and maintaining ethical clarity.

Every month, our team also holds intervention sessions – collaborative learning spaces where we explore emerging topics together. For example, our last discussion was about how AI, including tools like ChatGPT, might influence or reshape the future of therapy. We also share recent research, new books in neuroscience or trauma studies, and bring back insights from workshops. It’s a culture of ongoing curiosity and humility.

In a place like Auroville, where professionals can easily become isolated over time, this kind of deliberate connection to the wider field feels essential – not just for our clients, but for ourselves.

Where is Maatram now, and what does sustainable growth look like, for the team, the work, and long-term impact?

Maatram has evolved significantly. We began as a small group in a dining room at Mitra Hostel. Today we work out of Arka, with dedicated therapy spaces, including a new clay therapy room and a child therapy room. That’s been a big step forward.

Our team is also growing. We have Mathilde, who is an experienced play and art therapist, currently pursuing her degree in Clinical Psychology

from France, offering child therapy and Social Emotional Learning in schools. We’ve had international therapists join us, both short- and long-term, from Ukraine, US and different parts of India. Some, like Marina and Raam, are considering becoming newcomers. Psychology students frequently reach out for internships, and trained professionals around the world are expressing interest in our vision and Auroville’s ideals.

Our current space is working for now, thanks to staggered timings and flexible use, but we know expansion will eventually be necessary. We’re not actively trying to grow; we’re simply responding to a naturally increasing need. It’s a very organic process.

And what about sustainability in terms of resources, financing, and your ability to serve more people?

That’s one of our biggest challenges. As a service unit, we don’t charge Aurovilians, newcomers, volunteers, or the bioregion community. That’s intentional, it’s aligned with Auroville’s spirit, but it also means we have very limited income.

We are grateful to receive basic operational support from the BCC, which helps cover rent and minimal team support, thus enabling us to offer free services to Aurovilians, newcomers and volunteers. But to improve our infrastructure, offer preventive education programmes, support addiction recovery, or develop new therapeutic tools, we need additional funding.

Right now, our therapy rooms are quite basic, having cracked tiles, minimal furniture. The child therapy room came together through small donations and toy contributions. To truly equip our space in a way that reflects the depth of our work, more support is needed.

We’ve received some donations already and hope to collaborate with Auroville International and AVI USA for future fundraising. Specific initiatives, like theatre therapy or Social Emotional Learning in schools, could also attract targeted grants. So yes, we’re dreaming ahead.

Maatram has grown organically from a handful of volunteers experimenting with what might work to a diverse team offering psychiatry, psychology, neurofeedback, clay and movement therapy, group work, trauma care, and education.

We hope Maatram continues as a living, evolving organism, responsive to community needs while advocating for gentler, deeper ways of being with ourselves and each other.

We’re still growing. But what anchors us is that we hold space not just for healing, but for transformation.

In conversation with Chandra

Services of Maatram

Psychiatry and psychotherapy

Saif, who co-leads Maatram with Palani, is a psychiatrist trained in Mumbai. When he joined in 2019, there was no psychiatrist in Auroville. His goal has never been to rely on medication but to use it minimally, if at all, and focus on psychotherapy. He has been instrumental in supporting individuals through acute mental health episodes. He also offered support during the COVID period, especially for seniors dealing with dementia and Parkinson’s. He and Rashmi trained community volunteers to visit and care for them. Over time, that effort needed more resources than we could provide, so we now refer urgent cases to PIMS or ambulance services. But Saif continues to hold space for psychiatric consultations today.

Transpersonal psychology

Palani, with over 30 years of Government Medical College experience, focuses on transpersonal psychology. His specialty is addiction recovery, especially alcohol-related cases. He works with communities in and around Auroville, like Thamarai and Edayanchavadi. Alongside a dedicated volunteer, Raam, he also holds weekly sessions focused on addiction. These sessions are open and welcoming for anyone seeking support.

Schema therapy and EMDR

Gopa is trained in schema therapy and EMDR. Schema therapy is about self-awareness. It helps one understand the deep patterns or “schemas” one develops, often based on early life experiences or temperament. These patterns shape how people see themselves and the world. Schema therapy helps people identify those beliefs and patterns, understand where they come from, and gradually outgrow them. It’s a powerful path of transformation.

EMDR stands for Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing. It’s considered the gold standard for trauma treatment worldwide. And “trauma” isn’t limited to big, catastrophic events like war or natural disasters – what are called “Big T” traumas. There are also “small T” traumas, which stem from ongoing relational stress, like criticism, neglect, or chronic insecurity. These experiences can shape worldview and behaviour in profound ways.

Social Emotional Learning

Gopa and Mathilde have developed a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programme for Deepanam School, as part of their preventive work in mental health. SEL is an approach used globally to teach children how to understand and manage emotions, develop empathy, build relationships, and make responsible decisions. Research has shown that emotional intelligence – or EQ – is the most reliable predictor of how well-adjusted someone will be as an adult. It affects everything – relationships, work and well-being. The focus is on prevention: not just to see clients once distress has taken root, but to be with children and families from the beginning, helping them grow with awareness.

Gopa’s prevention work continues alongside her therapy work. When she works with a child, she also works with the parents, teachers, and the broader social context. She tries not to focus on “the event” only, but looks at the whole picture.

Neurofeedback

Chetna is a neurofeedback specialist and has been with Maatram since 2018. Her area of focus is the brain – how it processes and responds to different experiences – and she uses neurofeedback as a tool to support emotional regulation and healing.

Neurofeedback picks up on brain activity and helps identify things like depression, anxiety, or dysregulation. Her neurofeedback / biofeedback setup can provide insights into how a person’s brain is functioning. The person then learns, with audio-visual guidance to retrain their brain waves towards optimal states.

Biofeedback setup gives information on breathing pattern, heart rate and galvanic skin response (autonomic nervous system). For example, if someone is breathing in a shallow way (chest breathing) and isn’t aware of it, the sensors can detect that and display visually how to consciously adjust their breath. This self-regulation is a powerful tool that deeply impacts well-being.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming

Rashmi has extensive experience in Karnataka, where she worked with the police on rescuing and rehabilitating women in crisis.

She’s trained in Integral Eye Movement Therapy, Metaphors of Movement and Neuro-Linguistic Programming, a method for changing thoughts and behaviours by working with language and perception, and loves using theatre as a therapeutic and educational tool. She has collaborated with Thamarai and Yuvabe to co-create plays scripted by local youth, based on their own experiences of mental health struggles in the villages – alcoholism, suicide, depression, and domestic violence. These plays have toured villages and have been performed in Auroville Units. Most recently, the team was invited to perform in Kalapet Prison. Rashmi continues to work with women and children in Auroville and supports women’s groups in the bioregion.

Embodied therapies

Megha brings therapeutic modalities like clay therapy and movement-based work into the space. Embodiment of change and shifts is a big part of healing and transformation. When the change becomes a lived experience, it brings change in all dimensions of life. With clay, she works with the potter’s wheel, which is a powerful medium to bring in the tangible experience to the subtleness of our patterns, behaviours, and our tendencies. She also facilitates expressive movement, helping people “land” in their bodies, which is another way to release and process emotion, especially when words aren’t enough.

Megha also provides much-needed structure to the team by handling Maatram administration with great capability and heart.

Child therapy

Mathilde works as a child therapist, trained in both art therapy and play therapy. She offers a gentle, creative, and child-centered approach to emotional support. She is currently completing her Master’s degree in Psychology with a focus on developmental and clinical approaches for children, teenagers, and families. Alongside her therapeutic work, she facilitates classes on Social and Emotional Learning for children in Auroville, helping them explore emotions, communication, and empathy in a safe and supportive space.

From law to sound: Niva's unexpected journey

How an Israeli top lawyer joins Auroville to become a sound healer

Auroville Today: How did you come to Auroville, Niva?

Niva: By accident, really. I was between jobs in Israel and wanted to travel abroad. Some friends told me about a place in South India called Auroville they wanted to visit and invited me to come along. I wasn't particularly interested in Auroville; I said, "Okay, I'll come – but only for one day in Auroville. Then I'll go on to Kerala or somewhere else." But then, in Auroville, I met Pepe.

We had booked ourselves in at Quiet and were looking forward to the Watsu sessions we had reserved. But when we arrived, they told us all the sessions had been cancelled because of a retreat. I was really upset. I said, "Look, I'm here for just a few days and I booked this a month ago!" Pepe, the Aurovilian who by chance was at the Quiet office, relented and offered me a Watsu session on his free day. One session led to another, and a friendship began. Later, we married.

But Auroville? It was nice, but it never crossed my mind that it might become my future place. Far from it. The three-week holiday ended and I returned to Israel and started my new job. Pepe came to Israel, he liked Tel Aviv, but felt it wasn't the right place for children to grow up. "Children should grow up in Auroville, not Israel," he said.

So, when our first daughter Luna was born, I took a four-month maternity leave in Auroville. Two years later, when our second daughter Lola was ten months old, we decided to move for good – to give our daughters a beautiful place to grow up. That was in 2010. I took care of the kids and found a job stacking shelves at the Pour Tous Distribution Centre – quite a transition from my previous work.

What was your job in Israel?

I was the head of the legal department for Israel's main television channel. It was a very sexy job; I met celebrities and politicians regularly. I enjoyed the fast-paced decision-making. Israel is highly regulated, with new rules emerging constantly. My background in the telecommunications industry gave me an edge; I was familiar with the regulations and good at finding solutions quickly. My forte was negotiation. I once was told that "many lawyers were deal-breakers; you are a deal-maker".

How was the transition to Auroville?

Many people in Israel thought I was crazy to leave such a career for "some place in South India." But if I thought Auroville would welcome me and my expertise, I was mistaken. At the time, the Entry Service wasn't keen on pregnant women or young mothers joining. They told me, "With two small children, you won't be able to contribute to the community." I argued that if I could work as a Vice President Legal Counsel in Israel, I could also work as a Newcomer with kids in Auroville. But it didn't convince them. My Newcomer period dragged on



Niva playing the Nidranantar

for about three years until Pepe got fed up and went to the Entry Group. Shortly after, I became an Aurovilian.

During those years, as Aurovilian-in-waiting, I worked part-time for the Pour Tous Distribution Centre as an unpaid shelf filler. Honestly, it was one of the best jobs I've ever had. No responsibilities, no staff to manage, no decisions to make – just making sure the potatoes, toilet paper, and sugar were on the right shelves. And when I finished, I'd happily go over to PTDC Kitchen and help peel potatoes or cut veggies. I really enjoyed it; it was pure service, just working from the heart.

Later, I joined Wellpaper, helping with business development, for two years. [*Wellpaper is an Auroville unit that trains local village women to transform recycled newspapers into art and accessories, eds.*] Then, in 2014, I joined Elvira and Mukta in Auroville's budding conflict resolution service called Koodam. We did that work for almost 10 years.

So, you returned to your old profession?

In a sense, yes. I had studied mediation in Israel and had used it extensively in my previous work. The work at Koodam was very meaningful, a great opportunity to learn and know the Auroville community in its layers. It was a great experience for me to work with professionals and dedicated people such as Elvira and Mukta. The work included training and coaching other Aurovilians as mediators and arbiters. We did a few trainings, including one exclusively for Tamilians, as there is a large cultural difference from Westerners. The Tamilians are used to the Panchayat, a system where someone or some group in authority tells them what to do. We asked the Tamil trainees how best to adjust the mediation process to their culture; they offered a few tips. We

eventually introduced arbitration as an option to end the disputes when an agreement couldn't be reached.

Over the years, we handled hundreds of mediations and around twenty arbitrations and appeal process cases. Most mediations ended with the parties reaching agreements; all the arbitrations were implemented (some after 2 years) and brought the conflict to an end.

At one point, we had a call to move on, for several reasons. The atmosphere in the community had changed, the collaboration with the working groups got a twist and we realised that we had changed too. Koodam closed.

So, you moved to sound?

Yes. I joined Svaram as a business consultant. One day Aurelio gave me a session on the Nidranantar, the sound bed, in the Sonorium. The Sonorium is Svaram's dedicated sound room which has at its centre the Nidranantar – a wooden table with 50 strings underneath – which is surrounded by large scale instruments each tuned to the healing energies of 256 Herz. As I lay there, he played the strings. It was a deep experience; I was in a higher space. That sparked my fascination with sound and its healing effects on body, mind, and spirit. I was clear that Svaram has a treasure to share with the world, the Sonorium. We developed the Svaram Sonorium training and I found my new path as a sound practitioner. I now work with the sound bed, gongs, bells, sound stones, drums, flutes, and, increasingly, with my own voice.

How do people experience this?

People's experiences differ from one person to another. Some people get deeply relaxed or uplifted. Some report having an experience outside the body.

Some go back to childhood memories. Others experience old traumas or a physical tension suddenly being released. A few come out of the session with inspiration for new ideas.

You mentioned your intuition has developed...

Each session is intuitive. I am very concentrated, connected and feel the person's energy and follow it. During sessions, I spontaneously started using my voice. I'm not a trained musician and never sang before, but it came naturally. In some sessions I realised the person was entering a very deep state. I knew what the person experienced, I could feel what the person liked and didn't like, and what fears there were. It's difficult to explain, but I simply knew. Sometimes, I felt their experience in my own body. It was as if the person's consciousness and mine had become one.

My voice is changing from one person to another and sometimes doesn't come at all. I've learned this often relates to throat chakra issues. My voice naturally adjusts to the person's needs: if I hear my voice in lower tones, I know the client needs lower frequencies, higher notes for higher frequencies.

One powerful moment was with a Palestinian woman. The events of October 7th, 2023, were still raw. I asked if my being Israeli was a problem and offered her the option to have another facilitator. She said 'no, no problem', but I could sense a tension.

We entered the Sonorium sound space. I gave her a full session and ended in silence, allowing everything to integrate. That's the time when I sometimes receive 'messages'. In this case, it was pure silence and an incredible feeling of unity. Did she feel it too? Yes. All the walls had fallen down. We both started crying, we hugged and said how much we hope for peace for our people. It was a true and touching heart to heart connection, brought about by sound. It couldn't happen anywhere else but in Auroville.

Do you also work with groups?

I also work with couples and with families. The dynamics are fascinating. I sense the couple's dynamic through their reactions to the sounds. Sometimes, they are in shock when I share my observations. Doing couple work resembles to some extent mediation – but on a more subtle, energetic level.

Do you use the sound of OM in your sessions?

Very much. OM is incredibly powerful and harmonising. In group sessions, I often end with OM and then the participants join in. That's the time when people discover themselves in a different space. When they open their eyes they are smiling and soft to each other. It is because they are tuned to each other. That's what makes this work so interesting – it is very powerful and vast. It is Auroville's gift to people and to me.

In conversation with Carel

NEW BOOKS

Consciousness-Based Psychology

Consciousness-Based Psychology: Sri Aurobindo's Vision of Yoga, Health and Transpersonal Growth presents a pioneering framework for psychology and psychiatry rooted in the spiritual philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Co-authored by Indian psychiatrist Dr Soumitra Basu and American psychiatrist Dr Michael Miovic – both long-time students of Sri Aurobindo's teachings – the book introduces what the authors call "Consciousness-Based Psychology" (CBP). As Sri Aurobindo never wrote a formal work on psychology, the authors delve into his extensive writings on psychology, on psychology. The words of The Mother, as recorded in her *Entretiens* and *Agenda*, have served as another important source.

The authors explain, "In this book we have explored how Sri Aurobindo and The Mother have changed the aim of classical Indian yoga from the search for a static awareness that transcends the world, to a dynamic process of transformation that embraces life in the world and promotes the evolution of consciousness in both individuals and social collectives... An integrative psychology that embraces all of these different planes and parts of the being, both inner and outer, would be a truly whole person psychology."

The book is structured in two parts. **Part One** lays the conceptual foundation of CBP, drawing from Sri Aurobindo's integral yoga. It introduces and explores key concepts such as the psychic being, the ego, rebirth, occult influences, and the layered structure of cognition – from sensory and rational levels to the supra-rational and the Supermind. The authors propose a psychology that accounts not only for the measurable and observable but also for the subtle and spiritual dimensions of being.

Part Two focuses on the practical application of CBP. It maps human consciousness along two axes: a vertical hierarchy ranging

from the superconscious to the subconscious and inconscient, and a horizontal structure comprising the outer being, the inner being (with its chakras), the inmost being and the psychic being. The book also touches upon a person's environmental consciousness, and describes the possibilities of a universalisation of consciousness by surpassing the ego to realise the cosmic consciousness.

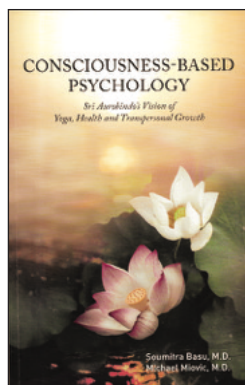
A dedicated chapter on "**Disharmonies in Consciousness**" addresses the deeper causes of psychological disturbance. The authors examine factors such as subconscious and inconscient forces, misalignment between inner and outer selves, disturbances from the so-called "intermediate zone," and the effects of cosmic dissonance – all supported by clinical case studies.

In the chapter "**The Superconscious**," the authors explore the realm of consciousness that lies beyond the ordinary cognitive field and is accessible through the inner being. This section discusses methods of cultivating a deeper connection with the psychic being through aspiration, rejection, and surrender, and elaborates on the role of Shakti in the process of inner growth.

The chapter "**Dreams and Visions**" presents CBP's unique contribution to dream interpretation, explaining how dreams emerge from different planes of consciousness and can offer insights into psychological and spiritual states.

Subsequent chapters delve into specific layers of consciousness:

- "**The Mental Consciousness**" distinguishes the physical, vital, and the mind proper and outlines therapeutic strategies tailored to each.
- "**The Vital Consciousness**" addresses emotional and psychosomatic disturbances, including bipolar disorders.
- "**The Physical Consciousness**" goes beyond medical diagnos-



tics to explore healing through subtle energies and supramental cognition. It also examines how cultivating awareness of the body-consciousness can enhance physical health, memory, and the functioning of bodily systems.

In "**The Subconscious**," the authors explore how trauma and habitual patterns often stem from this layer and how CBP trauma therapies aim to resolve them.

The book concludes with "**The Inconscient and the Future**." While acknowledging that the inconscience cannot be accessed by any psychological method and is beyond the purview of any plane of consciousness or cognition below the Supermind, the authors note that its influence can be noted by trained CBP psychologists. This final chapter is also a vision-

ary call for the development of a "**Greater Psychology**" that addresses not just individual healing but the collective evolution of consciousness.

Rich in insight and anchored in a spiritual yet practical vision, *Consciousness-Based Psychology* is a valuable contribution to the evolving dialogue between Eastern wisdom and modern psychological science. It is not only recommended reading for psychologists, healers, and seekers interested in the deeper dimensions of consciousness and human potential, but also of interest to all lay persons interested in the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother.

Carel

Consciousness-Based Psychology: Sri Aurobindo's Vision of Yoga, Health and Transpersonal Growth. 400 pages. Published by the Auroshakti Foundation and available from Amazon.in and VAK, Pondicherry. Price in India: ₹400.

The bookbinder of Vanaville

Tucked away in a small room at the back of Auroville's Vanaville unit is Michel's bookbinding sanctuary – a quiet space where hundreds of worn books have been given a new lease on life. Here, amidst the tools of his trade, Michel reflects on his journey to Auroville and his love for the craft.

“My interest in India began through music,” Michel recalls. “I was especially drawn to fusion music; Shakti – the band founded by English guitarist John McLaughlin, Indian violinist L.Shankar, table maestro Zakir Hussain, and ghatam virtuoso Vikku Vinayakram – had a big influence on my life. They had an extraordinary ability to blend Western jazz, Celtic folk, and classical music with both Hindustani and Carnatic traditions. My best friend Christian and I would spend hours listening, completely enthralled. And that’s how we got introduced to India: through music and Indian classical music.”

One day, Christian’s brother introduced them to the *Mother* trilogy by Satprem. “Those books lit an inner fire or a soul opening as Satprem’s words were filled with inner power. We felt a deep urge to go to India and visit Auroville.” In 1977 Satprem came to France to give radio talks about his books, and he spoke about The Mother’s mantra, which they heard for the first time. “He had an intense presence, and his words stayed with us.” The deepening interest eventually led them to the Auroville International office in Paris and later to reading *L’Agenda de Mère* (*Mother’s Agenda*).

Still, they couldn’t depart for India immediately – mandatory military service awaited them both. Only after completing their one-year duty did they finally set out. “It was 1981; we were both 20 years old.” Their tourist visa allowed for a six-month stay – long enough to convince them that Auroville was where they wanted to build their lives. They returned to France to save money and prepare for the move. Auroville had a deep meaning, contrary to staying in France to make a living by earning money.

A serendipitous encounter with bookbinding

Michel and Christian visited Auroville again in May 1989, then went to Australia and returned to France in November 1991. While in Auroville, Michel met Subir, who managed the Boutique d’Auroville in Pondicherry. Subir’s mother was the head of the Theosophical Society in Paris. “Back in France I was looking for work and she needed someone to help manage the library part-time.”



Michel working at his book sewing machine

Michel applied and got the job. “Not long after, I landed another part-time job – surprisingly, with Christian Dior’s fashion house, thanks to another former Aurovilian.”

“At the Theosophical Society, Michel met Subir’s brother Daniel who had his own bookbinding workshop over there. As he showed interest, Daniel introduced him to Celia Malouvier, a professional bookbinder who was giving bookbinding classes in her workshop in Paris. Then, quite unexpectedly, Christian Dior offered him 10,000 French francs to train in any craft of his choice. “I chose evening classes with Celia. She introduced me to the intricate world of bookbinding twice a week for two hours – not just the techniques, but also the rich history of the craft in Europe and Asia, and the many regional variations.”

Finding his place in Auroville

Michel officially returned to Auroville in 2003. Michel began

working at Dehashakti, Auroville’s sports department, as a physical education teacher. During a particularly heavy monsoon season, when work at Dehashakti came to a halt, he met Arun, a Tamil Aurovilian familiar with bookbinding. Arun offered him space at his unit, Vanaville. “That’s how my bookbinding work in Auroville really began.”

Auroville’s humid climate is notoriously hard on books. “People often bring me books for repair or full restoration. Restoration means trying to return a book to its original condition as closely as possible. Repairs usually involve fixing torn pages, damage from insects, reassembling a book that has fallen apart by resewing the sections, reinforcing the spine, or making a new cover.” Cover work varies. “Some clients want re-backing to preserve the original spine; others prefer a completely new cover in leather.” Michel works primarily with goat and, occasionally, buffalo leather, meticulously sandpapered or cut with a sharp knife to the right thickness. “It’s slow, detailed work.”

A craft sustained by passion

For over two decades now, Michel has balanced his time between teaching at Dehashakti and practicing his beloved craft. “I’ve repaired hundreds of books, including full sets of *Mother’s Agenda* in both French and English. One of my more significant recent projects was binding the bilingual English-French edition of Sri Aurobindo’s *Savitri*, with Satprem’s French translation alongside Sri Aurobindo’s English, a project of the late Gérard Maréchal in collaboration with the Vanaville executives Arun and Renuka and their staff. Most of my clients find me through word of mouth.”

Michel believes he may be the last artisanal bookbinder in the Pondicherry and Auroville area. “The Sri Aurobindo Ashram used to have a bookbinding department making leather covers, but that’s gone now. The Ashram Press only does industrial binding today. It’s remarkable that this ancient craft survives here, even in such a modest form.”

As told to Carel

To contact Michel, email michel@auroville.org.in

EDUCATION

Malarchi boarding closes

In 1989, more than three decades ago, a retired British police sergeant and school welfare officer visited Auroville. Having recently lost his wife, Roy Wicks was in search of new meaning and purpose. He found it in New Creation community, where André Tardeil was establishing a facility to support youth from the nearby village of Kuilapalayam. André needed someone to coordinate the educational efforts, and Roy was the ideal candidate.

Inspired by André’s vision, Roy returned to the UK to settle his affairs and soon came back to Auroville. Within six months, he was deeply involved in New Creation School¹, aimed at serving children from the impoverished village of Kuilapalayam.

Roy soon discovered that many of them came from dysfunctional or underprivileged families and that some had no relatives at all. Moved by their circumstances, he built a modest home in a quiet corner of New Creation community to house up to nine children alongside himself. Roy’s Boarding, as it soon became known, developed into a loving home for many village children. Roy sustained it through his pension, the rental income from his home in England, and with donations from visitors – many of whom became long-term sponsors for individual children.

In 2003, Roy underwent an unsuccessful surgery in a Pondicherry hospital and had to return to England for specialized treatment. But unexpectedly, the Indian immigration authorities denied him re-entry into India. While Roy continued to support the boarding financially until



The Malarchi children, helpers and caretakers celebrating Christmas in 2024. Tixon is second from left in the back row; Vanitha is fourth from right in the middle row.

his death in 2016, the day-to-day running of the home was taken up by Tixon, a young man from Kuilapalayam who had lived there since the age of six.

“Once it became clear that Roy wouldn’t be able to return, we renamed the boarding ‘Malarchi,’” says Tixon. “‘Malarchi’ is a Tamil word meaning ‘blossoming.’ It reflects the personal growth we saw here. More than 35 children have lived in Malarchi – some for over a decade – and we watched them flourish. Some even earned university degrees. Malarchi was a real success.”

“The boarding was like one big Indian family,”

adds Vanitha, Tixon’s wife, who has shared in both the caregiving and management of the home. “There was so much affection. The older children would always look after the younger ones. The bonds were very strong. And Tixon and I could always rely on several senior Aurovilians in case of need. They appreciated the well-versed running of the boarding, and its firmly established social and disciplinary ways.”

But in May this year, the Funds and Assets Management Committee (FAMC) constituted by the Governing Board informed Tixon that Malarchi would need to close. The reason: Malarchi lacked the official permissions required

for a boarding that houses children under the age of 18. “We consulted a lawyer who told us that the FAMC was correct,” says Tixon. “But we are sad that the current governance system has become so discouraging of initiatives like ours. So Malarchi will close and the four children who are living here at present will have to go back to their families.”

“It’s heartbreaking,” says Vanitha. “We’ve been doing this for more than twenty years. It’s not easy to let go of something you’ve put so much of your heart into, something that we have loved doing for all these years.”

“But perhaps it’s the right time,” reflects Tixon. “The situation in Kuilapalayam has improved significantly since Roy first started the boarding. While there are still some issues, the days of hearing about drunk, abusive fathers are largely gone. Welfare services have expanded, and the need for a place like Malarchi has lessened. We see the FAMC’s decision as a sign that it’s time to close this chapter and move on.”

In conversation with Carel

¹ *New Creation School was later renamed New Creation Bilingual School (NCBS) to reflect its bilingual curriculum in Tamil and English. In 2009, NCBS became Aikiyam School (from Aikyam, meaning “oneness, unity, harmony, unanimity”) and is now affiliated with the Central Board of Secondary Education.*

For more about Roy Wicks and Roy’s Boarding, see *Auroville Today* #213 (November 2006) and #320 (March 2016).

PASSINGS

Galyna Kubarchuk

Halyna (Galyna) Kubarchuk, living at Prayatna, passed away at home on 7 June. Her body was cremated on 11 June at the Auroville Cremation Ground.

Basile Vignes

Basile Vignes passed away on 12 June in his house in France, in the presence of his partner Claudine, his son Simon, his stepdaughter Djénane and close friends. Basile had been living in Dana community between 2001 and 2019 and was active as a film



Basile Vignes

maker and multimedia artist. In 2016 he published his 52-minute documentary, *Auroville: Towards a Sustainable Future* which can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mCCFPooVfV0>.

Lakshmi

Lakshmi, the wife of Ulaganathan, left her body at her home in Kuilapalayam on 9 July after a period of illness. She had been working at the billing counter of the Pour Tous Purchasing Service in Aspiration for more than 28 years.



Lakshmi

Her grace, gentleness, and quiet strength touched countless lives and she will be remembered for her kind personality and the enduring warmth she brought into many lives. Lakshmi’s funeral took place the same day at the Kuilapalayam mandapan.

Julius Trauwaen

Julius (Juul) Trauwaen, partner of Magda, passed away at his home in Arati on 9 July. His remains were buried at the Auroville Burial Ground on 12 July.

69th Governing Board meet
Residents learned from an article in the *Deccan Chronicle* that the Governing Board met on 8 July to review major developments since June 2024 and passed several key resolutions regarding infrastructure, education, administration and governance. This included approval of the first phase of the Line of Progress – comprising a 1,000 bed complex for 380 residents to be funded under the Higher Education Financing Agency. A 100-bed accommodation facility for volunteers was also sanctioned. Also, a partnership with NBCC (India) was approved for constructing a residential-cum-retail project outside the Master Plan area, aimed at well-wishers and supporters, and a proposal for establishing the Sri Aurobindo Integral Multiversity – a 1,000-student university – was submitted for inclusion under HEFA. The Board ratified the code of conduct for business units and the framework for functioning of the Residents Assembly 2025, and an elders committee was also approved to “preserve Auroville’s founding spirit”.

Open letter about actions of GB BCC and FAMC
The Working Committee of the Residents’ Assembly wrote an open letter to the community expressing their deep concern about how the social fabric of the community continues to be threatened “by people positioning themselves as decision-making groups, in how they have been treating other residents, and their casual disregard for well-being and livelihood. Impacting decisions have been made that affect everyone, without consultation, although signed with inspiring phrases of progress and ideals... Our endeavour, this spiritual and social experiment, calls on what is good in all of us, on doing away with machine-like calculations of cost versus human, and no matter what developments, legal proceedings, or differences in vision there can be, caring for one another should remain central.”

Emergency RA decision
Residents were asked to decide if they supported the resolution that the Admissions and Terminations Scrutinizing Committee (ATSC), the Admissions and Terminations Registry (ATR), the Human Resources Service (HRS),

and the Residence Criteria (RC) are not valid because they were created without consultation or approval of the RA. 98.6% (503) agreed, 0.2% (1) disagreed and 1.2% (6) abstained. As the quorum had been reached, it was announced that the Residents’ Assembly approved the resolution.

Frederick receives visa
86-year-old Frederick is one of Auroville’s longest-serving residents, having first come to Pondicherry and the Sri Aurobindo Ashram in 1960, and settling permanently in 1966. He had been informed in April 2025 that his application for a visa extension, which had been left pending since July 2024, had been rejected and he was ordered to upload a flight ticket on the FRRO’s website within seven days. Many Auroville residents and other well-wishers signed a petition appealing to the authorities to renew Frederick’s visa. It is reported that Frederick has now received a three-year visa which expires in one more year (valid from 2023-2026). In a brief video, he said he had experienced a “sense of a large Auroville global fraternity” in the many thousands of people who signed and wrote letters in his support, and he expressed his deep appreciation for their assistance.

Threat to Eternity land
On 24 July, a group of concerned Tamil Aurovilians called a community meeting to stop the Eternity land deal. They reported that there was a plan to exchange 7.5 acres of Eternity’s beachfront land worth Rs 112.5 crores for what they termed ‘useless’ private land partly outside the Master Plan zone, with a value of only Rs 11.5 crores, a loss to Auroville of over 97 crores. They called for an immediate stop to this exchange, as well as a legal and public review of all recent land deals. They also called upon intervention from the Tamil Nadu government.

AuroOrchard house relocation completed
The relocation of Jasmin and Aravinda’s house in AuroOrchard has at last been completed after a series of technical challenges. The move was necessitated by the AVFO’s land exchange in November 2023 that placed their residence

as well as several major and vital infrastructures of AuroOrchard on the property now claimed by a new landowner. The new landowner had issued an ultimatum to move the house before completing a massive stone wall around his boundary, forcing the residents to move their home approximately 35 meters across the boundary line. No support, monetary or otherwise, was received from the AVFO, nor from their appointed Land Board, WC, FAMC or ATDC for this move.

Aurovilians present paper on maths education in Seoul
Sanjeev Ranganathan, head of SAIER (Sri Aurobindo International Institute of Educational Research) and alumnus of IIT-Madras, and Poovizhi, mathematics teacher at an Auroville School, presented a research paper on “Indian Knowledge Systems and the Impact on Teachers When They Learn Indian Knowledge Systems and How They Interact with Children” at the 9th East Asia Regional Conference on Mathematics Education (EARCOME 9) in Seoul, South Korea. According to Mr. Ranganathan, the research revealed that most mathematical concepts taught in schools today originated in India but became distorted through centuries of cultural transmission. A press note from Auroville said this marked the first time India was participating in this regional conference (July18-22) and also represented “a milestone in the global recognition of Indian mathematical pedagogy”.

Sea Change programme update
The WasteLess team made a presentation to the community on 26 July about their Sea Change Programme. This educational initiative has reached over 13,499 Tamil Nadu government school students, transforming their understanding of marine plastic pollution and nurturing the next generation of environmental advocates. This locally-developed educational programme was supported by the National Geographic Society to address one of today’s most urgent environmental challenges, and it exemplifies Auroville’s commitment to creating meaningful solutions that serve both our local communities and contribute to global needs.

Yuvabe Education launches new course
The Yuvabe team announced a new learning opportunity for all youth in the Auroville bioregion. They are launching a 3-Month 3D Product Design Online Course using Autodesk Fusion 360, starting 7 July, 2025. This intensive course is ideal for creative young adults who want to learn computer-aided design, product innovation, and 3D modelling. Participants will gain industry-relevant skills, design portfolio-worthy projects, and receive mentorship from professional designers and engineers. Top students may also qualify for a paid internship with 3DPD Pvt. Ltd., a leading product design company.

Supportive Learning Satellite (SLS)
The SLS Team has now become an official unit under SAIER. The service, which began in 2015, offers support to all children, regardless of the educational system they are part of. Specifically they support children requiring specialised education and those facing learning challenges such as ADD, ADHD, ASD, ODD, Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, and other learning difficulties.

The Town Hall has a new eating place
The popular Auroville Bakery opened a new branch at the Town Hall on 11 July. It comprises a café as well as a bakery outlet where people can purchase their favourite bakery goodies as well as pick up bread and other bakery orders.

Dog sterilisations and rescue operations may be suspended
Auroville’s Dog Shelter is facing a breakdown of its services, a crisis directly triggered by a recent decision by the AVF auditors to ban crowdfunding in Auroville. This ban eliminates nearly half of the shelter’s vital income, leaving the shelter with a massive budget shortfall. A petition signed by over 1,000 residents and animal lovers demanding that the monthly budget be increased from Rs 50,000 to Rs 3.5 lakhs has been ignored since last year. Unless a solution is found quickly, the shelter will have to suspend its highly successful sterilisation project, which aims to sterilise 1,000 dogs per year and has already helped hundreds.

Snakes, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll: My Early Years

By Romulus Whitaker

Romulus Whitaker (‘Rom’), the world-renowned herpetologist, has had a long association with Auroville. He first visited around 1970 when ‘Cow John’ showed him around what was then the beginning of what he came to see as a fantastic experiment. After this, he has visited Auroville frequently and got to know the Auroville foresters, who advised him on how to plant trees at the Snake Park and the Crocodile Bank, both of which he set up. Our greenbelt experts also provided him with valuable advice when, as one of the founding members of the Palani Hills Conservation Council and the Irula Women’s Welfare Society, he was part of a team which planted lakhs of trees on degraded village land. For his work in wildlife conservation, he received the Padma Shri award in 2018 from the Government of India.

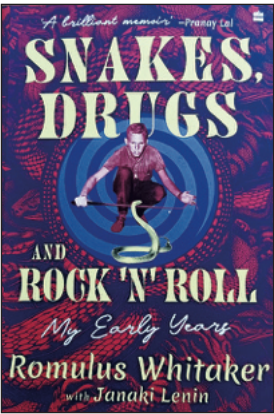
Recently, the first volume of his autobiography, which he wrote with his wife, Janaki Lenin, was published.

The first volume of Rom’s colourful autobiography only covers his first 24 years, but by then he had packed more into his life than most people manage in one or several lifetimes – as a hunter, taxidermist, salesman, merchant seaman, lab technician and reluctant army draftee. At school he kept a 6 foot python as a pet and experimented, among other things, with bomb making (during which, he admitted, he had been protected by the ‘god of idiots’). Later he

experimented with marijuana and hallucinogens.

But his most important job was the two years he spent assisting with Bill Haast, the world’s most famous snakeman, at his Miami Serpenterium. In fact, ‘Breezy’, as Rom was universally known, had been fascinated by snakes and sought them out from early childhood (he was blessed with a very understanding mother), but it was at the Serpenterium that he learned how to extract venom and care for the assortment of snakes (as well as a 14 foot Nile crocodile) housed there. Bill often sent Breezy and his friends on snake catching expeditions, and during these we are introduced to colourful acquaintances like Attila, who claimed he could catch snakes best when he was stoned.

In fact, Rom seemed at times to be leading a double life. On the one hand, there was the laid back Breezy who drank beer and ‘toked’ with friends while listening to Dylan and Led Zeppelin (the ‘rock ‘n’ roll’ Breezy), and who dated a succession of attractive girls who – somewhat surprisingly – seemed fascinated by snakes and, on the other hand, the Rom who needed all his wits about him when catching venomous snakes or extracting venom, or matching blood samples in the medical lab. In



fact, although he doesn’t make much of this, Rom had an extraordinary capacity to learn new skills, and this clearly required a great deal of commitment.

This autobiography is a breathless big dipper of a read; the pace never slackens. Most of the time the reader is swept along through his various adventures, although the many snake hunting expeditions described later in the book tend to blur into each other for those who are not committed herpetologists.

The pace, however, can feel exhausting at times, for what is missing, perhaps, is a certain sense of interiority, of Rom stepping back at times to reflect upon his many adventures. This is particularly important concerning his fascination with snakes – which, after all, are not everybody’s cup of tea. Apart from describing the beauty of certain snakes, Rom never gives us a real insight into what fascinates him about them. In fact, at times, as he drags a succession of them out from under rocks and stuffs them into bags, they seem merely a source of income for him, not extraordinary for him in any way. And how does the dedicated game hunter who shot and ate deer sit with Rom the conservationist?

Then again, after one of his experiments with hallucinogens, he remarks that “I was

scratching the surface of a spiritual experience”, and a later experiment, when he had an out of body experience, made him remark, “Something had shifted permanently in my mind and the way I understood the world.” It seemed like a very important moment, but he doesn’t explain what had changed, nor does his subsequent behaviour in any way reflect this shift. Rather, it disappears into a continuum of experiences, giving the impression that he was always simply living in and for the moment.

To be fair, Rom makes no attempt to hide the possible contradictions in his nature. In fact, in the preface, he states, “This is what I was and still am to a large extent – contradictions, complexities and all.” And it is his honesty, his refusal to varnish or justify some of the less salubrious aspects of his life, that makes this autobiography so engrossing.

We look forward to reading the next volume, out later this year, where he will talk about setting up India’s first reptile parks, creating a livelihood for the Irulas selling snake venom, and getting hired by the UN to set up crocodile farms in Africa and Asia. The final volume will be about making films and his snakebite work.

Alan

Snakes, Drugs and Rock ‘n’ Roll: My Early Years. Romulus Whitaker with Janaki Lenin. Published by HarperCollins 2024. Available on amazon.in Price in India Rs 394.

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