The Function of Auroville Associations

Extract from a letter from Satprem dated 7/11/78 and addressed to the Canadian Association.

Auroville makes sense only in so far as all of us, in every country, can house the spirit of Auroville within ourselves. It is not a model for a far-away city: it is a new type of association or collective communication. And, as it is not a mental model which is set up once and for all, this new type of collectivity must grow spontaneously, shape itself spontaneously, according to the very needs of each country, and the qualities inherent to each country. All you need is to take a first step – to move forward step by step, and the circumstances themselves will create the next step. Above all, no preconceived ideas or set outline: it is a new species to be built, not a small church with comfortable and convenient ideas. Auroville-India remains like a first venture which each one can and must help, a kind of first laboratory where one can find clues; but it is not the Auroville over there, which is the most important, it is Auroville wherever you are - in your heart first of all, in your own experience. We start off with a few others, without having much idea of where to go and how, but if we are sincere in our enthusiasm, if our will to succeed is pure, Mother will take the struggle out of our hands, and she will give it an unexpected direction and scope. It all depends on how much a few individuals can give themselves sincerely and enthusiastically to the service of a New World which has to be built, a new vibration we must embody, a new way of reaching out. Yes, it’s an adventure.

“The map of the new world is not made in advance” So Auroville-Canada and Auroville-India can walk hand in hand, with innumerable other points of Truth across the world, and all together, invisibly united by the golden thread of experience, can push slowly or quickly on the doors of the New World. Survival depends on the ability to EMBODY, to LIVE the experience. We do not know exactly what this experience is, but we must aim towards it. Auroville-France starts to flicker a little truthfully. All these little beacons of the Mother, all these little lights of the New World have to brush aside the terrestrial night, step by step, meeting again and again, forming a little network of NEW HARMONY. We must start somewhere, Mother will do the rest.

Satprem
What is AVI?

Auroville International (AVI) is a network of national organisations which exists to form a link between Auroville in India and people in various countries across the globe. The purpose of the AVI groups’ existence is to further and facilitate the physical/material and the inner manifestation of Auroville as one strand of a divinely inspired evolutionary work on Earth.

In the United Kingdom, the organisation that does this is called AVI UK. It is a registered charity that raises and channels funds for Auroville projects, organises public meetings and exhibitions to inform interested people and offers advice and information about visiting or staying in Auroville.

Among its legally registered objectives, AVI UK operates a Trust Fund which serves, within Auroville

- To organise and promote scientific research for the advancement of knowledge relevant to educational and community development in rural areas, publish the useful results of all such research and to co-operate with the community of Auroville as a living laboratory for applying, testing or evaluating such research.
- To provide training and education and the necessary human and material resources and facilities to achieve this aim.
- To place a particular emphasis on working with marginalised and dis-advantaged communities to enable them to improve and enrich their lives socially, economically, environmentally and institutionally in sound and sustainable ways.
- To meet the needs and support the work of the Auroville community in the fields of education, environment, healthcare, sustainable agriculture, appropriate technology, the arts and community development.

Auroville, at a human level, exists to discover and live the truth that no problems of human existence can be truly solved without an inner change that ceases to put the ego at the centre of the human reason for action. The construction of a city and all of the other work undertaken by, in, for and around Auroville is the field of action in which this change of vision and consciousness can be effected.

The History of Auroville International UK

The beginning of the UK’s collaboration with Auroville was in 1968 when Dick Batstone was asked to find some earth to place in the Urn for the opening ceremony on 28th February that year. He sent some earth from London and from Somerset. Between then and the early 1970’s, a number of speakers came to London to talk about Auroville, and an exhibition on Auroville was hosted by the Indian Tourist Office in London, which included a presentation and talk by Richard St. Barbe-Baker, a renowned British forester.

In 1972, a concert was given in aid of Auroville by world renowned musicians, violinist Yehudi Menuhin and sitar player, Ravi Shankar, where Yehudi Menuhin spoke briefly on the life of Sri Aurobindo and Auroville. He later became a member of the first AVI UK group, which included Tim Wrey, Dick Batstone and Pat Kaye. The group was based at the Sri Aurobindo Centre in Bell Street, London.

A number of events were organised in the following years, including talks and slide shows, promotional concerts, and participation in new age festivals around the country, including the Festival of Mind, Body and Spirit in London in 1977.

The first AVI UK newsletter was published by Tim Wrey in 1975, and was continued by Dick Batstone and Malcolm Richards until 1983, when Edith Schnapper and Joy Calvert started their work for Auroville from their beautiful home of Boytons near Saffron Walden in Essex.

Edith and Joy opened up this 600 year old farmhouse in 5 acres of gardens and meadows, as an informal Auroville Centre for weekend gatherings for the study of Sri Aurobindo’s writings, sharing news of Auroville, and providing hospitality to visiting Aurovilians. They themselves kept up a lively connection with Auroville, supporting many of its projects, and visiting it every year until they died. Boytons became a home away from home for many Aurovilians and supporters of Auroville, and one of the earliest AVI International meetings was held there in 1983.

In 1982 the organisation became a registered charity, enabling it to reclaim tax on donations. During the late 1980’s Thakor Mistry, John Mulrey and Martin Littlewood, became involved in the organisation, and soon took over the running of AVI UK from Edith and Joy.

Edith sadly passed away in 1991, and Boytons was reluctantly sold. A piece from the AVI UK newsletter for that year described the place that was so sadly missed:
“All of us who have visited, for even a few hours will remember the extraordinary beauty of the house and its gardens, the wonderful stillness, and feeling of light, especially in that most magical of places, Krishna’s Garden. Boytons was an experience which none of us will forget. A small piece of Auroville found in the middle of the English countryside, as many Aurovilians expressed it, an oasis of peace.”

In 1998 AVI UK decided, with the help of a development consultant, to apply for a grant from the European Commission to support Auroville’s work in Education in the villages surrounding the community. A substantial grant was received supporting a project lasting 3 years, enabling the improvement of facilities in three Auroville schools for village children, and the development of new education methods. A second 3 year project soon followed, supporting the work of regeneration of the Tropical Dry Evergreen Forest (TDEF), the indigenous forest of the Auroville area. Both projects were very successful, and it was hoped that more would follow. However, changes in the priorities of the European Commission meant that funding was being diverted from India to Africa, and despite several further applications, no further projects were accepted.

In 2008 AVI UK organised an exhibition on Auroville at the Nehru Centre (the cultural centre of the Indian High Commission) in London. A speaker from the Sri Aurobindo Ashram was invited to inaugurate the exhibition of photographs and display of products and books from Auroville. More than 100 people attended the inauguration.

A number of people have given their time and dedication to the work of AVI UK over the years, as well as those mentioned above. These include David Widdicombe, Caroline Davies, Sonia Dyne and Vikas (Alan Vickers). Sonia and Vikas remain part of the committee today. Martin has moved to Auroville, so has handed the Secretary’s job to Angiras Auro, who was born and grew up in Auroville.

The organisation aims to publish two newsletters each year, and hold two public meetings. We raise funds for Auroville projects and have an evolving website, which has a facility for receiving credit card donations. We collect funds for a number of Auroville projects, especially in village education, and the advantage of a generous tax refund from the UK government makes donating via AVI UK worthwhile for UK taxpayers, enabling additional funds to go to the projects concerned. Despite the Internet, there is still a need for personal communication with those interested in Auroville, and this work continues.

Martin Littlewood

AVI UK
Currently Funded Projects

Aside from The Matrimandir and its gardens, the main projects in Auroville for which we regularly receive and send on donations are:

Aikiyam School
www.aviuk.org/aikiyam.htm
Aikiyam means: “harmony, oneness and unity” in both Tamil and in Sanskrit. The school’s mission is to provide an appropriate kindergarten, primary and intermediate education to children from Kuilapalayam and other villages, which are geographically connected to Auroville. This education is based on the principles of integral education, as defined by Sri Aurobindo, and the Mother, who founded Auroville in 1968. The school strives to maintain a creative and joyful atmosphere, where the uniqueness of each child is respected and nurtured. The school’s aim is to provide quality bilingual education in Tamil and English, covering all of the standard academic subjects, physical education, and a wide variety of vocational options to prepare children for life in a rapidly changing world, while still maintaining contact with their Tamil cultural heritage.

Thamarai
www.auroville.org/environment/avag/thamarai.htm
A project of the Auroville Village Action Group under the Mohanam-Svaram Trust (established June 2006) “Thamarai” is the name given to the learning and cultural centre in Edayanchavady Village – a gateway village into the township of Auroville. Thamarai is the Tamil word for lotus and this is a symbol inspiring the work to foster the emergence of the women, children and families of this village.

KST
www.auroville.org/education/village_schools/khs.htm
The Kuilapalayam Higher Secondary School was set up by the Trust in 1993 with the aim to improve the education in schools surrounding Auroville. The school has around 1000 pupils from the local villages. The school provides government recognized education up to the 12th standard in Tamil medium. The school sets a high standard for its teaching, and achieves good results, with a concentration on both the educational needs and the development of the children.

The funds have been going to support higher education for children who have left the school.
Deepam
linknotworking.com
In India, an oil lamp with an open flame is called a Deepam. For centuries, every year in December, at full moon, the Deepam festival has been celebrated. We chose this name for our project because we want to bring light into the lives of disabled children.

UnLtd Tamil Nadu
linknotworking.com
At UnLtd Tamil Nadu we SEARCH, SELECT and SUPPORT exceptional individuals who are committed to solve some of India’s biggest challenges using their passion and entrepreneurial skills.

Sadhana Forest
sadhanaforest.org
Sadhana Forest started its ecological revival and sustainable living work on December 19th 2003.

Cyclone Thane
AVI UK also sent a lot of money in 2013 to deal with the effects of the Cyclone Thane, but we are not currently receiving or sending funds for that project any more.

Donations to Auroville through AVI UK
AVI UK receives and passes on donations to a variety of projects in Auroville. As a registered charity we qualify to receive ‘Gift Aid’ on donations provided the donor is a tax payer. This means we receive an extra 25p for every £1.00 donated and it does not cost the donor any extra.

Donations Policy
• Donations up to £5000: 50% of the Gift Aid to go to the project, the remainder retained by AVI UK.
• Donations over £5000: 50% of the Gift Aid from the first £5000, plus 100% of the Gift Aid on the value of the donation over £5000 to go to the project, the remaining Gift Aid to be retained by AVI UK.

For donations not eligible for Gift Aid:
• 7% of the donation to be retained by AVI UK for administration purposes.

Our Members on Themselves

Martin Littlewood

My own connection with Auroville began in the mid 1960’s when I was a teenager. My mother had come in contact with the teachings of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother, through Dr Edith Schnapper, a learned lady, who was a devotee, and part of a small Aurobindo group in the UK. Edith became a family friend, and books of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother were always in the house.

I heard about Auroville quite early on, and saw early brochures. I was touched by the images and the ideal, and somehow knew that this was to be part of my future. However, adulthood soon brought love, a family and a career, and my attention was fully taken up by everyday life. However, my connection with Auroville continued, and hearing that Edith and her friend Joy had purchased this beautiful house called Boytons, in the Essex countryside, intending it as a centre for those interested in the Yoga, I decided to pay a visit. In the summer of 1985, I attended my first AVI meeting there, and a number of Aurovilians were there, including Alan Herbert, who straight away invited me to visit Auroville and stay with him in the greenbelt community of Samriddhi. I set off that winter.

My first visit to Auroville was a dream-like experience, and one of contrasts. The experience of the bus ride from the airport was terrifying, living in the Auroville greenbelt in a keet hut was a little frightening, weekly trips on a cycle to Pondy, exhausting, and daily work on the Matrimandir outer structure was exhilarating and very moving. I could tell then that Auroville was indeed a very special place which was the focus of a special force, and that Matrimandir was the focus of that force, even when it was outwardly nothing more than bare concrete beams.

I returned two years later with my wife Dany and then again with our young family. I didn’t know then, but the eldest, Matthew, was later to become an Auroville resident. I have been returning almost every year since that time, and it quickly became my second home – if not my first, as it has always been the place which I have felt the most at home.

During those years, I became more and more involved with AVI UK, in 1991
taking over the Secretary’s role from Joy. AVI UK meetings held at Boytons were wonderful experiences, and there were always visits by Aurovilians with their tales of Auroville life. With the sale of Boytons after Edith’s passing, the AVI UK address became our house on the South Coast, and we regularly entertained visiting Aurovilians there.

From the late 1990’s I was fortunate that my work enabled me to spend more time working for the AVI UK and the AVI International organisation, and make longer trips to Auroville, visiting for at least two months each year, as well as attending annual international meetings in countries around the world.

In around 2003, we were able to contribute to the building of a house in Samriddhi, the community I first arrived in all those years before, and this has become our special Auroville home. This year (2014) Dany and I have decided to take the steps to live in Auroville permanently, becoming newcomers, and finally coming home for good.

Sonia Dyne

I was living in Singapore with my husband and five young children. My life was busy (I was doing freelance editorial work and some teaching) but I was becoming more and more aware that something important was missing from my life – something I had to do.

One day, while watching my children swimming at the Singapore Island Club, a small leaflet, which had been placed on a nearby shelf, caught my eye. I pulled it out: the first page showed a photo of Sri Aurobindo (an arresting face, I thought); the second page was about his role in the struggle for India’s independence from British rule (never been interested in politics); the third page gave a brief account of the Integral Yoga (??); and the fourth page changed my life – with seven lines from Savitri.

The date was May 1st, 1973. In the Ashram at Pondicherry the Mother had retired to her room, but looking back to that day I feel that something of her force had swept over the world and caught up people here and there in the wake of her comet trail, for although I had never heard of Sri Aurobindo or the Mother before, those few lines struck me with the power of a revelation and I knew that I needed to discover more. It is not easy at this distance in time, to recapture the sudden illumination that flooded into my mind as I read what this unknown poet had written. Some special grace must have prevented me from trying, out of habit, to submit it to some sort of critical analysis at first glance, for that might have prevented the experience of an overwhelming certainty that this message of hope, with its implicit rejection of human powerlessness and incapacity, was the way out of our human dilemma. There was no internet available to me in those days, no address on the leaflet, and a trawl of bookshops yielded no result; so I had to wait until July 1976 for the next stage of my journey to begin.

The whole family had gone with friends on a boat trip to an off-shore island. A picnic lunch was prepared as the children played on the beach. Then history seemed to repeat itself as my eye caught sight of a two-line item in the local newspaper announcing that Shri M.P. Pandit from Sri Aurobindo Ashram would be giving a talk that very evening at the Ramakrishna Mission. Here was the opportunity I had been waiting for!

However it took all my powers of persuasion to convince the rest of the party that their hostess needed to call an end to the picnic and return immediately to Singapore. Persistence was rewarded for I not only learned who Sri Aurobindo was but also met many members of the Singapore Indian community who had close links with the Ashram. Some of them had been to Auroville in those early years, and it was from this first contact that my interest developed, until in the late nineteen-seventies I was finally able to visit India, Pondicherry and Auroville itself for the first time. In later years, my work with AVI UK has brought me into closer contact with Auroville and with dedicated people throughout the world who have understood the importance of its destiny to be the cradle of a new consciousness.

John Mulrey

AVI UK Treasurer

During my youth I was always thinking about the big questions, i.e. why are we here and what is the purpose of life? Also I seemed to know deep down that all the ‘isms’ - socialism, communism, capitalism and the variations thereof were not the answers.

Somehow I knew that the only place that could possibly ever give me answers was in India. So many years ago I went to India and started travelling around and ended up in Pondicherry not having heard or read about Sri Aurobindo, The Mother and Auroville.

I went to Auroville and one day in a meeting I tuned into an aspiration in some Aurovilians for a different life. This different life was not mental or emotional, it was something else.

Instantly I knew in my soul that the answers were here and Sri Aurobindo and The Mother were guides to a cradle of a new consciousness. During my youth I was always thinking about the big questions, i.e. why are we here and what is the purpose of life? Also I seemed to know deep down that all the ‘isms’ - socialism, communism,
Paul Littlewood

I first visited Auroville at the age of 8. My dad Martin had a long term involvement with Auroville and in 1989 we visited on a family holiday. I still have some vivid memories of the trip, it was an exotic adventure and a stark contrast to my childhood in England. Auroville continued to be a presence with me whilst growing up through my dad who was secretary for AVIUK and devoted a lot of his time to all things AV. Advice whilst growing up would often be given with a reference to words from Sri Aurobindo or The Mother and became a strong influence to my outlook on life.

When I was eighteen I visited Auroville again, as part of a six month gap year trip. My brother, Matt, had made a similar trip two years previously and had quickly made the decision to permanently move to Auroville and was already living there. I stayed at Youth Camp in Fraternity and made friends with a group of architect students from Pune who had come to Auroville to carry out internships. I joined them in working on an archaeological excavation near Bharat Nivas organised by Popo, the architect who they were studying under. We had a fantastic time both with the work, which was fascinating and in discovering Auroville together.

I discovered a place rather different to the utopian image that I had constructed in my mind growing up, a place with far more contrast than I was expecting. Things here weren’t perfect, in fact it was very easy to be cynical, which many of the more casual visitors to Auroville I met in Youth Camp were. However the imperfections for me were clearly just a symptom of the work being carried out. It was clear that the majority of people I met were far more conscious of themselves and their nature and most importantly, passionate about applying themselves to working with what they found. Such a rare quality to be found in the west but here it was in abundance.

I returned several times over the following years both to India and Auroville being in a relationship with someone I met on my first trip. I developed a strong tie with both places, arriving in India and Auroville to such a bright energy feels not only exhilarating but also a relief, like returning home. One day I hope to remain for a longer time. It seems a waste to have made such a discovery and not more fully explore its nature and contribute to the work being done there.

Vikas

A progression of seemingly chance encounters on a personal search for something other than the conventional road map for petty success and happiness in this life lead up to a moment on top of truck en route to Kathmandu where something more than just words about the teaching of Sri Aurobindo and Mother, but a lived inner peace and light in a seventeen year-old make me realise that I must go to the source and perhaps find the meaningful existence that I had been seeking.

Realizing that the world was a mess was of course the discovery that I too was a mess and that if I wanted to make something more true and beautiful of this life around me, the place to start was myself and then perhaps to live in community with similarly concerned individuals. Thus Mother and Auroville, and over the course of the years the long, slow revelation of Sri Aurobindo’s light and living, constant action. What a grace, what fortune!

After an initial explosion of inner progress and joy, jump-started by meeting Mother and being given my name ‘Vikas’ (Progress), there followed a sine curve plunge and a recrudescence of all that had to go out of my personal evolution. At the time I had taken up smoking dope again, indulging in casual sex and becoming for Auroville a waste of space. This was the time of the Auroville/SAS conflict and physically I was emaciated and low, so I returned to UK and started working as an architect, got married and started a family. Yoga seemed to take a holiday for some years. When I finally re-engaged with Auroville and the yoga, it was with a far deeper commitment and with a compassion, tolerance and understanding that what sometimes seems like the negation of pursuit of the spiritual journey may just be part of the rhythm of the an individual’s or group’s personal sadhana and should not be judged.

When I revisited Auroville my heart was again opened to its dire necessity and purpose in a world on a progressively self-destructive trajectory. All world and personal events were screaming the message: nothing really changes unless the consciousness changes. Ironically, nowhere does this truism make itself more evident than in Auroville itself. Through our own lives and through Auroville International we can perhaps work for Auroville to be a living demonstration of the truth it was created to manifest.

David

I had a friend who taught Asian History at Durham University. When I went in about 1962 on a first visit to India, he suggested that I visit the Ashram at Pondichery, which I did, as I was interested in the writings of Sri Aurobindo. I stayed for a few weeks and met the Mother and got introduced to the activities of the Ashram. After that I went back to the Ashram several times, where I now had some good friends. I was a regular attendant on the street in front of the balcony when the Mother came out onto it.

When Auroville was started, I became interested and went for a visit at some time in the early 1990s. I went back a number of times from then on, and joined AVIUK.
Angiras Auro

Auroville is my home. I was born there in the mid-seventies and did all my schooling and education there. My upbringing has meant that I have lived and breathed the ideals of Auroville and the philosophy of Sri Aurobindo and The Mother from the start. I have also observed and experienced all the challenges that we face when people from different cultures come together to create something new with only the inner willingness to participate and the Divine as the sole authority.

I came over to the UK in the mid-nineties to attend university, with the aim of studying education and becoming a teacher to go back to Auroville and reforming the education system there. However, nearly twenty years later I am still here - with my husband, Radha, who also grew up in Auroville with me, and our two children. And although we go back as often as we can to recharge our batteries, I am often reminded of a cartoon I once saw, where two hippy parents are standing at the door, waving off their son to work in his suit and tie and brief case, asking “Where did we go wrong?” And though I live an outwardly very materialistic, western life style in the UK, for me Auroville is in my heart and my raison d’etre and the philosophy is part of my every day life as I strive to grow in consciousness.

I have been involved in AVI UK on and off over the last twenty years and appreciate the opportunities to connect with other people who have the same call. I am looking forward to my new role as Secretary.

Alan Herbert

I first learned about the Ashram while staying at a hotel in Darjeeling in 1979. The manager was a devotee and happened to be hosting a young couple who had just stayed there for a few weeks. They hadn’t enjoyed it - I can’t remember why - but they must have said something that piqued my interest and decided me to make a visit. This couple also gave me an introduction to Reg of the Good Guest House, an eccentric individual with a kind heart and an intense devotion to Mother. He, along with a few other sadhaks like Ravindra Khanna, was my introduction to the Ashram and the yoga.

A few months later, still recovering from amoebic dysentery, I visited Auroville for the first time. I came back to my room in Golconde energised and wanting to find out more about this strange place. I subsequently moved to Hope.

I have lived in Samriddhi since June, 1982. It is a Greenbelt community, so part of my responsibility is managing an area of forest. I was one of the founders of Auroville Today in 1988, and this remains a major focus today. I also run the occasional workshop or seminar on sustainability (‘surface’ and ‘deep’) issues which bring people from other parts of India to Auroville.

AVIUK Members December 2013

Back row: Vikas, John Mulrey, Angiras Auro with daughters, Martin Littlewood, Paul Littlewood
Front row: Sonia Dyne, David Widdicombe
To Be a True Aurovilian

It was day before yesterday, I think, the whole day was taken up like that in the experience, and I felt it was the revelation of Auroville’s true goal, and that THIS was what had to be told, and THIS is what will select the people, the Aurovilians. The true Aurovilians are those who want to make the search and discovery of the divine. But, as I said, not through mystic means: it’s in life. That too should be said.

“Our research will not be a search effected by mystic means. It is in life that we wish to find the divine.”

Kathy to Aurovilians, on Auronet, 2005 regarding AVI meeting in Barcelona, Spain

Impression of AVI by an Aurovilian

The impression that I take away with me is a deep appreciation for the work of the centres and their tremendous dedication to serve Auroville from afar. Living in Auroville, I feel blessed to be nourished by the direct contact with the force pervading the place. Our “extended family” receives that nourishment in another way and while non-local, it is very clear to me that they are part of Auroville as they work to support our activities in multifarious ways. It was not surprising to find that the proposal for ‘universal Aurovilians’ strikes such a cord of resonance among the centres and was one of the topics for discussion.

There is much more I could say but hopefully you get a little taste through this note. It was a great privilege to be part of this gathering and I plan to be less tentative and more engaged with this work of liaison between Auroville and the centres from now on. We can really consider the AVI’s as among our best allies in the world and please do contact me if you would like to share your work with them and explore how they can support it. The centres also send an invitation for any of you traveling abroad to make contact and visit if you can when you are in a place where there is a centre. It nourishes their work on our behalf.

Kathy to Aurovilians, on Auronet, 2005

Public Meeting

26th April 2pm

Auroville International public meeting at Auromira Centre, 126 Whitton Avenue East, Greenford, Midd’x UB6 OPY. The meeting will finish about 4pm.

Vijen Manek

5/3/1930 – 25/1/2014

Vijen Manek died on 25th January, aged 83. He created Auromira, where we have been hosting our London Open Meetings.

We will be publishing a fuller obituary in our next issue of AVI UK Newsletter.

Live in and be the Truth you aspire to.
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