



Auroville International
UNITED KINGDOM

What Makes us British?

The International Zone

The International Zone (IZ), one of the four principal zones of the Auroville city area, is the designated site for Pavilions from around the world. These Pavilions will represent all the major cultures from around the world and be centres of research, study and creative activity. They will be an expressive manifestation of human unity in diversity.

Somewhere in this zone, will be the British Pavilion which will ultimately represent the British Soul.

The essential aim of the cultural pavilions will be "to help individuals become aware of the fundamental genius of the nation to which they belong, at the same time bringing them into contact with the ways of life and genius of other nations, so that they can learn to know and respect equally the true spirit of all the countries of the world."

If anyone wants to contribute to this discussion please feel free to contact – John Mulrey, email john@aviuk.org

What makes us British?

So what are the characteristics of British culture? What makes us essentially British? Is this something only the British can do, or can other people from other cultures can tell us? Perhaps we are so wrapped up in our own culture we cannot see it, or can we work it out ourselves? Perhaps it will be a combination of both approaches?

At an AVI UK meeting some years ago there was a nice balance of people born in Britain and those born in other countries, who now live here. So I



Village Cricket Scene

asked the group the question: what makes us British?

Below is a summary, in no particular order, of what some people thought were British characteristics.

1. Talking about the weather
2. Drinking tea
3. Sense of humour
4. Inventing sports and a sense of fair play
5. Literature / Poetry
6. Gardening
7. Inventions and eccentricity
8. Love of animals

What have the British been good at?

Making a list is relatively easy, but how can this lead us to a deeper discussion about the British Soul? There is no magic formula or approach to use. So, I am going to jump in and look at the things I believe we have been historically good at.

The British love of play

Sports invented

The British have invented and / or developed numerous sports and games that are played worldwide.

To name but a few:

Football, rugby, hockey, golf, tennis, cricket, volleyball, darts, badminton, squash, water polo, netball, snooker, table tennis, bobsleigh, curling and some forms of sailing, rowing and skiing.

What circumstances helped this happen?

There are numerous theories why this happened.

It is argued that the British upper classes were operating in a remarkably stable social and economic environment from the late 17th Century and the early 20th century. Essentially, the English (and later the British) upper classes were rich, idle and secure for 200 years, and this led to leisure time. Also, Britain has a long history of higher education where some of the students found time to play sports.

Additionally, the church encouraged first cricket in the summer and then football in the winter, to keep young men 'out of trouble' and out of the pub.

Continued p2

What else?

Apart from the economic and social circumstances what else caused the British to exceed at inventing and developing so many sports?

Some people argue the British had a knack for codifying and writing down rules of many different sports. They even argue that the Rules of Associated Football is one of the most influential books ever written. Others believe the British very quickly understood the value of sport for individuals, society, and even empire building.

Love of play

But even allowing for these factors, the British invented a whole variety of sports. Fast sports, slow sports, sports that suited people of different sizes, outdoor sports, indoor sports, sports that could be played both outside and inside, summer sports, winter sports on grass and on ice, sports on water, team sports and individual sports and even a game or sport that was played in pubs.

In my opinion we just loved playing for the sake of playing. We embraced the essence of play which has been described as:

‘An activity standing quite consciously outside ordinary life as being ‘not serious’, but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly’.

You can only have this love of playing if you play with proper consideration for fairness, ethics, respect and a sense of fellowship with one’s competitors. So we embraced ‘sportsmanship’ in all its forms. I feel unconsciously we embraced the phrase “It’s not whether you win or lose, it’s how you play the game”.

Perhaps the ultimate example of our love of playing is shown by the fact that we invented a game called cricket which, when played between two

countries, can last 5 days and end in a draw!

The British Love of Literature and Poetry

World Famous

The British have produced a staggering number of worldwide well-known authors, poets and characters.

Among our best known authors we could name William Shakespeare, Jane Austen, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Bronte, Mary Ann Evans (known as George Elliot), CS Lewis, George Orwell, Ian Fleming, Roald Dahl and J K Rowling.

The characters include James Bond, Lady Macbeth, Miss Marple, Frankenstein, Harry Potter, Oliver Twist, Romeo and Juliet, Peter Pan, Matilda, and Sherlock Holmes, to name only a few.

As for our renowned poets, I would like to mention Geoffrey Chaucer, Alfred Lord Tennyson, John Keats, William Shakespeare, TS Eliot, William Wordsworth, Robert Burns, Dylan Thomas, Emily Bronte.

International Language

As England became a naval nation, and then an Empire, the English language spread and became international. When it spread, its literature became enriched considerably. However, some people believe that our language was always a rich cultural mix. There are two words for just about everything in English. A Latin word and an Anglo-Saxon word. They argue our language was international long before it became an international language.

Obviously, these authors, poets and characters have become famous partly because of the richness, development and international use of the English Language.

What else?

What are the other reasons for the British success in the literary field? I would welcome suggestions.

My personal view is that even though clearly imagination is needed in the literary field, but I marvel at the sheer scope and depth of the British imagination. We have had the ability to write and put in poetic form many aspects of life and to create characters that we all love or dislike but are hard to forget.

British poetry has successfully covered a whole range of topics from class culture (Robert Burns) to Mother Nature (Wordsworth). Similarly British Literature has covered social injustice (Charles Dickens), the future of society (George Orwell) to the rights of women (Virginia Woolf).

But the above is just a small selection of the vastness of the British Poetry and Literature tradition. Please let me know your thoughts on why British Literature and Poetry is so popular.

Summary

Quotation by the Mother:

Just as each individual has a psychic being which is his true self and which governs his destiny more or less overtly, so too each nation has a psychic being which is its true being and moulds its destiny from behind the veil: it is the soul of the country, the national genius, the spirit of the people, the centre of national aspiration, the fountainhead of all that is beautiful, noble, great and generous in the life of the country. True patriots feel its presence as a tangible reality.

Please let me know your thoughts on the natural genius of The British Nation.

Newcomers in Auroville

First visit to Auroville

We first came to Auroville only last year. Two months to visit Auroville, see what this strange place, labelled by some as a ‘cult’, was about and take our learnings back to Europe, to perhaps start or join an eco-project

there. Within a week of being here we started seriously questioning moving here instead, much to the dismay of loved ones back in Europe to whom we had promised we were only going to look, and not to move... What captured us back then was, in essence, the Auroville Dream, but what made

us consider moving here was the Aurovilian ability to self-criticise.

It was refreshing to see so much self-reflection which then prompts action. We saw people willing to talk about issues and willing to do something about it. Admittedly, there

was/is plenty to criticise and plenty to improve on, but what struck us then, and still does, is that generally everyone is trying. Everyone is trying to better themselves, and the world around them.

Having moved around and travelled a lot in my life, this is something I believe to be quite unusual. Sure, there are always a few people around who are trying to develop and push themselves, but a whole community? A whole 2000-odd people, plus thousands more volunteers and long-term guests all striving towards something greater than themselves? That's something I hadn't come across before on this scale, and it immediately made me feel at home.

Coming back

So, after 7 months back in the UK, saving and preparing for the move, my partner, Allan, and I returned to Auroville in October 2019; Allan, driven by the possibility to experiment with climate resiliency and human adaptation to climate change on a larger scale, and me driven by the social experiment and aim of achieving human unity. We are beginning our newcomer process and intend to stay and contribute what we can to realising the Mother's Dream.

Current situation

Now, it is hard now to imagine not being here.

I am writing this from COVID-19 lockdown, and I am grateful every day that we're locked down here in Auroville. I can't imagine a better place to be in quarantine. For a start, we live in a community with 8 others, so our "isolation" is expanded to a community of 10 who share common facilities like kitchen, toilets and showers.

As I write this, looking through the mosquito net wall of our little pod, I can see trees, the young papayas and bananas Allan planted, the community dog Roof lolling in the shade, clear skies and sunshine, our badminton "court" that is used every evening, and many bushes of the most beautiful magnolia with such vibrant pinks and oranges and white that are a feast for the visual senses. I can hear all kinds of birds, the occasional peacock that Roof loves to chase into the trees,

and at night we hear jackals. And I know, just out of sight in the daytime, there is a rat snake or two lying in the undergrowth that sometimes we are lucky enough to observe.

We can walk out of our rooms straight into the woods and carry on walking for a good while without seeing much sign of human life (particularly during lock down), and this is the town centre. A few community members are allocated shoppers for essentials, and the rest of our fruit and veg we get from Allan who works at Auro Orchard, an Aurovilian organic farm. As I said, we are very lucky to be "stuck" in this paradise.

What brings two young professionals to a place like Auroville?

This is a question that is often asked. I've highlighted above a little of what drew us here, but what feels particularly pertinent in these strange Coronavirus times is also what we left our traditional lives in the UK to search for.

Allan is a Town Planner by profession, and I am an Occupational Therapist, and both of us found our work unfulfilling, despite having professions that we liked and autonomy and flexibility in our work and focus. I, at the time, was living in London, where half of my income was going on rent for my tiny room in a little flat, and I was cycling up to 90 minutes one way to work because I simply couldn't justify spending so much on public transport.

Allan was commuting hours by train across rural Somerset, and sometimes on these train journeys he'd wake up as if from a daze, noticing another few months had gone by and wondering what he had done to combat the inevitable impending climate related social and economic collapse.

Despite our efforts to live low impact



Allan and Leo

lives (eating a local, vegan diet where possible, minimising unnecessary consumerism, cycling or using public transport etc), we were still calculating that we were using at best 1.5 x our share of the global resources that is sustainable. We were fed up of being part of the problem and wanted to find an alternative, kinder way of living.

Looking forward

The Mother, on initiating Auroville, invited those of goodwill to join the adventure to search for the Supreme Truth and invited us to use such challenges as opportunities for development and transformation. As I worry that the post-COVID-19 world may slide further into economics, politics and lifestyles governed by fear, safety measures that come at the expense of human rights and freedoms, and a kind of frantic desire to selfishly hoard survival items, I am relieved that Auroville exists. I am encouraged that something I'm apart of is striving towards overcoming the ego and working towards a new species that can live in harmony with each other and our beautiful planet that sustains us. I don't know if Auroville will achieve what it set out to, but I have hope, and that gives me hope for humankind.

*Leo Keller
Occupational Therapist at Deepam for
children with special needs*



Some of the editorial team left to right: Peter, Mariana, Carel, Divya and Alan

Auroville Today

The beginning

Auroville Today, Auroville's monthly news journal, put out its first issue in November, 1988. Our most recent summer issue was our 359th.

Nobody expected us to last this long. "I give you six months" was how one Aurovilian greeted our launch. He had good reason for his doubts. We, the first editorial team, were seven enthusiasts with zero experience of journalism and publishing. This became evident when we had to hurriedly reprint our first issue, on the passing of the Auroville Foundation Act, because we had named people who should have remained anonymous.

In fact, our team of enthusiasts was merely responding to a request from Auroville International (AVI) for regular information about what was happening in the community. This was severely lacking at the time. The Auroville Review, the only other publication that was being sent out intermittently, was providing little information about the

different activities: the editors were more concerned about telling their readers where the Aurovilians were falling short of the ideal.

Overview of diversity

Consequently, we decided that in Auroville Today we would try to give an overview of the extraordinary diversity of Auroville with a minimum of 'preaching'. It is difficult to know how far we have succeeded in this over the years.

Nobody expected us to last this long. "I give you six months" was how one Aurovilian greeted our launch.

While we always tried to mix humour, personal profiles, overview articles and depth, and while we have covered certain aspects – town planning, the economy, governance, environmental work, individual stories – fairly well, we are aware of certain lacuna. These include stories and expressions of Auroville youth, something we have

begun rectifying by inviting the youth to design and provide all the content for our most recent double summer issue.

Wide readership

We must have been doing something right, however, because while Auroville Today was initially planned for an outside readership, we discovered that more and more Aurovilians were reading us to find out what was happening in their own community, a comment upon the state of our internal communication culture. At a certain point, we also decided to send copies of the monthly journal to selected government offices and to the embassies and legations of all the nationalities represented in Auroville to acquaint them better with our work and ideals.

This, however, brought its own challenges. For now we were writing for multiple readerships with very different understandings of Auroville. It also meant we had to be much more discriminating in what we covered and how we covered it.

Perhaps the greatest challenge, however, has been to convey the

unique 'texture' of this experiment – the mix of idealism and pragmatism, bloody-mindedness and high aspiration subjected to the forces of this very particular pressure cooker called Auroville – for only then can our successes and our failures be contextualized and better understood.

At present we have 520 subscribers. Almost 200 of these are in Auroville (where we reckon each issue is read by four others), 150 in India, and the rest scattered around the world. Germany and the U.S. are the countries with the most overseas subscribers. Issues are also available for sale at Auroville outlets and online.

Team members and choice of topics

Only two of the original team members are still working on Auroville Today. Over the years many other Aurovilians have joined the team for shorter or longer periods. There have been

many other changes. The format of the publication has been re-jigged a number of times, in a moment of light-headedness we decide to print all our photographs in colour and, more recently, we made a digital version of the issue available to our subscribers, along with access to an archive of past issues.

What hasn't changed, however, is the very democratic process by which topics are chosen and articles are judged. At the beginning of each month, the team sits round at table and decides collectively on the topics that will be worked on for the next issue and who will write them. The drafts of articles are subsequently submitted to the whole team for their feedback, a process which can be very ego-bruising!

The layout is done by a member of the team, photographs are sent to an editor in France, then everything is sent to a press for printing. Initially, the

Auroville Press printed every issue; today, the Ashram Press in Pondicherry has taken up that responsibility.

Reflection

We have never seen ourselves as performing a Public Relations role for Auroville (we are very willing to criticize and raise questions when we think this is warranted) and we have never claimed to represent the views of the whole community – as if anybody could! What is beyond dispute, however, is that Auroville Today is a unique documentation of the last 30 years of this remarkable experiment in social and spiritual evolution.

Alan Herbert

For subscription information, please go to www.auroville.org/avtoday or contact John Mulrey, john@aviuk.org

Mahalakshmi Home for Assisted Living

The construction of the Mahalakshmi Home (MLH) for Assisted Living was started on 15th August 2016, though the Foundation stone was laid already on 3rd of October 2015 by Dr. Karan Singh.

As often with building projects in Auroville, it has taken a longer time to reach the present state of near completion. But now there is a really nice place which supports architecturally and systemically the need of Auroville's elderly where they can be happy and comfortable.

The building is located on the Crown Road, next to "Arka", where various health and well-being oriented activities, events and other facilities are offered.

The project is run by Auroville Health Services (AVHS) who look after the

residents and provide all necessary care, and by Auroville Housing Service, who will select the stewards and temporary occupants, in collaboration with AVHS.

This building is reserved for elderly long-term Aurovilians who are no longer able to care for themselves in Auroville's demanding environment. Most of these Aurovilians are not able to contribute the full amount of a unit in "Mahalakshmi Home" and the value of the houses they occupy at present is rarely sufficient to cover this amount.



View from Arka garden

If you wish to help to fully complete the building please contact John Mulrey – john@aviuk.org, 01296 415685

Sir Mark Tully

My 12 years as a Member of the International Advisory Council of Auroville

Background

The Auroville Foundation Act 1988 created the Governing Board and the International Advisory Council (IAC).

The Governing Board has many roles but one of its' roles is being a link between Auroville and the Indian Government.

The IAC is charged under the Act with ensuring that Aurovilians have "the freedom to grow and develop activities and institutions which further aspirations and programmes envisaged by the charter."

In a sense the IAC is the Aurovilians' watchdog, looking out for any encroachments on their autonomy, particularly encroachments by the Governing Body.

How did we fulfil our responsibility?

We held meetings twice a year which stretched over three days and coincided with meetings of the Governing Board. We would have discussions with the Working Committee, and then with numerous working groups. After collecting our thoughts we met the Governing Board to discuss with them the issues raised with us.

Finally, we would draw up minutes which covered all our discussions and the recommendations we had made. The minutes would be published. Dr Karan Singh, the politician and scholar of Indian philosophy who chaired The Governing Board, was always willing to take concerns we raised into consideration and so although we



Sir Mark Tully with Governing Board members, Dr Karen Singh , Ameeta Mehra, Dr B.V. Doshi

were a watchdog there was never any sense of us and them when we had our joint meetings.

IAC colleagues

I served with colleagues from a variety of nations and professions who provided diverse insights to our deliberations. To mention just four of my colleagues who were members of the IAC at some stage, we were very fortunate to have Julian Lines from America with us. His role in ' Auroville International ' and his roots in Auroville itself enabled him to deepen our understanding of Aurovilians' concerns.

The Belgian Marc Luycks Ghisi's experience in the European Commission and as Dean of a Business School proved invaluable in the discussions we had on Auroville's governance. During discussions on education we learnt from the experience of Kabir Shaikh, a Briton who had acquired a wealth of experience as a teacher and educational administrator in Britain and also headed UNESCO's provisions for education in Palestine. Our only woman, Vishaka Desai, at the time the CEO of America's Asian Society and a research scholar in Global Affairs, kept us anchored to the world with her global perspective.

Main issues and projects

There were certain issues which would come up almost every meeting. Among them was governance, the vexed

question of establishing a system of governance which preserved the autonomy of individual Aurovilians but didn't slide into anarchy. Other issues included the plan for the development of Auroville, the need for Auroville's population to grow, the difficulty of acquiring land, the complications Auroville's special tax status created for its entrepreneurs, and relations with the neighbouring villages.

We were also directly involved in projects. Perhaps the most significant project was the Retreat when Auroville came together to review its past and look to the future. We felt it brought out the enormous potential creativity and imagination among Aurovilians. It clearly demonstrated what Auroville achieved when everyone worked together.

Auroville's 50th anniversary

We also played a significant role in planning for the 50th anniversary. One of my personal concerns was the need for Auroville's potential to be more widely visible in the world outside. I saw so many remarkable initiatives which I felt should have been extensively replicated by collaborations with the government, the private sector or civil society. The forester Joss Brooks collaboration with the government is an example of what could be achieved. One of the aims of the 50th anniversary was to raise the profile of Auroville.

Reflection

At the end of my third and final term of office when all members of the IAC were retired, we wrote a letter to Aurovilians in which we described how we had seen our role. In it we said, “throughout our association with you we provided a keen ear to your ideas, thoughts, and sometimes even frustrations and disappointments.

Equally we communicated our own observations in all sincerity. We greatly valued the openness and honesty of our dialogue”.

We felt it had all been more than worthwhile when we received a letter from the Working Committee in which they said “your presence and support have helped Auroville to grow and to become more conscious of needed

developments in many directions.” It is sad that the government has not yet appointed a new IAC.

I feel deeply grateful for having been involved in a unique venture inspired by the teaching and experience of one of India’s most profound twentieth century philosophers Shri Aurobindo and his shakti the Mother.

Savitri

A personal view by Neeraj

The Mighty Mother

*The Mighty Mother lay outstretched at ease.
All was in line with her first satisfied plan;
Moved by a universal will of joy
The trees bloomed in their green felicity
And the wild children brooded not on pain.
At the end reclined a stern and giant tract
Of tangled depths and solemn questioning hills,
Peaks like a bare austerity of the soul,
Armoured, remote and desolately grand
Like the thought-screened infinities that lie
Behind the rapt smile of the Almighty’s dance.*

...

*This was the scene which the ambiguous Mother
Had chosen for her brief felicitous hour;
Here in this solitude far from the world
Her part she began in the world’s joy and strife.
Here were disclosed to her the mystic courts,
The lurking doors of beauty and surprise,
The wings that murmur in the golden house,
The temple of sweetness and the fiery aisle.
A stranger on the sorrowful roads of Time,
Immortal under the yoke of death and fate,
A sacrificant of the bliss and pain of the spheres,
Love in the wilderness met Savitri.*

Sri Aurobindo
Savitri, Book 5 Canto 1

She exists in a plane of consciousness very different to ours. A plane which is full of wonder, delight, magic and strength.

Mighty yet close Mother

She is the mighty mother: “*The Mighty Mother lay outstretched at ease*” and “*Calling the mighty Mother of the worlds to make this earthly tenement her house*”. Yet she will take birth: “*The Mighty Mother shall take birth in Time*”. Also, she will do her work in the world: “*The Earth-Goddess toils across the sands of Time.*”

The above few quotes from Savitri capture the magic and strength of the Divine Mother. She is there in the mystic world. Far more powerful than any army, government or natural force. Her Power is supreme.

Despite the magnitude of the Mother’s greatness, she is here, close to us. She is here in our day to day lives: “*To meet the ancient Mother in her groves.*”

In order to experience her reality we have to invoke her presence and her power: “*Descend. Let thy journey cease, come down to us.*”

This is the wonder of Savitri. She has the ability to make every day a marvel. She can transform any situation.

Bring Mother into our everyday lives

*To go with Satyavan holding his hand
Into the life that he has loved and touch
Herbs he has trod and know the forest flowers
And hear at ease the birds and the scurrying life
That starts and ceases, rich far rustle of boughs
And all the mystic whispering of the woods.
Release me now and let my heart have rest.*

Sri Aurobindo
Savitri, Book 7 Canto 3

There is a hidden mystic delight to live on the forest floor which people on the tree tops can not experience. The secret to experiencing this delight is Savitri. She will help bring a richness to daily life. This is not just on a physical level but on all the inner planes of who we are.

Even the darkness which pervades worldly life can be transformed by the Mother’s magic touch.

Neeraj

Solitude Farm

(and the food philistine)

Permaculture workshop

I am not a 'Foodie' and when people start talking about food I zone out. I avoid food programmes like the plague and when I see people taking pictures of their meals, I am internally shaking my head in despair. Basically, I am a food philistine.

Yet here I was going to Solitude Farm in Auroville to take part in a permaculture workshop. I knew I was here because I had seen videos of Krishna, the driving force behind Solitude Farm, talking and was impressed by his passion and the farm he had helped create.

There were 5 people in the workshop. A Turkish and German woman and a Spanish man who all had a good knowledge of growing food. There was also an Indian man who was looking for ideas about how to run his farm in the north of India. The fifth person was a food philistine.

Krishna's inspiration

The workshop started with Krishna giving us a talk about the relationship between food, culture and society. He said his inspiration came from the book 'The one straw revolution' by Masanobu Fukuoka. He told us that there is a global crisis in terms of a water shortage, air pollution, mental and physical health problems.

He added that one of the main reasons for these problems is we have lost our relationship with Mother Earth. This is because we do not know where our food comes from, or how it is grown or processed and there is a high carbon footprint of transporting food long distances.

Krishna said the solution is to grow and eat local foods. They grow easily and are abundant so they are cheaper and therefore accessible to the rich and poor. Also, local foods have a better nutritional value, use less resources and have a low ecological cost.

Krishna explained we need to value more the healthy soil and all the gifts, even every leaf, Mother nature gives us.



Krishna with the blue towel on his head with permaculture workshop participants

According to Krishna, culture helps society to bind together and local foods are part of that cultural identity. So as everyone has an interest in the local foods, local soil and local economy this helps society to develop a spirit of cooperation.

Tour of the farm

After the talk we then started on a tour of the farm led by Krishna and were given baskets to collect plants and fruits from around the farm. Krishna seemed to know the English, Latin, Tamil and Hindi names of all the plants and fruits and gave us their nutritional and medicinal value.

During the tour Krishna couldn't help himself, apart from talking to us he also spoke to the workers and even joined in the work by turning water valves on and off. In addition to all the plants and fruits, I saw an array of butterflies and other flying creatures.

As we walked around, I said to Krishna what a great farm this was but I thought the word 'Solitude' was not a cool name for the farm. He explained that the word 'Solitude' refers to the essential spiritual part of us that stands alone undisturbed by our outer self.

After a few hours we returned to the farm buildings and laid everything we had picked on a long bench. I counted a total of 50 different fruits and plants. I later learnt there were over 140 different fruits and plants on the farm.

Preparing part of lunch

Krishna then left us and an Indian woman called Madhuri took over and helped us to prepare a salad and some

juices from everything we had picked. She seemed to know as much as Krishna about all the plants and fruits.

We were all given jobs such as cleaning, cutting and squeezing. My job was to squeeze the small lemons. During my brief forays into the kitchen at home I had squeezed an orange and remember having to apply quite a bit of elbow grease for a small amount of juice.

I applied some pressure to the back of a small lemon and there was an explosion of juice into a bowl. I looked at all the juice in the bowl and thought 'how did all that juice come from that small lemon?' It seemed a minor miracle.

Lunch

After we finished preparing the salad we went over to a table and waited for our lunch. There were many tourists there but I also recognised quite a few Aurovilians. Clearly lunch at Solitude Farm was a popular venue.

After a short wait our lunch arrived, the Turkish lady, who later came back to volunteer at the farm, immediately took a picture of the meal. The lunch did look fantastic and I felt all sorts of mental barriers breaking down and I thought 'what the hell' and got out my phone and took a picture of my lovely, colourful and pleasantly presented lunch. It was probably the most nutritious lunch in my life and it was all lovingly organically and most importantly locally grown.

If you wish to help Solitude Farm please contact John Mulrey, john@aviuk.org, 01296 415685

John Mulrey

Gasanova Finally Roars

AVI UK had received substantial donations for the Pottery project at the Kalabhumi Art Centre so, as I was in Auroville I thought it was a good opportunity to see where the money was being spent. Also, I was curious to see a pottery project, as I had never been near a pottery kiln before.

The potter, Sabrina, had designed all aspects of the kiln from scratch, from the overall dimensions, internal workings, to the level of insulation.

Sabrina told me the kiln was gas fired, and its name was 'Gasanova'. She

explained the first firing with any new kiln is always a very nervous time. This is because what the first batch produces is a good indicator of what the kiln would produce from then on. I had arrived a few days after the first firing, and Sabrina and her partner Matt were both very happy because the first firing had gone well.

Sabrina is also an artist, so her plan is to use her specialist pottery and artistic skills for bespoke orders rather than mass producing. Gasanova will also be



Sabrina and her first firing

used for teaching pottery and artistic skills to the students from the local schools.

Let's hope Gasanova continues to roar!

M.E. Batstone

Passing: 27/03/2020

M.E. (as she wanted to be known) began attending AVI UK meetings in the late 1970s with her husband, Dick. Mercurial, quick-witted, she was in many ways the perfect foil to her quiet, contemplative partner.

She first met Dick when, as manager, she interviewed him for a job in Watkins bookshop, in London. They married in 1978. Like Dick, she had long been searching for a meaning in life. The daughter of a vicar, she loved the cadences of the King James Bible and Book of Common Prayer, but felt traditional Christianity was too narrow to encompass the riches of the spiritual world.

Dick became her doorway to that world, and particularly to Sri Aurobindo and The Mother. Dick had lived in the Sri Aurobindo Ashram between 1959 and 1960, so it was natural that when they visited Pondicherry together for the first time in the late 1970s, he would want to spend time there.

M.E, however, felt stifled in the Ashram. Auroville, on the other hand, was like a breath of fresh air. She loved the frankness, open-heartedness, dedication and idealistic energy of

the pioneer Aurovilians, and Auroville became her 'city on the hill' to which she remained devoted.

At one point, she and Dick thought about joining the community, but realized they didn't have the psychological stamina, and she felt they were too old. However, they revisited a number of times and regularly donated to the Matrimandir



M.E and Dick

and to the land. While she was not a regular attendee of AVI meetings in the UK, she welcomed many Aurovilians to their lovely Malmesbury home, seating them at the big pine table in the kitchen with a cup of freshly brewed coffee before excitedly demanding the very latest news from her 'second home'.

She visited Auroville for the last time in 2017. She planted a tree in memory of Dick, who had passed away in 2016,

she renewed old friendships and finally made it up to the Matrimandir Chamber (she had a fear of heights) where she had a 'marvelous meditation'.

After Dick passed away, it was a very difficult time for her. Although she continued to feel his presence, she found it difficult to do the sadhana on her own.

M.E. passed away on 27th March, a day before her 87th birthday. Her last wish was to be buried next to Dick in the lovely country churchyard where he lies.

M.E. was an original in her own right. Intense, challenging, highly strung, sometimes opinionated, sometimes irresolute to the point of paralysis, she was not always easy company. Hers was not an easy sadhana.

But nobody could deny her generosity of spirit, her vivaciousness, wit, sensitivity, quick intelligence, high culture and, above all, her devotion to Dick, whom she revered, protected, and at times inspired. It was largely due to her persistent encouragement that he wrote *Passage to More Than India*, a lovely account of his year-long stay in the Ashram.

We will miss her free spirit.

Alan Herbert

Auroville's Response to COVID 19

The Indian Government imposed a nationwide lockdown on 24th March for 21 days: this has been extended a number of times. However since the beginning of June there has been a partial relaxation of the lockdown, enabling some services to re-open and allowing many of Auroville's employees to return to work while observing social distancing and hygiene regulations.

How has Auroville dealt with this unique stress test?

On the whole, it has done very well: typically, we seem to derive strength from adversity. Those strengths include the extraordinary dedication and spirit of service displayed by those in our essential services to keep the community functioning efficiently; the long hours spent by Security, Health, the COVID Task Force and the Working Committee in dealing with the authorities and ensuring that that the tough lockdown conditions were adhered to. There was also a huge upsurge in volunteerism from people of all ages and, in spite of the rigours of the lockdown, a pervasive good humour and willingness to observe the unfamiliar practices of social distancing, mask-wearing and sanitising by the residents.

Support was provided for the older and more vulnerable members of our population through a new food delivery service and psychological counselling, while Auroville Village Action Group provided emergency aid to the most vulnerable in the nearby villages. Meanwhile some of our units rejigged their production process to make much needed masks and sanitisers.

Weaknesses

However, the stress test also revealed weaknesses. Perhaps the most obvious consequence of the lockdown, has been its disastrous effect upon

our economy. That economy was already in a weakened state due to reduced government grants and increased taxation, but now many of our commercial units, could no longer operate and contribute to community coffers, yet were expected, according to government regulations, to continue paying their workers. As there were no visitors to buy Auroville products, and e-commerce was blocked, we suddenly realised how dependent our commercial sector is on the tourist trade.

Unless commerce picks up very fast again, which seems unlikely – some units may be forced to close for ever – there will be big cuts in community budgets (this has already begun) and possibly in maintenances, meaning that those who are wholly dependent upon that source will be in serious financial difficulties, and the material development of the community as a whole thrown into question. Realizing that many people may require financial support during this emergency, the FAMC and BCC (Auroville's financial administration) have offered various support options, including temporary emergency maintenance, the reduction or suspension of contributions, and the restructuring or suspension of loans from Auroville finances.

Meanwhile we are dipping into our reserves. At the beginning of the



A food delivery to Food Link

financial year, City Services only had a buffer for three months, so the Financial Service opened a new account to which Aurovilians and the AVI centres were invited to contribute. Because of the very generous response (by mid-May the emergency account had received 30 lakh rupees (£32,000) and a major reduction in the recurring budgets, they reported in May that now they had enough to keep afloat for another six months.

Opportunity

The outlook seems dire for Auroville. Yet, as Albert Einstein put it, "in the midst of every crisis lies great opportunity". The lockdown has jolted us out of our habitual grooves, and now we have the opportunity to experience Auroville anew and to examine the economy, governance system, institutions etc. we have created, as well as the lifestyles we have grown accustomed to.

That lifestyle, we realise, is heavily dependent upon employees, on income derived from tourists, on high-end products and services, as well as government grants. There is also quite a strong culture of individualism. Often we prefer the food that appeals to our palate, even if it comes from far away,

rather than that which can be grown by our farmers, and rather than sharing infrastructure and expertise, many prefer to work separately so they can make their own decisions.

The crisis has also given us the opportunity to explore new areas we could develop – like distance learning or hygiene products – as well as to envisage how we could put some of our existing practices and institutions on a new basis.

The two areas which have received the most attention so far are the economy and farming. One Aurovilian feels this is an opportunity to move from a maintenance system to a 'basket-of-needs' system, where the basic needs of all residents are looked after by the larger community. The overarching goal would be a self-supporting and sustainable Auroville economy.

Food, of course, is one such core need. While Auroville has been able to access food from outside during this period, the lockdown has focussed us once again upon the urgent need for greater food autonomy. Another Aurovilian noted that we need to drastically increase production from existing farms, land needs to be identified for new farms, while we also need to develop many home and kitchen gardens. It was suggested that all able-bodied members of the community should work a minimum of

one day a week on an Auroville farm or in food supply.

In fact, attention to our food production is only one aspect of a renewed awareness of all things local which the lockdown has initiated. With more time on their hands, people are rediscovering community, the joy of walking in the forests, and the satisfaction and 'rootedness' that comes with doing their own gardening and housework.

What kind of future?

Above all, the lockdown has given people time to think about why they are here, how they want to live and how they wish Auroville to develop. "What if we built our city prioritizing the needs of cyclists and pedestrians?" wondered one. "Why not house Aurovilians, Newcomers and volunteers in our guest houses rather than tourists?" wondered another. "We need to take better care of each other and strengthen the service sector," wrote another. Universal maintenances and healthcare, and collective food distribution were some suggestions as to how to achieve this.

In other words, the lockdown has precipitated many ideas about how we could change, and these are being collected in a community-wide survey. But how to manifest change? Our experience suggests that while we are adept with coming up with new ideas,

we are poor at implementing them. Unfortunately we are still very much an individualistic culture, a place where individual needs often trump the needs of the larger community. This makes it very difficult for us to move together.

While the lockdown has given us a wonderful opportunity to reassess ourselves and come up with a new direction for our lives here, unless there is a change in our consciousness, meaning the beginning of a realisation of our essential oneness, we are liable to look back on it, as yet another opportunity missed.

Sri Aurobindo made the same point in his essay '1919'. Written just after the First World War, when so many pre-war institutions had been destroyed and there were hopes that a new world was about to be born, he noted:

The physical shock of war and revolution can break down stifling obstructions, but they cannot of themselves create either the kingdom of good or the kingdom of God; for that a mental and spiritual change is needed to which our slowly moving human nature takes time to shape its customary being.

*From an article by Alan,
Auroville Today*

Jean Neal

Passing: 10/07/2020

Jean Neal, wife of Bob Neal, peacefully left her body recently at the age of 86 in her UK home. She had been in constant pain for years and sadly her health had declined so much that communication was not possible anymore.

Jean was a lively, amazing woman who was part of London's 'Bell Street' group that regularly came together to study works of Sri Aurobindo and the Mother.

In 1998 Bob and Jean came to Auroville where, while living in Sri Ma, Bob would see many an Aurovilian in his capacity as healer using Samalin chiropractic and bio-magnetic techniques.

Jean, who had from young age onwards a second sight & hearing ability, would assist Aurovilians in different ways by giving 'beyond the 5th sense' and other workshops and one-to-one treatment sessions.

Unfortunately, Jean's health gradually started deteriorating, causing the couple to leave in April 2006. They both briefly joined AVI UK and but Jean's health remained troublesome.

Bob gave Jean constant loving care for many years before she left us.

Our sincerest condolences go out to Bob and other family members.



Jean Neal

The Goodness Guest House

My choice of Guest House

Last year I stayed at a guest house in Auroville and it was not a bad experience but I never felt comfortable there. It had a 'hotel' feeling, and there were many people staying there who had no interest in Auroville. So this year I looked around for a more homely experience.

After going through the vast number of guest houses in Auroville I chose the Goodness Guest House because it was small and preferred guests who wanted to stay more than a few days. I hoped it would be my cup of tea.

I arrived after 12 hours of travelling feeling dirty and tired. Suvedha, a Tamil Aurovilian greeted me and her first words to me were – "Hello John, here is your room key please rest, clean up, then when you are ready come down and we will complete the paperwork".

Immediately I felt at home, Suvedha knew my name and clearly knew the last thing I wanted to do when I arrived was to complete some forms, which is customary in India.

Meeting the family

After I came down Suvedha told me she helps to run the guest house with her husband, and she works for the entry group as well as having a young son and being 6 months pregnant. I also noticed that Suvedha and family live in part of the guest house building so they live with the guests as one big family.

In the morning I meet her husband, Venki another Tamil Aurovilian, and I tell him how impressed I am with the guest house and the garden.

He proceeds to tell me how he invested his family money into building the guest house, and it is a registered Auroville commercial unit on Auroville land and then adds he also runs a bakery. A few days later he takes me to the bakery and tells me that it is also a registered Auroville commercial unit and of his plans to improve it and move it on to Auroville land.

After a few days I keep seeing an old woman who is always, although slowly, doing something, whether cleaning around the garden, watering plants or something else. Venki explains it is his mother who gave over 30 years' service as a nurse at an Auroville health centre.

Experiences during my stay

Suvedha turns up at breakfast some days and seems to know everyone's name, and joins in the conversation whether in English or French. She even organised and served breakfast one Sunday.

Similarly Venki is always talking to the guests and similarly knew everyone's name and over breakfast one morning I ask Venki how his day was yesterday. He tells how he was asked by some guests to take them to various places in Auroville and later he took one guest to hospital and then arranged a taxi to bring this guest back to the guest house. He joked it was his day of service.

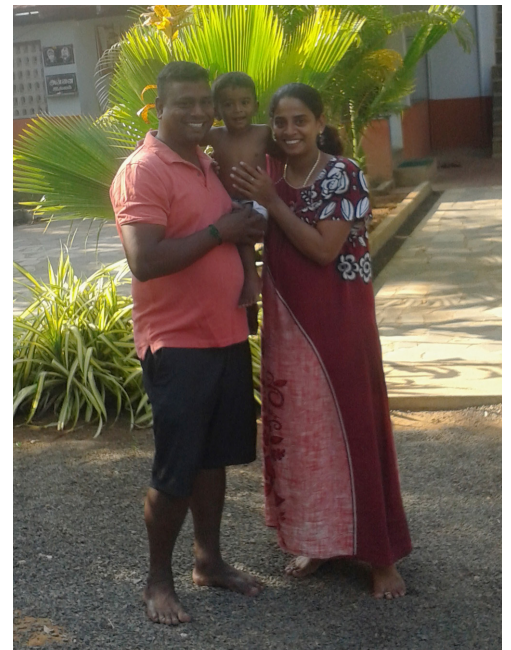
One day Venki tells me his plans to develop the guest house, have a better office and kitchen and parking area. He also wanted to lengthen the entrance to stop land encroachment and have a little café selling biscuits and cakes from his bakery.

One day during my stay some materials arrive at the entrance and a few days later a JCB had flattened the land in preparation for the above. Venki clearly has the imagination and energy to back up his plans.

Near the end of my stay Suvedha knows I am leaving at 6 pm on my last day and really apologises that she cannot let me stay in the room that day but unfortunately says there is another guest coming.

On my last day in Auroville I was at a meeting and the lack of money was mentioned for many projects. Someone said Auroville needed to develop economically to generate more money. I thought Auroville needs more people like Venki.

Just before my taxi arrives to take me to Chennai Venki tells me that it is a shame



Suvedha, Venki and family

I am leaving today because tomorrow is The Mother's birthday. Then he tells me he has arranged for two tuk tuks to take him, Suvedha and 4 guests to the Matrimandir in the morning. Then when they come back he has organised a birthday cake to celebrate The Mother's birthday. As the taxi pulls away, I think I will be back.

Recent Development – Royalty Bakery

As mentioned earlier in addition to helping to run and develop the guest house Venki also manages his bakery which is called 'Royalty Bakery'. The bakery has recently been recognised as an official Auroville commercial unit. During my visit to the bakery I saw that it was small, cramped and slightly dark. However, the quality of the biscuits, hygiene and packaging all were very good, so it was no surprise when Venki told me he supplied to both Auroville and non Auroville shops. He hopes to expand in the future and give more profit to Auroville. If anyone wishes to help his expansion plans, even in a small way, please contact: John Mulrey, email john@aviuk.org tel - 01296 415685